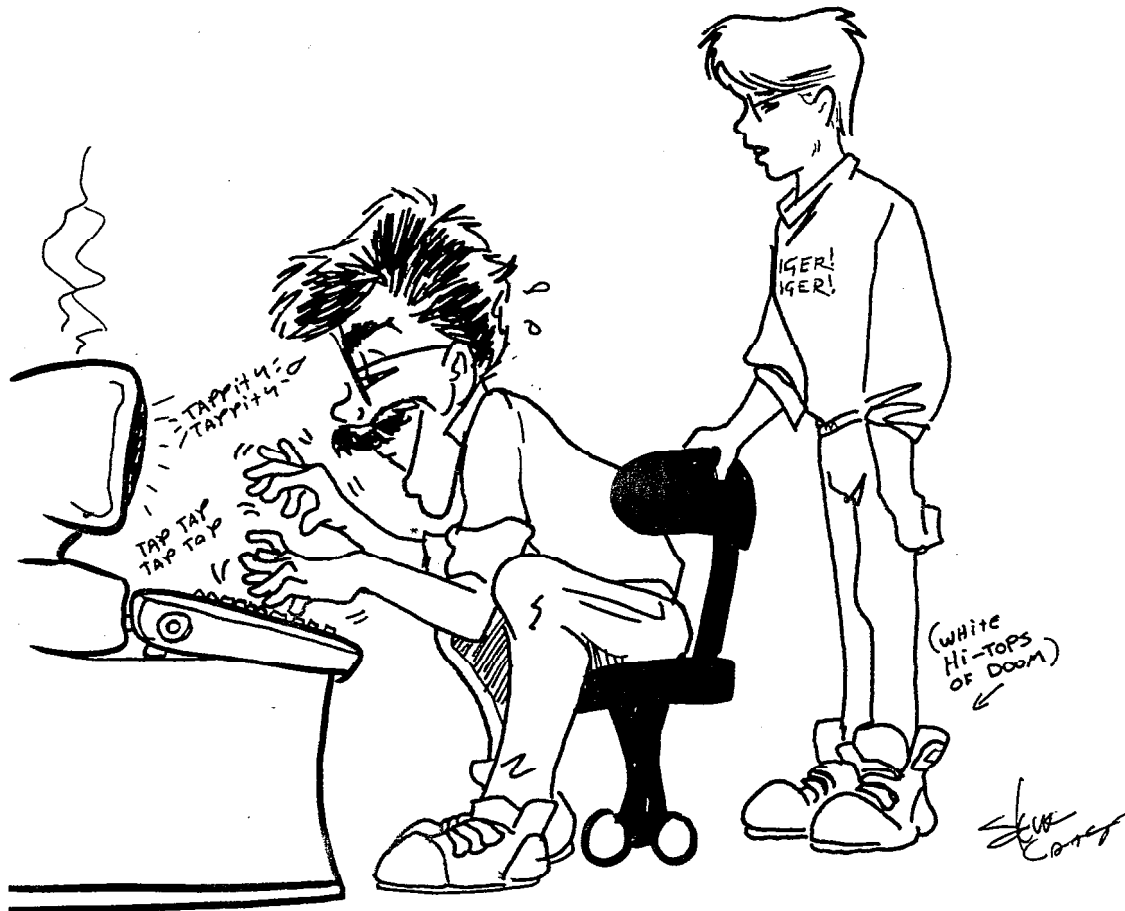


TIMBERS

Volume 4, Number 22





"UH... COME ON, TED. YOU CAN'T GO
A SIXTH DAY WITHOUT FOOD!"

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Return To Timber Valley

Editorial re-Introduction

May 1990 marked the publication of *Timbers* #21 and the official end of the six-year operation of the Timber Valley Holt. What I call "ElfQuest burnout" had hit many members and instead of growing by leaps and bounds with each issue that had long become normal, membership had begun to drop off rapidly and interest in the holt was getting low. That, combined with rising production costs and a dwindling bank account finally led me to shut down the group and disperse the cast. For all practical intents, the Timber Valley Holt, a chapter of the ElfQuest National Fan Club, had been laid to rest.

In 1996, at the prompting of friends, I attempted to resurrect the project in *Timber Valley Beginnings*, only to stop operation before it actually got started. That incarnation of the project would have taken the stories four thousand years into the past to the initial discovery of the valley by the elves. There was a whole new cast of characters to play with for the few members we would start off with. Unfortunately, things didn't work out as well as planned and the project died early.

Anyone familiar with Science Fiction & Fantasy knows that nothing dead has to stay that way, and frequently doesn't. Through the years I have missed Mooncrest, Wavesong, Nightstep and the others. On occasion I would pull out the old newsletters and reread them and the characters would come alive for me again. Granted, those early newsletters were poorly written and my editorials were rather corny, but I was new to fandom and quite excited to be leading such a crew. In some ways I never regretted closing down the holt. We had grown so large that in reality a tribe would have had trouble providing for so many at such a rate. Problems with the members themselves often created difficulties that probably should have given me ulcers. But, in *other* ways, I have regretted saying good-bye to the characters I'd come to love to read and write about.

I have always wanted to pick up my pencil and continue on with the holt's stories, but was reluctant to use characters established by others. I suppose I could have written them anyway, just for myself, but something always held me back, even as I remained active in one writing group or another. *Blue Horizon*, *Bright Mountain*, *Midnight Sonata*, *Mind's Eye*, *Stone Oak*, *Treasure Hunt* or *Wizard's Way* -- they all helped me have an outlet for my writing creativity and I've enjoyed each project. However, Timber Valley kept calling to me.

I don't mean to get metaphysical, but Timber Valley was my baby, back when I first discovered fandom and the fun of creative participation, and its voice has always been sweet to me. *ElfQuest* itself has grown and changed, and I must admit that the current stories produced in that publication don't really appeal to me anymore. What does, though, is the spirit of what it used to be, and that is the spirit that continues to call me through the original characters of Timber Valley.

As you see here, I am trying to resurrect this tribe of elves once again. The current setting is fifteen years after the events of the Timber Valley War. Practically all of the wanderers who'd discovered this place in the 24 years preceding the War have gone on to other places and even some of the native folk have gone with them. The tribe has been reduced practically back down to the original group that existed in the early issues of *Timbers* and it is this group the new stories will center upon.

The future productions of this fanzine, however, will be sporadic. There will be no print schedules such as monthly, quarterly or otherwise. The purpose of this zine is to have a place to exhibit ongoing tales of Timber Valley. Only a small group will be involved here and stories may come only a little at a time. *Timbers* will be released only when I have something to print, whether the stories are written by me or anyone else. If you are interested in contributing, I will be accepting written stories of any length, graphic stories, cartoons, character profiles, front or back covers or filler material. There will be no subscription fee for belonging to this group and no necessary requirements. All I ask is that your submissions fit within our guidelines.

For one of the first tales printed here, I am going to cheat and use an expanded version of the manuscript I originally wrote for *Timber Valley Beginnings* as a story told by one of our eldest for the children. It would be such a shame to discard a story about our beginnings, even though it really doesn't contain the characters and time period I wanted to resurrect this zine for. Instead of starting all new with an issue #1, this issue will pick up where we left off in 1990 as *Timbers* #22. There are format changes, but the spirit is the same. It is the return of Timber Valley.

~ Ted R. Blasingame

Project Background Notes

- *Return To Timber Valley* is a project to resurrect the story atmosphere of the original Timber Valley Holt, an ElfQuest Fan Chapter that was created by Ted Blasingame and operated between May 1984 - May 1990.

- *Timbers* is not intended to be for distribution outside the core group, and the artwork and stories printed here will be created for our own reading pleasure.

- The core group members of this small group are **Teresa Arellanes, Terri Barnard, Ted Blasingame, Steve Carter, Eileen Fryer and Terrie Smith.**

- There are no plans to notify other former Timber Valley Holt members, and characters belonging to former members not in the core group won't be used.

- Prior to the War over a period of 15-20 years, a whole load of wanderers found the valley and settled in. In the 15 years since the War, practically all of them have left again for other places and some of the natives (owned by members no longer present) have gone off with them. Some were emotionally traumatized by the death and destruction, some were homesick for their former tribes and families and others just wanted to travel on and see more of the world. Now, thirty-nine years after the Death Flood, the elfin inhabitants of the valley are back down to numbers similar to what they were before that catastrophic event.

- If you do not see a character listed in the Profiles, then assume that person, whether wanderer or native, has left the Valley for some purpose or another. I *don't* intend to create reasons for their absence, unless it was one who specifically died in the war. After the project closed down, some of the members took their Timber Valley characters on to other holts.

- In previous publications the date designation, **DF** stands for the *Death Flood*, the major event in the valley that segments the timeline. WF = White Fall (Winter). GT = Greening Time (Spring). HT = Hot Time (Summer). LF = Leaf Fall (Autumn). Current and future season designations have been *changed* over to W = Winter, S = Spring, H = Summer, F = Fall, for simplicity.

