

TIMBERS

Vol. 3, No. 19/20



Bill Nichols '89

★ The "Need-To-Know" Page ★

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SASE: When writing to the Holt for information, please include a stamp or Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope for a prompt reply. This enables me to respond quicker to your queries. I'd appreciate it!

CIS REQUESTS: If you are requesting character information sheets, be sure to send money for photocopying and postage to send them to you. The data sheets do exist, but not the extra funds to maintain a "service" to send them free. Suggestion: 25¢ stamps are welcomed in lieu of cash for payment, so long as the worth of the stamps matches the amount of photocopying the information you want (plus postage).

TEA TIME: Due to the enormous amount of material in this issue, there wasn't room for Teresa's Assistant Coordinator column this time. In it, she explained why she hadn't been able to answer mail sent to her, which was a combination of the amount of hours spent on her job, as well as becoming "engaged to be engaged" with her boyfriend (target date: approximately 11/25/92). She isn't mad at anyone -- just very busy these days. Due to a mutual decision by she and I, the Assistant Coordinator's position for this Holt will be discontinued, so all inquiries, information, stories, CIS's, artwork, etc., are to be sent to me.

BABY BOOM: All right, folks -- it seems we have a bunch of horny elves in this Holt! It's either that, or the High Ones are trying to make up for the deaths in the Troll War. It appears that a number of our tribe members will be having cubs within a few years after the War. So far, there are seven babies planned for our Holt. Please, people -- no more! Elf children are rare, and these I've been told about are all we need.

ELF RETREAT: In response to my question about whether or not anyone would be interested in attending a Timber Valley Elf Retreat, only three members said they would come. Due to lack of interest, though, the idea has been dropped.

PRINTING SCHEDULE FOR 1990: The next issue of **TIMBERS** will be another double issue (T-21/22) and will be sent out to you in July. The following issue will also be a double (T-23/24), and should arrive in your mailboxes in time for Christmas. The reason for all these double issues is due to the length of the Troll War.

CONVENTIONS: I'm only listing the ones you folks tell me of, so these are all I have to warn you about:

Dallas Fantasy Fair, Dallas, Texas: March 9-11, 1990
Dallas Fantasy Fair, Dallas, Texas: July 13-15, 1990.
Dallas Fantasy Fair, Dallas, Texas: November 23-25, 1990.

RECOMMENDED HOLTS: If interested in joining other Holts, here is a list of those operated by some of Timber Valley's own members. Write to these addresses for more information. If I've missed any of our members' own Holts, please let me know and I'll list them, too...

ERIGHT MOUNTAIN HOLT, 8405 West Central #1702, Wichita KS 67212. (Mark & Terri Barnard)
PLAINSHUNTER/WHITE WOLF HOLT, 9 Sixth Avenue, Atwater CA 95301. (Valerie Bowe)
SILVER SANDS HOLT, PO Box F, Holtsville NY 11742-0906. (Melissa Van Houten)
TRAILDUSTER HOLT, 747 N. 700 E. apt. 1, Provo UT 84606. (Ruth Clark)
THE WOLFGANG, 3675 Bellingham Avenue, San Diego CA 92104. (Terrie Smith)

TIMBERS



Newsletter of the Timber Valley Holt

Vol. 3, No. 19/20

Shadows Hide You Safely, Timber Folk!

Welcome to the forest once again, my friends -- though this Valley is not exactly a safe place to be any more, and it isn't warring Humans we are worrying about either!

The Timber Valley Troll War is in full swing now, and the action will be furious and fast paced in upcoming issues. Because of the enormity of this tale, and the seriousness of the effects it will play on our Elves' lives, this issue marks the first double-issue of **TIMBERS**. (Though, it won't be the last...see the Need-To-Know Page for the 1990 printing schedule.)

Back in **TIMBERS** 17, I printed a list of the stories in the files and their working status, along with a request for the authors to either finish the incomplete drafts or allow me to drop them. Those writers who haven't told me what to do with their stories will find them enclosed in the envelope along with this newsletter. If you get a story of yours returned, you can either go ahead and finish it for me, or put it back in your own file cabinet of stories you've written. I am not keeping copies since I cannot use unfinished material. If you would like to see it printed, finish the draft and then send it to me. Okay? Okay.

For those not in the ElfQuest National Fan Club, WaRP Graphics announced in the Autumn 1989 issue of **THE LOBESTONE** that the rumors are true...there are plans for a third **ELFQUEST** (EQ3) series, starting somewhere around May or June. It is scheduled to go bimonthly for anywhere between 12 - 20 issues and will, once again, be black and white in the magazine size format. There are also plans to include an 8-page backup story in each issue featuring EQ characters who don't usually get the main spotlight. (Similar to TVH's **LIFETIMES** stories, I gather.) Unfortunately, they won't be doing subscriptions this time around, so you'll have to watch your local comic shop for 'em. The only hint they would give us is that "the elves embark on a quest that teaches them that all of their travels, all their struggles so far are minor compared to what they face now. Their trek spans not only space -- for they must find and help whoever it is that has sent out an urgent mental cry for help -- but time as well." They also printed an illo of a possible cover from the new series. It appears this story takes place a long time after **SIEGE AT BLUE MOUNTAIN** (I'm only guessing here...), because there are well-dressed humans inside a constructed stone building (or at least the room they're shown in) and although Cutter is half in heavy shadows, it appears he now has long cheek whiskers (similar to those Rain The Healer wore...) It does raise a lot of speculation!

Get ready for an action-packed issue, my friends! Enjoy yourselves with it, and let me know your individual reactions. OK? OK!

Bright Starlights,

Mooncrest



THE TAMING
DF 20 HT
by Dana Evans

Torisen finished his sunning, reluctantly. While normally self-conscious about his scarred body, he didn't think much about it today. There was just no denying the fact that it was a beautiful day. Torisen had spent time wading in Minnowbrook and then dried off in the sun.

After pulling on his clothes, Torisen tied on his bright blue head band in a vain attempt to keep his damp, errant bangs back. Torisen cursed softly as he fumbled to tie the knot. He looked down at his fingers, studying the webbing that held two of his fingers together, the dents where muscles had been stripped away, the crookedness of poorly-healed bone. He remembered the pain of his injuries all too well. The clumsiness of his once very graceful fingers was a source of great sadness for Torisen.

The Healers had offered to try and help but he declined, knowing how old and severe the damage was. Besides that, Deep Pain, the terrible aching in his joints, had set in. Many warriors in his old tribe had the same arthritic affliction and their Healers never could do anything about it. His hands told him it was going to rain before his barely-developed storm sense could.

Heaving a sigh, Torisen floated up into the air. His gliding ability was very strong and he loved exercising it. When he got back to his hometree, his young hawk screeched at him loudly. Torisen had just begun to train him. His hunting hawk, Wing, was getting old and Torisen wanted to have another one trained in case Wing suddenly died.

"You are the noisiest thing I have ever heard, Screech. I don't think I could have named you better," Torisen said, scratching the bird's feathered head.

As Torisen thought of all the work it would take to train the hawk, his mind wandered back to the times he had trained Zwoots for his people. The Zwoots were fairly stupid, if sturdy, beasts. Thoughts of them brought Torisen's mind to the grasseaters he had seen. He had been impressed by the horses from the first time he had seen them. Unlike Zwoots, the grasseaters looked like intelligent, spirited beasts. Torisen liked watching them play and frolic. He knew he'd like to train one. The elves of his village never bonded with animals, but he felt close to the grasseaters.

Ideas that excited Torisen were few and far between. He was most often depressed or too steeped in wine to know anything. Torisen finally found something he wanted to do -- really, truly wanted to do.

Torisen knew he would need help to get himself a horse. There were plenty of elves who rode grasseaters, Skyflame, Grassy, Wildwood, Hushleaf, and Buckeye, just to name a few and he would need one of them to help him. Torisen knew Wildwood the best out of them all, so he went looking for her. He had the luck to find her talking to Hushleaf.

"Hello, Torisen," Wildwood called.

"Hello, Wildwood, Hushleaf. Could I beg a favor from you?"

"What do you need?"

"Well, I trained animals..." he began hesitantly.

"We know. We've heard that hawk of yours," Wildwood smiled.

"Noisy, isn't he? Anyhow, I need someone to help me with the hunts. I've never been happy with hunting alone and most of the hunting parties here hunt from wolf back or on grasseaters. We, of my village, didn't bond and I doubt a wolf is for me anyway," he said, indicating his long legs. Torisen was tall for an elf, taller than most in the Holt and he knew from experience that he wasn't much of a wolf rider.

"I'd like to train a grasseater."

"So how can we help you?" Wildwood inquired.

"I need someone to...well, I guess I'll need some help roping one." Torisen grimaced, looking down at the gloves that concealed his mangled hands. "I don't know if these fingers still have the strength and dexterity to do it anymore."

Wildwood took his hands and smiled up at him. "I'll be happy to help. Just keep in mind, I'm not the best roper around, but I'll try. Do you want to help too, Hushleaf?" The mute elf nodded his agreement. "Then we'll get ready and we can head out shortly," Wildwood decided.

Torisen rode behind Wildwood when the threesome went out to the Upper World to find the grasseaters. He figured gliding might panic the herd. It didn't take Torisen long to spot the grasseater he wanted. The horse was a tall, raven black stallion with a wonderful, glossy mane and tail. He was young, just at the stage where he would have

had to challenge the herd stallion and either win or be driven out. Torisen felt sure that when that time came this stallion would have won.

"**That one,**" he sent to Wildwood. Torisen didn't know Hushleaf's silent language yet, so Wildwood translated for him.

"**Are you sure?*" she hedged, knowing that of all the horses in the herd that one would be the most difficult to capture.

"**/es, I'm sure.**"

"**There are many other fine ones.**"

"**That one!*" Torisen insisted.

Torisen didn't see the problem with capturing it. All he saw was the challenge of breaking the beast. He dismounted to allow Wildwood freer movement. Hushleaf made his way to the far side of the stallion. He and Wildwood tossed their ropes at the same time and both missed. Time and again the stallion eluded the ropes until everyone got the idea he was laughing at them.

Hushleaf finally looped the rope over the stallion's head and it went wild, rearing and bucking. He pulled Hushleaf off his mount. Hushleaf tucked and rolled, reducing the shock of landing hard. He didn't let go of the rope, as he was too stunned from the fall to make his fingers move. He ended up being dragged, getting rope-burned hands and bruises in the process. The stallion pulled free.

Wildwood tried for the rope, but there was no way for her to get it. The stallion was off and running. Torisen took to the air and dived down to snare the rope. He shot up straight in the air, choking the stallion. That was how he used to stop Zwoots. A lack of air did wonders to calm raging beasts. There was no way for the horse to shake Torisen off. The elf was anchored in the air by his strong will and he was at the perfect angle, giving the stallion no leverage.

