

TIMBERS

Volume 4, Number 24



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Timbers #24

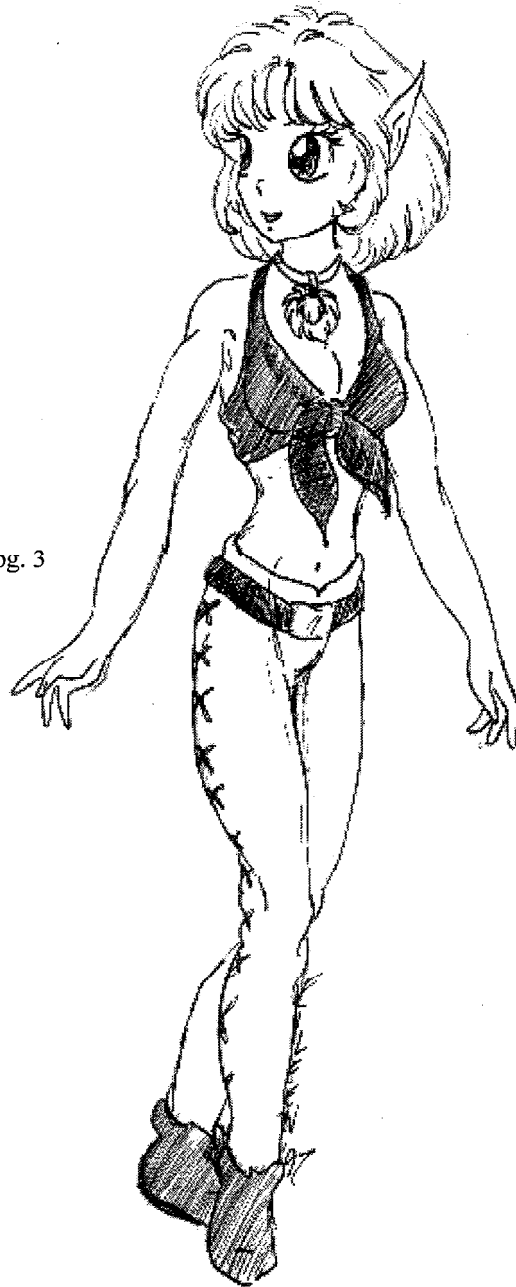
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Timbers #24 Cover Art by Steven Carter.

Sandstorm. Art on this page by Eileen Fryer.

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The Old One

by Ted Blasingame

(DF 39 H)

Stormer sat up from his digging in the dirt. He arched his back and twisted slightly to both sides to relieve the tension on his spine. He enjoyed a healthy physique in recent years, but it was due to constant activity and exercise. Kneeling in the food garden wasn't part of his normal routine, however, and his lower back complained to him about it.

Just as he'd requested, Goldenbraid had been sharing with him her knowledge of medicinal herbs and the dark-haired fisher was trying his hand at gardening. The rissa sprouts were coming in nicely, but then again it was a hardy plant that could grow just about anywhere. The wingroots didn't fare as well, however. It had been an eight-of-days since he'd planted the minuscule seeds, but the only things that broke through the rich soil was weeds.

The day was rather quiet in the holt. Most of those who were up in the daylight had gone to the lake or were occupied with solitary projects of their own. Goldenbraid had gone with Two Star to the redfruit grove so the fisher was left to enjoy the day on his own.

Stormer spied another weed and pulled it from the dirt. Goldenbraid had stressed to him the importance of keeping the garden free of weeds to let desired plants thrive. The weed he'd just pulled was larger than the others and he studied it idly. He stared at it only a moment before his casual smile wilted into a frown. The weed had a tiny, but recognizable, wing-shaped central root. He groaned as he realized the small strands of weeds beside him were the very wingroot seedlings he'd been hoping for. He sighed and dropped the last one beside the others. Once the root was exposed to open air it hardened and could not be replanted.

Stormer stood up and dusted off the knees of his pants and stretched with a yawn. It was time to find something else to do.

As he looked around him, he saw his wolf friend, Greyfrost sleeping quietly under a dense bush at the edge of the minnowbrook. He smiled at the old wolf and walked over to him. The aged animal twitched an ear and opened one amber eye to a slit when the elf sat down beside him.

Stormer gently scratched the wolf behind an ear and Greyfrost made a satisfied growl. The elf smiled wider when the animal rolled onto his back to expose his white belly. Stormer laughed and complied with the silent request by rubbing the wolf's tummy.

****Yes, old friend,**** he sent, ****I know that feels good.****

After a few moments, Greyfrost lolled back onto his side and faded off to sleep again. Stormer continued to slowly stroke the rough fur and his own thoughts drifted away.

He knew his wolf friend probably wouldn't be around much longer. He spent much of his time sleeping and rarely joined in on the occasional hunts with the elves. He did what hunting on his own he needed to survive, but was active in little else. Stormer wasn't much of a hunter anymore, either, having taken more to fishing, but even then the wolves didn't spend as much time around the elves as they had when he was chief of the tribe over a century ago.

The wolf had been a loyal friend to him during the past ten years, and hadn't been exactly a pup when they bonded then. Greyfrost had been a fierce protector and a good companion, but lately his age was slowing him down.

Even after seven hundred years, Stormer could still remember the death of his first wolf-friend. The tribe had been long allied with wolves, and while the immortal elves would far outlive their lupine friends, the first bonding was usually the one an elf would remember and cherish the most. However, Greyfrost was dear to him and he made many concessions for the old one.

Stormer looked up at Feather's giggling. Freshwind had her draped over one shoulder and was swinging her from side to side. The fisher grinned and gave the old wolf a last scratch before getting to his feet.

No one noticed Greyfrost's lip curl up with a contented smile. Stormer was his friend. He sighed peacefully and once again drifted into slumber. ✦

The Timber Valley War, pt 5
The Secret Weapon
by Ted Blasingame

(DF 24 H)

The air was heavy and the storm clouds thundering above promised another afternoon rain. It was midmorning, but already it seemed the day had been long. Nightstep sat in the lower branches of his hometree, watching the proceedings with mixed emotions. True, he'd suggested the alliance with the Ke L'Rhatan himself, but his old fears and hatred of the humans still existed. Though they needed the allies, he'd rather hate them. The humans had been the cause of many elfin deaths.

He watched as more of the humans crawled through the small openings in the thorn barrier. After Catgut's attack on the humans' village, the Tall Ones' chief had agreed to a truce and alliance with their old enemy, the Timber Folk. A new foe existed, and the need to band together against a common enemy was cause to dissolve the old feud.

As a surprise to all, the Ke L'Rhatan readily agreed to abandon their ruined village and move into the elves' holt area. The humans had been arriving all morning on the day after the attack, setting up tents and other makeshift shelters between the hometrees. A number of the more friendly elves were helping the new allies get set up and acquainting themselves with them.

Nightstep noted a commotion as Deta's party arrived. The old man was too weak to walk, but his spirit was still strong, if his loud voice and harsh orders to his own people was any indication. The human leader was being carried on a litter by two of the largest men Nightstep had ever seen. Deta directed his hunters to put his bed near the largest of all the trees, until Thunderfoot came out of the opening. Seeing the troll, Deta wrinkled his face and changed his mind, instead wishing to be placed near the Minnowbrook in the lush grass. Nightstep figured now was the time for him to act like the ally he was supposed to be.

He dropped to the ground with little effort and made his way across the crowded holt toward the human leader. Deta looked up at him and immediately recognized his authority. Each regarded the other silently as both had strong memories of the long feud between their tribes. Though his aged legs were weak, Deta slowly stood up to face the elf.

He was a full head taller than the elfin chief, and his long white hair flowed fluidly in the cooling breeze. His eyes, dark and sunken into narrow cheekbones, were sharp and steady. Nightstep could see the intelligence behind them and knew this man was no simple foe. In like fashion, Deta noted the elf's nobility and grace. The fierce penetrating gaze told the human of a strong will and the qualities of a natural leader. In their own ways, each respected the other.

Nightstep had made the decision to contact the humans as allies. With the advance warnings he had given Deta's people of Catgut's attacks, many of the Ke L'Rhatan had been spared death, whereas they would have surely died otherwise. Deta realized that the elf had taken the first step toward real peace between them; the Timber Folk could just have easily stood by and watched the humans slaughtered by the mad troll army.

He couldn't know that the very idea had been brought up in a heated council two nights ago. Hatred for the humans ran strong in the Timber Folk and the arguing had gone long into the early morning. If not for the deaths of Blackfire, Big Axe, Softwill and the others, the decision might have been to let the humans die, but the need for more allies weighed too heavily on the situation.

After a moment of cool silence, Deta took all these thoughts and put them into one action. He stared steadily into the elf's eyes and allowed a smile to lightly cross his face. He extended a hand toward his long time enemy.

Nightstep's hatred of humans ran deep, but he swallowed his pride and took the man's hand, sealing the alliance. Neither leader had been aware of the crowd of humans and elves that had gathered around them, until the moment their hands clasped. Cheers from both races rang throughout the holt. Nightstep also allowed himself a smile and tightened his grip ever so slightly. Deta nodded toward him and then looked out to the crowd. He knew a speech of some kind was expected, but he did something more eloquent. He raised the hand still clasped with the elf's and held it up in a sign of victory. Both tribes knew that the alliance was now true.

When the crowd noises subsided, Nightstep located Rockhammer and motioned for the troll to join them. Deta's eyes narrowed as the bulky creature approached. Nightstep cleared his throat and recalled the human's language.

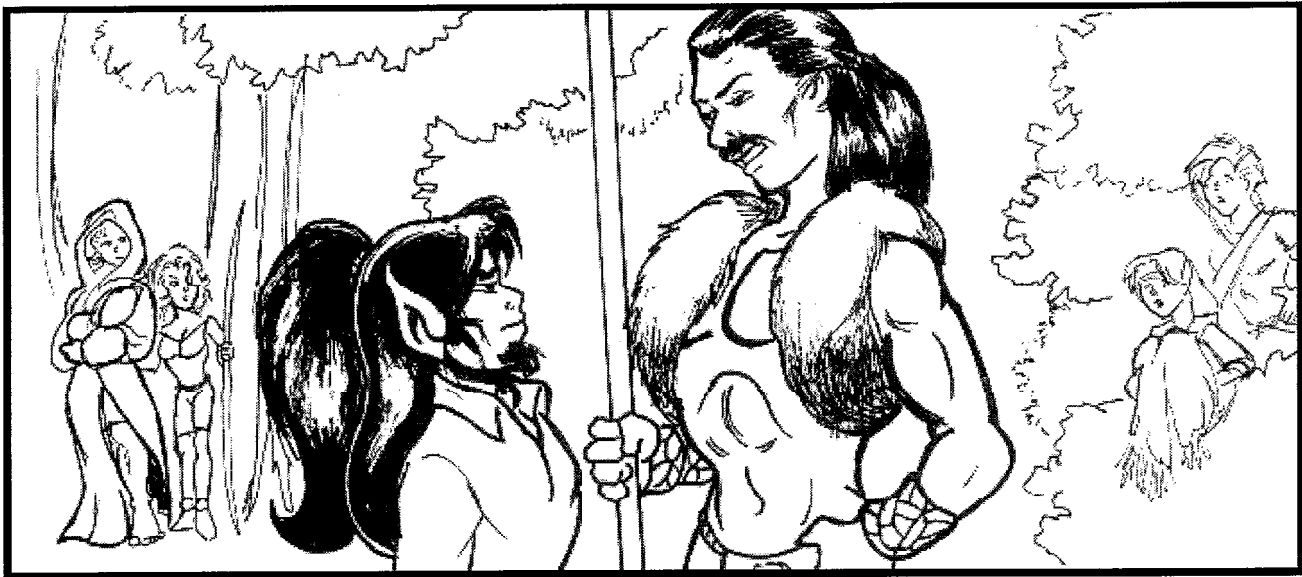
["This is Rockhammer,"] he said, ["He is the leader of the trolls whose forces we are allied with. Our three tribes will be fighting together against Catgut and those she commands."]