- Stories take place fifteen years after the war, which was in DF 24. The present timeline date is **DF 39**.

- The inhabitants refer to their home merely as "the valley," not by the name of "Timber Valley".

- The bond with the wolves has loosened considerably. They are still around, but don't take much of a part in the elves' daily lives anymore, except for the occasional hunt.

- The trolls have been working on a tremendous underground project that will *literally* reshape the valley.

- After running from a cougar full speed through the forest one spring night in DF 33, Chief Nightstep's long hair got tangled in the bushes and he was caught by the predator. Had it not been for a lucky thrust of his sword, he might have perished. After his near-fatal injuries were healed, he decreed that no one will have hair longer than the upper back, unless it is bound up or covered when out away from the holt. A massive hair cutting session took place immediately, though not without a lot of grumbling and crying.

- There is an entrance to a troll tunnel under a large slab of rock near the Rock Pits. There is another near the top of the Sheercliff Pass, and several more scattered throughout the valley.

- A mother's caution to her cub: "When in danger, stay up in a tree and keep your head and feet covered."

- Any artist interested in volunteering to update the character illos would be greatly appreciated.

In This Issue

Timbers #22. Front cover pencils by Eileen Fryer and inks by Steve Carter.

Sixth Day. Inside front cover cartoon by Steve Carter.

Something Fishy. Written by Ted Blasingame pg. 3

Phantom of the Newsletter. Cartoon by Steve Carter pg. 5

The Ladies of Timber Valley. A running art pictorial of the female elves by Eileen Fryer pg. 6

Timber Valley Beginnings. Written by Ted Blasingame and illustrated by Steve Carter pg. 7

Coming Up Next

Go back and reread all of the Timber Valley Troll War chapters in previous issues (#12, 18 & 19/20). Beginning with *Timbers #23*, I will be printing the chapters that follow those to finish a project started years ago that should have been completed. Part four of the storyline will be "*Strange Alliances*."

Something Fishy

by Ted Blasingame

(DF 39 S)

Arrowsong looked up from the trap she was making at a bedraggled pair of elves as they emerged from the south opening of the thorn barrier. Mooncrest and Stormer looked as if they had been through a war that they'd lost and their expressions did nothing to contradict her first impression. Both were soaked, splattered in mud and dirt and pieces of grass and riverweed clung to their clothing and hair. There were bruises on Mooncrest's face and arms and Stormer had them on his neck and chest. There were cuts across their cheeks and sticks and twigs were tangled in their hair. Mooncrest's lips were thick, his left eye was almost swollen shut and the fingers of his right hand were curled up as if in a cramp. They carried between them a net full of fish and nearly stumbled from its weight as they crossed over the Minnowbrook.

The archer shook her head and stood up, laying her trap aside the tree root she had sat against. "What in the valley happened to you two?" she asked with a chuckle. Mooncrest stumbled again, but this time he went down on his knees and lost his grip on the net. Speckled fish fell out upon the ground, but the exhausted elf didn't seem to even mind. He looked up at Arrowsong and tried to grin past his swollen lips.

"We went fishing," he replied, "but you should have seen the one that got away..." Arrowsong crossed her arms and looked down at him with a raised eyebrow as Stormer feebly tried to reacquire the dropped fish. Mooncrest coughed once and looked around him. "There's something in the lake big enough to eat any one of us," he said to Squirrel's wide eyes. Overhead thunder rumbled as if to accentuate his words. The sky had been rumbling all evening, but no rain had yet fallen.

"What kind of story are you trying to tell us, Mooncrest?" Season asked skeptically. "No one's ever seen anything like that before."

"Look at us," Stormer said sharply. "We barely got out of the lake with our lives." Everyone stared at the tribe's eldest as if he'd just turned into one of the trolls he so detested. "Listen to Mooncrest," he said as he finally picked up the last of the spilled fish. "There's something out there now."

"What's it look like?" Foxvine asked.

Skyflame leaned over Squirrel with his hands upraised and fingers wriggling. "It's huge, with multiple tentacles and a big gaping mouth!"

"With giant fangs and one bloodshot eyeball!" added Grassy with a laugh.

"And a long tongue for holding onto its meals!" Sandstorm finished. Squirrel looked around at the grinning faces and wondered what could be so funny about such a monster. He knelt next to his reddening uncle nervously.

Mooncrest scowled at the small crowd. "It's out there," he growled. "It nearly got me and Stormer and you're making jokes about it." He looked again at his nephew and said. "It's real."

"What's it look like?" Foxvine asked again.

Stormer pulled out his knife to begin cleaning the fish and answered solemnly. "We never got a good look at it," he said, "But it *does* have tentacles, and it smelled like a wet troll."

"Ewww!" Squirrel said as he wrinkled his nose.

**What happened to you two? Greeneyes asked with her feather-soft sending when she approached the small group. **Did you two get into a fight? She knelt next to Stormer and went to work on his cuts and bruises.

"That sounds more like what happened," Skyflame quipped. "Did you two have a fight over the fish you caught?"

"No," Mooncrest answered as his two lifemates arrived and began whispering to one another. He looked away from Nightway and Wildwood and gave his attention back to the crowd. "We set out to the lake earlier this evening to do some fishing," he said. "The conditions seemed right for a good catch and we were ready to get started..."

Mooncrest and Stormer neared the lake shore along the well-worn path from the holt, their spirits high. The sky was heavy with black clouds and they knew from experience that the fishing always seemed best just before a storm. They skirted around puddles and sent to one another silently as they moved north along the banks. They stopped at a spot near the sheercliff, where the reeds were tall, the water was shallow, and lake moss was spread out a short distance around the area. Both dark-haired elves stripped down to loincloths and entered the cool water. Both were armed with fishing spears and Mooncrest had a net slung across his shoulders.

It didn't take long before the fish came near the surface to feed on water bugs. The net fell off Mooncrest's shoulders with the first strike of his spear and he ignored it as he wrestled with the squirming spear staff. He flung the speckled fish up on the bank and then stilled himself for another catch.

Stormer noted the net as it floated by him, but the movement of a fish in the water near him drew his attention. He stabbed and missed, but secured his prey upon the second thrust of his spear. He yelped when its thrashing almost unbalanced him, but then laughed aloud as he hurled it off the metal tip upon the shore. The net went unnoticed as the spear fishing was good and the two elves were well occupied with their tasks.

A while later, Stormer stood on the bank beside a sizable pile of fish. "We've got twelve good-sized specklers, Mooncrest," he said with satisfaction. He looked up at the sky at a rumble and wondered when the rain would finally fall. "We have enough for now. Let's head back to the holt."

Both were dried off and redressed before either of them remembered the net. Mooncrest saw the thin strands floating out in the water just beyond the reeds. Their good fortune with the fishing had his feelings high and he dashed out into the lake to retrieve it fully clothed. Stormer laughed as the younger elf waded out to get the net, but the mirth caught in his throat when he saw something dark and leathery break the surface near his companion.

"Mooncrest!" he exclaimed, forgetting to send. "Something's out there!"

The other elf laughed and waved back at him as he reached forward in the waist-deep water for the net. Just as his right hand closed on the thin webbing, something jerked the net under and nearly took his fingers off with it. Mooncrest cried out pain and fell forward into the water. Stormer dropped his towel and ran out into the lake. When he reached Mooncrest's side, the other was struggling frantically with his hold on the thrashing net. Something underneath them struck Stormer's leg and for an instant the elder elf disappeared from view.

Mooncrest leaped forward toward whatever unseen thing has his net and tried to wrap his arms around it. Something large and thick struck him across the face and suddenly the overhead stars seemed to have found a way inside his brain. Stormer stood up suddenly, gasping for air and he caught a glimpse of an appendage breaking the water. It was as long as his arm, twice its thickness and dull green. He couldn't tell in the darkness what it was attached to, but he heard it spew out water and bellow with a gurgle. The sound chilled him to the bone and he found himself trying to back away.

"It's still got my net, Stormer!" Mooncrest coughed as he tried to clear the stars from his eyes. The elder elf abandoned his hesitation and dove into the water, swimming furiously toward the disturbance. Sight was always distorted under water, but Stormer was sure he came to face to face with a hideous creature with two red eyes atop a bulbous snout. A long tubular tentacle protruded from where he thought the mouth should be and he lost the air in his lungs as he screamed underwater.

Something struck out at him and he swam backward furiously to put distance between him and the... the *thing*. He slammed into Mooncrest and the two of them were all over one another trying to exit the lake. They managed to crawl out onto the shore and with a look of disbelief, Stormer discovered that he had the net in his hands.

