

The End

TIMBERS

Vol. 3, No. 21



Random & Whiskerwift

TIMBERS



Newsletter of the Timber Valley Holt

Vol. 3, No. 21/22

Dear Friends,

May 1990. This marks the sixth anniversary of the first publication of our newsletter, TIMBERS. It also marks the last. By now, the entire membership should have received my letter announcing the fate of this Holt. For those who may not have gotten the letter, the message is simple.

The Holt funds have been dry since Spring of '89. Interest in this Holt by members has been so low that the amount of people we've been losing due to non-renewals averages about ten member per issue released. This means we have less than half the people now than we did one year ago.

I have received a few stories from members, but not enough to keep this publication running. Even the Troll War storyline has suffered. All of this, in addition to several other minor reasons, has built up over time, to the inevitable decision I have had to make: closing down this Holt.

This issue contains all the usable stories still in my files, with the exception of two that are very long, both of which are mine. Since we will not be able to finish the Troll War, I have printed an overview explaining each part of the tale, up to the end. There are also three post-War stories for you to read.

It was my original intention to keep publishing until the entire Troll War was printed, but this year is going to be financially tight for me, and I simply can't afford it. Besides, I've been in EQ Fandom actively for over a decade and it's time for me to move on to other projects of importance.

All in all, the Timber Valley Holt has had a good life, and I've not regretted starting this group, but the time has now come to put down the pen, shut off the lights and say good-bye to our pointed-eared friends.

I wish all of you the best, and hope all your life dreams come true.

May Bright Stars Light Your Paths!

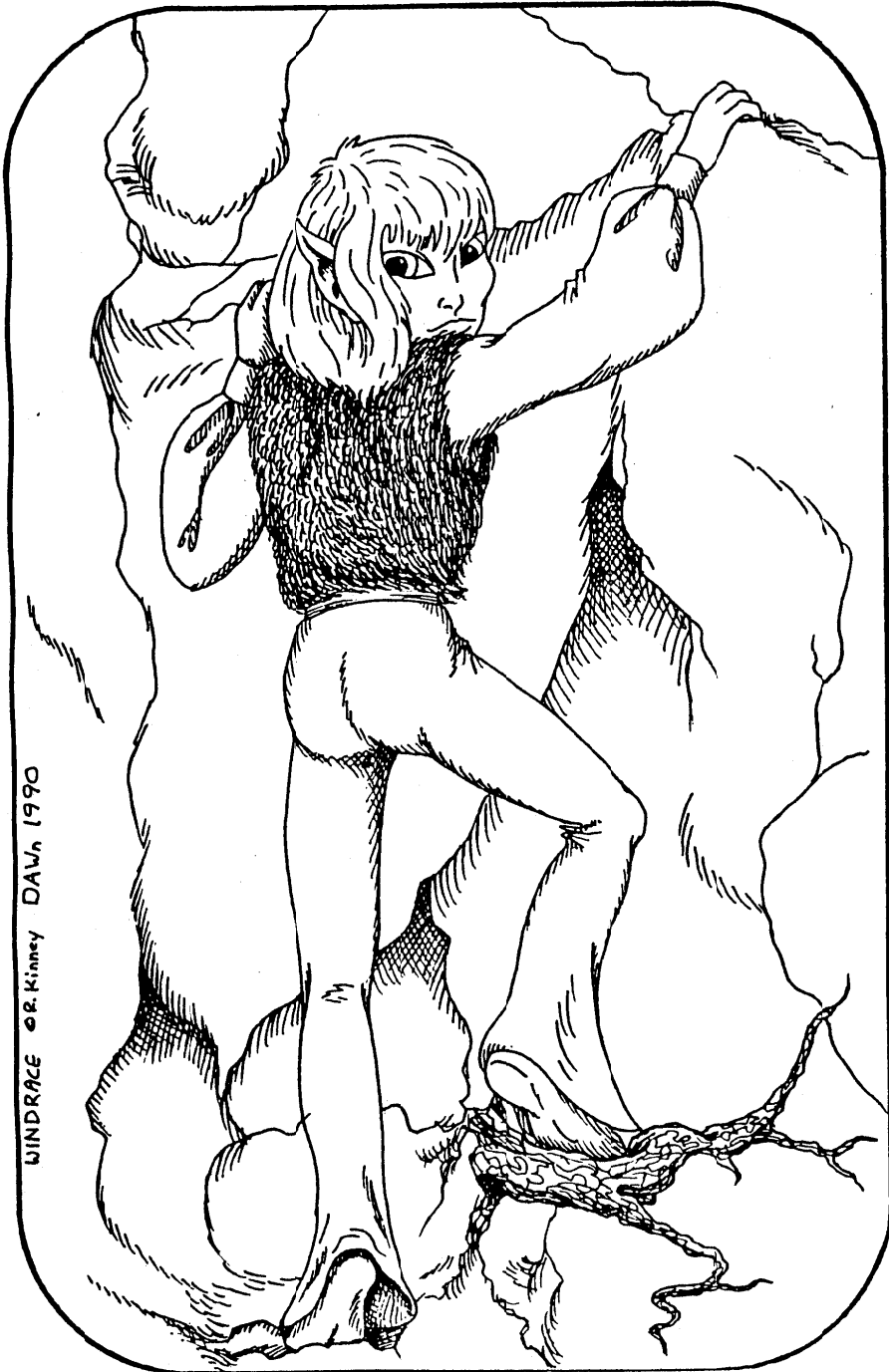
Mooncrest & Family



THE DANCE OF NEW GREENTIME

DANCERS: Roave, Skylight, Mooncrest

SPECTATORS: Duskdew, Wildwood, Evenfell, Ivory



LIFETIMES

SOUL'S TOUCH
by Rich Kinney
DF-27 LF

"Father, he's waking up!" Freshwind exclaimed as she stepped into the Healer's dwelling carrying a bowl of fruit in her arms.

At the back of his dwelling, Darkwell rose trembling up on one elbow. The exertion of his previous efforts etched upon his face. "Keep him still. If he moves too much he'll tear apart all that I've done!"

Silverleaf, who had been attending her father moments before, climbed over and lightly straddled the battered form of Windrace. She gently grasped his wrists and crossed her ankles over his knees. Leaning forward, she placed her chin on his left shoulder and pressed her head against his to restrict any movements.

The elf below would have in any other instance given his soul name to two hands of trolls to have her do that, but all he could do then was grin and try to double up in pain.

Easy, Windrace, Silverleaf sent, **Don't move. You'll only hurt yourself more.**

Although he didn't wake, Windrace apparently understood the sending and his movements lessened. Silverleaf carefully pulled herself away from him as Trilight edged his way in and did what he could to make his friend more comfortable.

Freshwind picked up an empty waterskin and turned to go refill it for Darkwell. At the entryway she paused for a moment and then looked over her shoulder at Silverleaf.

"What made him do such a stupid thing like that?" Silverleaf asked of her sister.

"Windrace -- or Foxvine?" With a sigh and slow shake of her head, Freshwind turned and walked out.

* * * * *

The elf's fingers were more than a bit sore. Windrace pushed the fingertips of his right hand into a small crack and pulled himself up higher. He searched to his left for another handhold, which had been getting harder to find the further he climbed. His probing fingers found a small ledge -- not much, but something. Taking hold of it, he lifted his right foot off the branch that maintained a lonely vigil on the sheer cliff face. His probing foot failed to locate an anchor point and after several unsuccessful attempts, he returned it to the branch.

Against his better judgement, Windrace looked down over his right shoulder. The view didn't petrify him, but he didn't spend long looking at the panorama of the Valley spread out behind him. He closed his eyes and took a slow deep breath. As he let it out the elf wished for a large cup of dreamberry wine.

Windrace looked up. It was hard to tell how far it was to the top, but no doubt existed in his mind that it was a long way. He flexed his hands, one at a time, to help restore circulation to his fingers then leaned his head against the rock and tried to rest.

After a few moments Windrace tried again for a higher foothold. Three tries later he gained an anchor in a narrow crack. Twisting his foot around so that his toes would fit in the near-vertical gap, he pushed up and reached for a tiny ledge. His fingers missed and only the grip he maintained with his other hand kept him company with the rock face. Another try yielded the same results. He took several deep breaths and with a fixed stare at his next handhold, he tensed himself for one more try.

"This is going to hurt," was Windrace's last calm thought before the panic of knowing he had failed took over.

* * * * *

By the time Trilight heard about the dare Foxvine had placed on Windrace, it was too late to stop his friend.

"Will you get down from there?! You'll get hurt -- or worse!" he shouted up to Windrace, already up about ten times his own height.

"Can't you see I'm concentrating?" Windrace shouted back. "Don't worry...I'm almost there!"

"You aren't anywhere near the top! Now, come on and get down!" The elf above didn't answer, but reached for a new handhold and pulled himself up higher.

"Can't you for once just let a dare go by without having to do it?" Trilight asked. When he got no response from Windrace, he continued. "Why is it that every time someone dares you to do something, you do it? Just what are you trying to do?"

Tired of shouting, Windrace sent, "Will you please be quiet? Foxvine doesn't believe that I can climb Sheercliff and I'm going to show him that I can."

Stung by the mild rebuke, Trilight fell silent but remained to watch his friend continue his foolhardy venture.

More times than he wanted to admit, Trilight's virtual sanity was tested as he watched Windrace grapple his way up the cliff. It was by slim chance that the elf somehow had missed Windrace's slip, but he stared in mute disbelief as he watched the hite-haired elf land amidst a small growth of thick brush. A scant moment passed before Trilight's legs obeyed his command to move.

"Windrace has fallen from the Sheercliff!" Trilight open-sent. "I think he's hurt bad. We're just hubward of Soul's Rest. Send a Healer -- quick!" He was slightly relieved when Darkwell answered his call immediately.

Trilight reached Windrace. Pushing aside the leafy barrier, he found Windrace sprawled face up, one arm behind his back and the other straight out sideways. One look and he knew that one of his legs was broken in at least one place, possibly the other one also.

He held a finger to Windrace's upper lip feeling for a breath. For several tense moments he felt nothing. Then it came -- very shallow and irregular.

"You're going to be all right. Darkwell is coming. Hang on, Windrace. Do you hear me? Windrace?"

A faint, broken reply finally surfaced from the depths. "I...hear you...already. Guess...Foxvine was right...huh?...Trilight? I feel numb...you still here?...Trilight?"

"I'm still here, Windrace. I won't leave. Don't you go and leave me. Do you hear? Don't you dare leave me, Windrace!"

Trilight's hands were trembling and several tears of frustration began to slowly cascade down his cheeks. He knew a Healer was who Windrace needed most and felt so helpless looking at the battered elf before him. With what he knew about healing, not knowing how would be best.

Trilight looked over Windrace again carefully. With the exception of minor cuts, scrapes and what will be many bruises, the damage was internal.

"Windrace, don't you leave me!" he repeated. "Don't even think about it!"

A faint reply came several moments later. "...if you think that...I'm going to...let you have the last word..."

Windrace's face contorted to a grimace and his chest shuddered. "...tell Foxvine...he was right...I couldn't do it...he was right...he was..."

"Tell him yourself!" Trilight sent fiercely. "You're not going anywhere! I won't let you!"

A hand upon Trilight's shoulder startled him. Darkwell took appraisal of Windrace when he knelt beside him. Placing his hands on the prone elf, the Healer closed his eyes and concentrated.

"He is very weak, Trilight," he murmured. "You must be with him, to help him -- or help me." Darkwell fell silent, slipping deep into a healing trance.

For a moment, Trilight didn't understand his meaning. Then it hit him. "Windrace? Darkwell is here. You'll be okay now." When he didn't get any response, Trilight placed his forehead against Windrace's and lock-sent, deeper than he ever had before. "Windrace, I know you're still here. I'm giving you something to help you back. Something to draw strength from. Strength to live. Listen Windrace, I am Tera. Tera. Come to me, Windrace."

A long pause followed. Then a faint voice drifted up from the void. "T-Tera? Tera? Where are you? You sound close?"

"I'm here, Windrace. I'm here to bring you back. Come with me."

Trilight never broke his sending with Windrace, even while he was being carried back to Darkwell's dwelling. Later, at the Healer's assurance did Trilight sever the bond.

* * * * *

Almost a hand of days passed before Windrace opened his eyes. He noted after a quick look around that he was in his own dwelling. He tried to sit up and was rewarded with a deep throbbing which slashed across his midsection, causing him to gasp aloud and fall back.

"Windrace! What are you doing?!" came an alarmed voice from behind.

"Trying to...ugh...sit up, you fool."

"Well, fog-noggin, don't. You're not ready for that." Trilight's face looked serious, but he was grinning inwardly. Windrace was acting like himself again.

"Is that a dare I hear?" Windrace cast a mischievous glance at his friend.

Trilight thought about it for several moments, then pursed his lips and looked Windrace in the eye. "No," he sat down on the furs. "If it was, you'd probably kill yourself trying to prove me wrong."

"I almost killed myself at the cliff."

Trilight eyed him. "Yes, you did."

Windrace returned his gaze. "But I didn't. I almost did, but because of you I still breathe. I owe you a lot."

"You're my friend, Windrace. You don't owe me anything."

Windrace slowly reached over and clasped Trilight's hand in his. "Yes, I do," he lock-sent. "I owe you my very life. You gave me something very important. You gave me Tera. Tera, you gave me life."

He squeezed Trilight's hand. The archer swallowed, not sure how to answer. Windrace continued. "Tera, I can be no less than this. I am Anai. I am still Anai because of you, Tera."

They looked at each other in silence for a long time, absorbing the significance of what they did.

Trilight broke the silence. "Does this mean that you'll stop pulling those double-cursed stunts you do?"

Windrace thought about it for a moment, glanced around the room, and then looked at Trilight. "Probably not..."



End

HOWL
DF 16 LF
by Maria Manemann

The wolf pack had come out onto the flat grassy plains from the nearby woodlands to hunt. The great migrating herds had come on their long journey away from the coming cold. Long-legged Tall Deer and lumbering Shaggy Bulls mixed with skyfire-fast Springers and swift Grasseaters in a great river of hoof and horn, shaggy bodies and dust clouds that passed for days without break. The wolves fed well on the weak and foolish. With bellies full and flesh on their bones, there was time for napping and play, for wolf and non-wolf alike.