The large troll extended his hand toward the human leader and flashed a big, toothy smile. "Pleased to meetcha," he said. Deta didn't understand the troll's words and he looked to Nightstep for help. The elf translated for him and Deta warily took the troll's offered hand. The recent attack on his village was still fresh in his mind—he trusted trolls far less than he did the elves at that moment. However, diplomacy once again won out as he sealed that alliance, too.

With that done, Deta's strength left him—his weak legs would hold him no more. As he returned to his bed, he motioned one of the strong-appearing men to his side.

["This is Seralle,"] Deta explained. ["When I am gone from this world, he will take my place. Work with him as you work with me."]

Seralle stepped forward and clasped hands with the elf and troll. He was taller than Deta and possessed a strength of character. His mustache and shoulder-length hair were black as night and his skin tanned to a light bronze color. His golden yellow eyes betrayed no fear or suspicion as he acquainted himself with the other two leaders. Within moments, Nightstep strangely found himself liking the guy.



Across the holt, LongKnife, Jasmine, and Thunderfoot watched as Rainforest stalked off to her hometree. Not all of the Timber Folk were pleased about having their longtime enemies inside their own holt. Trust did not come easy for Rainforest, and there were many others who felt the same. While some, such as Mooncrest and Hoodwink, easily made friends with the five-fingers, there were others who would not put aside their fears and hatred.

LongKnife and Jasmine were quietly conversing about the recent events while Thunderfoot looked on in silence. The troll opened his mouth to voice his opinion at something that was said, but the words never left his tongue when a rather large human walked up to them. Jasmine looked at LongKnife, shook her head, and without looking up walked away. The human scratched his arm absently and asked, ["What's her problem?"]

LongKnife studied him a moment before answering. The man was probably the largest human he'd ever seen. The huge muscular man crossed his arms and looked up to the moisture laden clouds above. LongKnife cleared his throat. ["The feud dies hard for her,"] he replied, ["Your people killed her mate years ago."]

The human looked thoughtful and nodded his head. ["I suspected as much. It will take more than the handshake of our leaders to make some accept the alliance. There is much unrest in my own tribe,"] he said. LongKnife was suddenly impressed. Though the man looked like a dumb brute, the man's words spoke of a hidden intelligence. ["I truly hope those like her can find a way to forgive past ignorance,"] the man finished.

LongKnife cocked his head to the side and frowned. ["Do you think it's that easy to forgive a killer for taking a loved one from you?"]

The man's eyes grew dark for an instant as a memory came up. ["I *know* it's not easy — my wife and child were found on the stone bridge six years ago, with arrows through their throats... arrows that belonged to *your* people."] The man's fists were clenched and Thunderfoot was preparing to run from certain destruction.

The human then smiled and turned to face the elf and troll. ["You see, I lost my mate, too. However, our feud is now over and I have decided to forgive."] LongKnife wondered how many of his own folk could do the same. This man had just proven that he was not quite the lowlife the elves had taken his kind to be. The man thumped a fist to his chest and said, ["My name is Rofea.]

With a swiftness that surprised the human, the elf reached over his shoulder to his scabbard, grabbed his sword hilt, and brandished the weapon so that the point rested only a finger's width from Rofea's nose. ["I am called LongKnife, as you can see why,"] he stated. Before the big man could respond, however, LongKnife flipped his namesake so that the blade rested across his crooked arm with the hilt offered to the human.

Rofea grinned wider and took the sword. He examined it and nodded his appreciation. It was actually too small for his large hand, but he noticed the fine quality of the shining blade. With a laugh, he handed the sword back to its owner and leaned toward Thunderfoot. ["I like him!"] he said to the troll. ["I've seen him fight, too. He's good!"]

Thunderfoot sighed his relief and smiled. He had been sure the human would take the opportunity to use the sword against the elf. His smile was also partly in self pride. Of the trolls, he was the *only* one who understood the human's tongue, due to the many years he'd spent visiting the Timber Folk. He briefly recalled how patient LongKnife and Redlace had been while teaching him the language, and how frustrating it was. He now relished the knowledge.

Thunderfoot offered his hand and introduced himself. Rofea took it and nodded his delight. A friendship between members of all three of the Valley's tribes had just begun.

Silverhair scowled down at the humans. He was in the upper branches of his hometree away from the cursed round-ears. They were his longtime enemies and he could not conceive of them being *inside* the holt. His own son had foolishly risked certain danger by boldly going into their village, and not only did he convince them to join the alliance of elves and trolls against Catgut, but he had gone so far as to invite them home with him. *This is madness!* He had never understood his son's fascination with the humans, especially as his mother had been murdered by them. Silverhair's own vow to communicate solely by sending had been a result of his lifemate's death. Dewdrop had loved his voice, especially when he sang, but after she had been taken from him, not a word had been uttered by him since.

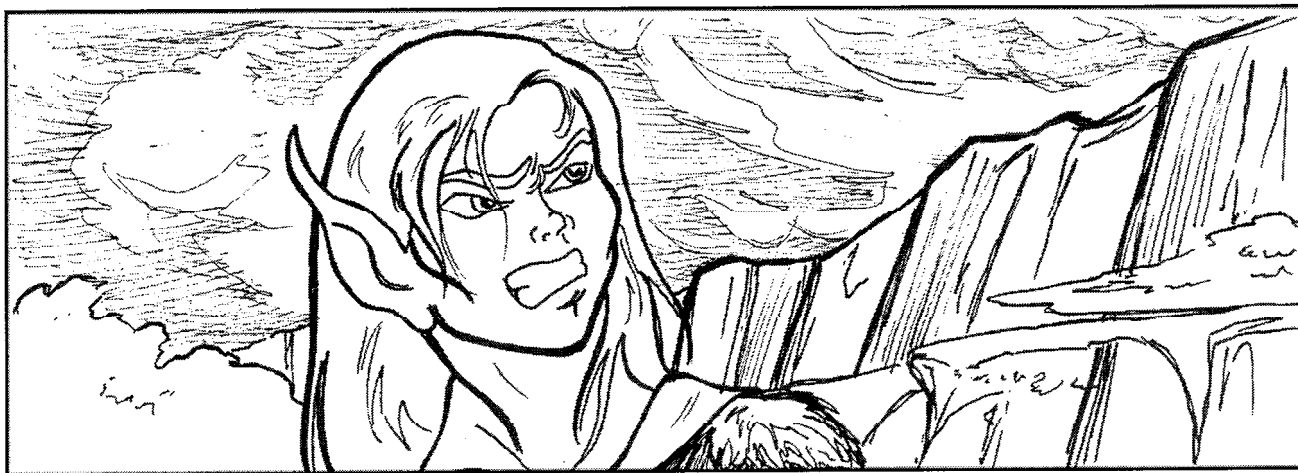
Were it not for his family and friends, he might have taken Nightstep up on his suggestion and left the valley to seek a safe haven elsewhere, as a few of the more recent wanderers had done already in the past few nights. Wavesong had come to him, however, and talked long with him about loyalty and freedom. Leave his blood tribe, he could, but he would be alone with the knowledge he could never return to whomever survived Catgut's bloody plan. He had been ashamed to think he had actually considered leaving those he knew and loved and knew he had been the foolish one. He may not agree with the plan chosen, but he wouldn't abandon those who believed in Silverstone's old vow, no matter how much he thought the odds were against them.

The elder teacher closely watched the noisy, crowded throng of elves, humans and trolls below him. He thought he'd recognized one of the intruders. They all looked alike to him, but one in particular... There! He saw an older man talking with the human tribe's new female shaman. What was his name? Hazar? Yes. Silverhair studied him in detail. Hazar had aged much in the twenty-five years since the elf had seen him last, but yes, he knew him. Hazar was the one who had shoved his spear through Dewdrop's belly when she had been captured. This man took his lifemate. Alliance or no, this man would pay.

Windrace cursed under his breath at the thunder rolling across the sky. The recent events hadn't left him in a tolerable mood, and he didn't need a rain shower to add to the complications. He and Arrowsong were hidden from view behind a high clump of sourberry bushes with the Sheercliff wall at their backs. The troll rescue party had been gone almost entirely too long — Windrace wondered if they'd been caught.

He looked over at Arrowsong and felt helpless. She had her knees drawn up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them. She rested her chin on one knee and had her eyes closed. The wind whipped her reddish-brown hair about as the rain began to fall. The small overhang of rock they rested under provided little protection from the rain driven at them with the breezes. Windrace crouched beside her and dropped an arm across her shoulders. She smiled faintly, but kept her eyes closed.

Without knowing specifics, Windrace could guess the thoughts going through her mind. She was there for the sole purpose of healing Rogue if his rescue brought him out wounded. The other healers were needed back at the holt, but Nightstep had wanted someone on the rescue team with the talent. Arrowsong's magic was weak and often uncontrollable, so she was rarely called on to use it — but the chief had insisted on her help, in spite of her fears of doing more damage than good. She didn't know if she could do it, and strongly hoped the captured elf wouldn't need her talent but only simple first aid, if at all.



Windrace coughed and once again cursed the wetness. He would be glad to have the rescue completed, but he wasn't quite so sure he really wanted to return to the holt. Hatfeather, being one of the strongest senders, had informed he and Arrowsong of the situation that had taken place since they'd gone. Windrace's hatred of humans was rooted deeply and his reaction had been rather unpleasant when he'd heard that the Ke L'Rhatan were now allies, instead of enemies. He spat his disgust, though he knew it wouldn't change a thing. He wished he'd been at the council to help argue down the idea. He hated the rotted round-eared filth.

Arrowsong sneezed suddenly and Windrace felt concerned for her. He removed his vest and draped it over her head. He didn't want the healer to catch a cold, especially when she might be needed. She thanked him with a smile and gathered his head underneath the vest with her. They would try to stay dry together. Windrace's thoughts went back to the trolls. What was taking them so long?

A dark chamber was suddenly pierced by the yellow dancing light of a torch as two troll guards entered the room. They carried a small, beaten captive between them and dropped him roughly to the floor. He didn't make a sound, but the pain he felt showed clearly in his eyes. In the beginning, those eyes spoke of defiance, but now the strong will had been beaten down. His spirit was nearly broken, like the grasseaters occasionally caught and trained. Nearly — but not yet.