Both of them looked back out toward a bubbling area and watched as the disturbance grew still. Only the ripples of a pre-storm breeze could be seen. Mooncrest started and Stormer gasped when a fish jumped out of the water after a bug and splashed back into its domain.

Mooncrest stared long and hard at the lake before he finally found his voice and asked, "What was that thing, Stormer?"

The elder wiped wet hair from his forehead and shook his head slowly. "I've never heard of anything like it, Mooncrest. Never in all my memory." He glanced over at their fish pile and wearily held up the net. "Let's get our catch back to the holt."

"No one's gonna believe this..." Mooncrest said quietly as he got up onto his feet.

"And, you're right," Season laughed. "You really expect us to believe that tale?"

"It's true," Stormer said to the hunter. "Every word of it."

"Then *send* it!" Grassy taunted. "If you can."

Mooncrest cleared his eyes as Greeneyes finished healing his wounds and then sent openly to everyone gathered. **Our story is true,** he sent honestly. **Everything we said was accurate.**

Smiles faded quickly as the realization hit home. Lies cannot be contained in sending and the cuts and bruises they'd come home with seemed to prove their struggles.

Nightway knelt down in the grass to help clean the fish and she gave her lifemate a worried look as the crowd dispersed to discuss the situation between themselves elsewhere. Squirrel sat in the grass with his hands on his ankles. "What's in the lake?" the boy of thirteen summers asked. "It is still out there?"

Mooncrest looked at his nephew and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he answered, "to either question."

"Whatever it was, we'd better be careful at the lake," Stormer added as he worked on his fish. "I wouldn't want to tangle with it again."

Up in a tree above the fishers, Nightstep leaned against the main trunk on his branch and looked at his best friend on the next limb over. **What do you think, Two Star?**

Their sending proves they believe they tangled with *something* out there, was the response. **I wonder what they really came across...**

A dark shape eased out of the lake onto the stone ledge of a cave between the twin waterfalls and sat down, puffing for air.

"What happened?" a grumbling voice asked from deeper inside the cave.

The wet shape removed a flexible tube of fibrous material from its mouth and replied, "I got tangled up in a stupid elf's fishing net. They got upset and attacked me."

There was silence for a moment, but the other soon dismissed the trouble. Instead, he asked, "How did the tube work?"

The troll on the ledge tilted his head sideways to let the water drain out of his ear and coughed once before he answered. "It still needs more work," he replied. "Water still seeps through the material and makes it hard to breathe through."

"Rockhammer's getting impatient, Grump. If we don't have this thing ready for the south end soon, the King's gonna have our heads."

Grump stood up and began removing his wet, leathery clothing and grunted. "Breathing underwater has never been tried before. What does he expect?"

"Results. Now let's get the tube back to the warrens and try to fix whatever's wrong with the thing." Grump sighed and followed his companion through the narrow rock passageway, gingerly feeling of his sore nose from his encounter with the elves.



The Ladies of Timber Valley

Wavesong



Whisperswift



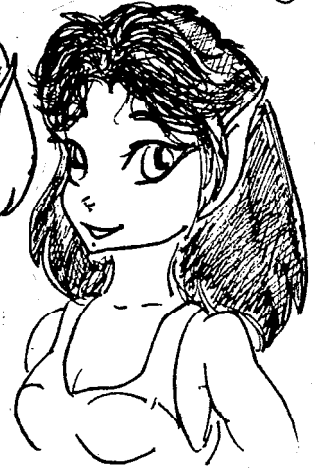
Wildwood



Arrowsong



GREENEYES



Goldenbraid



Dawnwatch



SANDSTORM

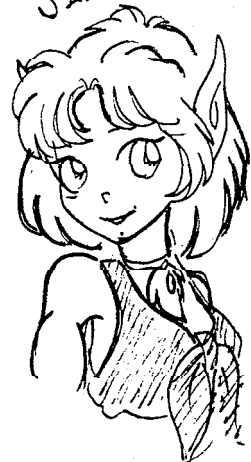


SILVER LEAF

Teal



Nightway



Feather

FRESHWIND

Two Star's Tale
Timber Valley Beginnings
by Ted Blasingame

(DF 39 S)

The springtime weather had finally grown warmer with the retreat of the winter snows from the valley and the elves of the Timber Folk found themselves outdoors more and more. The eldest of the elfin children, a female of fifteen summers who thought the greening time of the year was special just for her, found it an easy task to wander quietly away from her parents while they were taking care of the holt's gardens.

Teal was a simple girl with simple thoughts. She had been born outside of Recognition, which almost always prevented one from having too many complex thoughts. She was eternally optimistic about her short life and never seemed unhappy. Some in the tribe worried about her, but for herself she was content with her life just the way it was. When she wanted to know some fact and actually asked a question about it, those she asked were usually in awe that she would even do so.

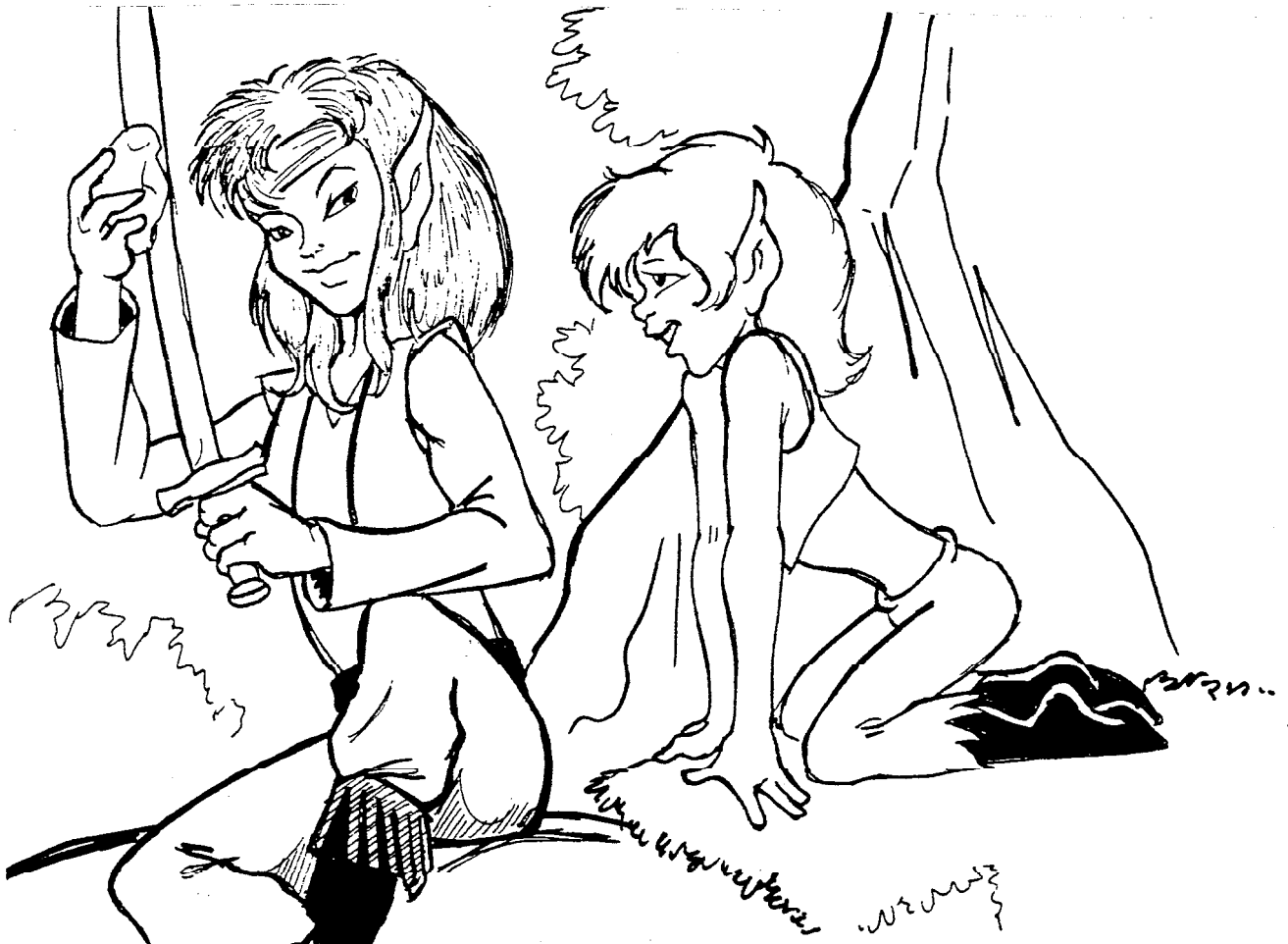
Such was the surprise of Two Star when she sat down next to him as he patiently sharpened the metal edge of his fine troll-made sword near the Minnowbrook and asked him a question.

"Two Star," she asked in a soft voice, "have we always lived in the valley?"