The elf's name was Sya, but no one knew this. Not that it really mattered for she had long since dispensed with any need to be named. The pack thought of her as simply the, Other One, and to the ones she bonded with she was Friend. In a time long gone, when she lived among her own kind, she had had other names - Winterhowl, Whitewolf - but these were vague recollections from a past she rarely concerned herself with. She knew who she was and she was Sya; no other name mattered.

Sya stood up and stretched, enjoying the warmth of the late sun on her sun-gold skin. The warmth was best enjoyed now. Fine lines feathered her strong-boned face as she squinted into the sinking sun and tested the air. Already she could taste frost on the wind. Suddenly she grunted in surprise as a gangly bundle of long legs and red fur hit her squarely on the back and sent her flying. Rolling out into a defensive crouch, a snarl broke from her as cat-yellow eyes glared at her assailant. The young wolf - an adolescent barely grown into oversized feet - was quivering from nose to tail tip in an invitation to play. Her annoyance couldn't survive that look and she grinned. Falling into the game, she gave a growl of warning and charged the wolf, knocking him off his big paws.

A wrestling match followed that sent them rolling through the dry, fragrant grasses. Yapping with excitement, her red-furred bond-friend broke free and dashed off, a laughing Sya not far behind. The game of chase and tag took the wolf and elf a good distance from where the pack rested. Sya was about to turn back when Racer suddenly stood still, his nose working furiously. Before his puzzled bond-friend could question him, the wolf gave a wuff and dashed off through the tall grass. Growling her exasperation, Sya followed, idly picking the grass out of her snow-white hair. Racer was no longer a cub but he still had more curiosity than sense. No telling where his nose would lead him.

What had drawn the rambunctious wolf was unexpected but not unknown. Hadn't realized we were this close, she mused as she gazed down into the green valley sunken into the surrounding plains. After warily testing the often treacherous cliff rim for a solid footing, Sya knelt next to her grinning bond-friend, idly stroking his ruff as she stared brooding over the place of her birth. The setting sun threw deepening shadows over the dense forest on the valley floor and the winding river, bouncing a few last rays off the rim of sheer cliffs. The twilight breeze brought up a barrage of smells to Sya and her companion. Breathing in deeply, the elf sorted through the scents. Strongest was the acrid smell of wood smoke from the humans' cook fires. Behind it was the cool sweetness of the river and green growing things. Another, just barely perceptible from the cliff top, tickled Sya's nose and other things. How long had it been since she lived in the valley, among her own kind? Sya nudged her memory, trying to see beyond past hunts and snows. Vaguely she reclaimed a few images of old companions, of hunts and howls and family long dead but could not get a clear grasp on them. Losing patience with the futile exercise, she gave it up with a snort. What did it matter, anyway? Yesterday no longer mattered at all. Her place was with the pack now and the Timber Folk did well enough without her.

Racer whined and shifted his weight, cocking his head at her in puzzlement. Sya could read his question. There were other Friends here. Were they going to see them? Scratching him between the ears, she sent affectionately, **No, friend. We belong here, not with them.** Getting to her feet, she slapped him affectionately. **Come.** She looked back at the peaceful valley one last time. Faintly she could hear the hunting howl of the Holt pack as it awakened to greet the night. She heard and was moved by the old, familiar wild song. Cocking back her head, she joined with Racer to echo that call.

The powerful, clear-voiced call rang across the breadth of the valley. In the human camp, sentries shuddered at the eerie sound and stoked the fires higher, muttering curses against the spirits of the night. Across the river, the elven hunters exchanged puzzled looks and a few of the wolves ventured to answer the challenge. But the strange howl reverberated off the valley walls, faded into silence and was not repeated.

END

Golden One

Be you a stranger to my campfire?
Come and beside me sit.
The stories of old are all around us -
Are you one who understands them?

Golden one, are fires burning within your eyes?
I am captivated by their flames.
In them, I see someone strong and handsome -
I am now a prisoner to your soul.

As yonder moon is rising,
Dance away your savage hunger with me.
My heart beats a steady boom-boom -
While our hunters chant their ancient melodies.

Golden one, with hair of whisper softness,
Steal away this night with me.
Together, we'll discover -
The magic of which the elders sing.

Nancy Strattan



Dawn 1989

RELATIVELY SPEAKING

by Valerie Bowe
DF 23 WF

Skylight padded swiftly and silently along the upper limbs of the tree canopy, his nimble feet practically dancing from branch to branch as he strove to keep up with the blue-white shadow trotting through the snow covered forest below.

I don't believe you know where we're going at all, you old faker, Skylight sent.

The four year old arctic wolf cast an amused glance over his shoulder at his Elf friend, and returned a swift image of a chase with Skylight falling behind.

The Elf lad chuckled softly and quickened his pace, catching up with Drifter just before the pair came to a snow blanketed clearing. He flung himself recklessly out of the tree, knocking Drifter off his feet. They rolled over and over in the powdery drifts, growling in mutual affection as each tried their best to get a play hold on the other's throat. They were evenly matched, each knowing the other's strengths and weaknesses too well. Drifter made a playful snap at Skylight's chin. Startled, the Elf tumbled backwards onto his rump and the moment his guard was down, Drifter was at his throat.

"Fairly won, little brother," Skylight panted, laughing. "But next time..."

Drifter rose, his ice blue eyes fairly laughing and he wagged his tail once as if to say, 'next times don't count, cub!'

Skylight sat up and brushed snow off his bare arms. It was mid-winter and most Timber Valley residents considered the weather sometimes harsh; but having been raised in a tundra environment, Skylight found the area's winter comfortably mild.

He stood and shook snow from his new one-piece admiring, as he did so, the style, fit, and especially the color. It was somewhat of a novelty to wear color so boldly without a thought to camouflage.

When he had arrived at this Holt called Timber Valley, the leathers he was wearing were in admittedly poor shape since they'd been his only garments for the past two years.

He had, after asking around, placed himself in the hands of Woodblaze and her daughter, Oriole, bowing to their superior skills in the art of clothing construction and design.

He had been quite pleased when the auburn-haired maiden had presented him with the new outfit. The one-piece was sleeveless, made of soft leather dyed a rich blue which complemented, though he didn't realize it, his hair which was the color of burnished copper. Though he had expected fancy embroidery since that was her most sought after skill, Woodblaze had apparently divined his simpler tastes. Or perhaps, Skylight thought with a low, rumbling chuckle, she had simply taken a look at Drifter and decided to save her more intricate handiwork for something that didn't need to be so hard wearing.

The one-piece was fringed along the outer legs, descending into cuffed, short, white fur boots. There was a wrap jacket too, the work of Woodblaze's ebony-haired daughter, but as Skylight had noted, the weather was positively balmy, so he thought he'd save the jacket for special occasions.

Skylight ran a hand through his curls and peered up at the slate-grey sky which backlit the bare branches of the trees. It was well into dawn and Skylight was drowsy. He was usually asleep by now in the snug, fur-lined hometree Wildwood had shaped for him, but he had stayed awake this morning for a particular purpose.

He loped through the knee high drifts with Drifter at his side. The pair came out by a creek and found an elf male with straight hair the color of bright red copper, bent over the Minnowbrook, chipping at the ice to get at the water running beneath.

A wolf, its fur a warm, golden brown, growled a challenge and the elf looked up inquiringly from his cupped hands. Drifter advanced, stiff-legged, and rumbled deep in his throat. The younger wolf lowered his head defensively and held his ground. The elf by the stream looked at the brown wolf in surprise. "Huntsong?"

The two wolves circled warily, taking each other's measure.

"You're Coppermane?" Skylight asked. He watched the confrontation with mild interest from the corner of his eye. Dominance fights were to be expected when a new wolf joined a pack.

"You're new here," Coppermane stated, his cautious yet matter of fact tone indicating he chose to reserve judgment on the stranger.

Skylight shrugged. "Been here nearly two moons now." He turned to gaze into

the blue brightness of Coppermane's eyes. "I come from Brightstar and Truearrow's home tribe. Usually I'm asleep during the day so there are several elves I haven't met yet."

Coppermane tilted his head, listening with interest to the thrumming undertone in Skylight's low drawl.

The two wolves erupted into snarls and leaped at each other, teeth clacking together as they each tried to get the other to submit.

"Has your wolf friend made his place in the pack yet?" Coppermane asked curiously.

"Some wins, some losses. Your Holt's pack doesn't seem to care for his coloring, but he's holding his own."

Coppermane nodded. While he admired the snowy whiteness of the strange wolf's pelt, he knew wolves tended to be hostile toward oddly colored strangers. He turned back to the elf. "You're called...?"

"Skylight. I was searching for you."

"For me?"

"I heard you make those things that hold water."

"Jars?"

"Whatever. It would be handy to have something in my tree hollow that holds more than my water pouch can. I'm not sure I have anything to trade," he added uncertainly. He didn't think Coppermane would be particularly interested in the variety of threads he was creating for Woodblaze and Oriole.

"No need to barter," Coppermane said amiably. He relaxed and propped his back against the rough bark of a pine. "I can provide something."

The wolf fight ended suddenly and the wolves stalked with dignity toward their respective elf friends, their relations to each other settled with minimum injury.

Skylight leaned across Drifter's shoulders, splaying fingers in the wolf's thick fur. "Still," he said, "my skills are yours if you ever have need. I'm a corder. I could make...um-m, string for necklaces. You do make jewelry, right? I was told you did." Drifter yawned mightily and Skylight scratched the pale wolf behind the ears.

Coppermane nodded. "I could use some cording. It's a bargain then. Where could I find you?"

Skylight rolled his eyes. "Ask Duskdew." He grinned wolfishly, recalling the green-eyed, towheaded flirt. "She could direct you. Believe me!" His eyes, the same burnished metal hue as his hair, twinkled with amusement.

Drifter stretched, yawning even more ostentatiously. Skylight thumped the wolf affectionately on the shoulder and took the wolf's pointed suggestion. "I'm off to my furs. If you don't want to leave the jar outside my hometree, I could meet you here tomorrow's dawn for the trade. It's true that these jar things won't leak, right?"

Coppermane smiled. He rather liked the stranger and his casual sense of humor. "I'll gift you my finest. Don't worry."

Skylight nodded and turned to trot back the way he had come, absently waving a farewell as he went. He almost didn't hear his final words as Coppermane mounted Huntsong to go his own way.

"I have some work of which even Clayshard would be proud."

Skylight had gone several steps before the words registered, but when he turned abruptly to question, Coppermane and Huntsong had already melted into the woodlands.

Could it be...?

Skylight almost ran after him, almost sent, then Drifter butted his thigh impatiently. It was a question that could wait until tomorrow. The elf was tired...and not quite ready to be disappointed.

* * *

To his surprise, Skylight found Coppermane waiting for him when he emerged from his hometree late that evening.

"I took a nap midday," Coppermane said, a trifle embarrassed. "I thought perhaps you might want to go hunting. You and your wolf, that is." He jerked his head to indicate where Drifter stood, arrogantly challenging the alpha male of the wolfpack. Drifter was getting cut up for his pains, Skylight noted, but not as badly as he had expected. The years they had spent travelling alone had strengthened the wolf and he wasn't the barely grown cub he had been when they had started out.

"I'd enjoy a hunt," Skylight said. He glanced down just before he could trip over something, then squatted to pick up a colorfully patterned container that had been set between the roots of his tree. "This is your work?" he asked admiringly.

"I made it this past Leaf Fall," Coppermane said, modestly deflecting the implied compliment.

"But what is it made out of?"

"Mud."

"Really?" Skylight arched his eyebrows, impressed. "How'd you learn to do this?"

"My mother taught me."

Drifter finally submitted, baring his throat to the pack leader. Then the white wolf rose and started in on a young grey who had the temerity to think Drifter might be tired and give in quickly to him too. Coppermane and Skylight sat down patiently on a protruding tree root to wait.

"Were you born here?" Skylight asked conversationally.

Coppermane glanced at him, thinking that was an odd question. "I was born at a Holt called Bright Mountain."

"Why did you leave, if you don't mind my asking?"

Coppermane shrugged. "I don't mind. My parents disappeared and I set out to find them if I could."

"Oh," Skylight said. Coppermane's parents had disappeared together. Well, he had expected to be disappointed. He stood as Drifter trotted up with tongue lolling out, looking insufferably pleased with himself. "If you're finished with your silly squabbles..."

Drifter cast him an injured look. Pack rank was serious business.

"...we'd like to go hunting."

Drifter's ears perked up. Coppermane sent for Huntsong. The two wolves sniffed noses, then trotted into the depths of the woods, their elf friends on their backs.

* * *

It felt like flying, their mad dash through the snow covered valley with dark tree trunks whipping by them and the crisp, cold wind stinging their cheeks. The stag bounded ahead of the two howling, wolf-mounted elves, its white tail flashing its alarm. The deer was a good deal smaller than caribou, and Skylight's mouth watered at that thought, but deer was deer. He gave himself over to the wolf song, clinging to Drifter's back with prey scent heavy in his nostrils, his mind on nothing else.

Wolves were not made for high speeds and distances, and Skylight reached for an arrow before the deer could pull too far ahead. Coppermane and Huntsong were slightly ahead, harrying the buck with tooth and blade in an attempt to slow its flight.

Intent on aiming, Skylight failed to see the low tree limb in his path. Drifter saw and tried to dodge. The wolf's sudden swerve, unfortunately attempted over a patch of ice, made the elf's shot go wild as the limb caught him squarely across the chest. "Whoof!" Skylight tumbled off Drifter's back and hit the ground hard. He heard Drifter's claws scrabbling on the ice as the wolf skidded. There was a surprised yelp from Huntsong and a scuffling and Skylight tried frantically to clear his head. A silence descended upon the Valley forest.

Coppermane?

Right here. Coppermane's sending sounded rather stunned and Skylight looked up to see elf, wolves, and the dying stag sprawled before him.

"High Ones!" Skylight panted. "What happened to you?"

"To me! What happened to you?"

"I got whacked by a low slung branch," Skylight said, chagrined. "Still not used to hunting in close vegetation, I suspect."