One of the guards walked to a stone sculpture of King Grubmoss and twisted the nose to one side. In response, a section of the wall swung out, revealing an adjoining chamber beyond. The other troll grunted and picked up the elf by his hair. The prisoner gasped and stood up obediently. He was then pushed into the dark room where he lost his balance and fell once again to the floor. The door boomed shut behind him, and the light was gone.

For a few moments, the elf stayed where he'd fallen; he had no reason to move. The pain inside was sharp and he bit his lip in agony. They'd broken something this time, he knew. His ribs felt like fire, his right eye was nearly swollen shut, and his knees were weak. He couldn't think of a time when he'd felt worse.

A shuffling of feet to the left drew his attention. More trolls? No, it was the other prisoner, from the sound of leg chains rattling in the darkness. He soon felt a hand on his shoulder.

***What happened this time?** his companion sent with concern.

Rogue looked up toward the cage-mate he couldn't see. Along with his words, he sent an image of the smile that was on his bruised lips. The grin was mischievous, with a hint of personal satisfaction.

I caused her to trip on my chains,** he sent with a mental chuckle. ***She fell rather ungracefully in front of her best warriors. I think her pride was hurt more than that big nose of hers.

So, she had them beat you,** the other prisoner replied. Rogue heard his companion sit on the dusty floor beside him. ***Why do you continue to get her hackles up? She treats me well enough — better than Grubmoss ever did.

Rogue put his head in his hands. He was acquiring a large headache. His answer held a trace of contempt, but it was soft. ***Perhaps you don't mind granting Catgut what she wants, Stormer, but I refuse to give in to her.***

Stormer sighed and crawled over to a wall, where a makeshift bed of smelly furs lay. ***Rogue,** he sent, ***King Grubmoss captured me many years ago - how long I don't know - and forced me to become his personal servant. I was like you in the beginning, full of spirit and pride, but the King repaid my stubbornness with severe punishment I endured for the better part of a year, but eventually I was broken.*** Stormer paused as he sent images of the memories to Rogue. He had once been chief of the Timber Folk — an honorable position with dignity. But, now he was literally the play-toy of the current Queen. He had given up all hope of escaping long ago, and merely lived from moment to moment.

Stormer,** Rogue sent, not quite sure of what to say, ***I know you're trying to spare me more pain, but I can't let Catgut have what she wants. He paused to collect his next words, and when he sent them, Stormer could not deny the truth in the intent. ***I will kill her, first.***

Rogue fell silent again as his ribs reminded him of his predicament. ***I need to rest now,** he sent.

Of course. I'll wake you when they bring food.

“Glow-fungus soup and bat meat. I can hardly wait.” Rogue said sarcastically.

***Rogue!** Stormer sent urgently. ***Wake up, Rogue!**

“What is it?” was the groggy answer.

Send, my friend, we have visitors.

Rogue tried to sit up, but his ribs hurt too much. ***I don't see the torches. Have they opened the door yet?**

Remember when you wanted to know how high the ceiling in here was? The rocks you tossed up never hit anything.

***Except you, when they came back down. By the way, how's the lump on the noggin?**

Still throbs, but I'll get by. Anyway, I think there are tunnels up there, and someone's coming down one of them.

Rogue cursed under his breath and looked up into the blackness of the overhead shaft. He thought he could see a dim glow of torch light, but wasn't sure. It could have been a trick of his eyes. He soon heard voices, however, which put a hold on his doubts. He couldn't distinguish words, but the voices were unmistakable. Trolls.

He and Stormer could now see flickering shadows as those up above neared the prison room shaft. Within seconds, a hand carrying a lantern emerged from a tunnel Rogue guessed to be up about eight times his own height.

***What now?** he sent to his companion.

As if in answer, a thick rope dropped into the room with a bit of excess coiling onto the floor between them. “Can you climb up, elf?” the troll whispered. Rogue and Stormer looked at one another, but didn't answer. “Maybe he's deaf,” the troll muttered to another behind him.

“Listen,” the troll called back down, trying to keep his voice low. “Your chief sent us to fetch you out of here.”

The other troll peered down into the pit and dimly saw Rogue's form in the shadows below. “I don't think he believes us,” he remarked dryly. “I was afraid of this, Irontongue.”

Irontongue muttered under his breath, grabbed the rope in both hands and tested it for strength. “He's as paranoid as the others — we shoulda brought that Windrunner fella to help out.”

The other troll, Potluck, snorted his disbelief. “You think we could have gotten him down here? The

tunnels are crawling with Catgut's warriors, and if it wasn't for that wench, BeeNest, we'd never have gotten this far. Not many know about this other passage into the prison." Irontongue's icy glare was the only answer he received.

"Better get 'im out myself, if he's coming out at all." With that, he descended hand over hand until he touched floor, facing the elf. Rogue looked at him suspiciously, but otherwise didn't move. "What's wrong with you? C'mon, elf, we're getting you out of he— UHHGH!"

Irontongue's knees buckled as Stormer kicked them from the shadows. His recovery was quick, however, and swiftly grabbed the elf's face in his massive hands.

"Another one!" he exclaimed, "I ought to belt your head into a wall!" He looked mean enough to do it, too. Stormer didn't have the strength to free himself, so relaxed in submission, as he'd learned to do around Grubmoss. He wasn't quite the fighter he used to be. Rogue held his side in pain. He'd moved to help Stormer subdue the troll, but his ribs protested heavily. All he could do now was glare at the tunnel-digger as another descended the rope.

Irontongue released Stormer's face, but kept a hand on his shirt. "I'll only tell you once more," he huffed, "Nightstep sent us, so quit fighting me." When he knew he had the elves' attention, he went on to explain, in brief, about the Resistance and the subsequent alliance with the Timber Folk. He had to keep his voice low, as so not to attract the guards.

When he finished, Rogue still didn't trust him, but agreed to go with them. It was better than waiting for Catgut to return for them. Besides that, Irontongue was going to take him, whether he cooperated or not.

"How are we supposed to get out of here?" Rogue asked, "I'm in no shape to climb that rope, and I'd never pass for a troll walking through the tunnels."

"We've already thought of that," said the troll. He looked back up the shaft and called lightly, "Fishnibbler, toss down the sack!" At his order, a large cloth sack of roughly woven material landed at his feet. He opened its mouth and looked at the elves. "Get in, and we'll haul you up."

Rogue looked doubtful, but complied. Potluck tied the rope around the sack's neck and motioned for Fishnibbler to pull it up. A sudden jerk caused Rogue to gasp — it was hard on his ribs.

As the elf was raised, Irontongue put his hands on his hips and looked down at Stormer. "You're next," he said.

Arrowsong and Windrace sneezed simultaneously. The winds that drove the wind at them had turned cool, and both were soaked to the skin. Windrace felt ashamed with himself. If he'd inherited his mother's rockshaping talent, he could have made them a shelter. He'd often wished for that magic, but wishing never caused it to develop.

Windrace, Arrowsong sent gloomily, ***It's been way too long. They must have failed.***

I agree, Arrow. I think we'd better head back to the holt before we get sick in this rain. He stood up and offered a hand to her. Arrowsong grabbed her bag of herbs and other necessary medicinal items and then took his hand. They nodded to one another and then pushed through the sourberry bushes. They took a few steps into the forest and immediately heard a voice from the left.

"HEY!" someone yelled at them, "Where you going? Get yer tails over here and give us a hand."

Windrace whirled and saw the rescue party emerging from a nearly-hidden tunnel opening. Arrowsong immediately ran to the group, looking for the one they'd gone in for. She didn't see him. "Where's Rogue?" she asked fearfully.

Windrace followed her into the cave and out of the rain. The lead troll lowered a sack he'd had slung over his shoulder and began untying the knot. "Right here," he said.

"In a sack?" Windrace asked, amazed.

"It was the only way we could get them out without being seen," Irontongue replied. Rogue poked his head out of the sack and grinned feebly, his hair fin wilted to the left.

"Hi, guys," he said weakly. The ride in the sack had caused his cracked ribs phenomenal pain, and he'd almost passed out from it. Arrowsong moved to his side and tried to help him up, but it was too much. Rogue collapsed on the cold stone floor.

"High Ones!" Windrace exclaimed, "Help him, Arrow!" Arrowsong had spent the better part of the day in fear of this moment, but the pain in Rogue's face compelled her to put it aside and draw on the small bit of magic

within her.

As she began her work, Windrace looked up at the trolls as Potluck set down another sack. “What did you mean, ‘get *them* out?’” he asked suspiciously.

Potluck opened the sack and let it fall open. When Windrace saw the face that emerged, his eyes grew wide. “Stormer?” he whispered, “My chief, we thought you dead!”

*****They’re coming!***** Thunderhawk’s report was sent openly, and the Timber Folk responded immediately by quickly gathering near the north entrance of the Thorn Barrier.

Rockhammer had been talking with Season, until the elf suddenly bolted away without warning. “Hey!” the troll exclaimed, “What’s the matter with you?”

“The rescue party’s back!” Season called over his shoulder at him. By this time, elves were emerging from every hometree in the holt and running.

Rockhammer, as well as the other trolls and the humans, too, were puzzled. As far as they knew no announcement had been made. The troll didn’t have time to ponder about it long, because the expected party suddenly emerged from the barrier entrance.

Two Star rushed forward and pushed his way through the crowd. Nightstep hadn’t had much sleep for the past couple of nights, so he had put Two Star in charge while he rested. “Make way!” the elder shouted to the crowd, “Let them through!”

He had to forcefully shove a couple of the humans aside, since he’d forgotten to shout in their tongue also. Within moments, three trolls emerged through the barrier, each carrying an elf. Windrace brought up the rear. “Take them to the Father Tree,” he told Iron tongue.

As Two Star stepped up to Windrace, he motioned to Thunderhawk. *****Take someone with you and scout out the path behind them, in case they were followed.***** The glider nodded and moved off into the crowd. Two Star turned to Windrace.

“How are they?” he asked. Windrace looked toward the Father Tree and abruptly sneezed. The rain had lessened, but he was completely soaked. As he was about to answer, a human female offered him a blanket to wrap up in. It startled him, as he wasn’t used to the humans yet. His first impression was to grab his knife as she approached him, but Two Star caught his wrist as it reached the hilt.

*****Easy, lad — she’s on our side, now,***** he sent.

Windrace stared at her warily, but took the blanket.

Tana smiled at him and replied, [“You’re welcome.”] As she walked away, Windrace let out a deep sigh. He couldn’t believe he’d come within striking distance of a round-ear and hadn’t killed her. Times were certainly changing.

“Now, lad, about Rogue and Arrowsong?” Two Star prompted.

“Rogue had a few broken ribs and other minor injuries,” Windrace answered as they walked toward the hometree he shared with his brother, Foxvine. “He’ll be fine with a little rest. Arrowsong repaired his wounds enough to get him here, but I think Goldenbraid may have to finish up.” He glanced back toward the Father Tree. “Arrow did fine, but it completely exhausted her. We should all be proud of her, but I don’t think it would be wise to depend on her talent in the future. The effort left her almost as weak as her patient.”

All of a sudden, realization came to Two Star. “Hold it — I thought the trolls were carrying *three* people!?!”

Windrace looked amused. “Yes, they were. You’re not going to believe who that third person is.”