The elder pulled the wetstone slowly down along the blade as he lifted an eyebrow at her. "No, lass, not always," he replied, "but we *have* been here a very, very long time, since chief Silverstone first led his people here."

"When was that?" she asked. "When you were a cub?"

Two Star laughed aloud. "Old I may be, Teal, but not that old." He sheathed the blade and set it on the



ground beside him and then laid back in the soft grasses once again growing after the long winter. The night air felt good on his face and he put his hands behind his head. Teal settled down next to him on her stomach and smiled at him.

“Nightstep is the ninth chief we’ve had,” he said a moment later. “Silverstone was the first chief of the Timber Folk, but he was only just a hunter for the tribe when they all followed him across the Sea of Grass and discovered the valley.”

“Why’d they come here?” Teal asked. “Didn’t they like it where they used to live?”

Two Star looked over at her and sighed. “Yes, they did,” he answered. “But they didn’t have a choice about it. Humans made them leave their homes, back at a time long before the tall ones were our friends.”

“What happened?”

The elder smiled and brushed a few errant strands of her silver hair from her eyes. “I’ll tell it to you how it was told to me long ago, cub. Close your eyes now and I’ll send you the pictures in my memory as I tell you about the discovery of our valley...”

(DF-4070 F)

It was getting harder to hear above the roar of the water. The silver-haired chief hunter of the Timber Folk squinted his eyes in the deepening darkness, but saw nothing more than the silhouettes of his tribe and the trees along both sides of the river. It was a moonless evening and the stars were brilliant, though not bright enough to see much by, even for a race with sensitive night vision. Silverstone knew the sound of a waterfall and silently hoped it was a sign their journey was near its end.

Eight days ago, the tranquil life of the small tribe of elves was shattered when creatures of legend moved into their region of the Great Wood. Humans had not been seen by the Timber Folk for many centuries and their sudden appearance was met with more curiosity than fear. Only the ruling council of four elders had actual memories of the Tall Ones, and although the rough language had been long out of use, there were those who remembered the words.

These humans, it seemed, had never hunted the small demons as the last of their kind in this area had. This group had legends of the little people or wood sprites who inhabited the densest part of forests, but they were believed to be helpers who worked to make the land grow. The Tall Ones were eager to befriend the elves, in hopes their presence would bless their hunts. Although wary, the elven council agreed to allow the newcomers to share their wood, for there was plenty to feed and clothe both tribes.

After three nights, however, the humans had discovered how prime that section of the Great Wood was for hunting. Their respected hunters argued to drive away the little people so they might have the entire region to themselves. The strongest won out and the killing began, even amidst the protests of many in their own tribe.

Silverstone closed his eyes momentarily at the recent memory. Two of the humans’ largest hunters had come into their holt, a dense area of shaped hometrees. The Timber Folk suspected nothing as the pair announced they had come to trade, but when they suddenly drew out their clubs and violently crushed the heads of two elves who had gathered near, sudden panic flew through the frightened tribe. There were no real fighters among the elves who had lived in relative peace for near countless years and several more died before someone sent openly for all to flee.

The elves grabbed what they could and fled into the forest. Human warriors jumped out at them and forced them ever farther away from their home, herding them to the edge of the wood that bordered endless rolling hills of grass. The Tall Ones did not follow the elves out onto the sea of grass, but remained just inside the shadows to keep any of the little people from returning. Of those who had perished in the slaughter, three had been elders.

The remaining elder of the council was in shock and was unable to lead. She could do nothing but stare back toward the Great Wood with terrified eyes, as if expecting the Tall Ones to come out onto the plains to finish her off. Desperate for someone to lead them, the elves looked to their chief-hunter to guide them. Silverstone had never ventured far out onto the sea of grass in his travels, but he knew they could not go back. A breeze had

blown in from the west and with it came the smell of trees. He could see none in the distance, but chose that direction to lead the survivors of the Timber Folk. Their supplies and provisions were few so they must quickly find a new home. Herds of treehorns frequently moved across the plains, so hope was high for food along their journey.

After three days of traveling, they had seen a line of trees in the distance. The elves eventually arrived and discovered a river flowing in its bed through the grass plains. Trees bordered the shore on both sides and they brought some comfort to the wood elves. Silverstone led them across a shallow, sandy area of the river, hoping that if they continued on they would find another forest, but once on the other side he realized that whatever sanctuary might be out there for them it would be along the river's course. He led them south and hoped for the best.

The chief hunter shook himself of his memories and looked ahead. A white-haired youth in garments of red and white ran back to him with an excited smile.

"Silverstone!" the young male exclaimed, "The river's falling into a deep valley!"

The chief hunter nodded and followed the youth at a trot. Most of the tribe was behind them as they arrived. Silverstone walked to the edge of a vast precipice and peered out into the darkness. All he could see was a large area of shadow darker than the rest of the night. He turned and looked back around at his tribe gathering near.



Ash has found us a valley, he sent to them openly. The falling water made it near impossible to be heard aloud. ***But, it's too dark to try to find a way down safely. We'll set up camp back upriver a ways and scout the area in the morning light.***

The chief hunter received a few sent acknowledgments, but most of the group silently moved to their tasks. Silverstone turned toward the green-clad rockshaper at his side.

***Blackthorn, will you check on Redder?** he sent.

The tribe's only shaper of stone nodded. ***She's been spending much of her time with the wolves that followed us from the Great Wood. They've always been a great comfort to her.***

Silverstone put a hand on his friend's thick arm. ***She's the only surviving elder. She'll have to name the new council before much longer.***

Blackthorn frowned, even though he knew Silverstone could barely see his face in the darkness. ***I think the human attack did something to her, Silver. She's changed. I don't know if she'll be able to name a council.***

The hunter sighed as he led his best friend away from the river. ***Maybe I should try to talk to her.*** He looked away to the sound of running feet approaching them. A youth of seventeen summers stopped beside the him and rockshaper.

"Silverstone, let me scout out the area tonight!" he said loudly to be heard over the roar of the falling water.

Send, Rush, Silverstone told him, ***and save your voice.***

Let me go out tonight, the youth repeated.

Silverstone pursed his lips. ***I don't think that would be a good idea. There's not much light out tonight and none of us knows the area.***

I can find my way back! Besides, there may be more humans out there.

Maybe so, Rush, but why ask me, anyway? I'm not on the council.

Rush fingered his longbow and glanced away at a fire someone had just started. ***I asked Redder, but she said you were chief now and it was your decision.***

Blackthorn looked at Silverstone in surprise. ***Chief-hunter, you mean?**

No, chief of the tribe.

Silverstone scratched his right ear. ***That's news to me...** He put a hand on Rush's shoulder and replied, ***I still don't think you should go off alone, but you may stand watch tonight, if you wish.***

Rush snorted. ***I'd rather scout the area,*** he sent.

Blackthorn smiled to himself and ran the fingers of his left hand through his black, curly hair. ***Why don't you help Holly gather wood for the fire? We'll need it tonight and it looks like someone built it far enough away from the valley's edge that if anyone lives down in there we won't have just announced ourselves.***

Instead, Silverstone said, ***I want you to go out with Windstalker and Sandstaff and see if the three of you can bring in some fresh meat for the tribe.***

***Sandstaff?!** Rush complained. ***He can't see game in the dark with a double full moon!**

Then take Ash, instead.

***Ash?! He's no hunter! I'll take Sandstaff before I'll take my dirt-digging brother...** Without another thought, the young archer disappeared into the darkness.

Blackthorn snickered and sent, ***That was mean, Silverstone!**

***What was, pairing him up with Sandstaff or mentioning Ash?**

Neither is a good prospect to send with Rush. He's too hardheaded.

The pair began walking toward the fire. ***Sandstaff needs the hunting experience and Rush and Windstalker are good hunters to gain it with,*** Silverstone replied. ***Besides, I think Sandstaff has a crush on Windstalker.***

***It must be her long legs...** Blackthorn sent with a mental chuckle.

The pair fell silent as they looked around at the various members of the tribe milling around the area. They were sufficiently far enough away from the waterfall where people were talking in normal voices again. Silverstone knelt down next to Windstalker's sister, who was on her back staring up into the stars overhead, lost in thought.

"Firelight?" he asked. "Have you seen Redder?"

The blue-eyed mender looked up at him and then pointed to her left with a yawn. "She's over there, Silverstone, with my father."

"Thank you." He stood up and turned to Blackthorn. "Find Dreamer and Highwind and have them meet us to talk to Redder. They're the likeliest ones for the new council, and Hawkleaf's already with her."

"Right." Blackthorn walked away, sending as he moved.

"Silverstone?" Firelight asked as she sat up and put her arms around her knees, "Are we going to try to go back to the Great Wood?"

The chief hunter knelt down again and shook his head. "I don't know," he replied. "I know there are those who want to try, but most are too frightened to face the humans there, in our own holt."

"What about you? What do you want to do?"