Coppermane chuckled, unable to contain his mirth. "I cut the stag's hamstring when I least expected it. The deer went end over end. Huntsong went end over end. And I went end over end." He grinned, his blue eyes dancing. "What a sight we four must have been!"

Skylight burst into laughter of his own but the wolves didn't look the least amused. Huntsong rose, stalked with dignity toward the kill, and sniffed hungrily around where Coppermane had finally managed to cut the deer's throat. Drifter got up and tore into the stag's belly and the elves took the hint and followed suit.

Afterward, when the four were sated, Coppermane stretched out on a sun-warmed rock and idly watched Huntsong gnaw red scraps off a nearly stripped bone. "Ah-h, I'm glad my parents didn't see that hunt," he said. "They'd never let me hear the end of it."

"As long as it winds up in your belly," Skylight quoted his own father.

Coppermane looked at him curiously. "My mother used to say that, too."

Skylight crouched on his haunches between the gnarled roots of an old oak, meticulously cleaning his obsidian knife. "Your mother..." he ventured hesitantly. "You mentioned a name this morning past. Clayshard. Was that her?"

Coppermane nodded.

Skylight looked at him intently. There was something about Coppermane's features that reminded him of a long ago sending. "Did she...did she look like this?" He gave Coppermane a rather shaky sending, for it was only a memory of the other sending, but Coppermane jerked upright, startled.

"You knew my mother?" he asked incredulously.

Skylight hesitated again. "No-o. But... Tell me about your parents. Were they Recognized?"

Coppermane shook his head. My mother Recognized a stranger after she was already lifemated to another. I've never met my blood father."

Skylight considered for a moment, then rose and sheathed his knife. "Come with me back to the Holt. I have something...meant for you."



The pair gave what was left of their kill over to the wolfpack and climbed up into the dimness of Skylight's hometree. Skylight lit the pinched wick of his stone lamp with a coal stolen from an outside campfire, then rummaged through his meager belongings. Like all his tribesfolk, he preferred to travel light, bearing only necessities; the clothes on his back, his bow and knife, and a length of strong string which had uses ranging from making a snare to serving as a fishing line. But when Skylight had parted from his father several years ago, he had also carried one other thing which was no necessity. He pulled it from under a corner of his sleepfurs and gave it to Coppermane.

"What is it?" Coppermane asked, turning the small figure over in his hands. It was a wolf image, carved out of white material, and the flickering lamplight made it seem almost alive. "This is ivory, isn't it?"

Skylight nodded. "Our sire--"

Coppermane jerked his head up, his round eyes growing even rounder with surprise.

"--gave that to me. He carved it himself. For you, he said, if ever I should find you. I didn't know your name. Only that I had an older brother in the world and a mother called Clayshard and a sending of what she looked like."

"A brother..." Coppermane sat still, trying to assimilate this revelation.

Skylight also sat quiet. With so few clues to go on, he had never actually expected to find his sibling. He had kept the figurine solely because he had promised his father, and because it reminded him of home. But Skylight had always had his father's love and affection. Distance could not erase the bond, nor time his heritage. The wolf belonged to Coppermane now, and for a time, the carving and Skylight would be all Coppermane had of their father.

The brothers sat in silence for a long time, until their combined breath and body heat warmed the snug den and the silence grew comfortable and easy, as if they had always been together. It would take time to get to know each other, but for now...

Skylight curled up into a shadowed corner and eyed his bemused brother. "So..." he said softly. "Tell me about our mother."

*



Redthorn

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TVH Mary Lopez



Nighthstep and Freshwind

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Hushleaf

TERRELL SMITH
© 1988



ROGUE
Bill Nixons
© 88

The Complete
TROLL WAR OVERVIEW

PART I "WANDERING SPIRIT"

While Duskdew and Quicksilver are out hunting together, they are attacked by a group of three Trolls. During the fighting, the Trolls are killed, but not before one of them deals a near-fatal blow to Duskdew. With Duskdew dying, Quicksilver takes her back to the Holt. Duskdew comes to believe that she has already died, and her spirit leaves her body before the Healers can get to her.

Goldenbraid and Greeneyes manage to heal her body, but her spirit is still gone, unaware that her body still lives. Quicksilver sends to her constantly, trying to call her back.

While in spirit form, Duskdew meets her long-dead parents. Her remorse over being dead changes to joy at the reunion. However, a stranger (who had "gone out" in spirit form) sees the reunion and overhears her soul-name being used.

Instead of taking her with them to the place the dead dwell, Duskdew's parents guide her back to where she belongs -- her own body. She is put back inside and awakens from her comatose state.

Quicksilver is happy to have her back, but Duskdew is suddenly violent. She wanted to go with her parents. She feels trapped inside her limited body's shell. Afterwards, she becomes moody and snappish. She wants to join her parents again...

PART II "THE THUNDER BELOW"

A few days have passed since Duskdew awoke from her comatose state. Nightstep is uneasy about letting a group go to the caverns for some trading & gambling. At first he won't let them go, but Trace talks him into changing his mind. The party consists of Blackfire, Hatfeather, Ivory, Knifeblade, Skyflame and Trace.

Several days later, the trading group still hasn't returned. Concerned that they may have gotten carried away with their gambling, Nightstep sends another group to fetch them. This group is made up of Dawnwatch, Ferret, Redlace, Rogue and Season.

When they get to the door of the Trolls' domain, they are led inside and then quickly knocked unconscious. When they awaken, they are in a cage in Queen Catgut's throne chamber. Redlace tries to use his levitation talent to threaten the queen to letting them go, but she laughs and kills Blackfire in order to make a point. Afterward, she has Rogue taken to her personal quarters for her own purposes.

The Resistance hears that Catgut has captured two groups of Elves and has plans to attack the Holt. She wants rockshapers and other slaves.

Since Dripstone is known to visit the Elves on occasion, the Resistance sends him to warn the Holt. However, a spy of Catgut's discovers Dripstone's mission and attempts to stop him.

Dripstone has to fight the spy, and manages to escape (using tactics the Elves taught him), though he has been injured with non-fatal wounds.

Dripstone manages to make it all the way to the Holt, where he enters through the Thorn Barrier and calls for the chief. He manages to tell Nightstep that King Grubmoss has been assassinated and that Catgut has taken Elves as prisoners. Then he collapses from his wounds.

PART III "BLOOD FRENZY"

Though it is the first time she has ever worked on a Troll, Goldenbraid heals Dripstone's wounds. He is still weak from loss of blood, so the Healer orders him to rest a couple of days.

While in the company of the Timber Folk, Thunderfoot (as he is known by the Elves) goes into detail about what he has heard about Catgut. After that, he tells them of the revolt and the Resistance Group who have remembered who Catgut is and what she did in the far past. He was sent to warn the Elves that the new Queen has captured Elves and that the Resistance wants to enlist their alliance.

After hearing all this, Nightstep holds a Council, where they decide on a plan to rescue their captured friends.

The rescue party enters through Twill's Cave, which is near the Caverns for a secret intrusion. On this party are fighters: Blg Axe, Frost, Shrike, and Silverhair. A rockshaper may be needed, so Twill goes also. Although not a fighter, Softwill goes with them to act as a guide. (Dripstone had often taken her to see the Kingdom, so she knows the passageways better than any other in the party.)

They make it inside and find their way to the place where the captives are held. The guards are quickly subdued. With the exception of Blackfire (who was killed

earlier) and Rogue (who was taken to another part of the caverns), all the prisoners are freed. But, troll reinforcements block their exit. They have to fight their way out. In the first bit of the fighting, Softwill is killed. Twill (her father) sees it and goes berserk. The Elves manage to subdue the Trolls, but had lost their way in the tunnels during the fighting.

They are attacked again as they find an exit near Two Falls. There are too many of them to creep along the narrow ledge of rock to the shore, so they take their chances by diving into the lake, beside the water falls. Big Axe stays at the back of the group, fighting off troll pursuers to allow the others escape time. However, before he can flee, he is slain.

The surviving Elves make their way back to the lake shore, but they soon realize that the Trolls have not followed. Truly a miracle, no one was drowned in the torrential fall of water from Two Falls. Another batch of Elves are waiting for them on the shore and help the groups return to the Holt.

PART IV "STRANGE ALLIANCES"

The rescue party has just returned to the Holt. Afraid to send more Elves into the Kingdom, but unwilling to abandon Rogue, Nightstep enlists the Troll Resistance to locate and free the prisoner (for they could walk the passages more inconspicuously than Elves).

At the same time, the Alliance (the Troll Resistance + the Timber Folk) sees that they are outnumbered and realize that they need more help. After much arguing and debating, it is finally decided to try to enlist the aid of the Humans. The idea is almost preposterous, but they decide to try it.

Elves who have knowledge of the Humans' language are chosen to go to the Village with the proposal. It won't be easy, since the Valley is still divided by the long feud. This party should consist of: Grassy, Hoodwink, Mooncrest, Redlace, and Two Star. (A few trolls, too).

When the elven party arrives at the Village, the Humans panic! Their leader, Deta, is on his death-bed. The shaman, Ariv, tries to instigate the warriors into slaying the elves, but Deta decides to hear out the elven party first.

Mooncrest acts as diplomat, giving the proposal to the Humans. While there are sympathetic Humans in the tribe, Ariv talks Deta out of agreement. Deta believes the Elves' story somewhat, but doesn't trust them. The territorial feuding has been long, and old fears die hard. He does, however, allow them to be escorted safely back to their own side of the Valley.

One of Catgut's spies had been trailing the Alliance group to the Human Village, and overhears their plans to enlist the Tall Ones' help. He rushes back to report the incident to the Queen, but before learning of the Humans' refusal. Catgut hadn't anticipated this, so to thwart the new alliance between Elves & Humans, she orders an attack on the Village, intending to wipe out all there.

It almost works as planned, but the Alliance finds out about it barely in time to warn the Humans. They still don't trust the Elves, but decide to be on the defensive, just in case. They find out the Elves weren't lying. A few Humans and several Elves (Diver, Sandstorm, Shadowstar, & Talon) are killed in the ensuing battle, fighting a desperate rearguard action against vastly superior forces. Many Humans are killed, but not so many as would have been if they hadn't been warned.

Ariv is killed by the Troll invaders. Without Ariv to council him, Deta seeks the truth in the Elves' words and decides to ally his people with the Timber Folk. They now have a common foe and need each other. With Ariv gone, his apprentice, Tana, becomes Shaman.

Silverleaf's newborn daughter, Teal, was born just before the War. (Trilight is the father) and Wildwood is due to have her children [twins, Random (m) & Whisperswift (f)] at any moment. (Mooncrest is the father, but they are not lifemated -- Grassy is Wildwood's lovmate).

Although the Elves and Humans are allied, there are still Humans who hate Elves, and Elves who still hate Humans. Others will accept the other as friends right off, but others will still have trouble.

PART V "SECRET WEAPON"

At the same time that the Humans, Elves and Resistance Trolls are getting acquainted and preparing for war with Catgut's army, the Resistance Troll rescue party find and free Rogue, who has been Catgut's prisoner, along with another elf who had been imprisoned with him.

Waco

This other elf has matted, blonde, waist-length hair, thin from hunger, ill-fitting clothes and a very humbled attitude. Unknown to the Timber Folk, he has been imprisoned by King Grubmoss for 136 years. He says his name is Stormer, but Rogue doesn't recognize the name. It is not disclosed exactly what Catgut has done to Rogue, but instead of his usual sharp wit and attentiveness, his manner is very subdued and quiet.

The Resistance Trolls manage to get both elves out of the Kingdom without notice. Once outside, Arrowsong uses her very feeble Healing talent to repair a couple of Rogue's cracked ribs. The effort completely exhausts her and she has to be carried back to the Holt with Rogue and Stormer. (Windrace is with them).

Meanwhile, both sides are busy spying on each other. The Alliance learns just how the enemy is spying on them and decide to set them up. Nightstep informs everyone that they're going to lure the enemy into the thorn barrier through a clever ruse, then burn down the whole Holt, with their foes inside. At the same time, the bulk of the Alliance are all heading up, out of the Valley, to camp somewhere on the Sea of Grass, an hour's walk away from Sheercliff Pass. Catgut's trolls find out. They're meant to.

Catgut decides this will be the time of her final triumph. She's going to launch an attack on the main body of the Alliance while the best warriors are inside the Holt, baiting their trap. Everyone she can muster is going to be in on this attack, and they're going to bring out their secret weapon...armor. They will be bigger, stronger and better armed than the Alliance. Actually, Nightstep's spies have found out about the armor. That's what their real trap is all about.

The Alliance Trolls tell us that Catgut's Trolls have one tunnel leading up by Sheercliff Pass, and that it is a small one -- not meant for major use. It's perfect for Nightstep's trap.

The Trolls come sneaking out of the tunnel in the dark, and spend hours getting into their positions and into their armor. Their spies report that the Elves are just where they're supposed to be, with no idea that Catgut's Trolls are anywhere around.

At the same time, the Queen sends a small attack group to the Holt to beat the Elves to their trap. They plan to use the Elves' own plan and burn the Holt before the Timber Folk have a chance to escape. However, Nightstep had anticipated this and an ambush party is waiting for the Troll warriors. In this battle, Ferrst and Hatfeather will die while fighting back to back. LongKnife will be killed while protecting a wounded human he had become a close ally with. Greeneyes happens to be sending to LongKnife at the exact moment of his death and feels his death. She goes into shock. Woodwreath is also killed while trying to protect the Healers.

Meanwhile, in the Upper World, a massed host of big, strong, invincible Trolls circle around the spot where the spies say the Elves were. Just before they close the ring, a fast party of Elves beat feet out of the trap, riding on the fastest wolves and/or horses to escape the closing jaws -- just as the sun comes up.

PART VI "FINAL BATTLE"

The Trolls discover that armor is not such a tremendous asset under the harsh sunlight of an unforgiving summer sun. The true trap is revealed. The Holt's rockshapers and a few sturdy Troll and Human warriors busily close the Trolls' escape tunnel. There is no other tunnel close by.