The beast had two choices -- continue and choke or stop. What the horse didn't know, but Torisen did, was that Torisen couldn't hold on long. His fingers were already beginning to buckle and the pain in them was incredible. It had become a race as to who would give up first. Torisen won out by a tiny margin. He landed, hoping the stallion wouldn't start up again because he knew he couldn't hang on any longer. The stallion stared angrily at the elf and Torisen could feel the heat coming off of him.

"Is Hushleaf all right, Wildwood?" he called, not taking his eyes off the horse.

"Yes, a little bruised, but he's fine."

"I can't thank you two enough. I couldn't have caught him without you. He's a fine beast."

"That he is. What do you want us to do now, Torisen?"

"Nothing. You've already done more than enough. I have to break him alone."

Wildwood took the rope from Torisen's hands, seeing how they were trembling.

"They hurt so much," he whispered, removing his gloves. His fingers had turned bluish from their exertion and looked puffy. The scars stood out like angry red ridges. He rubbed them together, trying to ease the tortured muscles.

"I'll help you tie up this beast before he gets his second wind," Wildwood offered.

"Thank you."

* * *

Torisen spent two days getting the stallion used to him. Torisen found a small tree out in the Sea of Grass that looked strong enough to suit his needs. He kept the horse tied very close to that tree, not giving him much room to graze and no water at all. Torisen had spread a mixture of pungent plant juices in a circle some distance away from the tree. They would be highly offensive to any animals making a try for the horse. He spent much of his time keeping an eye on the horse from a distance. Every time he came to see the spirited animal, he brought water and some sweet grasses, until the horse associated him with being rewarded. The stallion noticeably calmed each time Torisen came near.

Weakening unbroken animals by withholding food and water was an old trick of Torisen's people. It was a quick, easy way to break them for riding and other uses. The stallion was well along, but Torisen knew he still had a lot of work to do.

Torisen brought his customary water and this time some fruit. However, he had added a riding blanket and a length of rope to the collection. Once the stallion had eaten and drank, Torisen attached the long rope to the horse's halter. He attached the other end to a nearby tree, then untied the short rope that had held the horse for the past few days. He used the short rope to walk the stallion around.

The stallion enjoyed it and nuzzled Torisen's hair to move him along each time the



elf stopped. Torisen let him run and play at the length of the long rope for awhile before putting the blanket over the horse's back. At first, the stallion didn't like it and tried to pull it off. He got whacked on the nose each time he tried. Soon, he got used to the blanket.

Torisen had one more surprise for the stallion. He floated a heavy weight made up of a bundle of old furs and scrap leather bound together tightly, up and onto the horse's back, while quickly securing it. The stallion contemplated it for a few seconds then exploded in a fit of temper. Torisen checked to make sure the stallion couldn't pull free, then left the horse to exhaust itself. When he came back, the weight was still tight on the horse's back and the stallion wore a look of disgust.

Torisen freed the weight and looked down at his hands. He only hoped they would be strong enough to hold fast when he went to ride the stallion. Untying the long rope from the horse's halter, Torisen took hold of the short rope, which would function as reins, and swung himself up onto the stallion's muscled back.

The stallion went wild, trying his best to throw the elf off. The horse wasn't as used to the weight as Torisen had hoped. He found breaking the stallion was a good deal different from breaking a Zwoot. There was nothing clumsy or stupid about the horse. When the stallion saw Torisen had too good a seat to be thrown, he brought his head around to bite Torisen's thighs. Torisen had expected that trick and he belted the horse's soft nose every time. After a few unsuccessful tries, the stallion tried one last trick. He took off running, trying to knock the elf off on low branches or by crushing him up against a couple of the scraggly trees that were pushing their way up among the grasses. By clinging low and shifting quickly, Torisen avoided that fate. Finally, the stallion realized all it was doing was hurting and exhausting itself, so he stopped and accepted his defeat, somewhat less than gracefully. He looked back at Torisen with still-defiant eyes.

"Well, are you happy now? You still have such fire in your eyes. You'd love to toss me into the dirt, wouldn't you? Fire Eyes, yes, that's a perfect name for you. Let's take you back, Fire Eyes, so you can rest. You have a long way to go before I can teach you more tricks, but I think the hard part is over. I wonder how you'll take to hunting with two noisy hawks?" Torisen mused as he turned the spirited stallion back towards the tree he had been bound to for the past few days. It would be a few more days before Torisen trusted the horse enough to let him run free with the other horses the Holt members used.

Torisen was thrilled with his victory over Fire Eyes. Now he had to supplant mastery with friendship -- but he had all the time in the world for that.

End





"THE THUNDER BELOW"

by MELISSA ACKROYD-LIVINGSTON

DF 24 HT

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE... Quicksilver and Duskdew were attacked by three trolls, in which Duskdew was struck down. Quicksilver was able to get her back to the Holt's Healers, but not before Dusky's spirit (believing herself already dead) left her body. She met her long-dead parents, who guided her back to her body. Afterwards, Duskdew was not happy to be alive, wishing instead she had died.
[WANDERING SPIRIT by Ruth Clark, TIMBERS 18]

THE TIMBER VALLEY TROLL WAR Part Two

"The Thunder Below"
by Melissa Ackroyd-Livingston
Illustrated by Bill Nichols
DF 24 HT

The sky flickered dully yellow, creating a brief horizon of leaf and spike where it silhouetted the Thorn Barrier. There was no sound to accompany the light, nor rain, nor clouds. It was the sort of skyfire which lit the night in pale sheets during deepest Hot-Time, and normally it was ignored for it portended nothing.

Tonight it served well to set Nightstep's nerves on edge. He disliked skyfire which brought no storm with it, no sense of release or resolution. And this night there was much that wanted resolving. One of his tribesfolk lay in her tree, still unwilling to admit that she had been recalled to life by the Healers and her brother. And the reason for her near-meeting with the High Ones was even more troublesome. The elves of Timber Valley had established amicable trade with the resident trolls since Chief Silverstone's time; what under the sun and stars could possibly have prompted them to attack Quicksilver and Duskdew? Were they strangers to the Valley? Were they mad? Or drunk? None of it made sense to Nightstep, and he loathed the feeling of being unable to act on the situation.

He leaned back against a root which crept from the Father Tree down to Minnowbrook in search of its water. His son was beside him, binding new flint heads to his arrow shafts. They had come to the stream with the intention of spending time together, but Nightstep's mind was so occupied with its dilemma that he might as well have been alone. Most attempts at conversation on Skyflame's part had been met with monosyllables.

"My Chief!"

Nightstep did not start at the voice behind him, but his thoughts were snapped abruptly to the here and now. The scent of stream and tree were sharp in his nostrils as he turned to regard Trace, who knelt beside him.

"I have something to tell you," said the tracker with a swift smile at Skyflame. "A few of us are heading down to the caverns tomorrow for a little trading, perhaps a round or two of toss-stones, and we thought you should know--"

"The Troll Caverns?" Nightstep said sharply. "I'm very glad you told me this, Trace, because I'd prefer it if you dropped the idea altogether."

Trace frowned. "Dropped it? What for? Oh yes, Dusky and Silver's mysterious attackers. Nightstep, surely you don't believe those were our trolls?" He tucked his legs beneath him more comfortably, suspecting that it would take more than a few moments' cajoling to win the chief over.

Nightstep leaned back again. "I don't know what to believe." His voice was unusually strained as he tugged at his beard. "What I do know is that the Holt is in danger from trolls, and the only trolls we know live below us. I don't want to risk anyone else's lives until we know who tried to kill Duskdew and Quicksilver, and why. Call off your expedition, Trace."

"Father, it isn't as if he were going alone," said Skyflame, putting down a finished arrow.

"Of course not!" Trace seized this new argument, glancing thanks at Nightstep's son. "Ivory's coming, and Knifeblade, probably others--Hatfeather expressed her interest--not exactly a helpless lot, you'll agree. Besides, if something odd were afoot in the caverns, Redlace's chum would have told him. If wandering elves can find the Valley, why not wandering trolls? How can you assume that the entire kingdom is murderous on the evidence of three trolls' behavior, my Chief?"

Nightstep sighed in irritation. It was against his better judgement to permit the trading group to go, but as always, Trace was persuasive. It did sound illogical of him to jump to such a conclusion. And yet, and yet--

"I'd like to go, too," said Skyflame.

His father glared at him.

"Trace is right. The people he wants to take down can all take care of themselves individually; as a group, what could befall them? Besides, I want to get even with that rascal Slackface. He won four pelts off me last time, and I'd swear on Rock Span that his stones were loaded."

Nightstep wished fervently that Two Star or Wavesong were there to represent the voice of wisdom. Arguing with Trace was difficult enough without a solid base for his fears; arguing with his son was nigh impossible. He felt his resolve waver, and Trace sensed it.

"Listen. I'll find out tonight exactly who's going--you serious Skyflame?--and set a limit of, oh, two days to wreak havoc on the storerooms down there. We won't give you any more reason to worry than a cub in her mother's arms."

Nightstep said nothing. He watched the silently flashing sky beyond the Thorn Barrier and prayed for the High Ones to grant them real skyfire, an honest storm. This hot glimmer on the horizon only added his will and twisted his judgement.

He turned only his head to regard Trace. "Do what you will," he said. "I want your list of traders tomorrow morning."

Trace's grin was lit for a heartbeat. "Thank you, my Chief."

"Heeeeeeeyy, little brother!"

Redlace barely had time to look up before a sun-browned body dropped from the branches and landed on his back. He staggered under the sudden weight, but remained standing.

"Jag! Get off me, you over-ripe redfruit!" His efforts to shake the burden from his back were unsuccessful, as Jag had wrapped his legs around Redlace's stomach. Ferret, who had been accompanying Redlace to the Father Tree, stood aside with a small grin to let the siblings settle the problem however they might. She was not alone among the Timber Folk who continued to marvel that Jag was actually the elder of the two brothers; his behavior suggested an adolescent cub rather than an adult. Some suggested that the perpetual childishness was simply Jag's way of pretending his parents were not gone, one vanished in the Black Cavern's gut and the other with the High Ones of her own choice. For whatever the reason, there were often times when it seemed Redlace had to shoulder enough maturity for the both of them.

At the moment, Redlace had a very tangible weight on his shoulders and was rapidly growing tired of it. "Let go!" he shouted. "Nightstep's expecting us right now..."

"I know!" Jag replied with a toss of his ample mane. He tugged one of Redlace's forelocks. "I'm not letting go 'til you promise to bring me one of those shiny pendants they have down there. I'm making a choker for--"

"Jag, we're not going to trade," said Ferret, finally decided that Redlace needed some help if they expected to reach the Father Tree before sun-high. "It's the traders we're supposed to be bringing back. You should have attacked Hatfeather or Skyflame four days ago; then you would've gotten results."