Silverstone looked back over his shoulder toward the river. "If it were my decision, I would find a new home and forget about our old life, but I would make sure no one ever chased us out again."

Silverstone? Everyone you asked for is over with Redder, Blackthorn sent to him. ***I'm going to help Fawn gather provisions.***

He stood up and left the healer's daughter to her thoughts. A moment later he stood before those he knew should be the new council of elders. Everyone looked up at him, but remained silent as they all waited to find out why he called them together. He wanted the meeting private, so he locked his sending to only them.

Redder, you should name these to the new council, he sent. His words didn't seem to be unexpected to those gathered. Dreamer, Highwind and Hawkleaf the healer were the eldest surviving elves of the tribe.

The only member of the original council surprised them all, however. Redder looked at him through eyes that were weary and half-glazed, but her words were strong and the truth of her sending left no doubt to the belief she held to them. ***There will be no more council. The Timber Folk need one central figure to lead them now.***

***What?!** Dreamer exclaimed. ***We've always had a council of elders to guide the tribe!**

Redder's brown eyes were dark and penetrating. She looked at the huntress and stared deeply into her. ***When the humans came to us with words of praise and wishes to trade, the council was divided on what to do. We couldn't make a solid decision. Only our chief hunter really opposed the humans being allowed to share our part of forest, but the council finally decided to accept our new neighbors only because we couldn't agree on anything else. You know the result.***

Redder crossed her legs beneath her and ran a hand through her flaming red hair. ***Our lives have changed in the past few days, and with it needs other changes. I say Silverstone should be more than chief hunter, but chief of the tribe.***

The healer rubbed his chin in thought and replied, ***I would not be opposed to Silverstone,*** he said. ***He has done well to lead us to this place, and has the strength to make decisions. Besides Redder and Blackthorn, he's also the only other one in the tribe who knows the humans' tongue, should we ever encounter them again.***

Highwind snorted in frustration. ***Hawkleaf, Silverstone is not even an elder!***

No, I am... *** Redder sent strongly. ***I am the only one of the council left and I decide who can be an elder, Highwind. I haven't named you to the council. As of this moment, Silverstone is your chief. He is a council of one, now, and not even I can override his decisions.

Highwind stood up and faced Silverstone with a glare. Without another word, he turned on his heel and stormed off into the darkness. Dreamer got to her feet, too, but put a hand on his shoulder. ***I don't know if everyone will accept you as their chief, Silverstone, but I've always lived by the council's rule and Redder has spoken.*** With that, she also left the gathering.

Silverstone turned to Hawkleaf. ***As Highwind so strongly reminded us, I am not an elder, but I until I get used to my new role in the tribe, I would appreciate any advice or counsel you might give me.***

The healer smiled and nodded. "Of course."

Redder looked up at the chief. "Making decisions for the tribe has never been easy, Silverstone, but it's now your task to do so."

The chief knelt down next to her and raised his eyebrows over an amused smile. "I don't know if I should thank you for this or not."

Word of Redder's decision spread quickly through the tribe and while there were mixed reactions concerning Silverstone as chief of the Timber Folk, most believed he was a good choice. There were also those who felt that having a single leader would simplify things somewhat. The only one openly opposed to it was Highwind.

Of Silverstone, himself, he showed no outward sign of change. Only his lifemate, Loxii, knew just how seriously he took his new position.

Rush's hunting party had been successful in downing a prairie treehorn and a few longears for the tribe. There was plenty of meat for the elves and wolves and the gardeners had located many edible plants to add to the meal. Silverstone saw his people fed and cared for before he settled down for the night, himself.

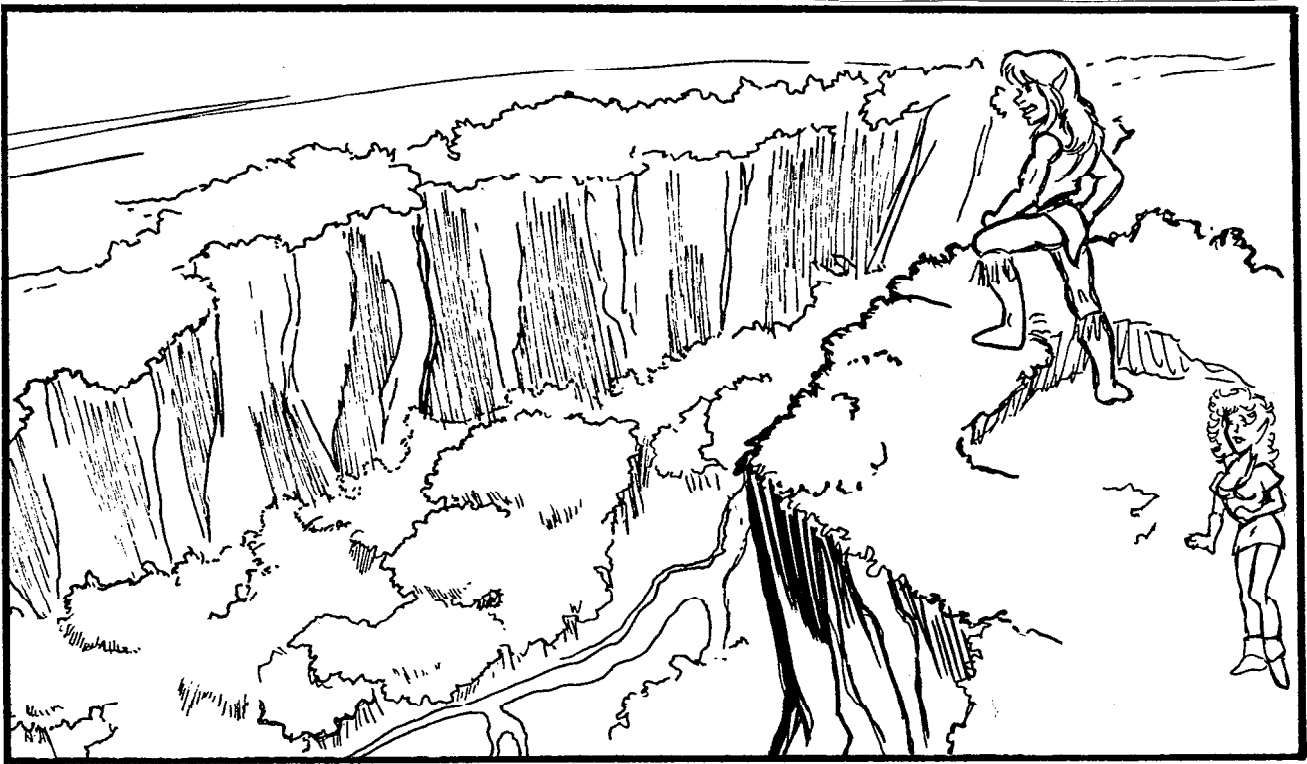
He located Loxii near the river and sat down next to her on the soft hide spread out on the ground beneath them. The humid weather of the summer had begun to fade as the seasons changed day by day, but it was still warm enough at night that a covering was not needed.

Silverstone removed his boots and rubbed his sore feet. They had done more traveling in the past few days than he had ever done all at once before. Loxii smiled at him and began rubbing his shoulders. He leaned into her, his feet forgotten. He loved it when she did that for him and her soft words of love in his ears made it a special time. When she had worked the kinks out of his muscles, he turned and took her in his arms.

Well, my chief, Loxii's mental words chuckled, ***what is it you would command of me? ***

Silverstone growled playfully at her and looked deep into her large blue eyes. He ran his fingers through the soft curls of her blonde hair and she giggled when he scratched her behind the ears like a wolf cub. She helped him out of his clothing and set them aside before they snuggled up together for the night.

The new chief of the Timber Folk was up when the sun rose over the sea of grass. He stood at the sheer-drop edge of the valley with the waterfall on his left. Loxii was beside him with her hand in his and the breezes coming up from the chasm sent the blue feather clipped to the back of her hair wildly fluttering behind her.



Silverstone was breathless at what he saw. Spread out below was a forest nestled into a valley that was surrounded on all sides by tall, sheer cliff walls, as if some catastrophe long ago had allowed the region to sink straight down into the grass plains. The waterfall beside them was split at the top around a large section of rock and fell into the valley as two separate rivers of water. A deep blue lake was directly below and the river continued on from its far end and disappeared into the forest.

From sheer wall to sheer wall, timber filled the large canyon. Plantlife had flourished here, and where there was a forest, the chief hunter knew there would be game. His breath was shallow as he surveyed the vision below. His mind had already set up a new home in the valley and he began to smile. He wasn't fooled by the beauty, however. As a skilled hunter he knew dangers would always be present. It was yet unknown what lived beneath that canopy and they were likely to discover new creatures years after settling in.