The Trolls weren't planning on a major campaign--just wipe out the Elves and traitors and go home. They have little food or water -- and their armor is HOT! And, there are Elves, Trolls and Humans all around them in the grass with bows and arrows. A battle takes place, with all three races, and Catgut's army is soon subdued.

A long respite follows this one since most of the Troll warriors are either wounded or suffering from heat exhaustion before it's over -- which makes this the perfect time for the Alliance to make its counterstrike into the heart of the Caverns.

Since only a portion of the Resistance fought the Trolls in the Upper World, the rest of the warriors breach the Caverns and attack the brain center of the Kingdom.

There isn't much fighting in the caves, since practically all of Catgut's forces were in the battle outside the Valley. The Alliance finds a number of very sick and injured Troll Warriors reeling from a major defeat, who are not at all pleased with their new Queen's flawed tactics. Catgut's survivors turn on her. She is killed by a mob of angry subjects before she has a chance to escape.

The Queen's Trolls surrender to the Alliance.

In the midst of everything:

Skyflame and Season will prove themselves with leadership qualities in battle.

Trilight is not a "magical" Healer, but he could be considered a medic by our standards. (The Elves call a person with this skill a Mender). Since the Healers, Goldenbraid & Greeneyes, are going to be rather busy in this war, Trilight will be quite a help to them.

Torisen had left his own holt because of war -- During this one, he will probably go into mental shock during a battle. He will find a way to leave the area and will lose himself in a dreamy stupor far away from the fighting. After one battle engagement, he will be useless as a fighter.

Jag, being the simple "loveable peacenik", is not going to deal well with the war. Word has it that he will probably climb a tree and stay there until it's all over.

Greeneyes only 'sends'. She deals with the situations on a strong emotional level. She picks up on others' emotions easily, which will play havoc with her during the battles. (During one of the earlier battles, she was sending to LongKnife at the exact moment he was killed. This will affect her very strongly).

Years ago, Silverhair's lifemate (Dewdrop) was killed in a Human attack near Roçk Span. After witnessing his lifemate murdered, Silverhair vowed never to speak again (Dewdrop was very fond of his voice) -- choosing instead to communicate by sending. During the final battle, Silverhair sees the Human who killed his mate and "accidentally on purpose" slays him during the confusion of the fighting. He doesn't think anyone notices, but Nightstep has. Later, when they are alone, Nightstep strongly scolds Silverhair for killing someone they were allied with -- no matter what their past. Silverhair answers his chief's argument, in a spoken voice, saying that Dewdrop is avenged and his lifemate will hear his voice again.

PART VII "EPILOGUE"

Rockhammer, the leader of the Resistance Trolls, is made the new King of the Trolls.

All through this time, Spicurl (Grubmoss' daughter) has had a crush on Dripstone. Dripstone takes Spicurl as his mate, and King Rockhammer makes him his "prime minister" or, his right-hand man. Dripstone has grown up and now has responsibility.

Because of his tremendous help with the wounded during the war, Goldenbraid gives Trilight a new name: Heartmender.

Wildwood's twins are born after the fighting ends, and Freshwind announces that she is pregnant again!

Stormer has returned to the Holt, though not as their lost chief. Nightstep will still lead the Timber Folk.

The alliance between the Humans and Elves dissolves the long feud between them. Chief Deta, of the Ke L'Rharan, lives to see the territorial fighting stopped and appoints his daughter's mate, Seralle, as his successor. He then dies. Chief Seralle vows to uphold the new truce with the Timber Folk.

Both races help one another rebuild their settlements. The Troll Resistance thanks the Humans and Elves for their help and then go back to the Caverns to rebuild the Kingdom. Rockhammer has plans for Catgut's survivors. Slaves will be needed to repair the damage to the tunnels during the War, but since some are still free in the woods, Rockhammer advises the Elves and Humans to stick close to their homes for a while until the criminals can all be rounded up.

Life goes on.

IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOW, seven cubs will start their journey towards growing up. Teal (f) was born outside of Recognition to Trilight (now Heartmender) and Silverleaf just before the Troll War began, and twins, Whisperswift (f) and Random (m) were born to Mooncrest and Wildwood at the end of the War. Afterwards, Nightsoul (m) is born to Duskdew by a forced Recognition with a traveller, Durran Shadowhand. Wildmane (m) is later born due a Recognition between Rogue and Bolt. Russet (f) is also born to Rogue and Starlight, outside of Recognition. The last of the "new blood" is Littlestorm (f), later born to Chief Nightstep and Freshwind.

Though the written stories of the Timber Folk end here, life for the inhabitants of Timber Valley goes on...

THE SECRET WORD
DF 24 HT
by Bill Nichols

#

Running...leaping...dodging...running...running...ESCAPING!

Rogue fled through the forest, the out-stretched branches of the bushes and trees scratching at his barely-clad body. This day the hunter ignored even the easiest prey as he pushed himself onward, as if a mob of angry humans were just behind him. His feet sought the barest hint of purchase in the mud before darting on to the next step, his breath hissing through his teeth in short gasps at the pace. The forest raced by as Rogue raced through IT, paying little attention to anything other than what lay ahead in his path.

An old fallen tree blocked his way. He hurdled the rotted, scallop-covered trunk easily, but slipped in the mud on the other side. A pillow of wet, oozing mud and leaves cushioned his fall. He lay there on the forest floor, figuring it was as good a place as any to take a rest. Above him, through the treetops, the clouds were covering the sky again. Good, let it rain. Maybe it would wash him away, him, his troubles, this whole nightmare. Fat chance of that, though. For him, there was no escape, no matter how far and long he ran.

How could this happen to HIM? He lived by "the way", didn't he? HIS way, maybe, but still...

And to HER, of all elves...Why couldn't it have been...? Or why not...? Well, it really didn't matter WHO it might have been; the result would still be the same. He would still feel as though his life had been irrevocably changed, as if his soul had been laid bare for all to see...as if he had been invaded.

He would still be Recognized.

* * * * *

Rogue...wake up, Evenfell sent softly to her sometimes-lovemate. He lay sprawled atop his sleeping furs, one arm draped over his eyes to keep out the invading light of dusk. The furs were a mess, she noticed, from her lover's fitful tossing in his sleep. The nightmares again. Since the Troll War, Rogue withdrew from his friends more and more, spending more of his time in his hometree, alone. Things had happened to him in those caves, she guessed, about which he might never want to talk. All she could do was try to brighten his outlook some and lift him from his troubles. She wasn't having much luck at it.

**Rogue?*

"What is it, 'Fell?" he moaned out.

Time for you to eat, love. Your ribs are showing, she sent, emphasizing her words with a little tickling up and down his ribcage.

He squirmed a bit, but didn't smile. His hand deftly sought her neck and stroked it affectionately. "You go ahead. I'm not hungry."

The others ask about you, Rogue. They worry that your scars aren't just on the outside. At the sending, he flinched and turned away from her. Evenfell's way of cutting to the bone of a problem was something he loved about her, but this wasn't the time for it. He lay on his stomach and said,

"Tell them I said I'd be out later, okay? I want to sleep some more. I didn't get my nap out. I dunno..."

Are you perhaps too tired for Shrike and Starlight, too? You haven't seen much of them lately, either... Evenfell sent, switching tactics. Perhaps she could appeal to his sense of loyalties to get him moving.

"Yeah, them, too. I've...got a few things on my mind. I just want to be alone for a while longer. Besides, they have other things to worry about. And so do you. So, just go on out, okay, 'Fell? I'll be there, later. I promise," he said, not moving at all. "Oh, and tell Smoke 'Hi' for me." His sarcasm wasn't totally lost on her, but she persisted in one last effort.

**What if I wanted to spend more time with you? ...Rogue?*

Rogue bolted out of his bed and faced her. "HIGH ONES CURSE IT, Evenfell! Will you please just get out of here and leave me alone? How many times do I have to say it?" he yelled. The outburst caused Evenfell to fall back onto the furs. First surprised, then angry, she rose to face him, to tell him to stop all this moping, to get on with his life, but the look in his eyes, of pain and torment, stopped her.

His red, swollen eyes burned into hers with an appeal for solitude, to let him deal with his pain as he could, that he wasn't really angry with her, that...

I'm...sorry, was all she sent. She bowed her head and walked out of the hometree, past Rogue's wolf, Pathdancer, who stood vigilant outside his elf-friend's tree. With each step away from Rogue, Evenfell felt the sadness even more and her steps quickened and her eyes reddened until she ran out into the forest, sobbing.

Nightstep watched as Evenfell ran past him. He nodded with approval when Shrike and Starlight went after her. They would calm her and perhaps things would return to normal in the Holt. Until Rogue's depression was lifted, though, each day would seem less bright, each night less alive without his pranks and laughter. His tribesman would need these lovers to bring him around to good humor, before he wasted away in his hometree. Nightstep considered talking with Rogue himself, but was unsure of the words that could comfort and console one who had fallen so far into despair. He hoped he wouldn't have to intervene...

Sullen, Mooncrest leaned against his own tree, feeling the helplessness of the situation. Rogue was his friend, no...his BEST friend, and he wasn't sure how to help him. At his attempts to pull a new prank on his pal, he received only muttered curses or praises for his efforts. No smiles. Mooncrest's life had been enriched by this friendship, and now, couldn't return the favor. He felt so darned helpless...

Across the grassy commons, Bolt watched the scene unfolding with much interest. Everyone wanted to help Rogue so much, but no one was quite sure how to go about it and get results. Bolt herself wanted to go to Rogue and open her heart to him, to tell him how she felt about him, and lift his spirits at the prospect of his new love. Could she do it, though? Could she tell him without embarrassment about the crush she had had since the early days of his arrival? How would he react at that? Would he laugh at her honesty and send her away? Would he tell her that he understood and that he, himself, felt the same way? Would he LAUGH? The thought of his rejecting her made her pause. Who was she fooling?

Later that night, Rogue tossed around on his furs. His yelling at Evenfell was still on his mind, adding one more thing to the list of his troubles. He hoped she could forgive him when he was feeling better, whenever that was. It pained him to keep his friends at arm's-length, but...but...but...he felt something touch his leg. He tried to flick whatever it was away, and found not some crawly-thing, but a hand. Evenfell's. Then something else touched his arm and another thing, his chest: Shrike and Starlight. Without a thought, a smile started to creep up on him and soon, there it was. The loveloves laughed and giggled at the grin that had been absent for so long and together, tried to see how many more they could get...

#

The treetops swayed in the breeze of the coming storm. Beyond them, the clouds covered the sky in puffy grey and darker grey swirls. Sometime within the next day, the rains would come.

As he still lay face-up in the mud, Rogue wondered when he should get up. 'I'm going to lie here, dirty and miserable, and it's going to rain in my face,' he thought. 'Serves me right.'

He wiped a muddy arm across his face, trying to brush away the tears. Dragging himself up, Rogue leaned against the fallen tree and considered his options. He could go back and take what life had thrown him or he could just keep running until either his legs or his will gave out.

How could life ever be the same again? She knew things about him no one could ever guess, one thing in particular, the word that summed up everything about him: his secret word, his soul name.

And he hadn't even had the option of GIVING it to her. Oh no, she just HAD it. And he had hers. It had appeared in his mind the same instant as his in hers. He had seen it in her face, in her eyes, in her mind. Recognition.

Weary, he stumbled to his feet and headed down the path he had chosen. Away from the Holt. Away from HER.

* * * * *

The food was good, the company excellent. Rogue started acting more like his old self as the night went on. His loveloves had dragged him out into the Holt to see his friends and a feast was put together. He even managed to pull off a quick prank on Mooncrest, who laughed and picked his pal up and swung him around at the stunt.

Rogue and his lovmates sat in the middle of the grand feast. Hunting had been good and fruit was plentiful. Morsels were passed over to the scrawny prankster from all sides, keeping his bowl full. Soon, his stomach bulged as he plopped back into the arms of his lovers.

Bolt smiled at the sight, even as she wished her arms were among those holding him. He didn't need her help after all. Maybe, one day...

Rogue called for a song and the music began. Everyone joined in, caring little if the diurnal elves were awakened a little early. Some of them even started to dance, even Bolt, who got caught up in the mood, too, and was suddenly dancing gracefully around the fire with the others. She spun, she leaped, she twirled, oblivious to the eyes watching her, all grateful for the chance to see her when she wasn't so self-conscious. She was a feather that barely touched the ground, a flame that flickered in the night, a wisp of smoke that twisted ethereally in the breeze.

Then, out of the corner of her vision she saw Rogue, watching her with as much interest as everyone else, perhaps more. But this was different; this was ROGUE. She was suddenly aware that it was HER he was smiling at. His smile was for her. Then she fell.

Rogue called for a song and the music began. His friends, eager to cheer him up, were only too happy to oblige, and some even took to dancing. Even Bolt, the quiet one, was soon dancing around the fire. She leaped, she spun, she was a feather that barely touched the ground. When she wasn't paying attention, she could be one of the most graceful creatures around. In the heat of the celebration, her mind wasn't on what she was doing; she was living for the moment and boy, did she look good doing it. She was a feather. A feather. Like one other Rogue had known...

Watching Bolt dance, Rogue caught her looking over at him and with each spin, her gaze became more intense. Starlight saw it, too, and lightly pinched his leg. Rogue's smile broadened and Bolt practically stared at him between leaps and spins. As she danced around the fire toward him, a strange look flashed across her face and her left foot caught her right and she fell, right on top of Rogue.

The music lulled and the laughter roared as the two tried to untangle themselves. "Are you okay, Red?" Rogue asked, concerned. He pushed the hair back from her face. Did she flinch? Was her face always this flushed?

"I--I'm sorry, Rogue, I didn't mean--," she stammered out, too embarrassed to look at him. "Um...I'm okay. Really. Really...I'm okay. I just tripped."

"Hey," Rogue said, lifting her chin, "you were looking pretty good out there. You should dance for us more often."

Bolt smiled broadly at the compliment and, hoping her cheeks weren't TOO flushed, said, "You think so?" She was looking up into his eyes.

It came as the barest whisper in the back of her head and grew in strength to a clap of thunder. In a sending meant only for Rogue, she sent,

LONR.

EHILL, came his answer.