"Oh." Jag screwed up his face in disappointment and dropped from Redlace's back, much to his brother's relief. "Well, how should I know what you all are coming and going for?" he asked plaintively. "Wish someone'd invite me on a troll trip...well, catch you later!" He whacked Ferret and Redlace on their respective shoulders and bounded away towards Woodblaze's hometree.

By the time Redlace and Ferret reached the Father Tree, the rest of the retrieval party were already there. Rogue was crouched between two roots thicker than his own torso, running a small whetstone along Blackedge's head. Dawnwatch and Season



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distributed the weight of a few rudimentary supplies between their two carriesacks. But Nightstep was nowhere to be seen.

Rogue glanced up from his work and grinned at the two latecomers. "What kept you? Can't keep those poor drunk fools waiting for us down there."

"Sibling troubles," said Redlace tersely. "Where's our esteemed Chief? It's his job to chew us out, not yours."

"He's inside with Wildwood," Dawnwatch told him as she tightened the straps on her carriesack. "She just had a false alarm--nothing serious, just that cub of hers trying to take after its father already. You'd think it could wait until it gets outside the womb to start playing pranks!"

Nightstep then emerged from the Father Tree with Two Star at his side. His face was composed, but the lines of sleeplessness about his eyes and mouth escaped no one's notice. He did not need to ask for attention from the small gathering of tribesfolk; it was granted immediately.

"I don't want you dallying in the Troll Caverns," he said in a low voice. "Find the traders and bring them back. That's all. And don't take any guff from them, either--Trace gave me his word that they would stay for two days. It has been four since they left. I'll accept no more irresponsible behavior from any of them."

"Who all was in the trading group?" asked Ferret.

Nightstep's gaze wandered to the ground and back before he replied. "Trace, Ivory, Hatfeather, Blackfire, Knifeblade...and Skyflame. Don't waste any time."

The five elves before him nodded or sent their acknowledgement of his orders, and turned for the Sun-Goes-Down exit in the Thorn Barrier.

"Irresponsible behavior," Nightstep?" said Two Star when they had gone. "Aren't you being rather hard on them?"

Nightstep glanced at him irritably. "You know full well why I want that trading party back. Their staying longer than Trace promised would not be so troublesome to me under most circumstances. But if there are more trolls down there of the same mind as those who attacked Quicksilver and Duskdew..."

"I know," said Two Star. "I simply needed to hear you say it."

Nightstep looked a question at him.

"You've kept your fear bound in your gut for two days now. Some of it was just released. Was it not?"

Nightstep swallowed quietly. **My son is in those caverns, Two Star.**

The elder nodded and placed a warm hand on the shoulder of his Chief and friend.

"Hai, Wormhole!" Dawnwatch called as she rapped smartly with her sword hilt on the smooth metal slab which sealed off the entrance to the Troll Caverns. "We've friends to collect--hurry it up!"

There was a gravelly reply from the other side of the door, made incoherent by stone and metal. But the door groaned on its massive concealed hinges, and gradually a crack formed between the slab and the rock it was set into. The crack widened into a band of smoky darkness, which grew in turn into an elf-sized opening. The visage of Wormhole the Doorkeeper glowered just beyond the shaft of daylight which penetrated from above the heads of entering elves.

"You should get a couple of rockshapers down here. It'd make opening doors a lot quicker," quipped Rogue as he passed the perspiring troll.

Not funny, Rogue, sent Ferret. **I met an elf on my travels who had been captured by trolls for just that purpose. They made her a slave to her own Talent for more years than either of us have been alive.**

Rogue looked properly penitent, but he did not remain silent for long. **At least I've got nothing a troll wants, thank the High Ones!** he declared.

"This way," Wormhole said to the small group, indicating that they should follow him down a different tunnel from the one normally used by trading parties. "Main run's being repaired."

"Just so we get to our tribesfolk eventually," said Season. "Chief Nightstep's not happy that they've been gone for so long."

"Then Chief Nightstep can keep a tighter rein on his litter," Wormhole retorted. His temper seemed shorter than usual.

"Got something on your mind, Wormy?" asked Rogue. "C'mon, you can tell Uncle Rogue all about it--"

"HEADS UP!" Season had barely uttered his cry of warning when a heavy net fell from the shadows above. It was followed by four burly trolls with

cudgels who held the net secure with their feet while they methodically saw to it that none of their captured prey would see the remainder of their journey to the throne room.

Darkness. Not the breathing, watching darkness of a moonless night, but the stagnant darkness beneath the ground. Darkness where no stars shine and no rain falls.

Ferret was dragged from her own inner darkness by a dull pain which pummeled her skull from a distinct point on her head. 'I've been struck,' was her first thought, but then she was distracted by a body moving slowly beside her.

"Season? Is that you?" she said softly.

"Uh-huh...what...we're still in the caverns..."

Keen as elfin vision might be, it was useless when there was no light at all to grasp and illuminate the dry darkness.

"Mother?" came Season's voice again.

"Here," answered Dawnwatch. "I think Rogue is coming around. Where's Redlace?"

"Under me," Rogue growled. "With my luck I've probably suffocated him. Hold on, I'll try and bring him to."

Then the darkness split. There was the sound of flint on flint; light sparked and flared. Burning wood and fat struck the elves' sensitive noses as they blinked, trying to assimilate their eyes to the sudden brightness.

Redlace, whose mind had not quite shed its dreamless blanket, looked up and gasped.

Rogue stared in disbelief. "C...Cat...Catgut?"

The other Timber Folk were no less astounded. Was this the shrouded and stumbling troll woman they had taken in only a year before? The dispossessed and humbled wanderer? The beggar?

"That's Queen Catgut to you, my pretty one," smiled the enthroned troll, leaning towards them as she handed her torch to a chamberlain. When the elves had last seen her, her head had been hooded and bent. Now it was held erect and crowned with a thick circlet set with red and blue stones. Deep brown hair billowed from beneath the circlet like a thunderhead. Instead of her wrappings of worn roughweave, she was robed in thick furs and a shirt of metal links that shone red in the torchlight. Her right hand toyed with a long dagger as if it were a willow twig.

"Queen...Catgut..." Ferret repeated slowly. "Where is K...Grubmoss?" Her eyes strayed longingly to her spear, which lay strewn atop Rogue's at the Queen's feet. A swift dash to the royal dais would have the much-needed weapon in her hands, were it not for the curious bars of brightmetal enclosing Ferret and her compatriots.

"Grubmoss." Catgut straightened and flipped the dagger casually. "Oh, he and I had a little argument regarding the running of this fine kingdom." Her voice was light, but beneath it ran a current of warning, like a chill subterranean stream below the Blue River.

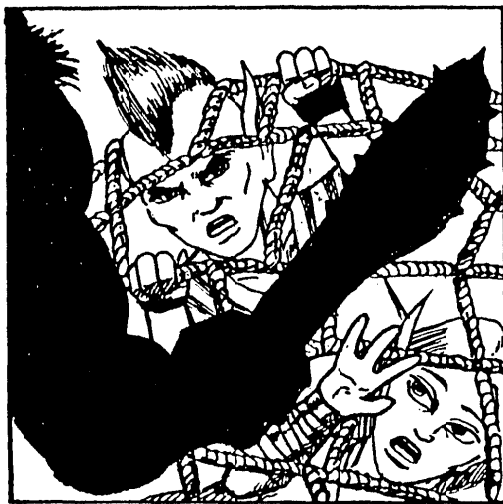
"You...won the argument, I take it," said Rogue, slowly getting to his feet.

"Looks that way, doesn't it, Lovely?"

Rogue barely suppressed a grimace.

"And where, Queen Catgut, are my sister and the others?" asked Ferret through clenched teeth.

Catgut shifted her weight on the draped throne and narrowed her eyes at Ferret. "Normally, I would string up by the lungs any subject of mine who spoke to me in such a tone as yours, little one. But since you are a stranger, and still learning our customs here, I'll let it pass." She smiled with mock benevolence. "This time. And not only that, but I will answer your question. Redrock!"



BILL NICHOLS '89

At the Queen's shout, a troll emerged from one of the numerous tunnels branching from the throne room. He held a thick chain which stretched behind him. Each of the traders who had descended a hand of days before was attached to the chain by brightmetal bands around their necks and wrists. None looked like they had slept or eaten much in those four days.

"Firebrand preserve us," whispered Dawnwatch.

The eyes of all the captive trading party had been downcast as they entered the room, but at Dawnwatch's heartfelt call to the long-dead Chieftess, Skyflame raised his head. Blackfire and Ivory soon followed suit, and soon elves on both sides regarded each other silently. There was sending between them, but no words were formed in that intimate touching of minds. There was a thread of greeting and of a shared burden, one which stretched before them with no discernible end. This thread broadened into a tumult of weariness on one side and aching sympathy on the other and a frantic, stubborn hope on both. Fear underscored all of the exchange, fear numbing the hands and tightening the throat, but it was forced aside in the tacit vow of compatrioty among the eight-and-three elves.

The delicate link of sending was broken by the intrusion of Catgut's voice. "Well! Am I to sit all day and watch you gawk at one another like snake-stunned mice? And here I thought you'd provide me with some entertainment!" She produced a scowl worthy of a she-bear's displeasure and twirled her dagger even faster. "But no matter; I'll have more entertainment than any Queen has ever dreamed of soon enough." The dagger's gyrations slowed and Catgut smiled, more to herself than to her literally captive audience.

Redlace had said nothing since his recovery of consciousness. He recalled the many times his friend Thunderfoot had lamented that trolls were never quite so keen as elves, never so completely aware of their surroundings. Redlace had often dismissed this with a breezy "'Cause you stay underground too much and there isn't anything to be aware of down there," but now he recalled this information with grim sobriety. It seemed that Thunderfoot's race had a taste for the dramatic as well; why else would Catgut have placed their weapons near enough to spit on, but unreachable because of the shining bars?

His bow and quiver were within sight on top of the pile, and a fairly easy target for his Talent. It was during Catgut's complaint of the elves' inability to amuse her that he concentrated--a slight miscalculation and he would achieve nothing but humiliation.

The weapon twitched once, then shot aloft and sailed into Redlace's waiting hand. Drawing and nocking a single arrow were to him as breathing.

"That's enough, your Majesty," he said. "Let us go. You haven't got that red metal protecting your head."

Catgut froze. Her gaze locked on Redlace's as if she meant to rip his head from his body with that glance. "Of course not, elf," she said in a low purr. "The question is, who dies first? Me or your friends?"