He let his eyes rest on the shimmering lake. Once they found a way down into the valley, they would make their way to that large body of water and set up their new home nearby. From this distance Silverstone couldn't tell what kind of trees grew below or if any would be large enough to shape into homes, but if so, Willowbend would have her hands full making places within them to live.

***Is that home?** Loxii asked hopefully.

Silverstone looked at her with a smile. ***Take a deep breath, beloved,*** he sent back in reply. ***Smell the scent of the trees within the moisture of the Two Falls.***

Loxii closed her eyes and inhaled deeply with a silly grin. Silverstone chuckled at her expression. She was older than he was but she seemed so childlike at times.

Smells nice, she sent as she opened her large blue eyes again. ***Smells like home.***

Then home it shall be, the chief replied. He picked up fringes of others' open sendings as the rest of the tribe came alive in the morning sun. With a good night's sleep and a fulfilling breakfast it would be time to move on soon.

Silverstone sent to a few of the tribe's scouts to pack up provisions and go out ahead of the rest of the Timber Folk. Even if it took several days, they needed to find a route down to their new home. He frowned when he didn't get a response from Rush. He led Loxii away from the valley and began looking for the youth. Blackthorn found the chief presently and seemed concerned.

"Have you seen my daughter?" he asked. The scar across his neck seemed more prominent than usual and his voice seemed a bit gruffer. It was the result of an accident years earlier, but it never daunted the easygoing elf. His concern, however, made it more gravely.

"The last time I saw Holly was last night just before I settled in to sleep," Silverstone answered. "She was smuggled up to Ash by the fire."

"I've already spoken with Ash this morning," the rockshaper replied, "but he said she was gone when he awoke."

"Rush is gone, too. Do you think they're away, enjoying one another in the bushes?" Silverstone suggested with a smile. Holly flirted openly with the two half-brothers a lot and was quite the tease.

"It would explain why neither answers us," Blackthorn laughed.

"Well, I'm sending scouts out ahead today and Rush wanted to be a part of that."

It was mid-morning when the tribe headed out away from the Two Falls. Neither Rush nor Holly had been located and Silverstone strongly suspected the two of them had gone out scouting the area during the night, against his wishes. Everyone was eager to get into the valley so he didn't want to delay their search for long. With the two still missing, Silverstone gave the word for the Timber Folk to move on.

The trees along the river that had given them comfort on their flight across the sea of grass were now left behind. There were few trees near the valley's edge. Nearly the whole tribe took part in the search along the crumbling rim, but nothing more than the sheer cliff walls were seen. Some became frightened of the distance they saw below them and had retreated away from the expanse.

They had traveled half the length of the valley when the sun began to set behind them and Silverstone called a stop for the night. Blackthorn's usual easy manner was strained with concern for his missing daughter and the chief was increasingly irritated over Rush's disobedience. The youth was often stubborn about having his way, but usually lived within the authority over him. No one appeared to know why, but Rush always seemed out to prove something. It was often felt the young archer was too aggressive for his age.

Silverstone, we've found Rush and Holly, Otter's sending announced suddenly. ***They're out of your range at the moment, but we can communicate with them here.***

Send them back to me, the chief responded.

They're down inside the valley, Softpetal added. Ash's mother sounded excited in her sending. ***They left a marker at the top of an animal trail that leads down along the cliff wall!***

***Where are they now?**

They've just started on their way back up, Otter replied.

Okay, Silverstone sent. ***Wait for us there. We're just setting up camp, but with news like this, I doubt anyone will want to wait. We'll be along shortly.***

The chief gave an account of the news in an open sending and suggested they continue on as far as the pass. There was overwhelming agreement in the responses directed back to him. Within moments, some were already on their way.

By the time the elves reached the trail down into the valley, many were exhausted from the full day of traveling. Excitement was still high, but no one objected when Silverstone told them they wouldn't venture down the pass to the forest below until morning.

The chief yawned widely as he approached Softpetal. "Where's Otter?" he asked and knelt beside her.

Softpetal reacted to his yawn with one of her own. She pointed to a mound of stone nearby and the shadow curled up on top of it. "He's asleep," she said, "and I'm fighting to stay awake, myself."

"Any sign of our wayward youths?"

Softpetal laughed lightly. "You almost stepped on them a few paces back." Silverstone looked back the way he came and saw the two sleeping bodies. "They've been out scouting longer than anyone," she added quietly, "and are exhausted."

The chief rubbed his temples with both hands and yawned again. "So am I," he said wearily. "I think I'll wait until I've had some rest before scolding those two for going off when I said not to." He stood up and looked back down at the white-haired scout. "Let's all get some rest. The wolves can watch for us tonight."

Softpetal nodded quietly and made her bed in the thick grass a short distance away from the valley rim. Silverstone had to concentrate on his steps to make it back to Loxii, and when he arrived he collapsed beside her without even removing his boots. He was asleep within moments.

The sun of their second morning near the valley rose from behind the opposite rim, large and bright, and it was in the chief's face. Silverstone shielded his eyes with an arm as he awoke and he groaned with an effort as he sat up. A sudden shadow blocked the brightness. He looked up through sleepy eyes at the broad, stocky silhouette of Blackthorn.

"How did you sleep?" the green-clad figure asked in his gravelly voice. Silverstone rubbed the dust out of his eyes and yawned widely.

"Like a rock," he said. He reached to where he'd reclined and picked up a stone. He handed it to his best friend and added, "This rock, actually. I think there's a permanent impression of it in my back..."

Blackthorn laughed. "Half the tribe is still asleep, but a couple of hunting teams have gone out already."

"Where's Rush and Holly?"

"Still sleeping. They must have been really worn out."

Silverstone yawned again. "I think we've all done more than what we're used to on this trip." Loxii still slept beside him, her face peaceful in her slumber. The chief looked at her lovingly and said, "Look at her, Blackthorn. We've lost our home, lost friends and family and have wandered the sea of grass until we're exhausted, but yet she still dreams at ease." He looked at his friend and frowned. "Every night I keep seeing the humans' club as it struck Pinewood's head. I've seen death before, Blackthorn, but never like that. Never so violent. I wonder if I'll ever be rid of that dream."

"Perhaps the beauty of the valley below will help calm your dreams," Hawkleaf said as he knelt down next to the chief.

Silverstone smiled at the healer and nodded. "Perhaps," he agreed. "I'm looking forward to being amongst the trees of a forest again." He worked the kinks out of his back a moment and then asked, "So, how many went against my word last night and slipped down the pass into the valley?"

Hawkleaf laughed. "Actually, none. Everyone's accounted for."

The chief looked at Blackthorn in mild surprise. "They're more tired than I thought," he quipped. He got to his feet and the three of them walked to the rim. They had to shade their eyes against the rising sun, and most of the valley was still in shadow from the sheercliff walls. Silverstone levelled an arm toward the north end of the large canyon and pointed to the lake in the distance.

"That's where I want to go, my friends," he said. "I'm hoping we can find a place near the lake to make our new home."

"We're likely to ruin the water supply when we get there," Blackthorn said under his breath.

Hawkleaf glanced at him sideways. "How?"

The rockshaper pinched his nose and replied in a funny voice, "When we all bathe in it after days of travel!"

Silverstone laughed and was suddenly aware of his own odor. He stuck his tongue out and added, "I'm surprised everyone's let me upwind of them. I smell terrible."

"Yes, you do," Hawkleaf said with a chuckle. "So do I, and Blackthorn, and all the others..."

"Well, I think I smell sweet," Holly said as she stepped up to the trio.

Blackthorn gave her a big hug and buried his face in her dark hair. "Good morning, daughter," he said warmly. "I'm glad to see your smiling face again!" He sniffed her hair and then pulled back a bit. "Hmm, you do smell sweet," he said.

She grinned at him. "I found a fresh spring to clean up in, at the bottom of the pass. Rush and I —"

"Where is he?" Silverstone interrupted. "I need to talk to you two."

Holly laughed and replied, "He's trying to impress Ash with our exploits of yesterday."

The chief frowned and shook his head. "Please go tell him I want to speak to both of you alone at the top of the trail you found."

"Okay," she answered and walked away.

Hawkleaf put a hand on Silverstone's shoulder and said, "Don't be too hard on them, chief. They just wanted to help out."

"Rush specifically disobeyed me," Silverstone said darkly. "It's not like him to do that." He sighed and looked down into the valley once more before leaving the two magic users. He saw Willowbend on his way and stopped beside her. She was on her stomach in the grass, looking over the rim to the forest below.

He squatted down beside her and said, "We'll be needing your talents soon, I hope."

She smiled and nodded toward the valley. "For the hometrees?" she asked.

"Yes," Silverstone replied. He gave her an easy smile and added, "We're almost home."

"I'm looking forward to trying it," Willowbend said, "but I've never worked on anything so large before."

"You'll do fine," the chief said. He saw Rush and Holly heading toward the pass so he excused himself from the treeshaper and went to meet them.