#

A cave. Perfect. Rogue crawled into the cave's mouth and tested the air for any occupants. Only small animals had used the cave recently. Good, let the food come to him. He pulled himself to the back and sank against the wall. Females. Always females. His mind thought back to another female who caused him grief, back when he was known by another name, one which described him as much then as 'Rogue' did now. When he was a reasonably happy elf named...

/ / / / /

"Wildmane!" called Featherdance from across the council ground. Her brother turned at her call, his long spear balanced deftly in his hand. He smiled his wicked smile at her and said,

"Yees?" Featherdance ran and danced into his arms. Accidentally, or on purpose, she bumped the spear from his hand. A scowl burned across Wildmane's face as it clattered to the ground, but Featherdance just looked innocently into his eyes and he couldn't help smiling.

"Does that piece of wood and metal mean more to you than I do?" she asked him.

"Of course not, sister, you're as special to me as Blackedge," he replied, feeling that he shouldn't have to state the obvious. A pout poked out on Feather's chin. Now he could deny her nothing.

"What can I do to convince you?" he asked. Before answering, Feather hugged him close and glanced around for any possible eavesdroppers.

"Meet me at the old grove tonight when the moons are high." Ah, a secret. Wildmane wondered if the elves of his village would ever learn to "think-talk" as he could. He could 'talk' to them, but they had to answer aloud. More than once it might have come in handy for the sake of privacy. This was such a time.

"What for?" he asked aloud, guessing at the answer already.

"Just come," Featherdance replied as she glided away, a mischievous glint in her eyes. Wildmane watched her get some skins for water and head for the stream. Before leaving his sight, she turned and stared meaningfully at him. Yes, he already had an idea of 'what for'.

#

"I'll go," Mooncrest volunteered to those assembled in the Father Tree. "He's my friend. If anyone should be the one to find him--"

"It should be Bolt," Goldenbraid said.

"Or us," Starlight added, indicating herself, Shrike and Evenfell. "We're closest to him."

"Not anymore," Mooncrest shot back. He was worried; Rogue had been gone for almost a whole day. They were all sure he would return once the shock wore off, but so far, no Rogue.

After the Recognition, Rogue had run to his hometree and could be heard throwing things angrily around inside. Everyone, including his trio of lovmates, felt awkward instead of joyous and seemed to forget the female partner in the ordeal, Bolt. She sat quietly watching Rogue's shadow pass his window and doorway as he threw something else. A tear rolled down her cheek.

She could feel everyone wanting her to go to him, but she wouldn't, not yet. At the instant of Recognition, she suddenly understood him, why he did the things he did, why he acted the way he did and why, now, he resisted the joining.

He was a loner. He always felt that he was somehow different. Although it might never occur to anyone else, Rogue always felt a little bit like a stranger.

Bolt understood all this and wept. She wondered if Rogue would realize how she felt and that she had inner feelings to keep secret, too. Did he understand that she had always been the self-conscious female who had, for the longest time, had a crush on the very elf with whom she Recognized? Would he forget his frustration and think about hers?

"Bolt?" she heard and looked up to see everyone looking her way. She quickly wiped the moisture from her cheeks and tried to smile.

"What?"

"What do you think we should do about Rogue?" Mooncrest asked, coming to her side. She knew he was concerned, they all were, but she said simply,

"Nothing."

"You can't mean that!" Starlight said, taking a step toward the fire, the light playing across her angry face. Although she was only one of Rogue's lovmates, she was also one of his friends and couldn't believe what her eyes and ears were telling her. "How can you just sit there and cry while he's out there facing HIGH-ONES-KNOWS-WHAT?"

Bolt leaped to her and faced off with Starlight across the fire. "Don't you think I'm WORRIED about that?" she yelled. "What if he ran out of here into a pack of Catgut's trolls or--or--a demon bear...?" The thought of Rogue being harmed had been all-too-prevalent in her mind for the past day. "But I have to trust Rogue to take care of himself until...he comes back...to me."

"Coses back? Trolls' ears, Bolt, there's two of you in this!" Mooncrest said as he joined the face-off over the fire.

"Is there, Mooncrest? Is there? You're all so concerned for Rogue and what he's going through, but what about ME? I'm not just some she-wolf in heat! What about ME?" Bolt screamed as she pushed past a stunned Mooncrest and ran out the doorway, away from the group and into the waiting arms of the forest.

/ / / / /

The night was brightly lit by the two moons above. Wildmane stood in the cool crisp air of the old grove of needle-trees. Here, the air was pungent with their scent and could almost be tasted.

Out of the forest stepped Featherdance, the glint in her eyes still there, but more intense. Her tongue ran delightfully over lips as she crossed the clearing to him. In her hand was a wineskin, no longer full from its sloshing sounds.

"Feather, what's the skin for?"

"Wine, silly. The fermented squeezings of fruit. The elixir of life and love," she replied, her speech slurring a little. With her free hand tugging at the knot of her tunic, Feather wiggled up to Wildmane, whose mouth fell open and eyes widened. She held the skin out to him and giggled; he answered by taking a large swallow. He choked, though, as her tunic fell from her shoulders to the ground.

"Guh--guh--guh," was all he could say. What was he supposed to do? What was she GOING to do? What was he going to do with her...tonight? Her fingers brushed across his stomach, making his muscles flutter at her touch. Grabbing her hand, he said, "Feather, what are you...you...you're drunk."

"Drunk? Yes, I am, on wine, on life, on YOU, my brother. How did you get so much hair? I wonder what you're real parents looked like?" she said, her other hand roaming through his mane of wild, dark brown hair. Her words stabbed at his almost-memory of his mother, cradling him in his arms. Treecutter, his adopted father, had found him there, his mother dying. Her only words were: "Love him."

And Treecutter had, with his lifemate, Windreed, loved the eccentric little cub. When he took to eating his meat rare or uncooked, they tried to understand. When he prowled the night and slept during the day, they let him go. When he bonded with his wolf, Pouncer, they were as confused as the rest of the village. So, they tried to love him as best they could, but he was not their true son and that knowledge would always haunt him.

Draining the wineskin, Wildmane tried to calm the trembling of his body. Even though Featherdance was not really his sister, he had been raised to think of her as such. He turned away, confused, but she threaded her arms through his and wrapped them around his chest. Her nails clawed lightly at his chest; her teeth nipped playfully at his shoulder. His cheeks flushed. Was it the wine?

He turned to face her. Her fingers fumbling at the knot at his belt, she rolled her tongue hungrily across her lips. The look in her eyes spoke of hunger, too, not for food or wine, but for him. He tried to keep his eyes from meeting hers, but couldn't. Grabbing her hands, he held them away from his body and his belt.

He whispered, "Why?"

The hunger-look in her eyes held the answer, but her mouth said, "Because you AREN'T like the others. Underneath, you're WILD, as wild as that wolf of yours. And that hair, that gorgeous head of hair..." Her hands slipped from his back to the knot. Inhaling the cool needle-scented air, Wildmane couldn't bring himself to stop her...

"Stop it, Wildmane! Stop it!" Featherdance cried, pushing his hands from her shoulders. Tears streamed down her reddened cheeks as she sank against the hut wall. Her body wracked with sobs, she avoided looking at the anguish in her lover's eyes.

"How could this happen, Featherdance? With Rootdigger, of all the males in the village? He isn't even a hunter!" Wildmane shouted, his arms angrily slashing the air around him. He stomped around the hut and kicked the rugs and furs around. Featherdance knew he was in pain, but couldn't see that SHE was, too?

"I didn't pick Rootdigger to Recognize with! But you don't know him as I do, can't see him as I can!"

"I'll bet," he spat back. He glared out the window and burned an icy stare into the back of Rootdigger, who was no doubt celebrating his good fortune from the High Ones. Wildmane said quietly, still staring out the window, "I always hoped it would be me. It was possible; we weren't brother and sister. It could have been ME."

"Would you stop saying that? It ISN'T you, so just stop! Please!" she begged, gripping his arm. He turned to face her, his own tears flowing, and hugged her close."

In her ear, he whispered, "I'll always love you." She clutched fiercely at his back and buried her face in his neck. After a few moments of mutual crying, he gently pushed her away and started for the door. She stepped forward but he stopped her. "No, Feather. Remember what I said. Always." He threw the curtains aside and left.

Later, from a place high in the boughs of a nut-tree, he watched his sister leave her hut and run across the council clearing into the arms of her new love, Rootdigger. Wildmane's heart sank like a stone in his chest.

Below, Pouncer pawed at the tree for her elf-friend to come down and away from this place of sadness for him. Together, they would run the forest and things would be right again. Perhaps they would catch something and feast on it, the flesh still warm. From above her came the sounds of her elf-friend's sobbing.

Yes, they would make things right...together.

"Well, look who's here. The wolf-rider," Featherdance called from her and Digger's hut. Wildmane, his face dirty and sweating from the hunt, turned and smiled at her. He handed her a freshly-caught hopper, which she took by the ears and tossed inside.

"It'll go well with Digger's root soup," she said, carefully emphasizing the name. She smiled at the look of pain that flashed across his face. So it had been since her Recognition to Digger. Her concern for Wildmane dissipated and was supplanted by a malicious urge to remind him that he was no longer her favored lover. These days, though, he was hardly around when he could help it. He was always off hunting with his wolf, lugging around that wicked spear of his.

"Careful how you cook it, Feather. You might slip in the wrong roots into the broth. Maybe I should catch you another hopper, just in case, but then, we might not be calling you 'Feather' much longer. Not with a straight face, anyway." He let that jibe sink in as he walked away to his own hut. He wasn't without his own malicious streak these days. He couldn't let her see how much her taunts hurt him. Did she still care for him? Didn't she know how much he hurt?

"He's been gone a whole moons-cycle. What if something's happened to him?" Treecutter said before the assembled villagers. "What if...he's dead?"

"He can take care of himself, Father," Featherdance said, cradled in Rootdigger's arms. "He always could." Her belly was beginning to show the signs of her child's two-year-long journey into the world. Softtouch, the village midwife, proclaimed the child would be a male, strong like his father.

Treecutter eyed his daughter curiously. Where had the path turned for his two children? Once, they were nigh inseparable, but after the Recognition of Feather and Digger, their sibling love seemed to wither and die. And it occurred to Treecutter that it was Featherdance who killed the roots of that love.

"He isn't like us. He's wild. The night and the wolf are in his blood. We grow things with our hands. We hunt and fish for our food; he KILLS. Will we turn over every stone in the stream just to bring him back? Are we sure he BELONGS here?" Feather asked of them all. The murmurs that answered her seemed split evenly in opinion.

Then, from the shadows, one voice said, "You aren't sure? Well, neither am I." Wildmane stepped from behind a tree and leaned against it, Pouncer just behind him. He let them all get a good look at him, at the changes in his appearance. His mass of hair shaved off except for one feathery strip down the middle. His gloves, his whole outfit, were changed. Especially his eyes. They were cold, hard, mocking. He looked carefully into each face before continuing, pausing at Treecutter and Windreed, but passing over Feather and Digger.

"I've made a few changes. You like?" he sneered out. Windreed rose to embrace her son, followed by her lifemate. They touched where he had shaved his hair and the strip of hair remaining. He gently stroked their faces and then turned once more to the others.

"To answer your unspoken questions, yes, I'm back, but not to stay. I came back to let you all know that I was all right, whether you really cared or not. By the way I'm dressed, you're probably wondering about that, but I had to get out, survive on my own, to see if I could live without your company. I guess I can. I know you cared for me, but I don't know if you can ever really accept me. 'The Way' I live by is different from yours. We all know it and now, I leave you, perhaps forever. Tonight the one you knew as 'Wildmane' dies and 'Rogue' takes his place, for that name describes him best. Fare you well."

Windreed held her son close, crying. His father joined her. Others came up to give him their regards, heartfelt or not. Soon, he drew away from them and started off, but turned to his parents and sent,

Mother, Father, I'll always remember you. He looked to where the stunned Featherdance sat, but said or sent nothing, only gave her one good look before he bounded away with Pouncer. The council ground was silent for several moments as the sounds of Wildmane's exit faded as soon as they began. Treecutter held his lifemate close, comforting her. The others mumbled their own thoughts amongst themselves.

Suddenly, Featherdance pushed herself to her feet and through the crowd and ran into the forest after her brother. Rootdigger stood and started after her, but was held back by Treecutter.

"Let her go, Digger. Maybe she'll change his mind...she'll be back," he said, adding his daughter's lifemate to the group embrace. He looked over their heads wistfully into the woods and thought, 'Yes, she'll be back, but he won't.'

The bushes scratched at her as she raced through them, hugging and puffing with her added burden. Wildmane's taunts about her weight jangled in her mind as she ran. Why was he doing this? Why was he being so cruel? Was this all just to hurt her? And that hair, that beautiful wild hair, mostly gone, was that done to hurt her, too, a private jab at the memory of their times together? Why?

"Wildmane! WILDMANE, COME BACK! Please! I have to talk to you. Please?" she cried, resting against the cook, dry bark of a nut-tree. The sounds of the night were the only replies she got, but somewhere amongst them she imagined the trees whispering,

The old grove. Go to the old grove.

Desperate, she crashed through the bushes between her and her needle-tree destination. Stones bruised her feet, but she kept going. Was she dreaming the whisper? Was she dreaming the whole thing? How she must have appeared back at the village to her family, and to Digger. What would he say when she returned? Probably nothing, he was just that way. They hoped the High Ones saw fit to endow their child with Digger's family talent of treeshaping, however meager. They hoped...

She stumbled into the clearing in which she and Wildmane had lain so many nights before. Her skin prickling from the scratches, she sank down on the grass and rubbed her poor bruised feet and legs. The night-sounds were still there, the crickets, the owls, the breeze through the branches of the needle-trees, along with the panting of her own labored breathing. No whispers came this time.

"Wildmane? Please? I'm here...Wildmane?" she called into the night. Then, recalling the words he had spoken back at the village, she called, "Rogue?"

"What do you want?"

"You're here! Where are you? I can't see you," she said, her eyes straining to pierce the forest gloom.

"I'm not surprised. You can't seem to see anything with only your eyes. I'm all around you. I'm the forest. I'm the night. Within a heartbeat my teeth could be at your throat like a wolf on a stag and you would never see me." Feather's hand involuntarily touched her neck as she swallowed against her fear. Was this really her brother or a nightmare brought on by her pregnancy? Had everyone back at the village seen him, too, or had she imagined that as well?