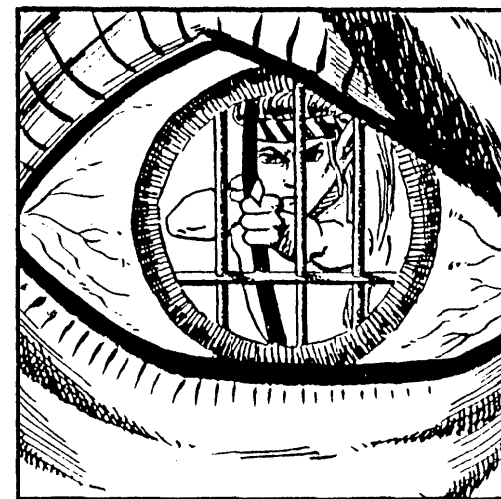
Redlace's brow furrowed, but he said nothing and kept his bow level.

"You obviously have something smothering your head, little one," the Queen continued. "What did I tell you before about manners in my domain? You've had your chance. You can drop the toy, or you can watch your pointy-eared puppies hit the floor. Choose."

I don't think she's bluffing, Redlace, Ferret sent.

Nor do I, agreed Season. **Do as she says; we're stronger as a group than as individuals right now!**

Redlace realized he'd been holding his breath, and released it. Perhaps his tribesfolk were right...he began to lower the bow.



BILL NICHOLS '89

But Catgut interpreted the action as something other than submission, for she made a sound not unlike the warning hiss of her namesake and the long dagger was gone from her hand. It shone for a moment in the stale air of the cavern, then struck Blackfire in the small space between his metal collar and his chin.

He dropped, and the rest of the elves on the chain dropped with him. Redlace's bow clattered to the stone floor as one of the minds which had held desperately to their tacit vow trembled, and was not.

Catgut relaxed on her throne and folded her hands contentedly, as if she'd just finished a delicious meal. "So you learn your first real lesson," she said. "Do not cross the cat in her den. Redrock! --Add these baubles to your necklace, but be sure to remove the one whose light seems to have gone out. Oh, and be sure to bring that one to my chambers tonight; I rather like him."

"Which one, my Queen?" asked Redrock as he summoned another troll with a length of thick chain over his shoulder.

"The lean one, there, with the crest. Tonight."

"Of course, my Queen." Redrock barely suppressed a smirk as he skillfully clamped a pair of shackles around Rogue's wrists. The brash elf was too stunned for even token resistance--stunned by his sudden loss of a tribesman, and by the blanket of horror which settled on his gut as he recalled his casual words to Ferret not so long before.

As the new captives were led away and Catgut called forth several lieutenants to continue her entertainment plan, a single troll slowly left the side of the guard she had been flirting with. Her name was Beenest, and she bore no love for the new Queen and her plots.

She hurried off down a corridor to her waiting comrades.

It was early in the evening that another troll fled toward the surface world to do a task not called for by Queen Catgut. He had been informed of his duty almost as soon as Beenest's news reached its target, for the roots of the Resistance stretched deep and far, and carried information much faster than the roots of a tree carry water. He had been the natural choice for the mission, for he alone was trusted among those the news must be brought to.

Not only that, but one of the captive elves was his best friend.

And so it was that Dripstone, known to the Timber Folk as Thunderfoot, made his way upward with a speed which bordered on carelessness.

He glimpsed the dim light of sundown ahead and breathed easier; none of Catgut's flunkies had stopped him and he was nearly out of the troll runs. Once he reached the surface, his safety was almost guaranteed.

Almost...a bulky form, one of his own people, blocked out the waning light from the tunnel's exit. He couldn't see who it was until his vision quickly adjusted to the darkness it was accustomed to.

"Hookbeak? Is that you?" he asked in a small voice.

"Sure enough, pup. What're you up to?" asked the other troll. He was well known to Dripstone, a staunch bachelor and an old family friend.

"I'm getting herbs for Hotbrew. She keeps running out of her wine spices..." Dripstone held up the gathering sack he had taken with him to make his cover more convincing.

"Indeed she does." Hookbeak nodded with a knowing grin. The master chef was known to use up vast quantities of hard-to-come-by herbs in dubious culinary experiments. "Go on, then--what are you staring at me for?"

Dripstone passed the older troll carefully, electing not to voice his own question--namely, what was a metalsmith doing in one of the upper corridors? And Hookbeak certainly wasn't a member of the Resistance, as far as he knew--

His breath fled from him as a dull weight hit him squarely in the back. The pain which radiated from the point of impact felt to be the size of a trollish boot, but Dripstone didn't have time to reflect on what had hit him. He was face-down in the grass outside the small tunnel, and Hookbeak straddled him, one calloused hand pressed against his neck.

"Turncoat! Grubmoss' fool!" spat Hookbeak. "You think I'm as gullible as you are, don't you, louse?" The hand pressed harder and Dripstone fought to keep his vision clear. "The Queen knows more than you think she does, Drippy, and your little 'gathering trip' is no exception! Elf-loving, bat-wooled runt--she'll have you for breakfast and pick her teeth with your bones!"

Dripstone was thinking frantically while Hookbeak filled his ears with sour invective. Redlace had often told him of the time he'd been caught in strangleweed with no help in earshot. He had escaped, though, with all his limbs intact--how? What was the secret?

The elf's voice came back to him from the rainy day they'd spent chatting beneath a mossy overhang last Hot-Time "I just didn't try to spread my energy out all over the place," Redlace had said. "If I'd done that, I would've been weed food. I made myself one tight ball of breath--I put myself entirely in my center. Know what I'm talking about?"

Dripstone hadn't. The elf went on to explain about the center of balance, a concept drilled into every youngster who aspired to any sort of physical work. Find the center and you find the strength to do anything, Redlace had told him authoritatively.

So Dripstone tried it. He drew as deep breaths as possible under the weigh of Catgut's spy, trying to imagine all his blood rushing into his middle, into that imaginary core Redlace had described to him. Find the center and you find the strength--find the center, he chanted in his mind.

Dripstone's body heaved upward and to the side, sending Hookbeak sprawling in the dark grass. He had time to stagger to his feet and draw his knife before Hookbeak came at him again, shouting more insults.

The small troll didn't reply. He knew, from Redlace's countless reprimands, to save his breath.

In the following moments, Dripstone felt as if he were in a dream. He continued to channel his breath into his center, and his limbs moved seemingly of their own accord. So this was how the elves came to be so agile! His back and neck ached, but he focused his attention on keeping Hookbeak in sight. They fell together and apart, and each clash felt to Dripstone like meeting with a source of blazing heat. His senses were heightened by the concentration of his breath and by pain...pain in his sides, his shoulder, his jaw, his thigh...had Hookbeak caught him so many times with his axe? It hadn't occurred to Dripstone that he was getting hurt until the hot stream of his own blood tore him from the reverie of breath and movement. To be sure, he'd landed gashes on Hookbeak as well, but he felt his concentration weaken as his blood left him. It was time to flee.

Hookbeak noticed that the younger elf was drawing them into the forest, and cursed. Then he called over his shoulder, "Scrub! Scaletoe! Get out here before he escapes!"

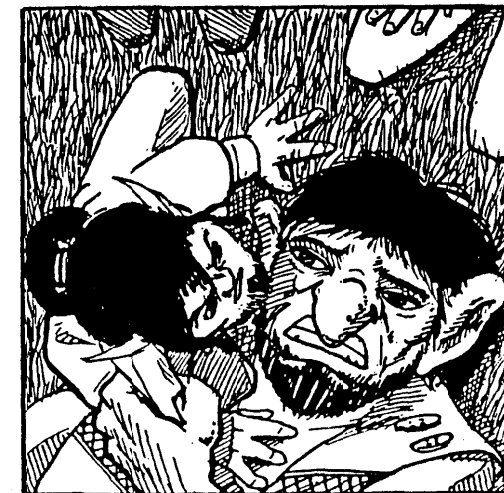
Dripstone flung his dagger aside and plunged into the trees. He might have been able to hold his own against one troll, but three was impossible. His chances were far better if he tried to lose the other trolls, who did not know the surface world nearly as well as he did. The elves called him Thunderfoot, but in reality he had grown far quieter in passing through the woods than any troll thought possible. In addition, he knew the paths and double-backs used by the Timber Folk in emergencies.

He continued to forge onward, hearing his own breath rip in and out of his lungs.

He couldn't tell if he was still being pursued, but forced the concentration back into his weakening mind. Find the center and you find the strength. There was the metallic taste of blood on his tongue, and the fire of the metallurgy caverns was in his chest. But there--oh, there was the Thorn Barrier! There was the wall of spiked bush and tree which meant he was far, far from the troll runs...and far from Catgut's spies, for there was no longer the crash of running trolls behind him.

Dripstone dove through one of the concealed entrances to the Timber Valley Holt, and stumbled past startled elves. Some of them he knew, and some he did not, but it made no difference--their faces were rapidly beginning to blend together in his speckled vision, and they all knew who he needed to find before the blood and fire overtook him.

"My Chief!" Dripstone gasped. He continued his lurching flight



toward the center of the Holt. His voice was ragged but stronger, strong from desperation, as the Father Tree hove into sight. "My Chief, where are you?"

Then there were hands, hands all around him as he halted and swayed on shuddering legs. And he triumphantly plucked one face from the stream of those around him: Nightstep.

Dripstone let himself fall then; he would only have breath enough if he were no longer standing. He caught hold of Nightstep's collar as he went down--the dark elf had to hear him.

"Grub...Grubmoss is dead," he sobbed into Nightstep's ear. "Prisoners...the elves you sent down, she...she's got them all..." Dripstone wasn't sure if Nightstep had understood him, so he took another breath to explain. But all that erupted from his mouth was a fit of coughing, coughing which wracked his frame and shook darkness like a fine dust over his eyes.

The last sensation he was aware of was the laboring thunder of his own heart.

[To Be Continued In "Blood Frenzy"]

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ART CREDITS

Valeria Bove: Pg. 3 (Arrowsong)

Bill Nichols: Pg 1 (Catgut, Redrock, Rogue, Skyflame, Blackfire, Ivory)

Pg. 8 (Nightstep, Skyflame)

Pg. 10 (Redlace, Jag)

Pg. 12 (Rogue, Ferret)

Pg. 13 (Redlace)

Pg. 15 (Nightstep, Dripstone)

Pg. 17 (Catgut)

April Lee: Pg. 7 (Mooncrest)

Pg. 22 (Goldenbraid, Thunderfoot)

Pg. 24 (Quicksilver, Duskdew)

Pg. 25 (Nightstep watching Jag's whittling)

Pg. 26 (Softwill)

Pg. 27 (Shrike, Big Axe)

Pg. 29 (Season, attacking Troll, Softwill)

Pg. 30 (Trace, Dawnwatch)

Maria Manemann: Pg. 18 (Dawnwatch)

Pg. 19 (Nightway)

Pg. 21 (Twill)

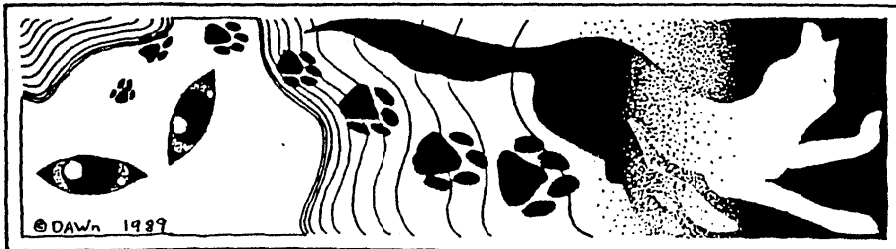
Terrie Smith: Pg. 32 (Hushleaf - "How He Lost His Tongue")

David Trimble: Pg. 6 (Torisen & Fire Eyes). Pg 20 (Torisen)

Deb TRIMBLE: Pg. 31 (Pebble)

Pg. 16 (The Wolf)

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT: Two of our members, David Trimble & Deb Whitmer became Lifemates February 3rd! Congratulations, you two!