Rush looked up at him as he approached and sighed audibly. Holly sat down on a nearby rock as Silverstone stopped in front of them.

"Okay, Rush, why did you disobey me?" the chief asked in a low voice.

The slender youth leaned on his longbow and replied, "You never said I couldn't go out." Silverstone started to speak, but the archer continued without hesitation. "You only said not to go out alone. I didn't go alone. Holly was with me."

Silverstone raised an eyebrow at Rush's logic. He cleared his throat and said, "I suppose I should have been more specific. I didn't want anyone going out that night."

"But it worked out okay," Holly added.

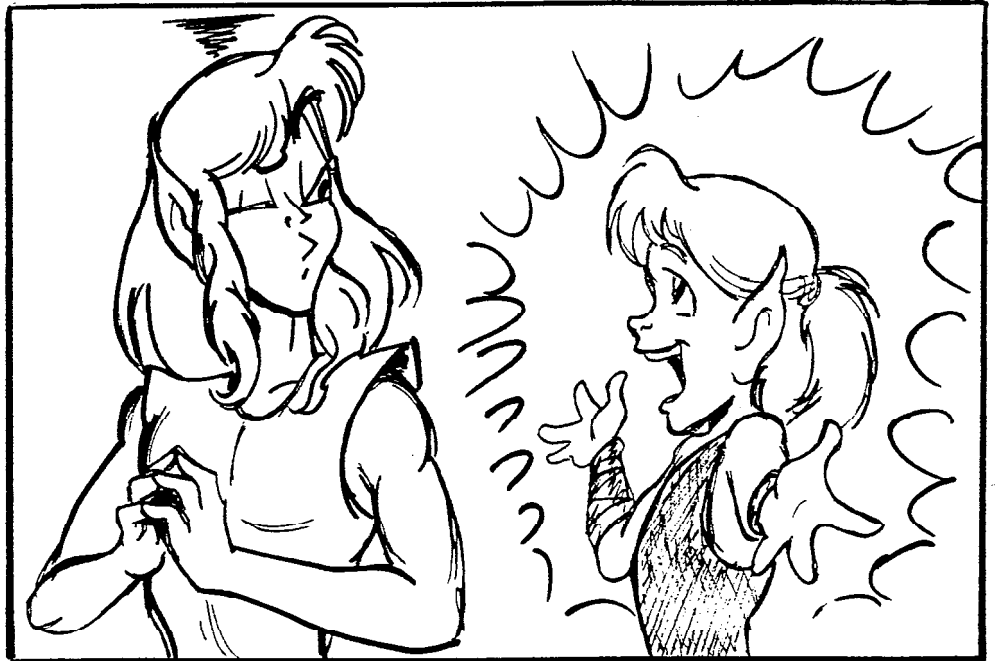
"Yes, it did," the chief replied and then shook his head. "But, you went out of sending range. If something had happened to you, we might have never known about it." He stepped over to the edge of the trail and looked down along the pass. "Because I wasn't clear on my wishes,

and because you two did find what we wanted," Silverstone said, "we'll ignore the concern you gave everyone. As you said, it worked out, but next time I want you to do as I tell you, is that clear?"

Rush nodded. "Understood, Silverstone."

"Me, too," added Holly.

Silverstone smiled at them. "While we're waiting for everyone to wake up and get ready to travel, tell me what you found down there."



Ash stumbled on a washout in the rock and gravel trail, but Firelight caught his arm and pulled him back upright on his feet.

"Thanks," he said to the mender. He ran the fingers of his right hand through his shoulder-length white hair and smiled at her. Hawkleaf chuckled at the youth's embarrassed grin and shook his head. He was fond of the boy of seventeen summers. Ash had come to him a year earlier, wanting the healer to teach him the skills of a mender, and he had been happy to have someone else learn the art of non-magical healing.

Hawkleaf had come from a long line of healers, but neither of his daughters had manifested the talent. He hadn't known of a time when the Timber Folk had ever been without a healer so had devised the plan to teach mending techniques that could be done without the use of magic. Firelight had agreed to learn what her father would teach her. Hawkleaf intended to be around a long time, but wanted his knowledge passed on should fate decide otherwise. He had been pleased to have Ash as a pupil.

They had been walking down Rush's animal trail most of the morning and were nearing the bottom. The pass was walkable, but steep, and it would have been easy to stumble off the side as Ash had nearly done. No

one seemed to have much difficulty with it, although the wolves didn't appear too happy.

"Will there be healing herbs here, Hawkleaf?" Ash asked.

"Probably," the healer replied. "We may not find the same plants in this place, but if they're here, we'll find them."

"I hope we have rich soil for the garden," Ash replied. "The humans trampled the one in the holt and I couldn't save any of my plants!" He shuddered at the thought. A human's club had whistled through the air only a hand's width from his ear and it was a chance leap sideways that had saved the young gardener from death.

He opened the leather bag that hung at his side from a long strap across his chest, and studied the contents: a wooden trowel, a few seeds and leaves and a small pouch of nuts; not much to start a new garden with.

He heard a shout followed by laughter and he looked down the trail to see what it was about. He grinned when he saw Fawn sitting in the middle of a large pool of water at the base of the sheer cliff wall. Someone had pushed the loner in, from the look of things. Fawn looked rather indignant.

A spring gurgled out of the rock wall into a rather large basin carved into the valley floor and fed a small stream that led away into the forest. Elves gathered at Holly's pool and began to strip and bathe in it. Days of traveling had left them all gritty and grimy and they welcomed the opportunity to clean up a bit.

Silverstone had no objection to the stop, as he was one of the first in after Holly had unceremoniously shoved in his son. Time and again, Blackthorn's daughter reminded everyone that she had found the pool at the bottom of Rush's trail. It was obvious she wanted the place named for her.

The healer and two menders were the last of the Timber Folk off the trail. They had all finally arrived at the valley floor. Ash wasted no time to shed his clothing and had jumped in within moments. There was laughter and joy in their voices and Silverstone felt encouraged by it. Even Redder had slipped into the pool and was smiling easily. Death and loss had been heavy on everyone. This joy was good to see.

A cool breeze reached the depths of the valley and the large fronds of a massive fern beside the pool dipped down and gently slapped Loxii on the back. She laughed and held the plant to her nose and decided she liked its minty scent.

Blackthorn hadn't joined everyone in the pool, but had his green tunic and brown vest off. He cleaned up sparingly and kept a watch while most everyone else was vulnerable. He studied the woods and noted with satisfaction that he recognized most of the trees and bushes around them. The lush grass was different from what he had known, however. It was dark green, soft to the touch and seemed to do well under the forest canopy where there was little direct sunlight. The underbrush didn't seem very thick and game trails were everywhere. He liked the place and felt as if he were welcome here.

Silverstone stopped beside him, dripping water into a puddle at his feet. His clothing was wet from washing, as well as his silver hair.

You look thoughtful, my friend, the chief sent merrily. ***What're you thinking?**

This place smells right, Blackthorn answered. He picked up a few fallen leaves and studied them carefully. ***The trees will be hibernating soon. We will need to be settled in before the snows come***

Silverstone nodded silently and gazed back at the tribe. ***We have nothing, Blackthorn,*** he sent solemnly. ***Once we have established a place to live, everyone will be needed to help build up our supplies again. We need furs and skins for clothing and bedding... bowls and cups for our meals... stores for our food and a garden for edibles and medicinals. We must have shelter, weapons, snares, and more just for basic survival. Everyone's skills will be needed all at once.***

Blackthorn thumped his friend on the forehead with a finger. ***I know, Silver. The humans didn't give us time to gather supplies for our journey. We have to start new and vulnerable.***

Why did they attack us? We did nothing against them.

We'll probably never know, Blackthorn replied.

Silverstone moved a clump of wet hair from his face and looked darkly at his companion. ***Whatever the reason, Blackthorn, it won't happen again. We will have to be more than hunters and gardeners if we are to keep our next home. We must become fighters, too.***

I don't like the sound of that, the rockshaper sent, ***but I'm afraid you're right.***

Silverstone knew they still had a long hike to do, so he sent openly to the entire tribe. ***It's time we got*

moving again,** he told them. ***Get dressed and gather up anything you have. I want to head toward the lake we saw from above, but it isn't certain how to get there. Because the sheer cliffs can be seen from anywhere in the valley, it is my intention to travel along this wall to the north until it brings us around to the lake. Once there, we'll begin a search of the area to set up our new holt.***

He paused and watched them dress and prepare to leave. He had everyone's attention so he continued. ***It took us a day to travel to the pass from the Two Falls, so it's likely to take as long to reach the lake. I don't want anyone to leave the group without telling me, whether it is for hunting or to relieve yourself. No one goes off alone and no one leaves unannounced.*** He looked straight at Rush as he sent it and the archer nodded in response.