"Who are you?" she asked weakly.

"Once I was your brother. Once your lover. Now, I'm neither. I am ROGUE and I'm alone, except for my spear and wolf," he said from somewhere.

"You don't have to be."

"Oh, yes I do. Once, not so very long ago, I let myself care too much about you, but as soon as you Recognized with Digger, you cast me aside...totally. You made sure there was no place in your new life for me. You succeeded. And I won't forget that lesson." Rogue seemed to appear out of the shadows at her side, making her jump, her hand covering her neck.

"I hope never to see you again, Feather," he said with those cold, hard eyes.

"Wildmane...Rogue...you don't mean that. You can't! You love me!" she said, trying to embrace him, but he held her away.

"Yes, once I truly did. But now...look at you. I told you before we'd have to stop calling you 'Feather'. Well, maybe now, 'Stone' fits you better, for your weight and your heart. Go back to Digger and live your life without me, because I'll never be back," he said, stepping away.

"Will you ever forgive me?" she asked, following.

"Maybe, but you'll never hear me say it. Be happy with what you have and remember me to your child, as his wild uncle who prowled the night and ate his meat uncooked. Love the cub as I would have had it been mine." And Rogue disappeared into the night. The sounds of a female sobbing were added to the chirping of the crickets, the hooting of the owls and the whispers of the breeze.

#

Where WAS he?

Exhausted, Bolt considered climbing some nearby tree and spending what was left of the night there. It was too far to go all the way back to the Holt now. Besides, she was just too tired.

She pulled herself up into the boughs of a tree and tried to get comfortable, lodging her body into a cradle of branches near the trunk. She tested the night air carefully. All day long rain threatened and felt as though it would start soon. What a stupid move, coming so far under these conditions.

She hadn't intended to follow Rogue's day-old trail when she ran out of the Holt, but in her flight, she came across a path through the muddy forest that could only be his. It led to no particular direction and as night approached, she lost it.

Occasionally, the moons above would peek out from their dense cover of clouds. Bolt heard a growling nearby and realized it was her own stomach. She was cold and hungry and it would probably rain, and she had a biological fire that she couldn't even begin to douse without Rogue.

So, this was Recognition. Phooey.

#

The fire kept him warm, but a chill still ran down his spine. Rogue absently chewed the sweetbark he plucked from one of the trees outside. His panic subsided, he settled back into the niche he had made in the wall, snuggling up to the cool dirt and stone. He thought of Bolt and of the Recognition and how Bolt must have felt when he threw such a fit.

'I wonder if she hates me. No, how can she? Can she? She probably thinks I'm a jerk,' he thought.

Recognition. What a crock.

#

The rains came soon after dawn. Bolt awoke with a start and quickly climbed out of the tree and headed for the Valley wall. Blinking against the downpour, she thought she saw an overhang that might shelter her. Did she smell smoke? Did Recognition make you hallucinate?

#

Outside, it was raining a big one. Rogue huddled near the fire and watched the flames dancing in the wind. Like Feather. Like Bolt. The chaotic leaping of the flames made him smile. The faint heat on his face and body felt good.

Snoke ahead, definitely. In that cave.

What was that noise? Something was outside besides the wind and rain. What was it?

Rogue.

Bolt.

She stood framed in the mouth of the cave, drenched and ragged. Her face was covered by her hair, but her eyes blazed into his. The sight of her brought back his earlier feelings, with a vengeance.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" he cried in anger/fear/frustration/need.

Bolt looked pitifully at her love, crouched against the rear wall of the cove, afraid of her, afraid of what she knew about him, afraid of what it would mean to the both of them.

She sobbed, "I CAN'T!"

Rogue's features softened a little at that, his body relaxing just a bit. Recalling his thoughts of her before, his mouth and throat all dry, he choked out,

"I know."

Bolt's shoulders shook with each sob. With each pathetic jerk, Rogue's own body relaxed a little more. He rose unsteadily and, reluctantly, held out his hand. She remained where she was.

"What's wrong, Bolt? It's what you want, isn't it? It's inevitable," Rogue said, not really believing he was initiating contact. Did Recognition cause you to do weird things?

"What I WANT, Rogue, is YOU! Just you! But I didn't want to have to Recognize with you to do it!" she yelled. "I've love you for a long time, don't you know that?"

"I do...now. Why didn't you just TELL me, Bolt? It isn't like we didn't see each other every day," he replied, the sarcastic edge creeping back into his voice. A good sign.

"I COULDN'T tell you. You were always off with Mooncrest pulling some prank or

hunting with Skyflame or...or...you know...with Evenfell and the others. There wasn't room in your life for me, too," she said, taking a step into the cave. Rogue held his hand out again; this time she took it, hesitantly, then tenderly. He pulled her close and pushed the wet, clinging hair back from her face.

"I didn't know...you were so quiet, so graceful, so beautiful."

"Until I saw somebody looking at me and tripped," she said, letting his hand stroke her neck and face.

"No, even then," he said, tickling her ear.

"So, what happens now? Do we go back to things the way they were...?" Rogue stopped her.

"Things can't be the way they were. No, things will change, for the better, I think, don't you...Rhill?" he asked nuzzling her ear with his nose.

She held him away for a second. "Don't just do it because we Recognized, Rogue. 'Cause if that's the only reason we'll be together, I don't want it. Not now and not when the baby comes," she said.

Rogue's eyes bulged. "Hey, that's right! We're going to be...parents! I'll be a...daddy. Wow..." It was Bolt's turn to nuzzle his ear. That woke him up. "Listen, I'm sorry about how I acted--It was you--It was--" Bolt's fingers at his lips stopped him.

"I KNOW," she said.

Rogue laughed and held her tightly, the tears falling again, this time with joy and relief. "Is this what Recognition does to you? Makes you a little crazy? Turns your whole world upside-down? Or is it just me?" he asked in her ear.

Bolt smiled and said, "It's just you."

#

The rains had stopped the next day when Rogue and Bolt appeared out of the fog into the Holt. Each had lost the haunted look in his or her features. Instead, a look of happiness had taken its place. Rogue bounced around, greeting all his friends and lovers, who were all happy to see them both back, safe and together.

Mooncrest, hearing they were back, came out to congratulate the couple. He bowed to Bolt and nudged Rogue in the ribs with a knowing grin. Same old Mooncrest, but was this the same old Rogue? No, thought Mooncrest, the same but different.

Bolt dropped her hand from Rogue's and said, "Well, I'll be seeing you around, Rogue. Come visit me sometime..."

"HEY!"

"Yes?"

"Just where do you think you're going?" he asked, trailing after her. "I don't think we're through with this Recognition stuff. In fact, I feel like Recognizing you a little more."

"Then lead on, Wildmane," she said. "I believe that's your tree over there, isn't it? RACE you!" She took off across the Holt, graceful as a deer, Rogue bounding right behind. Nightstep joined Mooncrest watching the two run. Things might just return to normal now. The same, but different.

END

ART CREDITS

VALERIE BOWE: 1, Random & Whisperswift. 2, Dance of New Greentime. 7, Frost.

15, Nightstep & Freshwind. 36, The New Blood. 40, Skylight & Arrowsong.

RUTH CLARK: 31, Durran Shadowhand.

EILEEN FRYER: 3, Mooncrest & Family.

MARY LOPEZ: 15, Redthorn.

MARIA MANEMANN: 14, Skylight & Coppermane.

BILL NICHOLS: 15, Rogue.

TERRIE SMITH: 15, Hushleaf.

DEB TRIMBLE: 4, Windrace. 10, Skylight & Coppermane.

SOMETHING LEFT BEHIND

DF 24 LF

by Ruth Clark

[A continuation of Wandering Spirit]

Let me go, let me go. Please. I have to be free again!

Duskdew sat outside her hometree, legs crossed in front of her, hands hanging over her knees, and head tipped back. Her physical appearance was relaxed, her face was serene, but inside she fought her body, trying to be loosed from the flesh she now found alien.

She's doing it again, Quicksilver thought as he quietly approached his sister. He had seen her sit like this several times since the death of the troll queen, Catgut, and the end of the War. He hadn't noticed it before because of the war with the diggers, but Catgut was gone now and a tentative, uneasy truce had been established. With that out of the way, Quicksilver had turned his attention to Duskdew, finally noticing her strange behavior. She was withdrawn, moody, and snappish, and she hated to be touched. She didn't flirt or tease anymore, which had shocked everyone in the Holt. Duskdew lived for flirting.

At first, Quicksilver had tried to justify her strange mood, trying to convince himself that she was sad over the deaths of friends she had lost in the War, but he couldn't deny the truth anymore. Duskdew hadn't been sad over the deaths. Instead, she had envied those who had died. He knew that was what she wanted.

I should have done something sooner, Quicksilver thought, watching her. I should have tried to help her right after the attack. But there was the War, which had taken everybody's attention. The glider thought back to what had happened. A season ago, he and Duskdew had been attacked by trolls. Duskdew had almost died, and while unconscious, her spirit had wandered freely. While in spirit form, she'd had contact with the spirits of her parents, and it had been they who had returned her to her body. But now, she no longer wanted to be in her body.

"Duskdew?" Quicksilver asked, sitting down beside her. She didn't respond, so he reached out to touch her shoulder. At the soft brush of his fingers, the maiden lurched backwards, springing to her feet. The calm expression she had been wearing was gone.

"Don't touch me!" Duskdew snarled, clenching her fists. Her face twisted with rage, her green eyes narrowed and bright. "Go away! Leave me alone!"

"Dusky, please don't do this," Quicksilver pleaded, rising. "I want to talk to you. I want to help you. Please, talk to me."

"I don't want to talk! I don't need your help!" she shouted. "You couldn't help me." Her shoulders slumped and her head drooped. It ripped at Quicksilver's conscience to hear her next words, the sorrow in her voice. "No one can help me."

"Duskdew..." Quicksilver went to comfort her, but the maiden shoved him back.

"Don't touch me!" She whirled around, grabbed a long, slender basket lying on the ground, and ran away. Quicksilver couldn't see, but his sister's face was quickly lined with tears which she angrily rubbed away.

Sers! Quicksilver sent, but he found himself blocked out. He closed his eyes for a moment. She had never done that to him before. He knew her soul name, as she did his through an exchange they had made years ago as youths. He could force his way past the shield, but he didn't. The glider scratched the back of his head, ruffling silver hair. Curse it, she's so hostile, he thought. I have to go after her. She'll hurt herself.

Just as he was about to go after her, a hand came to rest on his arm. Quicksilver turned and found Goldenbraid standing beside him.

"You saw?" he asked. The Healer nodded, giving a sympathetic smile. "What do I do?"

"Give her time. She'll come around," Goldenbraid said.

"I think she's had too much time." Quicksilver rubbed the back of his head again. "I should have paid more attention to her, but with the trolls and the War, I was just too distracted. She needed me right after the attack, and I wasn't there to help her. She's been alone too long, been given too much time to dwell on things. You saw her. I'm afraid it's too late." He sighed. "She's blocking me out."

"It'll work out in the end," Goldenbraid said. "She has to deal with it, and she has to go through this. Everyone in the Holt is going through some sort of tragedy right now. We can't expect them to ignore it."

"I suppose you're right," Quicksilver said.

"There's no right or wrong about this, Quicksilver. Everybody is going to be

different, so we can't expect them to all behave the same." The elder Healer hooked her arm through the young glider's arm. "Come. I have to go talk with Greeneyes. She needs to see a few friendly faces."

Quicksilver nodded absently. The tiny Healer had lost her lifemate in the War and could use some comfort. He exhaled slowly and glanced over his shoulder in the direction that Duskdew had gone. Maybe, if she was feeling up to it, Greeneyes could give him some advise on handling Duskdew's problem.

Duskdew glanced around quickly to make sure no one was watching before she crawled through a small hole that the wolves had dug under the Thorn Barrier. Thorns yanked at her clothing and white-blond hair, but she ignored the discomfort. A season ago, she would have gone out of her way to protect her clothing, but they no longer mattered to her, and she didn't care if her hair was knotted and torn. She had to get out.

The maiden crawled out of the hole and stood up. She wasn't supposed to be outside the Thorn Barrier -- no one was without Nightstep's consent because of the recent War--but that didn't matter. If caught, she'd say she forgot and had gone to collect flowers. Duskdew had used that excuse before and had only gotten in a little trouble because she was Duskdew and stupid things like that were expected of her. Now, it didn't matter to how much she displeased her chief.

Clutching her basket in one hand, the maiden started to run. Faster, she told herself, and she ran faster. She kept her pace up for a long time, ignoring her body when it wanted to stop. She crashed through bushes, not caring about the danger she could be placing herself in. There could still be Catgut's trolls seeking revenge, but she didn't think about that. All she could think about was going faster and reaching the place she wanted to be.

At last, Duskdew arrived at her destination and stopped, gasping for breath and shoving her hair out of her face. There was a large oak tree in front of her, and she stared up at it. It was here. It was almost a relief to see it. This was the tree where she had first communicated with her parents.

Duskdew sat down, cross-legged, and gazed at the tree for a long time, remembering how it felt to talk to Truesight and Lakedove, remembering how it felt to fly. She wanted that again, forever.

The maiden closed her eyes and tilted her head back, inhaling deeply. Please, now. She strained against the confines of her body, trying to cast her spirit out. Hard, so hard. It hurt, this trap she was in. She could feel everything around her pressing her spirit into her body, holding her prisoner. She felt suffocated. Let me out of here. I can't live like this. She strained harder.

It didn't work. No matter how she tried, she couldn't leave. Duskdew's shoulders quivered and fell. Why? she wondered. Why? I did it once without even trying, when I hadn't wanted to go. Now, when I want to leave, I can't. It's not fair! She covered her face with her hands and cried. I want out, I want out! I don't want to be trapped in this body anymore!