TROLL NAME: Catgut

GENDER: Female

MATE: --

FAMILY: Unknown...

DF DATE BORN: -8204 HT (a long time ago!)

ORIGIN OF BIRTH: Unknown

DF DATE OF ARRIVAL IN VALLEY: 23 GT

EYES: Brownish-yellow

HAIR: Brown, curls and waves "billowing like thunder-clouds", hanging to lower back.

HEIGHT: 4'1"

MARKS/SCARS: Has wart on left side of her long nose.

PREFERRED WEAPONS: Experienced in many weapons, but her favorite is the ability in controlling others in intimidation.

SKILLS: Warrior, thinker, leadership, survival tactics.

JEWELRY: Gold crown set with red and blue gemstones.

CLOTHING: Long robes of thick black furs, and a shirt made of red metal links. Loose pants of the same chain-mail material.

OTHER INFORMATION: Catgut is very intelligent and possesses a mind for strategy and controlling the wills of others. It is rumored that her mother was Cattail, the troll who caused a distant-past Troll War to end by collapsing many levels of the caverns upon themselves, thus creating the area now known as Timber Valley. (Cattail was sentenced to die for her crime, but was freed by two friends and escaped). Catgut has the same type of conniving and strong will as that long-ago troll warrior, but seems to be more successful in her quest for gaining power over the Valley's troll kingdom.

Catgut was found dressed in rags and travel-tired by an Upper World hunting party and was taken to the Troll Caverns. A year later, it is discovered that she has assassinated old King Grubmoss and taken his throne as her own, and made herself Queen. She then had loyal followers of Grubmoss executed to strengthen her grip on the caverns and rewarded those who helped her in the takeover.

This malicious troll Queen has designs for more than the Troll Kingdom, too, it would seem, as she has plans to rid the Valley of both elves and humans from her Valley. A resistance group of trolls who care nothing for her governing head gather secretly, in an attempt to dethrone the murderous female. As a result of the two opposing groups, the Timber Valley Troll War erupts, endangering all the inhabitants of the Valley and below.

She has many devious schemes and revels in perverted pleasures. She also has a dramatic flair and uses it to awe her subjects or captives at any given time. She has a special smile that she wears when in moods of dangerous thinking. (She wore one such smile just prior to sticking a dagger through Grubmoss' throat). She is likely to celebrate at victories, but is always filled with caution. She is not stupid -- she knows she has enemies of her own subjects, and enacts many safeguards to protect herself. Her greatest triumphs are times when she dominates. This pleases her most.

CREATIVE CONTROL: Timber Valley Non-Persona Character.



ELF NAME: Dawnwatch
 GENDER: Female
 MATE: Twill
 FATHER: Webstring (d)
 MOTHER: Twinfire (d)
 SIBLINGS:
 CHILDREN: Softwll (f), Season (m).
 OTHER RELATIONS: Foster children: Duskdew (f),
 Quicksilver (m).
 ANIMAL FRIENDS: Featherdew, female wolf.
 DF DATE BORN: -152 WF
 ORIGIN OF BIRTH: Timber Valley
 EYES: Pale blue.
 HAIR: Buff-colored, wavy, short to neck.
 HEIGHT: 4'



TALENT (POWER): Strong, long-distance sending, especially adept at lock sends and can pick up others' private sendings, though this is rarely done.
 PREFERRED WEAPONS: Long sword, twin edged with hand guard. The hilt is wrapped in black leather.
 SKILLS: Midwife, tanner, hunter, fighter.
 JEWELRY: Silver ring around neck adorned with metal silver leaf.

CLOTHING: Long sleeved dark blue collared shirt with billowed sleeves. Dark blue flare bottom breeches with white lacing. White leather ankle boots with black fur trim. White rope belt.

OTHER INFORMATION: Dawnwatch can use her long sword with deadly accuracy and, although a midwife, she can be a most fierce warrior in battle. Deals with death as well as life. Dawnwatch has a strong personality and hates to do things against her will (she only takes orders from her Chief); She took Recognition very badly and became very ill before giving in. Now she is happy with Twill and is a stern, but loving, mother to her children. The other members of the Holt tend to step lightly around her, as she can be very swift to temper at times. She is not one to be messed around with in any way, and any elf who would consider playing a practical joke on her is risking a great deal. She has little sense of humor where such things are concerned.

Dawnwatch has a gentler side, seen by her family and those she midwives for most often, and by others when someone in the Holt is in trouble. She cares deeply for her tribesfolk, but keeps it hidden inside most of the time. At heart she is a sensitive and loving person. After the Death Flood she even took on the responsibility of caring for two Holt orphans, Duskdew and Quicksilver. The somewhat harsh and arrogant front she shows to the world is a defense.

She is an excellent sender, able to send with great precision and control over long distances. She can occasionally pick up the private sending of others if she tries very hard, but she does this very rarely. She is especially good with a lock send, and is often used by Nightstep as a communicator to keep Holt and hunting parties in contact. She is also a deadly huntress and enjoys it. The sword she uses belonged to her mother.

Twill's lifemate is touchy about her own privacy and is bound to be snappish with anyone who tries to inquire into her own business or enters her hometree unannounced. She will gladly loan out her possessions if asked, but woe to the elf who touches her things without permission.

Dawnwatch needs only a few hours sleep a night and sleeps lightly at all times. She is usually one of the first up and last asleep, and enjoys watching the sun rise and set. The use of magic fascinates her and she will sit and watch treeshapers or rockshapers for hours. She is very admiring and respectful of her lifemate's rockshaping ability.

CREATIVE CONTROL: Timber Valley Non-Persona Character.

ELF NAME: Nightway
 GENDER: Female
 MATE: Mooncrest
 FATHER: Splitpath (d)
 MOTHER: Moonshine (d)
 SIBLINGS: --
 CHILDREN: --
 OTHER RELATIONS: --
 ANIMAL FRIENDS: Woodweaver, female wolf.
 DF DATE BORN: -19 LF
 ORIGIN OF BIRTH: Timber Valley
 EYES: Opaque black
 HAIR: Straight, dark grey, tied in one long ponytail, hangs to lower hips.
 HEIGHT: 3'10"
 TALENT (POWER): Treeshaping.
 PREFERRED WEAPONS: Small dagger w/blue crystal pommel.
 SKILLS: Fisher, trap-maker (shaper).
 JEWELRY: Silver metallic band on upper left arm and silver metallic band on right wrist.
 CLOTHING: Dark blue deep-V-neck tunic with collar. Wide grey girded belt. Grey double-stitched pants, tucked into dark blue knee-high boots.
 OTHER INFORMATION: Nightway was orphaned at age nine, and lived with Goldenbraid for seven years. At that age, she loved with Grassy, an attachment that lasted until a few moons before the death of Newfur. She became friends with Mooncrest at a young age and supported him through his grief at Newfur's death. That relationship later deepened into a strong love-making, and then after a long time, became a Lifemating.



Nightway has a sweet, gentle nature, almost naive at times, and tries to befriend everyone. A timid sort, she fears many things and may "freeze" in a bad situation (a dangerous habit that sometimes gets her in trouble). Among the things that terrify her are: snakes, thunderstorms, trolls, and most especially, humans. She won't go anywhere near the Tall Ones' camp. She has yet to understand Mooncrest's fascination with them.

Nightway prefers to be a follower and is very uncomfortable when responsibility is placed upon her; she fears letting her tribe-folk down if she is depended upon, unaware of her own inner strength. It exists, but she has never put it to the test and so does not know that she possesses it. She is highly non-aggressive and will go out of her way to avoid a conflict, almost always backing down in an argument even if she is in the right.

Nightway came into her treeshaping ability young and strong, and she is delighted with it still. She is very fond of flowers and usually wears some in her hair; she spends a lot of time adorning her tree with vines and blossoming plants. Her power is a source of pride to her, and she is called upon to do most of the Holt's large shaping jobs. She has an artistic bent with her work and often adds frills to what she does, weaving vines in intricate patterns and so on.

The center of Nightway's life is Mooncrest. She loves him deeply and will do anything for her. She was saddened when he Recognized Wildwood, but was overjoyed when he remained Lifemates with her. She knows that when the child of the Recognition is born, that Mooncrest will probably spend a lot of time with Wildwood raising the cub, but she's willing to share him if he's willing to remain Lifemates with her. Besides, she'll probably have a hand in raising the cub, too.

Nightway is very graceful and loves to dance, especially in the moonlight. She is almost entirely nocturnal and never goes out during the day if she can help it. Her night sight is very keen, more so than usual. She also has extra-sensitive hearing and is always alert and quite easily startled by loud noises. She makes a good, sympathetic listener and knows how to keep a secret. She is rather fastidious and hates to be dirty; she bathes often in the Minnowbrook, but won't go in over her head, although she does know how to swim. Her clothing is changed often, both colors and styles, but she does have one favorite set (listed in the CLOTHING section). She loves to walk in the forest, but never does so alone. She is competent with weapons, but is not bold enough to be a really good hunter or fighter.

