

## An Elven Interlude Part IV: Diluting and Dispelling

by Stuart Emmerman

Lake Eminara was hidden far in the forest, an hour's walk from the Oaklymb Enclave. The group of druids had started the journey in hopeful spirits as Skylana made sure they each understood their part in the upcoming ritual. They'd barely passed the boundaries of the settlement when the ruined land began. The ground grew bare of grass, the moist soil turned grey and hollow sounding underfoot, as if it were likely to collapse and cave in with each step. The trees were blackened, their cracked bark dripping ooze onto the toadstool covered ground. Now Falahaim led the group in solemn silence, Skylana doing her best to ignore the low sinking feeling in her gut.

They had almost reached the lake. The last time Softbreeze had been there was for her Day of Naming, when she'd been accepted as a full Druid. She'd stood knee deep in the moon-blessed water, laughing at the nixies that swam in circles around her ankles, letting the energy of the cool, clear water wash over her.

That day was long ago.

"Luna's tears..." Falahaim murmured as his golden eyes swept the blighted basin that once was Lake Eminara -- a pool of black oil covered with a blanket of green fuzz like the mold found on fortnight-old bread. Small white twigs were scattered all over, bobbing on the surface of the lake... the bones of the water nixies. Shuddering, Sky squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed down a wave of sickness.

"This is a waste of time," Lumenora scowled as she glared at Skylana, hands clenched into fists around her gauzy dress as she kept it from trailing in the slimy mud. "Falahaim, do you honestly believe the lake can be restored with a mage spell, where the powers of the druids have failed?"

The Arch Druid's head snapped round to glare at her. "Were you not given ample time to produce a solution of your own?" he roared, as Lumenora bowed her head meekly. "The entire forest would be lost, were we to wait for you!"

Lumenora turned to Sky, her eyes narrowed to hard slits. "Then cast thine spell, *magus*," she hissed, spitting the word like a curse. Sky pressed her lips together, breathing slow and evenly, refusing to be baited. Completing the ritual successfully was the only way she could honor her mage teachers and prove Lumenora wrong, and to do that, she needed to be calm.

Sky strode out to the shore of the lake, boots squelching in the muck. Dragging the end of her staff in the mud, she drew a wide circle around herself, leaving an unfinished gap. "Halrun'el, Anowynn," Sky called, beckoning to the two young druids who'd learned her spell on the journey here. They took their places inside the circle, and Skylana traced another line in the ground to close the gap behind them.

Being within the circle served to join their magic in common purpose, tripling its power. The

elves locked hands, and the three began to chant as one:

Hear me creatures of the wood  
From mountaintop to grassy glade  
May my words be understood  
I pray thee come forth to my aid

Their words rang out into the still air. Standing at the edge of the clearing, Lumenora raised one thin eyebrow and sniffed disdainfully, "Well?"

Falahaim silenced her with a sharp glare and quickly looked back to the three elves, leaning forward urgently. Skylana chewed her lip as time dragged by, feeling the weight of the Arch Druid's gaze upon her, uncertainty gnawing a pit in her stomach. Something should have happened by now.

Closing her eyes, Sky cast her senses out, psychically scanning the forest for signs of animal life. There were precious few creatures left in these plagued woods and she had to look further and further, calling on the energy of the elves beside her to bolster her efforts. Nothing. Just a few crows perched on dead branches, a herd of starving deer heading west where the land was still green.

Anowynn gave a soft moan beside her, fingers turning limp in Sky's hand. She couldn't keep this up for much longer, they were all getting too drained... then her eyes snapped open. "I found him," she murmured. There was a single unicorn near the river, not five miles from where they stood. Together, the three elves focused the last of their power on the unicorn, calling him to the lake. "I think he heard us," Sky croaked at last, vision swimming with black and purple dots.

Minute after tense minute passed by as the druids intently scanned the forest edge, looking for a flash of white between the trees. Though they were all expecting it, it still came as a shock when the unicorn emerged from the dead woods. For a moment the elves stared at him, lost in wonder as he slowly trotted to the them, his ivory coat giving off a brilliant glow that almost hurt to look upon, and made the rotting tree trunks seem all the blacker. Unicorns were one of the rarest creatures, their horns said to purify even the vilest toxins, and as Falahaim whispered a soft prayer in awe, Skylana doubted even he had seen one before.

The unicorn came to a stop before them, his golden hooves spotless though he'd trodden through the same mud that sucked at Skylana's boots with every step. His deep blue eyes met hers, and a knowledge passed between them. "You know why we've called you," she said. The unicorn nickered and tossed his head, his spiraling gold and pearl horn flashing in the thin sunlight as he began to walk to the lakeshore.

He gave a high whine as he approached, eyeing the black water with mistrust. Skylana held her breath as he paused for what seemed like an age, sighing with relief when he lowered his front hooves and head as if to drink, and dipped his horn into the lake. The oily water glowed pure blue around his horn, then started to churn and bubble, spreading out in shimmering waves until the entire lake boiled like a cauldron.

Skylana turned to Falahaim with joy. "It's working!" she cried, barely able to keep from jumping up and down with excitement. The Arch Druid's face shone with happiness as he smiled back at her. The surface of the lake gradually began to calm, once again filled with the crystal clear water of Skylana's memory.

The unicorn didn't linger to receive their thanks, disappearing as soon as the lake was restored. Skylana knew they had been lucky to be able to call upon such a solitary creature at all, but it still pained her to see him go. Falahaim clapped a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "The forest is slowly healing itself," he said. "The plants will drink from these waters and in time the woods will no longer be plagued. Here, I prepared a vial for you to take back to Bristol," he continued, handing her a small glass tube filled with the glowing azure waters of Lake Eminara. "That's enough for both Lake Elizabeth and Bathurst Basin, so don't use it all in one place."

"Thank you," Skylana replied, checking to make sure the vial was corked tightly before slipping it into her rucksack. Half of her wanted to stay and help repair the land, but she and Ryder still had a meeting with the Atlean Council to attend that very evening, not to mention the trouble back in Bristol. So Softbreeze said her farewells to the Oaklymb Druids, and started the long walk back to Atlea.