"Curse it!" She hopped to her feet, angrily brushing the moisture from her face. "Mother! Father! Talk to me! Why'd you bring me back?!" she yelled at the tree. "Why'd you leave me here?! I wanted to go with you! What use am I here?!" She glanced at the basket which was supposedly for flower collecting, and she picked it up and hurled it at the oak. "C-collecting stupid flowers! Nothing! That's what I've done all my life! Nothing! Look at me! I can't fight, I can't lead, I can't protect anyone! I hunt, but so does everyone else, and better than I. I flirt, and tease, and collect stupid flowers, and talk nonsense and try to pretend that it matters, but it doesn't! I'm nothing! My existence here is nothing! Why'd you bring me back to it?! Was it so important? I could have been free." Duskdew sighed. "Free."

The tears came again. Duskdew knelt down, holding her head in her hands and pressing down close to her knees. Free, free, free, free, free. The word sang in her head, mocking her. She shuddered and tried to block it out, squeezing her body into an even tighter ball.

Something dug into her hip, and Duskdew reached out and touched the smooth metal of her dagger's sheath. She sat up and pulled the weapon free. Moonlight shone on the silver metal of the blade as she lifted it, cradling it in both her hands. She could escape a way other than the method she was trying. By death. It was a brush with death that had freed her spirit in the first place. Dying would release her forever. That was what she desired, to be free from her physical existence. She should have died the first time, but Greeneyes and Goldenbraid had stolen that from her. She could steal it back.

It could be quicker this time, Duskdew thought, staring at the blade. Slit throat or stab through the heart. No Healers this time. No lingering. She turned the blade toward her chest and pressed the tip against her ribs. It would be quick. Her hands trembled. Free, free, free, free, free, the word came again, enticing this time.

"No." Duskdew dropped the weapon. She couldn't. It was wrong. She wanted to die, but not by her own hand. Elves didn't take their own lives.

I could go down to the troll warren. They'd kill me, she thought. Duskdew shuddered at the idea. She was too scared to go down there after what had happened, and they might not kill her if she went. They might enslave her instead, and then she'd be more trapped than she already was.

"So what am I supposed to do?" she asked aloud to the tree. "Help me, mother, father. You put me back here. What am I supposed to do?" There was no answer, and Duskdew bowed her head and cried some more.

Durran Shadowhand watched the small, golden-haired maiden, relief in his handsome features. He was hidden behind a tree not far from her. For a moment, he had feared she would actually use her sword on herself, and he needed her alive. He had waited so patiently for this time to come, to lose it now would be a disappointment. The war with the trolls had gotten in the way. He hadn't wanted to carry out his plan, only to have the maiden die at the hands of the trolls after all his hard work.

Stupid trolls, Durran thought. He had known it wouldn't last long. Catgut was a fool. He had spied on the trolls while in spirit form and had been aghast at the lack of organization and loyalty. Catgut should have waited a few years, learning who was loyal to her and who wasn't. She should have taken time to build up her forces, but instead, she had jumped in after a single year of leadership, and in the end, the trolls had turned on her. Durran had waited for that to happen, expecting it. Loyalties, he knew, were not gained easily.

Durran felt a trace of sympathy for the elf maiden, watching her cry and beg to her parents for help. He knew what it was like, to want to leave a body behind forever. When his father had been killed by enemies, the tainted elves, Durran had tried to follow him. He had come so close he had actually felt the aura of the Palace of the High Ones. He had wanted to stay forever, almost had, but he had been called back to his home. In Darwik's death, the Underground had been cast into panic. His mother had disappeared, leaving the elves leaderless, so Durran had returned to patch things back together, setting his own desires and emotions aside.

Those were good years for us, Durran thought. The Underground, after the loss of its two founders, had improved greatly under his leadership. With his guidance, the elves had become more productive. The Underground had been perfected, trade had been set up with outside humans, the trolls had become more organized with a leader of their own whom Durran had appointed, and the system of Hunters had been founded by his brother, Nuel.

Soon after Oracle's disappearance, however, Recognition had also disappeared. No more children had been born into the Underground. Durran hadn't been too concerned at the time. What had they needed children for? They had everything they needed. Babies were such a nuisance anyway, crying, always demanding attention, and soiling their clothes.

However, after a while, Durran had started to wonder why it was that humans, trolls, and animals



could produce young without any effort while elves could not--elves, after all, were superior to such races. Always intrigued with the mysteries of the body, Durran had started to explore, with his healing talent, the live bodies of any species, trying to discover the secret. He had spent centuries examining bodies, not just to know how to reproduce, but to know everything he could discover. It was all so fascinating, the Underground elves sometimes hadn't seen their leader for seasons at a time because of his obsessive drive for knowledge, wherein Nuel had to play the role of leader.

Oracle had returned, though, and put an end to his studies. She had wanted her throne back. Durran, at first, had been willing to hand it over to her and devote all his time and energy to discovery, but after a few days, he had recognized the fact that his mother was mad. He had often questioned her mentality before her disappearance, and it seemed that Darwik's death had been the final thing to crush her waning sanity.

Durran had tried to fight her takeover, and he would have succeeded, if it hadn't been for the trolls. Loyalty, he thought, shaking his head. After centuries of leading them, Catgut, I still didn't have the support of the trolls. They ran to whoever offered them the most. With the help of Ashtongue and Firebug, Oracle had chased Durran from the Underground. She would have killed him, had he given her the chance.

Durran had to admit, however, that he had not been entirely displeased with his exile. In his wanderings, he had found a world of new knowledge to discover. Several times, he had almost lost his life to the harshness of the lands, but he had managed to endure. Only away from it had he been able to see the Underground for what it really was; a cage, a place to hide, a tomb. Those who lived there unwittingly buried themselves. There was no growth in that. That was why there had been no births. Because of their stultified state, their non-living existence, children had ceased to be required. That was why outsiders bore young. Life was harsh for them and they died, so they needed posterity to replace them. No children replaced the elves in the Underground because there were so few deaths.

But I must have a child; the elderly elf thought, watching Duskdew. Within the last century, he had decided that. He had felt himself growing older, his body changing, and was worried by it. For how much longer would he be able to sire a child? Although it hadn't seemed important in the Underground, he wanted it now. Elves talked of immortality, of living forever. But Durran now saw it differently. Immortality wasn't living forever. It was leaving something important behind. What better thing than a child, a part of the parent, taught in the ways of the parent, made to be like the parents? The that child would pass that knowledge onto his young, and that one to his young and forever on. That was immortality. Durran wanted a child before he lost the ability to sire one and before he died.

Duskdew wouldn't be his first try to conception, but he hoped it would be the first successful one. Durran had tried to produce a child with other maideas, but none had worked. He was a powerful Healer and anti-Healer, but he had known others, like his mother and twin, Stallowick, who were far stronger than himself. The manipulation of a body against its natural functions was difficult. He had discovered one female he had worked with, after all his effort, had been barren, unable to produce children. What a waste that had been. Another had resisted the invasion of her body. On the two others he had joined with, it had just been too difficult.

This one will be different, he thought to himself. Duskdew was by far the most perfect specimen he had chosen. She was the youngest, had never born a child, was pure-blooded, and healthy. And, more important than any of those, he knew her soul name. Sers. Durran believed that would be the key to his success this time. With the knowledge of her name, he could invade her mind and body with no resistance, and manipulate it to do as he wished.

Durran smiled and carefully stepped from his hiding place.

Duskdew was still kneeling on the ground, head close to her knees, but her crying had stopped and she simply sat there, too tired and sad to move. She heard leaves move together, and she snapped her head up, the muscles in her stomach tightening with fright. There was an elf stepping out from behind a tree, pushing aside the branches on a bush. She stared at him for a moment, in awe. He was beautiful and tall, taller than any elf she had ever seen. This, wavy black hair was swept back from his high brow and fell around the collar of his leather jacket. His skin was pale, almost translucent, and the features of his face, darkly lashed night-blue eyes, long nose, sculpted lips, and firm chin, had an ancient dignity. The stranger was dressed in leather clothing that were suited for travel, but he carried no weapon she could see.

Duskdew jumped up, backing away. "W-who're you?" she asked, rubbing her face to get rid of any lingering moisture.

"A weary traveller, pretty child," the stranger said politely in a rich tenor voice, drawing closer with his long, unthreatening stride. He smiled beckoningly, his dark blue eyes filled with empathy. "Your cries called to me." He lifted his hand under her chin, causing the young maiden to flinch involuntarily, and he stroked his thumb over her cheek. "Tears? You're so sad, child. Why? One so young and pretty should never be this sad."

"I-I-I..." Duskdew stammered. The tall elf was staring into her eyes so intently, it was unnerving. She wished he would stop, as she found it impossible to look away from his face for some reason. What's wrong with me? Duskdew wondered. She felt as if she were rooted to the place she stood, unable to even turn her head. His hand was warm on her face, and she felt her body flush.

Sers! The male's eyes widened in surprise, and Duskdew almost jumped at the sudden use of her soul name.

"W-What? H-h-how?" Duskdew gasped.

"Recognition, little one. Can't you feel it?" the stranger asked in his deep voice, stroking her neck. Her spine tingled at the touch.

"No," Duskdew whispered, staring at this elf who was looking directly into her soul. A wave of hot desire hit her, like nothing she had ever felt before. "I...I...I don't want this now." I want to die now, not Recognize, she thought in her clouded mind.

"Recognition is something that no elf can decide, or refuse, Sers," Durran told her, setting his hands on her shoulders. He reached inside her body, arousing her with his magical talent. "When two elves that are suited for each other come together, Recognition occurs. We can not fight that."

Pleasure pulsing twisted her thoughts. Duskdew blinked her eyes. "But...but I don't know...you don't have a name."

"I was born before the time that soul names were needed by the younger of our race. Call me Durran."

"Durran," Duskdew repeated.

"Yes, child, Durran." The older elf leaned over and pulled the small maiden into his arms, embracing her. Duskdew gasped, closing her eyes. Something was wrong, but her mind was too muddled to think. Her heart pounded. So dizzy. His hands felt good wherever he touched her. Thought, sadness, and memory fled. All she could think about was him and this Recognition that she couldn't deny. She wanted to join, and it had been so long since she had been close to anyone. She gave in finally, forgetting her questions, and lifted her arms about his neck.

Good, Sers, Durran sent, smiling into her soft, clean-smelling curls. He kissed her neck, working to untie the stitches that held the high collar of her shirt in place. He was pleased with her own knowledge, the way she skillfully worked her hands past his clothing. It had been a handful of years since his last joining. This was a task that had to be performed, but still, it would be quite pleasurable.

Durran gazed at Duskdew, who was curled over his own body. She was almost asleep, weary from their joining. He stroked her brow, and she was asleep, slumbering so deeply that she wouldn't wake until he wished it. He sat up, cradling her like a child in his arms, and spread out his large jacket to lay her in.

She's so small, he thought, noting the way she almost became lost in the material of the coat. He brushed her blond-white curls from her brow. Pretty child. Almost too young to be having one of your own. But old enough.

Durran sat cross-legged beside the maiden, leaned over her, and placed his hands on her body to start the shaping. He was powerful, but Durran knew it would take all his strength. A simple conception would be easier, but with his knowledge and skill, he didn't just want a child that was thrown together carelessly with his magic, a combination chosen randomly. He wanted a child that was the perfect combination of his and Duskdew's seed and egg, possibly even better than Recognition could produce. And, he also wanted a son. Everything would have to be perfect, or he wouldn't have it at all. That was the way he like things to be.

Closing his eyes, he began the flesh-shaping.

"Done! Yes!" Durran whispered triumphantly, lifting his hands from the maiden. It was almost day, and he had spent over half the night working. Wearily, he sagged over Duskdew, shoulders hunching as if a great weight had been placed over him, but there was a satisfied smile on his lips. At last, at last! he thought. A child! It had finally worked! But it had taken every trace of strength out of him. He

suddenly felt much older than his many years, but he knew that would pass in a handful of days. Any weariness was worth what he had just accomplished, though. In two years, he would have a son.

Durran tried to rise, but found himself too weak. His body begged for sleep, even though he hadn't slept in several decades. Sleep, Durran found, he could usually go without because he could use his Talent to satisfy his body's needs. Now, however, his strength gone, his body needed to rest to regain some of its energy. He didn't mind though. Slipping one arm around Duskdew, he lay down beside her, and in only a moment, was unconscious.

Something shoved Durran in the side, waking him, then an angry voice growled, "Wake up!" The dark-haired elder rolled over and sat up. Duskdew was awake, clothed, and holding her dagger at him. There was rage in her light green eyes. "I don't know how, but you tricked me," she said. "We did not Recognize."

"Aye, we didn't," Durran admitted, shrugging his shoulders. The weapon didn't scare him. He could stop her without even touching her.

"I don't like being tricked, stranger. I want to know how you knew my name." The fact that he knew frightened Duskdew a little. She couldn't think of any way he could know it, unless they'd Recognized, which they hadn't.

"I overheard your parents call you by your name, little one," Durran said.

Duskdew's eyes widened and her face paled. "My parents? But they're..."

"Dead. Yes, I know. I was watching you when you met your parents under this tree, as a spirit."

"How dare you spy on me!" Duskdew hissed, clenching her weapon tightly. Color flamed inside her cheeks. To think that this elf had watched her during such an intimate, personal moment, and then taken her soul name in order to manipulate her almost blinded Duskdew with rage. "You had no..."

"Would you like to go back, youngling?" Durran interrupted.

"What? What did you say?"

"I know of your pains, your desire to be free again, as you were then," the Healer explained. "I could teach you to draw your spirit from your body, as I do."

"Y-you could?" Duskdew whispered.

"Yes." He reached out his hand to her. "Put away your knife, and I'll teach you everything you like."

Duskdew stared at him, then at her dagger. This elf who had tricked her into joining him for some unknown reason was now offering her everything she wanted. Why would he do that? she wondered. Could he do it? she asked herself. He might be your only chance to ever be free again.

Duskdew lowered her dagger and grasped his hand tightly, watching him with desperate eyes. Please, oh please, don't be lying to me again.

Durran drew her down into his arms, massaging her brow. "Trust me, youngling," he murmured softly, then she was unconscious, limp in his hold. "Forgive me, Sers, but I have not the time to teach you now, and I need your to remain in your body to protect and nourish my child. And I can't have you knowing of what happened here, for now." He entered her soul freely with the knowledge of her name and started to remove her memory of him and their encounter from her mind. "But, I can take some of your pain from you. Not all of it, but make you forget a little, make it seem old and not so important." He knew that the Healers in the Holt that Duskdew lived in had tried to heal her soul, to soothe her, but had failed. He wouldn't, however, because he had all access to her soul.