CREATIVE CONTROL: Teresa Arellanes

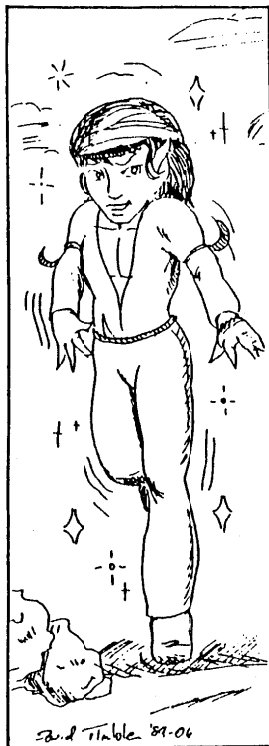
ELF NAME: **Torisen**
 GENDER: Male
 MATE: --
 FATHER: Takashi (d)
 MOTHER: T'seuq (d)
 SIBLINGS: Asha (sister)
 CHILDREN: --
 OTHER RELATIONS: --
 ANIMAL FRIENDS: Fire Eyes, black stallion.
 Wing, male hawk. Screech, fledgling male hawk.
 DF DATE BORN: -207 GT
 ORIGIN OF BIRTH: Crab Apple Tree Holt
 DF DATE OF ARRIVAL IN VALLEY: 21 H7.
 EYES: Dark brown, almond-shaped, large and slanted.
 HAIR: Chestnut brown, thick & wavy, worn to hips,
 straggling bangs are held back by headband.
 Occasionally wears a turban.
 HEIGHT: 5' (tall for an elf)
 TALENT (POWER): Gliding.
 PREFERRED WEAPONS: Long bow (can't use well, due to
 condition of his hands). Short sword, sling, small
 cleaning dagger.
 SKILLS: Hunting, armed and unarmed combat, desert
 survival, animal training, singing and playing
 musical instruments.
 JEWELRY: V-shaped silver torc.
 CLOTHING: (warm weather): White pants, loose white
 shirt with short, cap-shouldered sleeves, dark blue
 headband, gloves (to hide scars...not worn when
 weather is very hot), waist scarf, boots (only for
 rough terrain -- goes barefoot when he can) with a
 light blue V-cuff. Colorful ribbons tie down his
 sleeves and decorates his scarf and boots. Bells
 hang from end of each ribbon but are removed before
 hunting or fighting. A white turban decorated with
 colored ribbons and bells (which are detachable).
 (Cold weather): A long sleeved white shirt is
 substituted in for the short sleeved shirt. A fur
 sleeveless tunic is added over shirt, a fur cloak
 and gloves. All else is the same.

MARKS/SCARS: Badly scarred hand--last two fingers on left hand are partially webbed
 together. Very stiff hands bend with pain but can still hold
 a sword if necessary. Long scar across belly. Three parallel scars (claw marks)
 on back.

OTHER INFORMATION: Torisen is very melancholic and depressed, but he tries to appear
 friendly and helpful. He is quiet, except at parties, and even then isn't too rowdy.
 He a peaceful individual, despite his warring background. He has a strong dislike of
 humans, but is basically indifferent to Trolls. Has a great fondness for dreamberries,
 mainly for their use in drowning his pain and sorrows in. Though he wants to trust
 other elves with his heart and soul, his past experience in his home Holt warring with
 other elves have made him slow to trust and ever cautious around other.

Torisen's people and another group of elves lived in the desert, and for centuries
 they fought in a vicious war over the small water supply. Torisen is peaceful and he
 felt the war was wrong. Elves shouldn't harm other elves. He refused to let the war
 harden him. He watched as his parents and lifemate were slaughtered by the opposing
 elves, and finally saw enough of war and death, so he fled. Before he could get far,
 he was mauled by one of the enemies' mountain lion, ruing his hands and scarring his
 back. In a delirious panic he glided off and nearly died for lack of blood. He and
 Wind, his hawk, wandered for nine years before happening upon Timber Valley. Now, his
 hands are slow and pained. He can barely play his beloved harp so he normally plays a
 tambourine in group sessions. He feels like a coward for deserting his Holt and can't
 see himself any other way. He won't say much about his old Holt, or his past life. He
 desperately needs peace of mind and friends now that he is in a strange place. He
 loves to glide and spends much time with it, and is strong enough in it that he can
 lift two others at the same time as himself (though not over very great distances).

CREATIVE CONTROL: Dana Evans



ELF NAME: **Twill**
 GENDER: Male
 MATE: Dawnwatch
 FATHER: Bluetree (d)
 MOTHER: Wavesong
 SIBLINGS: --
 CHILDREN: Softwill (f), Season (m).
 OTHER RELATIONS: Foster children: Duskdew (f),
 Quicksilver (m).
 ANIMAL FRIENDS: Aewood, male wolf with brownish red
 fur and black paws.
 DF DATE BORN: -133 GT
 ORIGIN OF BIRTH: Timber Valley
 EYES: Greenish-yellow
 HAIR: Straight, creme-colored, falls around shoulders.
 HEIGHT: 3'11"
 TALENT (POWER): Strong rockshaping ability.
 PREFERRED WEAPONS: A short sword that is very wide
 and twin-edged. A sling and a pouch of stones that
 he shaped points into.
 SKILLS: Hunter, explorer, metal smith.
 JEWELRY: Although he makes them, he doesn't wear any.
 CLOTHING: Usually wears a black fringed vest, tan
 breeches tucked into brown moccasin fringed boots,
 and an occasional collar-less white shirt. Loosely
 draped around his waist is a black belt with two
 silver buckles.

OTHER INFORMATION: Twill is the Holt's strongest rock-
 shaper, a power he inherited from his father. He is a
 direct descendant of Blackrock, the shaper who created
 Rock Span. The shaped rock bridge is very important to Twill, and he spent many
 painful hours repairing it after the Death Flood's damage. He enjoys his talent and
 spends a lot of time shaping designs into Rock Span or any handy stone. He has a
 "lucky charm" passed down to him from his grandmother, Windcone. It is the remnant of
 a meteorite that crashed north of the Valley in recent centuries, creating the Starfall
 Crater. He likes it because it looks like stone, but won't respond to his talent.

Twill is unusual in his attitude concerning Humans. He is firmly of the belief that
 the two tribes should learn to get along together. His attitude leads him into
 arguments with such as Silverhair, Rainforest and Windrace, who see no good in humans
 at all. Among those who agree, at least in part, with his ideas are Trilight,
 Wavesong, and Goldenbraid. Twill is a good friend of Trilight's, but also a rival of
 Trilight's soul-brother, Windrace. This leads to some interesting situations.
 Nightstep tolerates Twill's thinking, although the chief is more inclined to agree with
 those who believe the humans should be exterminated. In spite of his willingness to
 tolerate differing views, though, Nightstep will not allow Twill to take any action to
 support his ideas for fear of human treachery. Season shares his father's views, but
 Dawnwatch is puzzled by them. She does not interfere, though, so long as no harm comes
 to her family through them. Twill is attempting to swing Skyflame over to his way of
 thinking, an effort which has not yet shown results; Skyflame is too loyal to his
 father to disagree with him.

Twill is a good hunter, and very dependable. He has a reputation for never coming
 back empty-handed, and he is very proud of it. He spends somewhat less time with his
 children than with most fathers; he loves his cubs, but hasn't had much experience
 with youngsters and so left most of the raising to Dawnwatch and the other teachers of
 the Holt. He likes dreamberries, but knows when to stop.

Twill has a personal hideaway that he goes to when he needs to be alone. It is a
 small shaped cave near the lake beside Two Falls. He shaped it quite a while ago;
 when the trolls found out about it, they dug a channel from it to the river, flooding
 the cave. Twill repaired the damage, and then paid a visit to the troll king (while on
 one of his regular strolls through his domain), telling him in great detail what an
 angry rockshaper could do to the tunnels. From then on, the trolls left Twill's Cave
 alone. Because of this incident, Twill and the trolls have a certain amount of
 animosity for each other.

CREATIVE CONTROL: Timber Valley Non-Persona Character.



BLOOD FRENZY

BY
L. D.
WOELTJEN



LAST TIME... After two groups of elves were captured by trolls, and Blackfire is killed by the new Queen, Dripstone was sent by the Resistance to warn the Timber Folk. However, he had to fight his way out of the Caverns, but managed to deliver the news to Nightstep before collapsing. [THE THUNDER BELOW by Melissa Ackroyd-Livingston, 7-19/20]

THE TIMBER VALLEY TROLL WAR Part Three

"BLOOD FRENZY"
by L.D. Woeltjen
Illustrated by April Lee
DF 24 HT

The storms had given way to a light drizzle, enabling the entire Holt to assemble in the gray, damp morning. Goldenbraid sat beside her patient, watching him closely. With Greeneyes, she had done what she could to heal him, but Thunderfoot had lost a great deal of blood. Only the pressing urgency of his own need to tell the elves all he could had made the Healer agree to let the wounded troll venture out into the chilly dawn.

"Back when my grandfather was a mump," the troll began, then stopped, slowly eyeing the gathering, "ahem, cub, the Troll Caverns filled with turmoil." The gash on his jaw had mended, but the side of his face was still bluish purple and swollen. The Healers' first attempt at treating a troll went better than Goldenbraid might have hoped. Overcoming the alienness of the troll had been the biggest difficulty, but as he now gestured with his four-fingered hand, something niggled at the edge of her mind. Goldenbraid sensed that there was a link between the elves and the trolls, a bond that eights upon eights of generations had eroded.

"No one remembers," continued the troll, "what caused the rift among us, but a vicious feud eventually divided the Kingdom. Each side set traps for the others, sometimes even rigging a whole cavern roof to collapse.

"One of the sides was led by a crafty female named Cattail. She devised a ruthless plan for destroying her enemies by flooding their warrens. To do this, she found the source of the Blue River, then had her followers dam it up. While that was being done, other workers dug channels to the enemy caverns, taking precautions to keep their own tunnels dry."

"What's this got to do with our missing families and friends?" Twill demanded. He sat in the inner cluster of listeners, among those either chosen for the rescue party or with loved ones held captive in the caverns. Twill fit both categories. His lifemate and his son had been part of the group of gamblers who had been detained by the trolls.

Thunderfoot cringed at the angry tone in Twill's voice, but calmly put off the question.

"Let me finish my story, then you will understand it's importance." Softwill, seated beside her father, gave her troll-friend a reassuring smile. "Cattail's channel was finished just in time, on two counts. Her foes were about to launch a massive attack when a flash flood rushed through the warrens. Unfortunately, Cattail's plan worked too well. The barriers which were supposed to protect her side's warrens could not stand against the force of the water. The raging torrent battered down walls, collapsing the entire cave system and creating this valley."

He paused, letting the idea of that their home was the result of troll activity sink in. Goldenbraid saw faces tense as some of her friends realized for the first time just what sort of foes the trolls could be.

"The survivors," Thunderfoot went on, "of both sides joined together in blaming Cattail for the destruction and death. They staked her out on top of the Sheercliff, leaving her to die. Legend says that two young, adventurous males crept out at night and freed her. The trio disappeared from the valley and were never heard of again." He turned his swollen face toward Twill. "Now, to answer your question. A year ago, a female troll wandered into the valley."

"Catgut," Quicksilver spat out the words, "I knew this was something to do with her." The elf sat with a protective arm about his sister. Duskdew looked sullen and disinterested. Once more, Goldenbraid wondered if calling the young female back to life had been a mistake.