We don't know if we have enemies in this forest, so I suggest everyone communicate solely by sending until we think it safe to speak aloud again. Be on the lookout for anything along the way we can use to start our lives anew in this place. The falling leaves season's coming soon and we'll need to prepare for it. Fill your waterskins in the spring that fills Holly's pool and let's be on our way. Fawn, you and Softpetal scout out ahead of the group in the areas we'll pass through. Don't go beyond sending range and check in with me from time to time.

Leaving now, Softpetal answered. He could hear the pleasure in her thoughts. She loved exploring. Fawn only gave a mental acknowledgment, but Silverstone saw the pair of scouts leave together. Fawn was a loner and preferred to travel alone, but the chief knew Softpetal got along with him better than anyone. Fawn could be pleasant to be around, when he wanted to be, and he always seemed amiable to Softpetal's presence.

Loxii moved to his side and looked up at him with concern. ***We'll have rain soon, beloved. Can you feel it?****

Silverstone sniffed the air and frowned. ***No, I can't, but you're usually right about that.*** He led the way along the rock walls when he saw his people ready. There was a natural trail along that route where few trees or brush grew right up to the cliff. It was rocky, but passable for them. The wolves had long since disappeared into the forest, but the chief had a feeling they'd be back.

Silverstone paced from wall to wall in the small cave he shared with Loxii, Redder, Blackthorn and Holly. Thunder boomed noisily outside in the downpour of rain and a cold wind blew through the grotto. They had found a series of small caves just before the storm hit and had divided up into small groups to each shelter.

The Timber Folk had traveled all day and into the evening and had made it to the north end of the valley, but had yet to reach the lake. The downpour made it impossible to see or hear the Two Falls so it was anyone's guess how far they were from it.

Silverstone, Firelight's sending touched him.

Yes?*

The cave we're in has a tunnel in the back of it.

A tunnel? Where does it go?*

Willowbend took a burning stick from our fire to explore it, but the flame died before she got very far. She said it looks like it goes on.

Silverstone stopped pacing and stared out into the wet night. ***It is a natural or shaped tunnel?****

Neither, the mender replied. ***It looks like someone dug it out with tools.***

Tools!* Silverstone began pacing again. ***Don't go back in there too far,*** he sent to Willowbend. ***Humans might have made it.***

Okay, the treeshaper replied, ***but can I come back to check it out later?****

Once we've settled into a new holt, you can, though not alone.

Of course!*

Silverstone awoke the next morning, his back aching and his throat dry. Blackthorn shook him gently and smiled when the chief opened his eyes.

We have mostly clear skies and a cool breeze blowing through the trees.

Silverstone sat up with a groan and picked up a stone he'd slept on. He would have sworn it was the same rock he'd slept on every night lately. ***Send out scouts to find out how close we are to the lake,*** he instructed.

No need for that, Silver. You can see the Two Falls from here.

Jen is watching over us, Silverstone commented, intoning his grandsire's name. ***Okay, wake everyone and give them the news.***

Blackthorn gave a mental chuckle. ***Everyone's already gone down to the lake. You're the last one sleeping.***

Silverstone stared at his friend. ***Some help you are,*** he sent dryly. ***Why didn't anyone wake me?**

We tried, but you wouldn't wake up, until now. Hawkleaf even suggested carrying you down to the lake to toss you in, but Loxii wouldn't let him.

The groggy chief began dressing and soon followed his best friend out of the cave. He inhaled deeply and smiled at the clean scent of wet trees. It took a moment for the sound to register, but Silverstone soon looked up at the constant low roar of the twin waterfalls over the lake. He followed the rockshaper along the sheercliff trail and presently arrived at the large blue lake.

The Timber Folk were scattered about, but the chief instantly noticed that no one was out in the open, with the exception of Fawn and Loxii. The two were in a stand of reeds taller than themselves, knee deep in water, and both were poised to spear fish that swam near them. Fawn struck suddenly and with a strong flip, tossed a speckled fish upon the shore. Holly darted out of a large bush, retrieved the food and then disappeared again.

Blackthorn saw the chief's eyes dart around to locate everyone and correctly guessed what was on his mind. ***Highwind suggested we stay out of sight, in case someone might be watching from across the lake,*** he explained.

Silverstone nodded his approval. ***Good thinking. Have you seen anyone out there?**

No, but we've been watching. Loxii and Fawn wouldn't wait, however, and went straight to fishing.

Where's Hawkleaf or Ash? I don't see either of them.

Blackthorn shook his head. ***Don't know.***

***Hawkleaf?** Silverstone sent openly. There was an uncomfortable pause before he received a response.

***It's about time you woke up!** the healer teased. ***You've just missed a big discovery!**

Nearly all the Timber Folk stopped what they were doing at the healer's announcement. ***Ash and I wandered down the shore of the lake looking for certain plants,*** Hawkleaf sent, ***and found a stream that led away into the woods. We followed it a short distance and found a copse of trees that look perfect for a holt site!**

***How big are the trees?** Willowbend's sending interrupted.

All are large in diameter, but not large enough for living in — at least not without a treeshaper's helping hand. Everyone could feel the delight in the healer's thoughts. ***There is little underbrush here and the grass is lush beside the stream. Ash has already picked out a spot he wants to put the garden.***

Silverstone smiled widely and looked at Blackthorn. ***We'll all join you shortly, Hawkleaf.*** He didn't have to order the tribe to go, as they were already on the move. Rush and Holly carried a bundle of fish together, wrapped up in the archer's winter cloak and Loxii ran over to help. The others moved through the brush, eager to see their new home, but mindful to stay out of direct sight from the lake.

***Did we leave anything in the caves?** the chief asked.

No, Blackthorn replied. ***We have what we have with us.***

As they walked, Silverstone sighed and felt relieved. He looked up at the partly cloudy sky and saw a few hawks riding the winds above the valley. He listened and the place was alive with the sound of insects, birds and animal cries in the forest. He understood what Blackthorn and Loxii had felt earlier. The place smelled like home. It felt right.

Silverstone stood in the middle of a large grassy clearing next to the minnow-filled brook that coursed its way through the area of their new holt. It was all they had hoped for. These trees were larger around than three elves could reach together and Willowbend had high hopes of coaxing internal rooms into them. Until there were enough hometrees shaped for them all, the Timber Folk could either stay in makeshift shelters or the caves in the nearby sheercliff wall.

Blackthorn had shaped a stone pedestal in the center of the clearing so their chief could see everyone as he

addressed them in council. The largest of the trees bordered this area and the Minnowbrook, and was designated the Father Tree of the holt. Silverstone faced his assembled tribe and spoke aloud to them.

"We have come home," he said with a pleasant smile. "I don't know if the High Ones brought us here, but after the invasion of our holt in the Great Wood, we could hardly have done better to find a new place to start our lives over." He searched for words to say. He was a hunter and wasn't used to making speeches, even though he seemed to be making a lot of them lately.

"The humans left us with nothing, so everyone's skills are needed to put us back on our feet. If there is anything you can do, do it. Use your skills and experience to create. We need the basics to survive and we must get busy now. The season of falling leaves is coming so we have little time to get ready for whatever winter this place has. Prepare for the worst. We need to stock up on foods we can store, on furs, pelts and leathers, too. I need our scouts and hunters to get familiar with the immediate areas surrounding our new home."

He stopped for a moment and thought about their survival. "No one is to travel alone outside of the holt and communication by sending only when away. We still don't know who or what lives in this forest, but the Timber Folk have just become residents of this valley of trees." He stepped down from the council rock of red granite and then said. "That's all I have for now. Since we've been traveling for many days, rest up if you want to for today. Everyone must figure out what they can do and get started tomorrow." Then he smiled and turned toward the Father Tree. He raised and outstretched his arms and announced in a quiet voice, "Welcome to the timber valley..."

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"Welcome to the timber valley..." Two Star said as he ended his tale. He looked over at the girl with teal blue eyes and smiled. She looked as if she were perplexed with the story.

"If that's what really happened," she said after a moment, "then that boy, Ash, is really the one who found the valley, right?"

"Well, yes," the elder replied, "but Silverstone led them here. It was he who gave the Timber Folk the leadership they needed to survive."

"Is that what Ash really looked like?" Teal asked, referring to the sending pictures he had given her during his tale.

Two Star chuckled at her interest in Ash. "Those were the same memory pictures that old Timberline gave to me when I was but a cub listening to the storyteller, just as I'm doing for you now."

"I like Ash," Teal said with a smile. "He's cute."

Two Star shook his head in wonder. All the girl was concerned with was a boy near her age in the story. She got to her feet and brushed grass from her knees. "Thank you, Two Star," she said. "I liked hearing about

Ash when he found the valley."

The elder decided not to press the real story and just nodded to her as he sat up. "You're welcome, Teal. You know I always like to share my tales." The elfin girl gave him a quick kiss on the top of his head and then wandered away, smiling contentedly.