“Who?”

Windrace was about to open his mouth to answer when a sending interrupted their conversation. It was Nightstep and he sounded quite amazed.

*****Two Star! Come to the Father Tree — He’s back! He’s back!*****

The elder was confused. He looked to Windrace for an explanation. “Who’s back?” he asked.

“Chief Stormer. He was another of the trolls’ captives.” Two Star’s jaw fell open. For once, he was genuinely stunned.

In the confusion of the milling crowd, one troll darted out the north entrance of the holt. He was certain he hadn’t been noticed as he pushed through the underbrush. He had a specific destination in mind and went straight

for it. He would have to make this quick.

***Woodwreath? Did you hear something over there — to the left?** Thunderhawk sent as he pulled his foot free of a mud puddle he'd stepped in. He gripped his talon-whip nervously as his companion followed his gaze.

At first, she didn't see anything, but then the elder caught a glimpse of an orange shirt. ***There!** she pointed as the troll trotted down a path, obviously in a hurry. ***That's Brownbat,** Woodwreath mused, ***I talked to him back at the holt earlier.**** Silently, she noted how similar in appearance he seemed to Thunderfoot.

Let's see where he's off to in such a rush,* Thunderhawk suggested. Woodwreath nodded, and the partners set out after their prey. The sky rumbled lowly, announcing to the valley that the rain would continue a while longer. Thunderhawk had given up trying to stay dry and concentrated on the task at hand.

Soon, the tunnel-digger arrived at a stony depression. This was the Rock Pits, a favorite place of the elfin children to play. He went to the center of the area and sat down. The elves watched in interest as he picked up a couple of fist-sized rocks and began tapping them together. There was an obvious pattern to it and lasted for a few moments. He then set the rocks back on the ground and waited.

It wasn't long before three other trolls appeared out of the forest. All were armed with mean-looking swords and axes. Thunderhawk and Woodwreath exchanged glances and began to feel uneasy.

"What do you have this time, Brownbat?" one of the trolls said in a gravelly voice. The spy explained the turn of events concerning Rogue's rescue and the release of Stormer.

One of the warriors cursed vehemently when he heard that news. "The Queen's not going to like this," he grumbled, envisioning his head being removed from his body when they reported in. "Who freed them?"

Brownbat gave the names of the three trolls who'd handled the rescue. The others were looking more sour by the second.

"Irontongue??!" the warrior exclaimed, "I thought he was the Queen's personal... Once we tell her of this, she'll have that bat-dung's head on a spit!" From their hiding place, the two elves listened with horror. ***We've got to warn the holt, before Irontongue and his group go back to the caverns!**** Woodwreath sent. She started to leave, but Thunderhawk held her back.

Let's wait a bit — perhaps we can learn something else,* he suggested. The elder looked uncertain, but nodded. The raindrops made it difficult to pick up all their words, so they moved a little closer. If the weather hadn't been cleaning the air, they would have been able to smell the trolls from their present location.

The only other thing they learned was that Brownbat was planning to make friendly with Spicurl, the female that Thunderhawk remembered as being Grubmoss' daughter. Spicurl was presently in the holt — part of the Resistance. Brownbat was planning to kill her when she slept, on orders from Catgut.

Isn't she the one who keeps trying to cuddle up to Thunderfoot?* Woodwreath asked.

Thunderhawk gave a mental chuckle. ***Yes, but poor Thunderfoot isn't handling her attentions too well. He embarrasses easily.****

As they shared a private chuckle on the young troll's behalf, Brownbat rose to his feet and left his companions. It was time he got back to the holt before he was missed. The elves waited for him to travel a ways before trailing him. So far, he hadn't known he'd been followed, and they wanted to keep it that way.

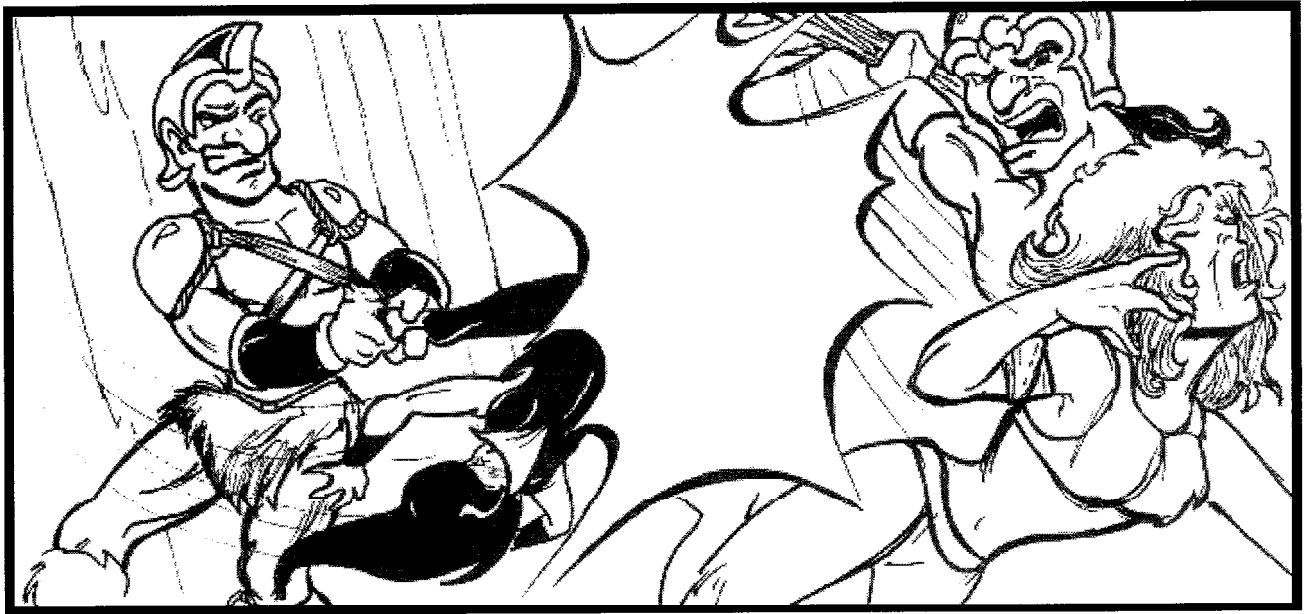
When it was decided they had waited long enough, Thunderhawk stood and offered his companion a hand up. When she took it and arose, however, her pants caught a thorn at the knee and ripped loudly. ***Oh, no!**** she sent in alarm.

"Hey! Someone's there!" A troll's voice croaked, "Get 'em!"

The elves didn't wait around any longer. They scurried to escape, but in the confusion, ran the wrong direction. The troll warriors were upon them instantly.

"Look out!" Thunderhawk yelled, just as a troll brought a broken tree branch down across the back of Woodwreath's head. His warning came too late. There was a resounding *crack* and the elder fell to the ground like a sack of stones. The other trolls fought to grab Thunderhawk's arms, but he was doing his best to avoid their grasps. He knew there was only one way left to escape.

He called on his limited airwalking ability and floated up off the ground. As he did so, he kicked out and caught the toe of his boot in one troll's eye. His victim bellowed in pain, and the other warrior reached out and



wrapped his bulky fingers around the elf's ankle. Putting all his weight into the effort, the troll swung Thunderhawk around and smashed him into a nearby tree. The airwalker's breath was knocked from him and he fell to the ground. He was quickly beaten until he lost consciousness.

Thunderhawk was dimly aware of his surroundings, but refused to open his eyes. It was still raining. Mentally, he checked off a list of places he hurt. He soon realized that it would have been easier to count the areas which did not feel pain. His side felt the worst as he recalled meeting a tree. He was a bit nauseated and fought to keep the contents of his stomach down.

Just as he seemed to be on the verge of unconsciousness again, a long, terrified shriek brought him to full alert. He sat up quickly and looked about, but saw no one. There were no more screams, but he could hear voices and a painful whimpering. Thunderhawk's heart rose up in his throat,

It was then he noticed the cage that held him. It had been hastily constructed and was rather crude. Tree limbs and branches had been lashed together with creeper vines. It wouldn't take much to get out of, but he'd have to hurry. He was about to start working at a vine-knot, but he couldn't get his fingers to work. The fear had begun. It wasn't the fear of the nearby trolls, who seemed to be torturing Woodwreath from the sounds, but another, deeper phobia that held him like a snare.

Mooncrest and Shrike had strongly-rooted fears of wide open spaces, but Thunderhawk's was quite the opposite — small closed-in places squeezed at his sanity, and his worst nightmares always included being caged in a small container. Humans had captured him long ago, before he found the valley, and had caged and tortured him. His fear was very real. His present accommodations were quite constricted, so he did the first thing that came to mind. He panicked.

He began thrashing around, kicking out blindly at the cage, and resulted in tipping it over sideways. His adrenaline surged through his body as his mind went numb. He threw his body at the wooden bars again and again. He had to get out!

"Gravel," a troll yelled, "get that other elf before he busts loose!" Thunderhawk heard the command and renewed his efforts with determined fury. The vines began to snap and the bars eased apart as he pushed with all his strength. Gravel emerged from the bushes just as the airwalker squeezed through the opening he'd made in the cage. Free!

Thunderhawk grabbed the empty cage and swung its light weight at the onrushing troll. Gravel's head happened to go through the opening that had been made in the bars, and the elf seized the opportunity. He wrenched the cage violently to the side and it was more than wood that cracked in result. The troll fell to the ground, his neck broken.

Thunderhawk was panting heavily, holding the remains of the cage in his hands. When the other two

trolls appeared with Woodwreath hanging limp between them, he turned to face them. His teeth were bared and clinched, and his eyes were those of a mad animal. The trolls were momentarily uncertain as to whether or not to approach the elf, but the sight of Gravel's body quickly made their decision for them.

The trolls took Woodwreath and tossed her at Thunderhawk's feet. The elf looked down and immediately noticed that she wasn't breathing. He felt sick, especially when he noted the pool she was in was quickly turning red.

"Look at this, elf," one of the trolls said. Thunderhawk glanced up and saw the warrior holding something bloody in his hand. The troll grinned evilly and began laughing at the elf's pale expression. "You're next," he said.

With a sick cry, Thunderhawk turned and ran as hard as he could to put space between he and them. Once he had sufficient distance, he took to the air and didn't look back. One troll hurled his knife, but it passed him harmlessly. The troll cursed as Thunderhawk disappeared into the overhead branches, and stamped his feet angrily in the mud puddles.

"What are we going to do about Brownbat? That elf heard him talking to us. They'll kill him, for sure," he said gloomily.

The other troll looked at the object in his hand and casually tossed it at the elfin body it had once belonged to. "Forget Brownbat," he said, "We'll be lucky if Catgut doesn't cut out *our* hearts for letting the elf escape!"

Tempest brushed her hair out of the way as she knelt next to Stormer. Her own raven-black hair was just as long as his, falling to the hips with a slight wave to it. She handed him a wooden bowl of broth and gave him a friendly smile. The one-time chief returned her smile with a wink. Her face flushed slightly.