"Yes," Thunderfoot was nodding. "Catgut seems to carry the same ambitions that drove Cattail. Some even believe she is Cattail's daughter." There were rumblings in the crowd, but the troll ignored the whispers. "Only Catgut is more successful. She has killed King Grubmoss and made herself Queen. Word is, she intends to wipe out all the elves, and will start with those she now holds prisoner."

The clearing erupted with protests and violent threats. Goldenbraid reached protectively toward Thunderfoot. He raised his thick-fingered hand, whether in fear, or to quiet them, she could not tell.

"But wait," he pleaded earnestly. "Not all of us serve Catgut. There is a rebellion starting up. A resistance force is gathering, and we need your help. I've been sent to warn you, as proof that we're on your side."

"Why not bring out our friends, as a token of your sincerity," someone called out sarcastically.

"We considered that," Thunderfoot answered. His voice wavered. "I have friends among the prisoners and would gladly have given my life to free them. But, if the resistance moves now, before we've established ourselves, Catgut will be warned of our existence. She'd have us wiped out before we could even get organized. Believe me, once she begins her campaign to rid the valley of elves, you'll welcome our help.

"I've already been here two days. Who knows what's happened to our friends by now? Catgut may have tired of playing with them and killed them already."

Thunderfoot's words triggered a new wave of anger. Even Goldenbraid found herself reacting with ire to the idea of her kind being treated so contemptuously. But, she knew that Thunderfoot did not share the callous attitude held by other trolls. He leaned forward, his eyes watery.

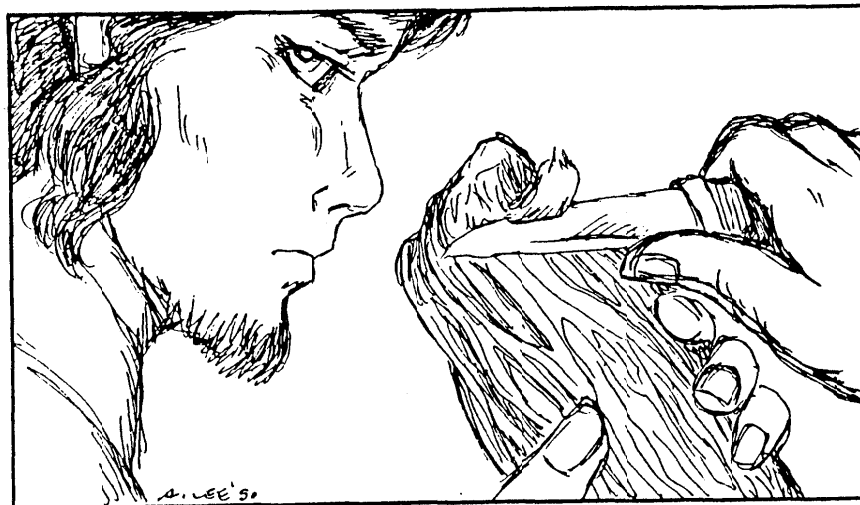
"Don't waste time arguing with me." He turned to the rescue party, hands folded together in a pleading gesture. "You've got to save Redlace and the others."

"We will," Big Axe vowed. "Just tell us where to find them."

The rescue party crowded closer as Thunderfoot began describing the network of tunnels where the captives would be found. Of the warriors in the group, only silent Silverhair had no close tie to the imprisoned elves. Blackhair, Big Axe's lifetime friend, had been part of Trace's gambling party. Frost's brother, Knifeblade, and Shrike's loveate, Rogue, became trapped when they went to retrieve the tardy gamblers.

Rockshaper Twill would provide access to the troll warrens. Already angered by the troll attack on Duskdew and Quicksilver, his foster children, Twill had a new score to settle. His lifemate and son were among the captives. His daughter, Softwill, would guide the party once they were inside the tunnels.

As Nightstep listened to Thunderfoot's description of the honeycombed underground passageways, he found his eyes focused on Jag. The placid elf sat among those whose loved ones were trapped in the troll kingdom, yet his face lacked the anger and distrust of those around him. Jag listened quietly, his nervousness betrayed only by the industry of his hands. He was whittling at a large chunk of darkwood. His knife moved silently across the face of the wood, paring off bits which dropped to the soil between his feet.



Was this what Catgut hoped to do to his tribe, whittle them away, bit by bit? Nightstep remembered the near-fatal attack on Duskdew and Quicksilver, the capture of the gamblers, then of those sent to bring them home. Little by little, the number of his tribe decreased. Even now, he worried at sending another small party into the tunnels, but everyone agreed that a few elves had a better chance of creeping unnoticed through the caverns than an army would.

How ironic that this should happen now, just when new life was coming into the Holt. Silverleaf's cub, Teal, arrived just before this trouble began and Wildwood would give birth soon.

Nightstep's own son, Skyflame, had been the last cub born of Recognition. A long stretch of years without births was not uncommon for the Holt, so Nightstep had viewed two cubs coming so close together as an omen of prosperity for his tribe. Now he wondered if it wasn't something else. Perhaps the High Ones were preparing to replace lives soon to be lost.

Thinking of Skyflame, Nightstep wondered how his son fared in troll captivity. He'd had no sense of his cub's death, but, with the lad so far beneath the land's surface, this was only vaguely reassuring. The chieftain berated himself for not listening to his own apprehension. He'd been reluctant to let the gamblers go into the troll caverns so soon after the mysterious attack on Duskdew and her brother. But Trace and Skyflame talked him out of it. Then, when others had gone to retrieve the gamblers, he'd stifled his own misgivings and let them go, not wanting to cause undue alarm. Now, he knew he had to make choices and rely on his instincts. He was Chief, and the lives of all those gathered around him might depend on the choices he made in the next few days.

As if by plan, Jag's artistry was completed at the moment Thunderfoot ended his instructions. The peace-lover walked shyly up to the troll and presented him with the carved piece of wood. Nightstep rose to take charge of the meeting. He went to stand beside Thunderfoot, glancing at the carving as he put a hand of thanks on the troll's arm. Jag's creation was a rough depiction of his brother, Redlace, riding playfully on the troll's shoulders.

He was glad that some of his folk seemed able to accept the troll. Nightstep had told Thunderfoot not to mention the request from the resistance forces that he'd brought along with his warning. While their friends were in jeopardy was hardly the time to let the Holt know they might soon be playing host to a number of trolls.

Turning his eyes from the woodcarver, Nightstep looked at the assembled elves. He wondered what his tribe would be like when Catgut had finished whittling away at them. His eyes rested on Duskdew, already altered, perhaps forever, by troll blades. Who else would be changed, and who might be cut away before this trouble ended?

Softwill's fingertips moved idly to the dagger at her waist as she walked beside Meatpaw. She feared being forced to use the weapon, yet exhilarated by this mission. To be included in the rescue party, to be one of those sent to rescue the group which included her mother and brother gave Softwill a sense of purpose. Until now, her keen eyesight had been her only asset. She'd been only a mediocre hunter and knew her parents were deeply disappointed by her lack of any strong skill or talent.

Season's quick grasp of archery had made her feel all the more inferior. Since the time he'd mastered the bow, maybe even longer, Softwill had lived in her brother's shadow. Now she relished the thought of being one of his rescuers.

Glad now that she'd let Thunderfoot give her a tour of his underground world years before, Softwill moved her hand from her blade to the scruffy neck of her bondwolf. Meatpaw was her best friend. He was old now, too old to ride, and usually did nothing more but lay in the sun, when there was one. Today, the wolf had seemed insistent on accompanying her. She felt reassured by his presence. The wolves were all her friends, accepting her just as she was.



She sensed a sudden change in the beast beside her, a reaction to something ahead of them. Wary, Softwill looked into the grey, mist-shrouded forest. A dark shape moved, but caused no fear in her. It was a wolf.

Before she could silence him, Meatpaw howled a greeting. The wolf turned and bounded toward the party, other wolves joining it. She strained her eyes in an effort to identify them: Deerstalker, Shadowpacer, and her brother's wolf, Greysoft. The wolves greeted each other in the way of their kind, yet Softwill sensed a lost, worried air about them. Soon they were joined by Ivory's wolf, Dusty, and Skyflame's Jugwisher. Only her mother's new wolf-friend was missing, and since Featherdew was just being trained, that was not surprising.

"Looks like they've been waiting by the main entrance," Big Axe said as wolf greetings subsided. "I'm surprised the trolls haven't tried to attack them."

"Too cowardly," Twill answered. He turned to Softwill. "See if you can settle them down and get them to follow us."

Smiling, Softwill nodded and began to mentally urge the beasts to go against their natural instincts. "You can't wait here," she sent, picturing the danger of troll attack in her mind. She sent images of Ferret, Season, Hatfeather and all the others, trying to show the wolves the intentions of the rescue party.

Finally, the bond-beasts seemed to understand and joined the party. They skirted the rocky hillsides, avoiding known entrances, then finally arrived at their destination. Twill's Cave had once been discovered by trolls, but the tunnel dwellers

had learned not to bother the rockshaper's special retreat. Hopefully, Catgut had not had time to learn of its existence. Dripstone believed the cave had been forgotten by most of his people.

"I'll go make an opening," Twill told the party as he led them into the cave. "Do what you can to make the wolves wait here for us. We may have trolls on our tails when we return." As each elf with a bond-beast bent to commune with his or her wolf, Softwill did what she could with the others. Pathdancer, Rogue's wolf, seemed particularly distressed, but, with Shrike's assistance, Softwill was able to calm him. By the time Twill had made an opening in the stone wall of the cave large enough for elves to slip through, Pathdancer was laying on the dirt floor, playfully nuzzling Deerstalker.

"Lead the way, daughter," Twill said softly, holding his palm toward the gaping wall. Was that pride she heard in his voice?

Quelling her fears, Softwill stepped through the hole. The tunnel inside was dark, but she could see clearly enough to know they were alone.

"It's clear," she sent to those behind her, then turning her mind in the direction Thunderfoot had said they should go, she reached out to the captives. "Mother? Season?"

"Tel?" came her mother's response. Dawnwatch was known for her strong sending talent. "Who else is there?"

"Father," she answered, then, realizing others might want to join in the message, she changed to an open sending. "Shrike, Big Axe, Frost and Silverhair."

There were a flurry of sendings, mostly weak, but the rescuers soon knew that the majority of their friends were together and safe. Only Rogue and Blackfire were missing, and questions about them brought no response. Softwill looked back to see Shrike stiffen when her inquiries about Rogue were not answered.

Their gazes locked in the near-darkness of the passageway.

"Let's go," the warrior hissed, her expression fierce. Softwill quickly turned and began leading them through the maze of passageways.

Troll guards waited outside the cavern which held the captives. Their concern was more toward the prisoners escaping than someone coming at them from outside. Big Axe raised his double-headed axe and waited for the others to ready themselves. The three troll guards all had their backs to the small side tunnel which currently hid the elves. Beside Big Axe, Shrike readied the long sword she'd purportedly crafted herself. She seemed to be taking this whole incident very personally, but then, her love mate was somewhere in these caverns.