Carefully, Durran toned down her memory of the incident with her parents, taking the sting and hurt away. He knew, even without his tampering, that eventually she would have adjusted and gone on, but he didn't want her trying anything dangerous as he had seen her do earlier. He didn't want her depressed or doing anything to harm herself or the child she carried.

When he was done, Durran quickly dressed and picked the small maiden up to move her to another spot where his scent wouldn't be so noticeable. Leaving her curled against the trunk of the large oak, Durran departed to return to his camp, where he would pack and leave the Valley quickly. He didn't want to run the chance of meeting up with any of the other valley folk.

Duskdew awoke shortly, stretching and scratching the back of her head. She opened her eyes and gasped in dismay.

"Oh no! The sun's up!" she cried, looking up at the pale morning sky. "Nightstep's going to kill me." She hadn't meant to fall asleep, nor could she remember lying down to do so, but that didn't matter at the moment. She had to get back to the Holt.

Duskdew hopped to her feet, grabbed her basket, and ran as fast as she could back to the Thorn Barrier, imagining all the trouble she's be in for leaving the Holt territory when she knew it was prohibited.

Half way there, she met up with Quicksilver, who was coming from the opposite direction. "Duskdew, where have you been?" the silver-haired youth demanded, flying down to the ground. "You're not supposed to be out here!"

"Well, neither are you!" Duskdew gasped breathlessly.

"I was looking for you! When I couldn't find you anywhere in the Holt, I knew you'd be out here," Quicksilver said. "I was really worried, Dusky."

"I'm sorry," Duskdew said. She flung herself at her brother and hugged him. He was too shocked to move for a moment, but after recovering, he returned the hug fiercely, glad that she was touching again. If gone out of the Holt territory had done this to her, then he wouldn't be mad at her.

"You feel better now?" he asked.

"Yeah." Duskdew released him, keeping one arm around his waist, and the two began walking back to the Holt. She nodded her head, brushing her fingers through her bangs to see how the sunlight made the yellow strands look like silver webs. "Yeah, I really do. I just noticed that. It was if I'd forgotten all about it and why I was so angry. I guess seeing that tree really helped. I don't know why." She thought about it for a moment, but couldn't explain it, even to herself. All she knew was that last evening she had been miserable, and now she felt relieved and alive, and strangely, lazily warm.

"Enough about that, though!" she laughed, eyes twinkling. "We'd better get back to the Holt before Nightstep sends the entire Holt out to fetch us back. He's going to skin both our butts for this!"

"All right!" Quicksilver grabbed the maiden around the waist and flew into the air, swinging toward the Holt. She laughed and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

Sitting on top of his steed, Durran watched the two young elves, smiling to himself. Soon, his son would be born, and soon after, he'd return to claim him.

"Move, Rowin," the tall elf murmured, clicking softly. Pulling on the reins, he turned the horse around and headed out of the Valley.

[The following is reprinted from a postcard received from WaRP Graphics...]

ATTENTION ALL ELFQUEST FANS!

This is a special mailing going to members of the Elfquest Fan Club to let all of you know how to subscribe to the new Elfquest comic-book series, "Kings Of The Broken Wheel." It's taking forever to get out the next Lodestone (#32) so this will give you the information you need. The series is open-ended, meaning we will keep publishing issues as long as we have the story to tell -- and there's LOTS of story to tell! The first issue is at the printer, to be finished the first week in June. Subscription copies will be mailed out, in protective envelopes, as soon as copies are shipped from the printer to the subscription center here in Poughkeepsie (which, by the way, is NOT us here at WaRP, but a professional fulfillment service).

Now for the important information. Subscriptions will run for 6 issues, and will cost \$15.00 in the U.S., \$18.00 in Canada and Mexico, and \$21.00 outside of North America. You will have some sort of notification when your subscription is about to expire so you can renew. Checks or money orders only, please, made out to "WaRP Graphics" and mailed to ELFQUEST SUBSCRIPTION, 5 Reno Road, Poughkeepsie NY 12603. This card is being sent out around May 1, so all orders received by June 1 will start with the first issue! Don't delay!

THE NEW BLOOD
OF
TIMBER VALLEY



Lifetimes

CHANGES
DF+30GT
by Ted R Blasingame

Mooncrest yawned lazily and stretched his arms. He clasped his hands behind his head, feeling content to lie in the warm sunlight that made its way to the center of the Council Clearing. It used to be rare for him to be up and about during the daylight hours, but in the years since the War, the Timber Folk had developed a growing friendship with their past enemies, the Ke L'Rhatan; Mooncrest had just returned from their village, where he'd traded with them and played with their children. He had become one of their favorite playmates.

His new wolf-friend, a white bitch with black-tipped ears and tail, was on her back in the warm sun. They had bonded during the last White-Fall when he had saved her from a fall through the thin winter ice on Blue Lake. He called her Snowdrift for the way she enjoyed jumping into soft drifts of snow to make the fine powder fly. She was young, full of energy and affection. Mooncrest would never forget Bushtail, but Snowdrift had taken his friendship and returned it loyally.

At the moment, Nightway was asleep in their tree, a totally nocturnal elf. His other mate, his Recognized, was in the Minnowbrook, giving their twins a bath. The six-year-old cubs loved the water, so Wildwood wasn't having much difficulty with them. From time to time, Mooncrest could hear them squeal when they splashed one another.

Mooncrest yawned again, feeling very good to be alive. The last six years had been a time of rebuilding after the War, and hadn't been easy. Only now was life seeming normal. He had lost friends in the conflict -- some he'd known a long time -- others only a short while. The pain of loss had been great and it had taken the entire Holt banding together to go on. It reminded him of the years following the Death Flood all too well.

Many changes had taken place in their lives. Some subtle, some outstanding. Take Greeneyes, for instance...the tiny Healer had lost her lifemate, LongKnife, while sending to him during a fierce battle. After that, she had drawn up a mental barrier against any kind of Sending, and it took a long time before she would communicate with anyone. The healing of Greeneyes' own mind finally came when the children were born into the Holt. Her love for little ones was strong enough to push through her soul-deep pain. It was good to see her smile again.

The War had a different effect on Mooncrest's father. During the fighting, Silverhair had recognized the human who had killed his mate years earlier. In the confusion of the fighting, Silverhair had his revenge on the man. Only Nightstep had seen it, and although the Chief had chewed him out for killing an ally, Silverhair had told him that his vengeance was satisfied and that his voice which had been silent since Dewdrop's death would be heard again. Now, six years later, Silverhair's melodious singing could be heard over the tree-tops.

Most of the changes that had occurred in Mooncrest's life hadn't resulted from the War, but from the birth of Whisperswift and Random, the Holt tribe's first set of twins -- the cubs from his Recognition with Wildwood. Being a father taught him more about responsibility than natural aging ever had. To the relief of the tribe, he grew more mature and wasn't quite the annoying prankster he used to be. He realized a whole new world in the rearing of his cubs, making sure they had the best reachers of skill, but most important, a father who looks after them and loves them greatly.

Another change came when he took Wildwood as his second mate. At the time of their Recognition, Wildwood had declined becoming his mate, since he still loved Nightway. She did not want to interfere with that relationship. However, it was inevitable that love would develop between them, since they were together constantly taking care of the cubs. Nightway and Wildwood were the best of friends, so it only seemed natural that all three would agree to a tri-bond. Mooncrest's love for Nightway never faded, but grew ever stronger, as did his love for Wildwood. Together, the five were a family.

Mooncrest broke from his reverie suddenly as Whisperswift pounced on his chest, still wet from her bath. He grabbed her, smiling, and began to tickle her bare ribs. She squealed and unsuccessfully tried to squirm out of his grasp. He laughed and then hugged her close. "Where's your clothes?" he asked, kissing her on the nose.

"Over there," she replied, pointing to the Minnowbrook where Wildwood was dressing Random.

"Well," Mooncrest said, "you had better go get them before someone pinches your

bottom." He reached for her exposed behind in a mock attempt to grab her, but she shrieked and bounded out across the grass toward her mother. Mooncrest laughed and settled back down to let the sun dry his now-wet tunic.

As he closed his eyes again, he thought about the children in the Holt, seven in number. They had all been born in the years after the War except Teal, his brother's daughter, who had arrived just prior to the conflict. Rogue had been an excited father when he was found to be the sire of two children himself: his son, Wildmane was conceived when Rogue had Recognized with Bolt, and his daughter, Russet, was born outside of Recognition through Starlight, one of his lovmates. Both were born close together two years after the War.

A BIG surprise was the arrival of Duskdew's child, Nightsoul. The Holt flirt didn't know who had fathered the male cub, since she had joined with practically any willing guy. Some suspected Windrace, who was also known to hop sleep-furs, but no one knew for sure.

The last of the "new blood" (as Two Star called them) was Littlestorm, a small wiry girl born to Chief Nightstep and Freshwind. Skyflame and Littlestorm had become quite close to one another in the four short years since her birth, the child adoring her big brother. Nightstep was a very proud father and chief.

Mooncrest reflected how the High Ones had sent a few cubs to replace some of those lost in the War, knowing that the ones who had died would have been pleased.

The long feud with the humans had dissolved, and the trolls had finally settled down under King Rockhammer's rule, all making Timber Valley a rather peaceful place, the first time in many centuries. Hoo - even Dripstone and Spicurl had a couple of little mumps themselves. Who would have thought he'd see all this?

A shadow over his face suddenly blocked out the sunlight above. He opened one eye and looked up at his grinning son's face. He smiled back and closed his eye.

Random physically opened his father's eyelid and giggled at Mooncrest's expression of surprise. "Mother wants to know if you want her to bathe you, too," he said.

Mooncrest peered over to the Minnowbrook where Wildwood made a "come-here" expression with her smiling face and a crooked finger. "Sounds like a good idea to me, cub," he said, standing up. Random grabbed Mooncrest's waist-length hair and started pulling his father toward the water.

"Can we go to the rock pits when you're done?" Random asked in a sing-song voice, "All the other kids are going to play there with Hushleaf."

"I suppose so -- but try not to get dirty -- you just had your bath!" Mooncrest said, picking up the child in his arms.

"Oh, father!" Random huffed, "You know me better than that!"

Mooncrest turned him upside-down and then draped him over his shoulder. "You're right, I do," he laughed. "So, don't get dirty..."

He set Random down next to Wildwood's clothes and winked at his mate. "Now, go along and find out where your sister ran off to."

"Kay." Random was gone in the wink of an eye.

Mooncrest stepped out of his clothes and then stepped into the water next to Wildwood, slowly sitting in the cold stream beside her. He threaded his arm around her waist and nuzzled her playfully before settling back to relax in the brook.

Yes, changes had come to the Holt. Some good, some not-so-good, but life went on in the valley of timbers, as always.

Only The Beginning...

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TIMELINE ADDITIONS

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- * Evenfell returns to Timber Valley.
- * Timber Valley's TROLL WAR begins...
- * "WANDERING SPIRIT" Duskdew comes close to dying after a troll attack on she and Quicksilver.

- * "THE THUNDER BELOW" It is discovered Catgut is now Queen of the Trolls, having killed old King Grubmoss. Elfin trading parties are captured and Blackfire is killed.

- * "BLOOD FRENZY" Dripstone gets word of the situation to the elves, but is wounded trying to escape the caverns. While recuperating, he gives the Timber Folk information of Catgut's past. A rescue party penetrates the caverns to free the captives. Though they succeed in removing all the captives but Rogue, who was taken elsewhere in the caverns, Softwill and Big Axe are killed in the attempt.

- * "STRANGE ALLIANCES" The Elves and Trolls of the Resistance try to enlist the Humans as allies. The proposal is rejected until Trolls attack the Humans' village, killing many. Among the dead were Diver, Saadstorm, Shadowstar and Talon, who were sent to warn the Humans. The Ke L'Rhatan agree to drop the feud with the Timber Folk to fight a new common foe, Queen Catgut.

- * "SECRET WEAPON" Rogue is rescued by the Troll Resistance, along with Stormer, former chief of the Timber Folk, who was also a captive unknown to the Elves. A Troll spy is discovered in the Holt and a ruse is enacted to deceive him into taking false information to Catgut. As most of the Alliance left the Valley to fulfill part of their plan, Catgut's Trolls attack those still in the Holt. The Trolls are all dispatched, but not before killing Ferret, Hatfeather, Longknife and Woodwreath. For the upcoming battle in the Upper World, Catgut brings out her secret weapon...armor.

- * "FINAL BATTLE" Due to the morning sunshine and humid atmosphere caused by the previous night's rains, the Troll's armor became hot, tiring the soldiers quickly. In the battle, Buckeye, Oriole and Woodblaze are killed. The fighting is soon over and the Alliance then made a counter strike into the heart of the Caverns. The fighting in the tunnels is brief, as those remaining of the queen's forces turn on her. Catgut is killed, and her army surrenders, ending the war.

- * Rockhammer, the leader of the Resistance Trolls, is made new King of the Caverns.

- * Dripstone takes Spicurl (Grubmoss' daughter) as his mate.

- * Whisperswift (f) & Random (m), the native Timber Folk's first set of twins, are born to Mooncrest and Wildwood.

- * Due to events during the War, Trilight's name is changed to Heartmender.

24 LF

- * "SOMETHING LEFT BEHIND" Duskdew meets Durran Shadowhand (m), who deceives her into believing they Recognized. With magical manipulation, Durran uses his power to insure a child will be born from their joining. When he leaves, he erases her memory of him.

25 GT

- * "THE SECRET WORD" Rogue and Bolt Recognize.

26 HT

- * Littlestorm (f) is born to Chief Nightstep and Freshwind.

26 LF

- * Nightsoul (m) is born to Duskdew.

27 GT

- * Wildmane (m) is born to Rogue and Bolt.
- * Russet (f) is born to Rogue and Starlight, outside of Recognition.

30 GT

- * Nightway, Mooncrest and Wildwood become tri-bonded Lifemates.