Stormer lifted the bowl to his nose. The aroma was delicious, and after he began to drink, decided that the taste was even better. He was presently resting in an upper chamber of the Father Tree, relishing his freedom from the trolls. He had forgotten what it was like to live in comfort and at ease. It had been nearly one hundred forty years since he'd been abducted by King Grubmoss and beaten into a humbled slave. Apparently, knowledge of his presence in the caverns had been kept from the Timber Folk, since a rescue for him was never enacted.

Tempest had earlier combed out the tangles in his darkly-colored hair and now began to cut it for him to shoulder-length, as he'd requested. He relaxed as she worked and thought about the reunion he'd had earlier with his daughter, Wavesong, and his grandsons, Nightstep and Twill. It had been a joyous meeting and, had the tribe not been gearing up for war with Catgut's army, a grand celebration would have broken out.

After the initial excitement of the reunion had worn off, a serious tone came over the tribe as a rumored question was whispered around the holt: Would Stormer reclaim his position as chief?

He had been gone a long time, and those who had known him before had forgotten that he'd had very sensitive hearing. Stormer heard the whisperings, and acted upon the rumor swiftly. He called a private council with Nightstep. The meeting had been short, but the situation had been resolved. Stormer made the announcement himself, through sending; this was only for the elves.

Timber Folk, I was once your chief — and now I'm back, he'd sent, ***However, to stop the rumors floating about, I wanted you to be aware of a council Nightstep and I have just had. I have been away for a long time, and I know only a few of you now. Nightstep knows each of you — knows your strengths, your weaknesses, and just how you will react in a given situation. I have only seen faces that I do not know. He has led you for the past thirty years, and with my approval, will continue to do so. I am content just to live here with my people once again.*** After that announcement, he had felt the tension leave the air. Though he did not know it, he gained respect from a lot of elves whom he had never met before.

Stormer broke from his musings to look up at Tempest. She had been born long after his disappearance, but she was now a grown elfin woman — a pretty one, at that. He found that he liked her, and enjoyed her company.

His thoughts were interrupted by a commotion in the lower chamber of the tree. An elf by the name of Thunderhawk, Stormer heard, had just been brought in, wounded and slightly hysterical. Another had been killed by the trolls. He and Tempest glanced at one another and then descended to the room below, the hair-cutting forgotten.

Goldenbraid took her hand from Thunderhawk's forehead and sighed. "I've induced sleep," she said, her eyes still wet with tears. "Now that he's calm, I can work to heal him."

Nightstep nodded to her and sat back against the wall of the Father Tree, silently stroking his beard. Slowly, he looked around at the others in the spacious room. They'd all just heard Thunderhawk's story and the chief studied their individual reactions.

Goldenbraid's tears had stopped as she concentrated on the wounded glider, but Greeneyes wept openly into the arms of Wavesong. Stormer sat silently on the steps of the Father Tree, looking out into the holt. Two Star was clenching his fists and his eyes were closed, while Rogue stared blankly at the wall from the bed where he rested. Tempest had left the tree. Also in the room was the human, Seralle, who listened to Tana's translations of what Thunderhawk had said. The troll, Rockhammer, was clearly angry and turned to Nightstep.

"Brownbat's mine," he said, thumping his chest. "I'm going to rip out *his*—"

"No!" Nightstep interrupted, purposely preventing the troll from getting graphic. They'd just had that from Thunderhawk. He shook his head and stood up. "So far, Brownbat doesn't know he was tailed. Let's keep it that way."

"Why?" Wavesong asked "Doesn't Woodwreath's death mean anything? We're at war — and Brownbat is the enemy!"

"Yes, losing Woodwreath hurts, especially the way she died," Nightstep answered, "But we can use this spy to our own advantage — without him knowing anything about it.

"What use can he be to us?" Two Star asked wearily. Usually, he could guess the patterns his best friend and chief's thoughts moved, but this time he was baffled. Since the beginnings of this war, Nightstep had seemed a little more removed from everyone, and his judgments on matters appeared to be coming from a different perspective than everyone else in the holt. So far, it had proved to have value. Two Star marveled silently about his friend.

Stormer got up and moved back inside as Dawnwatch came through the doorway, motioning Wildwood to come in. "Sorry to break up this special council," she said, moving across the room, "but Wildwood's about ready to have her child!"

The sorrows of recent events were momentarily forgotten as the prospect of new life amidst death took all attentions. Dawnwatch had been through this a number of times before and knew her place. It only took a specific stare from the midwife for those in the room to know her demands.

Nightstep gave a quick send to all the elves present except Wildwood. ***Woodwreath was Wildwood's blood aunt. It would be best if we kept quiet about her death around Wildwood, until she's safely given birth. Her grief could possibly hurt the child within her.***

But, Nightstep, Wavesong replied in like manner, ***Wildwood has a right to know about Woodwreath.***

Yes, she does, but I don't want to put any more risk on the birth. Think of the baby.

I agree with Nightstep, Dawnwatch added as she led the pregnant mother into the room. ***Try to keep quiet about Woodwreath for now. There will be a time later to give her the news.*** Silently, the elves agreed and then the chief began waving his arms toward the doorway.

"All right," Nightstep said, "everyone not essential to the birthing — outside!" As one, the council broke up to leave. When Rogue started to get up Nightstep put a hand on his shoulder.

"Not you, Rogue," he said, "You stay here and rest. The rain outside won't do you any better."

"Nightstep," the prankster replied, "I'm okay now. The healers patched me up all right, and I'll just be in the way here. Let me go out to find Shrike. She can be my caretaker."

The chief frowned, but he had no argument so he nodded. Rogue stood up slowly and followed him toward the door. Before the pair could leave the tree, Grassy and Mooncrest burst into the room and went to Wildwood's sides. Dawnwatch gave them both a sincere smile and told them that it could still be a while before the child was born, but since they were there she could use their help in getting things ready. Nightstep flashed a rare warm smile at the expectant mother and exited the tree.

The chief of the Timber Folk looked up at the sky and noted immediately that the rain had stopped. The clouds were still thick, but the soaking shower had ceased, for a while, at least. Nightstep glanced around, searching for a semidry place to resume the council.

Seralle stepped up to his side and pointed to a large tent-like structure placed in the center of the Council Clearing. ["We can continue in there,"] he suggested.

Nightstep nodded and relayed the message to the others. As they walked, he moved next to Rockhammer. "I've noticed that Spicurl has an eye for Thunderfoot," he stated. When the troll looked confused, he added, "Dripstone."

"Ah, yes," Rockhammer chuckled. "But, I don't think the youngster fully appreciates the interest old King Grubmoss' daughter has for him."

Nightstep stroked his beard momentarily in thought. When they arrived at the tent, he looked again at the troll. "I think it would be good for Dripstone to accept Spicurl's attentions and begin getting acquainted," he said.

"Why?" the troll asked.

"Since Brownbat has the notion to get Spicurl alone in order to kill her, we need to have someone else with her at all times."

"And Drippy is perfect for the job!" Rockhammer said with a smile. "Fill me in on what else is said during council when I get back — I think I need to have a father-to-son chat with Dripstone about the facts of life."

Two Star had been listening quietly, but now he spoke up. "Father-to-son?" he asked, "Is Dripstone your son?"

Rockhammer shook his head. "Actually, no. His father disowned him when the revolt began. Belcher is a strong supporter of Catgut. In fact, if Dripstone were to go into the caverns now, it is certain he would be killed. It is well known in the kingdom that he's been a regular visitor to your holt, and right now that makes him the enemy — especially by his family."

He spotted the young troll across the holt and took his leave. The others went inside the tent for their meeting. The humans who happened to be inside the shelter were shooed out by Seralle, to give the council some privacy.

"Here's the plan I propose," Nightstep said after everyone had gotten settled. "Catgut has declared war on us," he began.

The sky rumbled lowly overhead where all three races in the holt gathered to hear the announcement the council was about to make. The morning sun couldn't be seen through the dense clouds, but enough light came through to make the area glow hazily. Nightstep stood on the steps of the Father Tree, flanked by Rockhammer on one side and Tana on the other.

Neither Deta nor Seralle understood the elves' language, but Tana had been taught in secret by Hoodwink not long ago, so the shaman had been chosen to translate Nightstep's words for her people.

While the elf chief waited for the crowd to settle into silence, Rockhammer looked out into the mixture of races, searching for a particular face. When he spotted Brownbat, he noted that the spy wasn't too happy. Rockhammer could see him stare at a nearby couple. Ever since he'd gotten back to the holt, Brownbat hadn't been able to fulfill his mission. Spicurl seemed glued to Dripstone, as she had not left his side all night. It was now early morning, and the two were still together. Dripstone tried to hide a yawn, but Spicurl saw it and giggled. She covered his mouth with her hand, which caused Dripstone to laugh. They appeared to be getting along rather well, and Brownbat looked miserable.

Well, Rockhammer thought to himself, Drippy seems to be enjoying his assignment. Besides, it was about time the young troll found someone other than elves to spend his time with.

A sudden hush came over the crowd as Nightstep drew their attentions with a steady clap of his hands. When all eyes were on him, the elfin chief spoke loudly so all could hear him.

"Catgut has declared war on us, and each of our tribes have lost lives," he said, carefully choosing his words. "It doesn't look as if she intends to let any of us live, so it is time we take action and strike back at her. If we sit here and wait as we've done, the Queen will see us as easy targets and attack in full force."

"What are we going to do?" Starlight called from the back of the crowd. "Will we try to attack her in the safety of her throne room?"

Nightstep put his hands on his hips and shook his head. "No, we're going to draw her warriors here — into the holt itself." Murmurs rose immediately from all three races, until Rockhammer's booming shout to be quiet silenced them. Nightstep cleared his throat and was about to continue when Oakstaff spoke up.



“Look how crowded this holt is,” he said. “Do you think we can fight them hand-to-hand effectively with all of us bunched up together?” Others agreed with him, wanting to know the answer to that argument. Oakstaff had been teaching the non-fighters how to use their weapons against skilled warriors. Despite their differences, many of the humans had sought his lessons, as well as some of the elves and a few trolls. He waited for the answer to his question with crossed arms and a steady stare.

“Actually,” Nightstep replied, “there won’t be anyone inside the holt except Catgut’s warriors. Once we have them within the thorn barrier, we’ll set fire to it and burn down everything in the holt — including our enemies. It’ll be a major blow to the queen.”

“Burn the holt?!?” Silverleaf exclaimed her eyes wide in disbelief. Her outburst startled her infant daughter into crying. She held the child close and tried to soothe her wails. Other shouts of protests came from the Timber Folk and, for an instant, Nightstep thought he was going to have a riot. With a split-second decision, the chief sent the command of ***Silence!*** to his tribe folk. His sending abilities were among the strongest of the holt, and all of the Timber Folk received him through the commotion. Without waiting for the noise to subside, he sent to them again, this time with inside information on the plans.

To the humans and trolls, he simply stared into the crowd until all the elves became silent. Many didn’t look happy, yet others had seemed to change abruptly. For the sake of the Ke L’Rhatan and the Resistance trolls, Nightstep continued with his announcements.

“We will lure Catgut’s army inside the thorn barrier,” he repeated, “and then burn the holt. Once our enemies are defeated, then we’ll set up another holt elsewhere in the valley.”