He, too, had a friend within. Blackfire, his companion from childhood, was his only link to his past. Together they had travelled from their home tribe in the north, finding Timber Valley quite by accident. Someday, they might decide to return to their home and this would be one more of the exploits they would have to share with their kin around a campfire.

Silverhair stepped between them, his sword ready, too. Each quickly chose a guard to attack. The scuffle was quick, and deadly, for the trolls. Wiping troll blood from his weapon, Big Axe smiled in satisfaction. The guards hadn't been able to sound an alarm. Quickly the others joined them and they all rushed into the room where the prisoners waited.

Shrike stopped. Rogue wasn't there. She'd known that, and yet she'd hoped...
 Rogue, she reached out to him with all the intensity she could muster.
 Shrike! his answer was weak.
 Where are you?!" she asked. **We're with the others. Once we've freed them, we'll come for you.
 **Don't...too dangerous...!" his message faded. She'd lost him.
 **Where are you?!" she sent frantically, but Rogue did not answer.
 Look at this came a sending from nearby. Twill's words forced Shrike to take in her surroundings. The eight plus one elves stood together, bound by shackles and chains.

"How can we get these off?" Softwill asked anxiously. Her gaze kept returning to the door. She was fearful of any delay.

"Redrock has some tools over there..." Ferret pointed toward a shadowy corner. Still caught up in her worry for Rogue, Shrike watched idly as Silverhair returned with the tools and began a fumbling attempt to use them on the shackles.

As she saw his inept efforts, Shrike realized she was probably the only one there who knew how to use metal-working tools. Forgetting her own pain, the warrior quickly took over the unshackling process. When she reached Trace, she questioned him quietly.

"Where's Rogue?"
 "Catgut ordered him brought to her." His dark brown eyes evaded hers, but she had no time to ask what he was keeping from her. There would be time for that later. She went on to finish unshackling her friends.

"And Blackfire?" Big Axe asked no one in particular.
 "Dead," Redlace answered, seeming to choke on the word.
 Shrike watched grief etch itself briefly on Big Axe's face. He must have known, just as she'd sensed Rogue still lived even before his sendings confirmed the fact. Quickly hiding his sorrow, Big Axe stiffened as he learned the details of Blackfire's death.

"Catgut made an object lesson of him, Season said bitterly. He rubbed the wrists Shrike had just freed, then moved toward his parents and sister, all caught up in the relief of being reunited. Shrike freed Hatfeather into the waiting arms of her sister, Ferret, then dropped the tools. A pang of envy made her turn away from their joy.

Common sense and loyalty told Shrike that she must help the others escape. Rogue could be rescued later. At least he still lived, but as she watched others hugging, she found hope a very unsatisfactory thing to cling to.

"Let's get out of here," she urged.
 Softwill took the lead, which surprised Season, until he remembered her friendship with Thunderfoot. As they left their prison most of the captives grabbed lengths of chains or tools from the floor to use as weapons. Season gripped his father's knife in his hand, hoping all the while that there would be no need for makeshift arms.

When his sister sent that they were nearing the final corridor to his father's cave, Season began to relax. He found he felt an envious sort of pride for Softwill's accomplishment. How strange that his usually hapless older sister should be one of those who saved him.

Others in the party also showed relief that the ordeal was nearly over. Beside him, his mother inquired, by means of sending, whether she'd missed her chance to play midwife for Wildwood.

Whatever the response came was shattered by a gasp from Softwill. "Oh no!"
 Suddenly, the tunnels echoed with a commotion from up ahead. Standing just behind Softwill, Season could see a line of trolls blocking the way to the opening his father had made. From beyond, the light from the outside world shone dimly. Then, through that opening came a howl and a hurtling furred body. Another wolf followed. The trolls turned to meet the attack. The lead wolf, Big Axe's Sheba, leapt at the waiting troll only to be impaled on one of their heavy spears.

Big Axe groaned as if he'd been hit, but Softwill screamed. Drawing her dagger, she rushed at the trolls. The other elves followed, just as eager to protect their bond-friends. Softwill ducked as a troll jabbed a spear at her, then sliced up with her blade. She fumbled to pull the thin blade from the troll's belly.

The troll laughed and dropped his spear. Picking her up in his two hands, he only seemed amused as she tried to wriggle out of his grasp. Season moved in to aid her, plunging his knife into one of the troll's arms.



The troll brushed him aside, holding Softwill with one hand while he shoved Season against the wall. Then, before he could react, Season saw his sister being swung, club-like, toward him. As her head neared his, he ducked instinctively. The hideous crack of her skull against the tunnel wall made Season jump. He dodged as the troll released Softwill's weak ankles. One quick glance at her smashed face was enough to tell Season that his sister was beyond help.

Her killer stood above him, still weaponless. Season plunged his knife at him, but another elf pushed past, bumping him aside. With an anguished, animal-like growl, Twill swung his two-edged sword at the troll. The murderer's eyes were still on Season as the blade tore the troll's head from his neck.

Season turned to look at his father, but the face that stared back at him bore a crazed expression. Twill looked about him, spotted another troll and took after him, mindful of the danger.

"CUB-KILLERS!" he shouted as he hacked and slashed. Inspired by Twill's manic rage, the others were able to fight their way past the trolls. But, in the fighting, they'd been backed through the tunnels. Now, no one was sure of the way to Twill's Cave.

"Besides," Big Axe said, "that battle will have summoned more reinforcements than we can handle. There are dozens of exits that the trolls use. We'll just have to find one."

Big Axe wasn't sure why he was suddenly leading the party. He and Blackfire had always kept fairly much to themselves. But now, Season and Silverhair had their hands full trying to calm Twill. Dawnwatch seemed strangely distant, determined to find a way out, unwilling to take time to acknowledge the death of her daughter. Trace and the others seemed too wearied from their ordeal to take charge.

As they'd approached the captive's chamber, he'd lied to himself. Pretending that no sense of Blackfire's presence was no cause for alarm. But now, Big Axe had to be honest with himself. He tried to think rationally about their plight, and their chances for escape. At least he didn't have the wolves to worry about. Other than his own Sheba, Big Axe thought the other wolves had managed to flee back through Twill's Cave.

Remembering Sheba made him realize how alone he was. Not just in this party of elves with concerns for their own loved ones. Even back at the Holt, no one waited for him. Sheba and Blackfire were all he had.

Big Axe could not give in to the grief now. Instead he swallowed it, smothering it down somewhere deep inside till it could be expressed. Right now, he needed a clear mind.

All right, everyone, he sent to those who straggled behind him. **Which way do we go now?!" When no one answered he stopped and turned as they clustered up behind him. **There's no point in wandering aimlessly** he answered their questioning stares. **We have to have a plan.**"

A rumbling echoed through the corridors. He'd been hearing it for quite some time

and had assumed it was just another storm. Now, the constantness of the sound puzzled him. He shared his bewilderment with the others.

****It's Two Falls!**** Trace sent with a surge of renewed hope. ****There's a narrow ledge from the opening there. One troll's couldn't manage.****

They followed the sound of raging water till the fresh, moist air of the outside world began to pervade the stuffy cavern. As they neared their goal. But now, another sound scuffed into Big Axe's awareness, barely audible above the roaring of the waterfalls.

"TROLLS!"

The elves rushed forward, and with new hope, Big Axe spotted the opening that overlooked the lake. The elves pushed rapidly toward the cave mouth, the sound of their pursuers growing louder.

"We won't have time to creep along the ledge," Trace shouted from behind. **"It's too slow. Some of us will be trapped here."**

Big Axe had reached the opening. He stepped aside to let Shrike begin inching her way along the thin ledge. Trace was right.

"Just jump!" he told those who waited to follow Shrike onto the ledge. Big Axe moved back through the tunnel, squeezing past those who sought escape.

"Get everyone to jump," he told Trace as he passed. **"I'll hold them off as long as I can."**

Trace nodded, his eyes filled with both respect and sorrow.

"Hurry," Big Axe nodded. He turned to face the coming onslaught of trolls. Now, the grief he'd swallowed earlier welled up, shaping itself into an anger that would drive him in a killing fury much like Twill's earlier rage, though more controlled.



Dawnwatch balked at jumping.

"I'm not ready," she told Trace. Turning her mind Holtward, she tried again to summon assistance from the tribe. If the trolls followed, they'd need all the help they could get.

Behind them, the vicious sounds of battle raged. She knew Big Axe was still there, that he would never leave that tunnel alive.

"It's time for both of us to jump," she told Trace calmly.

"But Big Axe..."

Not willing to waste time, nor Big Axe's sacrifice, she grabbed her gambling friend's arm. Before he could shrug her away, she jumped off the ledge, pulling him with her.

She let go of him when they hit the water. Down she plunged, alone, into the

depths. Time seemed to stop as she went down farther and farther. Could she hold her breath long enough? Could she live through this? Did she want to?

The sight of her daughter's beautiful face slamming into the cave wall returned. Poor Tel. Just when she'd finally found the confidence she'd always lacked. Thinking of her child, Dawnwatch remembered all the things she'd neglected to do. She'd never told Softwill how proud she was of her persistence at trying to master skills which came so easily to others. Nor how she envied her daughter's innocent ability to care unselfishly, when she, herself was so cautious with affection. And Dawnwatch had never told her daughter how jealous she was to have her cub turn to Wavesong with all her childhood joys and troubles.

Dawnwatch realized that she'd stopped her descent. She wanted to breath and had to force herself not to inhale water. Desperately, she clawed her way to the surface and looked around. Several other heads bobbed in the water around her.

"Over here!" came a shout from the shore. She looked up to see Skylight waving at them from the lake bank. A spear hurtled by, splashing her as it plunged into the water. Dawnwatch looked up to see two trolls crowded into the opening in the cliff wall. Neither was armed now, so they provided no threat. She swam quickly toward the shore and safety. Tears flowed from her eyes, mingling with the lake water as she swam. Poor Tel.

By the time Truearrow and Skylight had pulled her from the water, Dawnwatch had her emotions stable once more. Her grief was too private to share with anyone. Besides, these were times that required cool logic and calm action. She looked back at the cave mouth. The trolls were gone. Apparently, they'd given up.

She and her tribe were safe, for now. But what of the future? Queen Catgut's forces outnumbered the elves by four or five to one. Even an incorrigible gambler like Trace would hesitate to take those odds...

* * * * *

NEXT: Part Four of the Troll War picks up with "Strange Alliances," also written by Linda Woeltjen. The Alliance of the Limber Folk and the Resistance Trolls decide they will need more help if they are to win against the new troll queen. Other known elven Holts are too far away to be of help, so they must look closer to home for allies...