[“And where will *we* be when the warriors come?”] the huge man, Rofea, wanted to know. [“There are too many of us to just hide in the woods.”]

Before answering, Nightstep translated the man’s words for those who didn’t know the human’s tongue. After that, he pointed a finger toward the distant Sheercliff walls. “The Upper World,” he replied. “We will all take necessary supplies with us to camp on the grass plains until the conflict is over. There is an oasis of trees a good, long walk away from the valley towards the west. We can get fresh water there and shade from the sun.”

“Leave the valley?” Mooncrest repeated with a croak. “Oh no...”

“Why do we have to even leave the valley?” Sapphire asked. “Isn’t it large enough to find a place to hide?” As an Elder of the tribe, she would have normally been part of the council, but she had been busy knapping flint arrowheads for the archers, so she had missed out on the planning.

“Because the valley isn’t safe anymore,” Nightstep replied. “Rockhammer has told us that the troll kingdom stretches out even toward the south end of the valley, and that there are several tunnels from the caverns that lead to the forest. No matter where we relocated to in this valley, we could be quickly rediscovered. That’s why we are going to the Upper World.”

As murmurs began to rise again, the chief looked to his companions, Tana and Rockhammer, and nodded

toward them. “We will be leaving shortly,” he said loudly, “Start preparing the supplies we will need. Anything not necessary will be left behind.” The announcement was over as the crowd began to disperse.

Rockhammer tapped Nightstep on the shoulder and nodded toward the thorn barrier. Brownbat ducked into the passage and away from the holt. They also noticed Quicksilver float up and over the living wall, his prior assignment to follow the troll if he should leave.

“I see the bait has been taken,” Tana said, following their gaze. “Don’t you think you should tell your two tribes the real plan now, before everyone starts packing to go?”

“What about your tribe? Shouldn’t you tell them, too?” Rockhammer asked.

“I already have,” she replied with an innocent smile, “while Nightstep was making his speech, I was telling my people the real plan.”

“What if Brownbat heard you?” the troll asked, suddenly afraid of having the news leaked to the enemy.

Tana continued smiling. She wasn’t the incompetent female the troll was beginning to think she was. “You told me yourself,” she answered, “that none of the trolls ever learned my language. I think I was safe in what I did.” Rockhammer still wasn’t convinced, but didn’t say anything.

“My folk already know about it, too,” Nightstep said, “So you’d better start informing yours.”

Rockhammer sputtered in confusion. “You’ve already told your people? When? How?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the chief replied, unwilling to reveal the elves’ secret of sending. “Once you tell them, we can begin.”

Rockhammer looked unhappy, but proceeded to bellow at the Resistance trolls until they dropped what they were doing and gathered around for his announcement. As he began, Nightstep turned to Seralle and let out a deep breath.

[“I hope this works,”] he said wearily.

Brownbat had to hurry. He hadn’t expected the elves to be so ruthless as to destroy their own homes to fight back at the Queen. He had to warn her of the trap before the warriors were killed in it. The distance to the doorway was a long run for his short legs and he was panting heavily before he’d gone a third of that length. To top off matters, the rain had started again.

From the treetops overhead, Quicksilver could follow the troll’s orange shirt without trouble. He floated almost directly above the spy, but he blended into the rainy sky easily with the grey cloak he’d donned before leaving the holt. He wondered how long the tunnel-digger could run at a steady pace. He’d just passed the Rock Pits, but the caverns were still quite a distance away.

He almost missed the troll and kept on flying when Brownbat stopped near a large boulder to rest. The glider doubled back and quietly alighted in a nearby tree. As he waited for his quarry to start off again, Quicksilver’s thoughts whirled as he recalled all that had happened in such a short period of time.

The near-fatal attack on Duskdew by a group of trolls had almost been too much for him. He’d thought he had lost his sister forever. Since that time, she had been different — snappish and moody — and took very little part in the things going on around her.

As he mused, he caught a glimpse of movement in the corner of his eye. When he looked, the troll was gone. Quicksilver began searching the area for the orange shirt in a rush. He made wide sweeps back and forth, but didn’t see the troll. He continued flying around for a while, but never located him. Brownbat had given him the slip. Frustrated, Quicksilver headed back to the holt. He would have to tell Nightstep that he had failed.

Brownbat fumbled in the dark for the flint-rocks he carried as his eyes tried to adjust to the dim light filtering in the tunnel. Within a few moments, he had a torch on the wall burning. He turned back to the door and closed it tightly, making sure it was sealed from the outside. Then he grabbed up the torch and hurried down the narrow corridor, its yellow light casting long ominous shadows on the walls.

The rock he’d rested on in the forest above also served as a doorway to a small tunnel into the kingdom. There was no rain here, and there was less chance of being seen by the enemy. To the best of his knowledge, Brownbat hadn’t been followed; his flight to warn the Queen had gone unnoticed.

The passage was straight as an arrow, so he was able to run at a full sprint for quite a distance. Before too long, he saw lights up ahead and he knew he was near the forge chamber. The sound of hammers ringing against

metal was constant as work on Catgut's special project had top priority.

Brownbat didn't pause to look at the fine handiwork, but rushed through the busy work place toward the next tunnel. In his haste, he ran into a sultry female who was just leaving the forge chamber. He recognized BeeNest and flashed her a big smile. He'd been with the wench a few times and he was always glad to see her. However, he had important news for the Queen, so he couldn't spend time with her just now. He apologized to her and rushed off down the tunnel. BeeNest smiled to herself and strode toward the passage the spy had just come from. She grabbed a torch and disappeared down the corridor.

Brownbat was getting very tired. The long, long flight from the holt was almost more than he was physically able to handle. He stopped in an eating chamber and sat down for a rest. A metal container of water sat on the table beside him. He took it in his trembling hands and drank long and hard from it. He coughed and sputtered from panting and set the water aside.

After a few moments, he got up and continued toward his destination. It wasn't far, and two large guards blocked his way with vicious-looking swords. "Scram!" one with a large scar across his forehead said, "The Queen's not in a good mood now." Brownbat swallowed hard as he got a good look at the business end of the guard's weapon.

"Tell the Queen I have important news concerning the Resistance," he said.

One guard looked doubtful, but Catgut had ordered that any information about the enemy was to be brought to her without delay. "Hold him here," he said, "I'll see if her majesty will grant him some time." He then turned down the hall and disappeared around a corner.

Brownbat looked at the remaining guard. "Why is she upset?" he asked.

The guard absently scratched his scar and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "It seems her two favorite pets have escaped, and she misses them." Brownbat smiled, but caught himself before the guard noticed. He didn't say anything else as he waited.

The other guard returned momentarily. "Come with me," he said, "she'll see you now." As they began down the tunnel, he leaned over to the spy and whispered, "I hope you have some good news for her — if not, you're likely to lose your ears."

Brownbat gulped and grabbed his ears instinctively. "It's not good..." he squeaked. They rounded another corner and then were in the Throne Room. The throne was between two massive stalagmites and the seat itself had been carved out of a huge deposit of flowstone. It was covered with several wolf pelts. The figure sitting quietly on it watched the spy's entrance with a steady piercing gaze. She waited until he stopped in front of her.

"Brownbat," the Queen said slowly, her voice almost purring. "You have left your post to come here. Why?" Her stare was penetrating.

The small troll's throat refused to swallow. He coughed once and then told her of the council.

Two Star walked across the holt to where two young elves stood next to the Minnowbrook. Even in the middle of a rain shower, Skyflame always had a ready smile for the elder. He and Season had just gone over their gear and were waiting for the rest of their party to arrive.

"You two straight on what you're to do? Two Star asked.

"Yes," answered Skyflame. "If Torisen's weather sensing is correct, the rain should end just before sunup, which will fit perfectly into our plans."

Season brushed a wet strand of hair from his forehead and grumbled. "I wish it would end now," he remarked. "The ride to Sheercliff Pass will be a long one, without the added discomfort of being wet!" He looked up at Two Star and gave him a thin mischievous grin. "But, as this fellow says," he pointed a thumb at Skyflame, "it will definitely be an asset when we reach the Upper World."

The elder studied them for a moment and saw the similarities of the friendship between these two, and his own with Nightstep. He admired them and was in complete approval of the assignment he was to give them.

"Well, lads," he said, "there's just one more thing. Nightstep wants you two in charge of our Upper World group." Both of the younger elves' faces lit up at the implications. Two Star nodded and added, "You'll be 'chief' over the elves who go with you. Rockhammer will lead the trolls, and Seralle, the humans."

Skyflame felt pride that his father saw enough leadership in him to give him the assignment. He could have easily given it to someone with more experience. Nightstep rarely acknowledged his son's accomplishments,

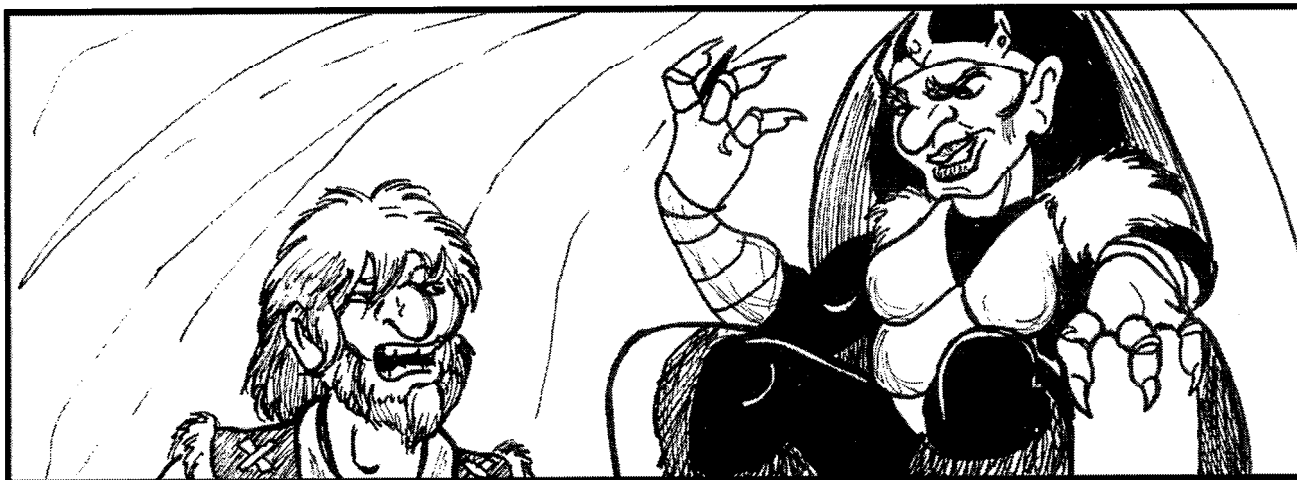
which made this situation even better. Season was speechless.

“Thanks, Two Star,” Skyflame said, “We’ll do our best to keep everything according to plan.” The elder wished them the best and then left to take care of other matters.

Catgut rested her chin on intertwined fingers, her facial expression fairly amused. The report she’d just heard contained some surprising information. She stared steadily at the spy and narrowed her eyes. Brownbat was sure that he was receiving the same look she’d given King Grubmoss just before burying her dagger up to the hilt in his throat. Already, he thought he could feel her cold blade as he waited nervously for her reaction.

For long moments, she merely stared at him. Actually, she wasn’t even seeing him — her eyes just happened to be pointed directly at him as she thought over the information. Finally, a wide grin spread across her face and she chuckled to herself.

This is it, thought the spy.



“Brownbat,” the Queen said, “you’ve done well.” The small troll almost fainted in relief, but he was certain he didn’t know why his hide had been spared.

“Your M-M-Majesty?” he stammered.

Catgut sat up straight on her throne and grinned evilly. “Yes, this situation will work to our advantage, not theirs. They think to trick me and escape with their puny little lives, but I now have the upper hand.” She looked over at a figure standing to the left of her throne.

“Slacker,” she said, “I want two groups of warriors — one small force of twenty-five, and everyone else in the other,” she said to her head guardsman. “The small group will attack the holt and spring the enemy’s trap on themselves by burning their holt first. Any who try to escape the flames are to be hunted down and killed,” she ordered. Then, as an afterthought, she added, “Tell them to cause as much pain as they can...”

Catgut laughed at the thought and Brownbat could see the kill-lust in her eyes. He shuddered at what he saw. The Queen stood up and pointed at him. “You will be greatly rewarded, Little One. What would you have in my domain? What rank do you desire?”

Brownbat was stunned. “I-uhm...uh...” He was dumbfounded.

The Queen’s eyes twinkled merrily at his confusion. “There will be time enough to think it over, my loyal servant, but for now I want you to return to the Alliance as my spy. They will be going to the Upper World, and I want you with them,” she commanded. “Then, when they have set up their camp, you will sneak away and inform our army of their exact location.”

“Y-Yes, your highness,” Brownbat acknowledged.

“Fine,” she said. “Grab some food from the kitchen for yourself, and then be on your way.” The spy bowed and then left the chamber. She turned again to the captain of the guard.

“For the second group,” she said, stepping down from the throne to face him eye-to-eye, “I want every remaining warrior, every fighter, and anyone else available to prepare for war. I want you to lead this campaign against the Alliance. Their hiding spot in the Upper World won’t give them any safety,” she hissed. “I want every stinking elf, human, and troll traitor slaughtered — including their offspring! No prisoners. Kill them all!”

Slacker was beginning to feel the bloodlust. Catgut's enthusiasm was contagious and if he'd been within striking distance of the Alliance, he probably would have gone after them alone. That was a quality Catgut liked in her subjects.

"Yes, my Queen!" he exclaimed, "No survivors!" He bowed and was about to rush off, but she held him back with a hand on his belt.

"Wait," she said, "I want this to be so one-sided that the Alliance won't even get a sporting chance. I want to insure that only the Alliance dies. It is time to use my secret weapon, and it will make our army invincible!"

"Yes, my Queen," Slacker answered. "I'll inform the forgers to prepare for the warriors."

"One more thing," Catgut said, still clutching his belt. "Leave ten guards here to attend me — but take *everyone else* to war! This includes the cooks, smiths, jewelers and diggers. The females are to be quartered together with all the snot-nosed mumps. When the elves, humans and Grubmoss' loyalists are all dead and rotting, the warriors will have a grand mating party to increase our numbers."

"Yes, my Queen!"

Catgut returned to her throne as the guard captain rushed to fulfill her commands. She pictured in her mind all the pain and screams of agony she would inflict through her army, and felt a surge of delight. It would be too dangerous for her to go with them, but she envied her warriors in their mission. Oh, how she would love to be there, destroying those who had stood in her way! She felt ecstatic.

Catgut stepped down from her throne and strode through the cavernous room to a side passage. She went through a door and closed it behind her. Her bed chamber contained all the luxuries the caverns could offer. Soft furs, pelts and pillows filled the sleeping arena and candles of animal fat were set in many niches along the walls.

She missed her playmates, and stuck out her lower lip momentarily until an idea occurred to her. As the Queen, she should see the secret weapon once more before its use. Gathering her robe around her, Catgut left the chamber and moved catlike down the passage.

Moments later, she arrived at the armory. The forge captain bowed as she walked in, and knew exactly why she'd come — he had expected her. "My Queen," he said, "Slacker gave me the news only a moment ago. As soon as the warriors start arriving, we can get everyone ready."

Catgut nodded and replied, "Let me see them, Leatherskin." The captain went to a large door. It opened easily on its well-oiled hinges. Torches were already burning in the storage room and the reflections off the brightmetal were dazzling. The Queen walked over to the rows and rows of stacked shields and breastplates. The other pieces of armor were placed in individual stacks around the chamber, each according to what they were. Catgut gazed contentedly at their secret weapon, protective armored clothing.

During the year before her takeover, she had discovered a good number of disgruntled trolls who were looking for someone to dethrone old Grubmoss and had coaxed them into helping her prepare for the future. It started in secret, when she suggested the need for the armor to her followers. The King rarely visited the forges and it was an easy task to set up production for the body pieces without his knowledge. Some of the trolls believed it to be foolhardy, but the time had now come for the true meaning of superior fighting strength to be shown to the inhabitants of *her* valley.

As she quietly walked around the gleaming metal stacks, Slacker arrived with the first bunch of warriors. Catgut walked over to him and smiled. "Once everyone has their armor assigned to them, take them to the entrance that opens out into the Upper World near Sheercliff Pass. It's a long distance, so don't have them put on the body pieces until you get set to massacre the Alliance at their new camp. Be careful, though, as that entrance is small and the stairs leading up to it are steep."

"As I recall," Leatherskin said, "that passage wasn't meant for major usage. There's only enough room to allow one troll at a time through the opening."

Catgut looked thoughtful as she digested this information. "Slacker," she said while watching the warriors pick out body shield parts, "Since we have that to slow us down a bit, go ahead and send the warriors out there as soon as they have their armor. The Alliance is already on their way to the Upper World, and so must we."

"Good idea, my Queen," the captain of the guard replied. He walked over to the trolls digging through the armor and gave them the word. Before they had collected what they would need here, other warriors arrived.

Catgut nodded toward her two captains and left the room. More warriors were arriving and she could feel the anticipation for action. The Queen laughed and ran a hand through her long hair. "I love it when a plan comes

together!” she said to herself.

“Dowse that light, Redrock,” Slacker whispered to the soldier behind him. “Tell everyone else down the line to do the same. Once I open this door to the outside, everybody *must* be quiet — the enemy may be anywhere near.” The captain of the guard waited until his orders had been fulfilled and then turned the large metal handle mounted into the stone wall of the narrow tunnel. An audible click was heard and then a sliver of moonlight leaked into the crack which opened before them.

Silently, he pushed on the section of wall until the door swung out fully. He peered out onto the grass plains, but saw nothing of interest. From his vantage point, all Slacker could see was an expanse of an endless field of grass. Tentatively, he poked his head out into the moonlight and looked around. The door he was in was set into the face of a tiny rocky hill. Behind that was the valley.

“All clear,” Slacker whispered, and stepped out into the open. The others followed singly and silently as he got his bearings and began walking across the wet, soggy grasses. Behind him, someone fell to the ground with a loud crash. A troll had slipped on a spot of slick grass and fell on top of the sack of armor he’d had slung over his shoulder.

“Quiet!” Slacker hissed. The warrior regained his footing and silently resumed his place in the line. Slacker looked up at the sky. He hadn’t been *outside* for many years and was unfamiliar with it. From the smell of moisture in the air, the wet grasses, and the overhead clouds, he figured that it must have rained recently. It didn’t mean anything to him, though. He had a war to wage and matters such as the weather didn’t concern him.

The captain motioned to Redrock and whispered, “Are you sure you know where the Alliance will be camped?”

Redrock snorted. “Yeah — I’ve been up here enough times to know. It’s a grove of trees and a spring, west of here. It’s a bit of a long walk, but we can make it easily.”

“Okay, then,” Slacker said, once again looking up at the sky, “You lead the way.” Without a word, Redrock hefted his armor sack up on his shoulders and trudged off through the grasses. The clouds above were breaking up and moonlight slowly filtered down to the plains. The sun would be waking up soon, and the warriors wanted to be in position before then.

It took a long time before Catgut’s warriors were all finally out of the tunnel. As the last one cleared the doorway, he could see the long line of trolls stretching out to his event horizon. His pack was getting heavy, but he still had a long way to walk.

As he grunted to himself and followed his companions, he didn’t notice a shadow move across the top of the tiny rocky hill behind him. The shadow had pointed ears.

Smoke dashed around the hill to where two others waited. Sapphire and Twill stood quietly, though ready to run. “Okay,” he told the rockshapers, “they’ve all gone, and the tunnel is standing wide open.” Twill nodded to Sapphire and they moved to accomplish their task. Smoke helped them shut the door so they could seal it, cutting off access to the tunnel.

Slacker looked around his camp and watched the warriors getting into their armor. In the past year, Catgut had instructed them as to how the metal clothing went on. The trolls were quiet and efficient.

It had taken them quite a while to reach their present place which was just out of sight range of the oasis that was their target. The long journey through the tunnels, and then their hike out across the plains had exhausted a number of them. Slacker would grant them the time to rest, mainly because he was fairly worn out himself. In his own mind, the guard captain wondered if Catgut was aware of the physical toll this venture was taking on her army. He hoped the armor would be well worth its weight, since it hadn’t been light on their backs, either. He waited patiently for their spy to arrive and was glad for the opportunity to rest.

Redrock nudged Slacker back to consciousness, who’d dozed off. “Our spy has arrived,” he said. The captain struggled to clear his mind as a short troll in an orange shirt and ratty brown pants stepped up to him. Slacker recognized him as being the little grunt the Queen had assigned to spy on the Alliance. He’d only seen him that one time, but for scene reason he couldn’t place a finger on, he now seemed a little different. Maybe it was

because he wore a wide brimmed hat now.

“Brownbat?” he asked.

“Yes,” the spy answered, “Catgut wanted me to let you know when the Resistance had gotten all set up in their camp. They’re sitting pretty now, just waiting for you to pick ‘em off.”

Slacker squinted at him in the moonlight “Do they know we’re here?” he asked.

“No. They have no idea you’re anywhere around. They think they’re safe from the Queen’s army, being out of the valley.”

The captain looked out over the plains and then turned back to the spy. “Okay,” he said after a few moments of thinking, “Get back to their camp before they discover you missing and start to suspect something. Once the fighting starts, use the surprise and kill as many as you can.”

“Right away,” the spy answered and then turned to go.

“One more thing,” Slacker said. The spy paused and waited for the captain to continue. “What have you done about Spitecurl?”

The spy chuckled. “I pushed her off the pass as we climbed up out of the valley... made it look like an accident. Several were rather upset about it, but... it was an accident.”

“Good. The Queen will be pleased,” Slacker said as he stretched and yawned. “Now off with you. I’ll give you enough time to get back to the rebels before I have the troops start to encircle them. It’ll be a long process, but no one will escape alive,” he said.

Without another sound, the spy hurried out across the plains, back to the Alliance. When he was well away from the troll army, he removed his hat and wiped the sweat off his brow. Dripstone chuckled to himself and cracked his knuckles with satisfaction. The captain had been deceived into thinking he was Brownbat.

A troll warrior crouched behind the fronds of a large fern, careful to keep himself hidden from the human sentry, who also hid behind some bushes. The troll surveyed the area near the holt quickly and moved on to another spot. As before, he spotted another, but this one was an elf. He moved on. In his reconnaissance around the holt, he’d seen four people keeping watch. The troll scout stealthily crept away. Everything seemed quiet. Everything seemed ripe.

Greeneyes shuddered and cuddled closer under LongKnife’s arms. Her sending abilities were keener than most, and she often felt the emotional level of those around her — the powers of empathy could be a curse at times. At the moment, she felt the oppressiveness of those around her as they waited in anticipation of battle.

Those who had stayed behind in the holt were ready. At present, the tiny healer was set up and ready in the Father Tree. Dawnwatch attended Wildwood on the opposite side of the chamber. The mother was near giving birth. The father of the coming child, Mooncrest, waited outside the tree with Grassy, Wildwood’s lovemate.

Goldenbraid had gone with the group to the Upper World, as had Trilight to help her. Greeneyes smiled briefly when two pair of colored wings fluttered into the tree. Both preservers had sensed the tiny healer’s ill ease and had come to comfort her.

LongKnife looked cross-eyed at Shimmer, who landed on his Lifemate’s head in front of him. “Shimmer, Pebble,” he said softly, “Take care of Greeneyes. I need to be outside with the others.”

“We take care of Greensoft Highthing,” Pebble sing-songed. Shimmer agreed readily. LongKnife nodded and hugged his mate once before leaving the tree. Greeneyes felt herself dreading his departure.

Be careful, Onen, she sent.

I will, Syla, he answered, giving her face a quick caress.

When he exited the great Father Tree, Rofea walked up to him, holding his spear ready. [“Well, my friend,”] the human said, [“we should hear from our enemies soon.”]

LongKnife was about to speak, when Trace’s sending touched his mind. ***Ten trolls are approaching from the south,*** the scout sent.

And fifteen more from the north, added Morningdew. ***Get ready.***

Nightstep emerged from his hometree, as did others around the holt. LongKnife looked up at Rofea. [“They’re coming,”] he said.

The human looked confused. He didn’t know how the elf knew that, but he figured his friend’s pointed

ears were keen enough to hear the enemy drawing near. He held his spear ready and followed him to one of the three entrances to the holt.

The elves had already received their scouts' sendings, and were quickly spreading the word to the humans with them. There were none of the Resistance trolls in the holt, as they'd all gone with the Upper World group. The battle they'd anticipated was about to begin.

Ferret knelt next to the Minnowbrook to moisten her throat. It had gone dry when she'd gotten the news. Hatfeather stood beside her, watching the thorn barrier. When Ferret had finished drinking, she changed positions with Hatfeather to allow her sister to quench her own thirst.

As they stood ready, Quicksilver floated off the ground, carrying a jar of water in his arms. Seconds later they heard a shout of pain from outside the barrier. The glider disappeared over the wall of thorns as Morningdew's sending announced the arrival of the enemy.

One troll had slipped past her and had thrust a torch into the barrier's base. She had discovered him and put a knife through his middle, but not before the thistles caught fire.

Only seconds earlier, Quicksilver's keen sense of smell detected the smoke and had acted quickly. He emptied the jar's contents on the flames and extinguished them. He stepped over the lifeless troll body toward Morningdew, but before he could say a word, several more invaders jumped out at them from the bushes.

Get back! Quicksilver sent to his companion. His memory of the attack on Duskdew was still fresh on his mind as he rushed the invaders. Morningdew was at his side instantly, ignoring his command. She darted in and around one troll's jabbing spear and finally struck her own blade into his throat. The warrior collapsed, gurgling blood drowning his screams.

Fire in the holt! Trace's open sending shouted, ***Three places! ***

Quicksilver hopped into the air and planted his feet hard in an attacker's chest. The troll fell backward into another and the elf sprawled on top of them. Both trolls scrambled to grab the glider, but Morningdew jumped into the foray, her crimson blade slashing out again.

Inside the holt, more fighting occurred as Catgut's fighting force entered through the spots burned through the barrier. LongKnife, Grassy and Rofea fought as a trio against three attackers. Several more invaders were engaged with Shrike, and she was quickly dealing out death with her slender blade. Starlight was nearby, beating in a troll's head with a mace she'd stolen moments earlier from another victim.

Hatfeather pulled her bloody sword from a troll's eye and glanced around quickly. Ferret had taken off running toward the Father Tree, where Nightstep was attempting to hold off two trolls from entering the great tree. With a howl, Hatfeather followed her sister, her bloodlust growing wildly.

Inside the Father Tree, Greeneyes knelt over Fable, his leg slashed open from the knee to the ankle. Fable howled in agony until the healer was able to stop the pain. Two Star had brought him inside, and once he saw that the wounded storyteller would be fine, he dashed outside.

He saw Nightstep rip open his opponent's belly and then turn to the next troll, snarling fiercely. Before he could strike, however, Ferret leaped on the troll's back and buried her blade deep in his shoulder. Nightstep finished him with a quick stab through the heart, mindful not to follow through and impale Ferret as well. The troll collapsed as Hatfeather rushed up.

[“Someone help me!”] Two Star looked toward the human female who had screamed. It was Wilsa, one of Deta's adult twin daughters. The woman was in the garden, struggling against a troll who was trying to crush the life out of her. As one, Nightstep and Two Star ran toward them.

From behind a row of tall food plants at the rear of the garden, a human woman screamed and ran forward. Keena attacked her sister's assailant with a tree branch and attempted to bash in the warrior's head. Annoyed, the troll twisted Wilsa's head until it cracked loudly and then turned toward the tall human with a wicked grin.

For a moment, Keena was stunned. Without a doubt, her sibling was dead. Unfortunately, she paused for a split-second, and it was long enough for the troll to strike. He hit her full in the face with a closed fist, and knocked her back into the food plants. With bloodthirsty glee, the warrior kicked her in the ribs and raised his foot to strike her head, too. The elfin chief and his elder tackled the tunnel-digger. The troll was too well balanced, however, and rolled with the blow. He grabbed Two Star by the hair and hit him with his free hand. The elder collapsed.

Nightstep picked up the branch Keena had dropped and struck the warrior with the end straight on in the face. The troll bellowed in pain as a sharp splinter was driven into his eye, and Nightstep used the opportunity to draw his sword and silence his foe with multiple stabs. He then knelt down next to his best friend. Two Star's mouth and nose were bleeding. The elder groaned and bordered on unconsciousness.

At the same time, Grassy was holding his own against a troll who meant to chop him into bits. The elf already bled from numerous cuts on his left arm and shoulder. He'd been fortunate, as none of the wounds were very serious. With his good hand, he held off the attacks, but wasn't able to do much more than defend himself. ***LongKnife,*** he sent frantically, ***Help me!***

The white-haired swordsman couldn't aid him, however, as he was fighting a fierce battle himself with a troll who really knew how to use a sword. ***I don't think I can, Grassy,*** he sent apologetically. ***I've got my hands full!*** He dodged a slice toward his head and ducked into a roll to get away. The troll had expected it, though, and was after him immediately.

From the trees overhead, Sandstorm and Silverhair had spent almost all of their arrows in shooting down invading trolls. It had been hard to fire into the bodies below without the risk of hitting an ally. Silverhair was down to his last feathered shaft and was about to release it into a troll facing off with an older human. The elf bit his bottom lip when he saw that it was Hazar and he adjusted his aim only slightly. The arrow flew as aimed and struck deep into the man's neck. The troll swung his war club at the human's bulging eyes and finished the kill, not even realizing an elfin arrow had beat him to his prey.

Silverhair nodded to himself, but felt no elation. He'd finally had his revenge on the one who'd slain Dewdrop, but nothing had changed for him. Nothing at all. He stared at the man's body for a long moment as the troll moved away for another fight. He shook his head slowly and then looked for Sandstorm in the next tree over. He saw her release her last arrow and the troll dropped where he'd stood. She slumped back against the tree herself. With her wounds only freshly healed, her strength was still low. Silverhair made his way into her tree to get her to a safer location higher in the trees.

A loud yell rended the air as Mooncrest jumped howling from an overhead tree branch onto Grassy's attacker. The troll looked up, distracted, just in time to see the point of the elf's blade at near pointblank range. A spontaneous reflex saved him as he twisted his body out of the way. The sword ripped open his shirt and cut a shallow line down his side, but was otherwise unscathed. Mooncrest landed in the wet grass at his side and brought the sword back up with a growl. The razor-sharp blade passed up under the troll's arm and sliced muscles and tendons from the bone. The troll ran off screaming before the elf could deliver another blow.

The prankster dashed after him to finish the job and left Grassy holding his wounded arm. He turned around and saw Rofea standing tall, holding a troll over his head. With a battle cry, the human threw his foe at a nearby tree, where the warrior bounced, fell to the ground and didn't move afterward.

Rofea saw that Grassy was all right and rushed to help LongKnife. The elf thrust his sword straight in toward his enemy, but another attacking troll ran up from behind and kicked his legs out from under him. Grassy gripped his sword grimly and joined the fight again. Rofea grabbed the troll LongKnife had been fighting with and tried to break his neck. However, the new arrival picked up a fallen sword and swung it toward the human. Rofea yelled in pain as he unsuccessfully tried to twist out of the way.

The troll's blade entered his right leg near the hip and slashed down to his knee, cutting deeply. Grassy angrily threw his knife at the troll's throat, but it missed. The tunnel-digger knocked him backward with a massive backhand swing for his effort.

Grassy rolled across LongKnife, who'd been trying to get up, and they both collapsed to the ground. Rofea continued to holler in pain. Though fighting was going on around the holt, Foxvine was drawn to the commotion of the human's cries. He was perhaps thirty strides away, but he pulled the daggers from his arm sheaths and hurled them simultaneously, one from each hand.

Both trolls received one of the dreamberry keeper's blades in the base of their skulls and dropped to the ground without a sound. Foxvine ran to the human and tried to lift him up. Grassy grabbed the man's other arm and helped. They had to get Rofea to Greeneyes — he was losing a lot of blood.

LongKnife snatched up his sword and sent, ***Greeneyes, we're bringing in one of the humans. He's been severely wounded!*** The tiny healer acknowledged that she was ready. She'd been observing from the window and had been on edge watching the fighting. The elves somehow managed to get the heavy human into the Father

Tree and on to the furs.

From her hiding in an upper chamber, Wildwood watched horrified as the healer immediately sunk into a deep trance. Dawnwatch drew her back inside and closed the curtain. The midwife longed to be out killing more trolls, but she had a greater duty now to Wildwood.

Nightstep emerged from a random hometree he'd picked to hide the unconscious Two Star. He spun to his right at movement on the edge of his vision and saw a troll raise his crossbow to shoot him. Nightstep dove to his left as a bolt hit the tree at the spot he'd just vacated.

Two humans rushed the troll from behind and caught him by surprise. One man hit the short troll in the face with both fists clasped together and the intruder reeled backward. Before he could recover, both of the human warriors each grabbed one of his arms and legs and picked him up. The troll's vision cleared as the men began running with him and he started to holler as they ran directly toward the holt's granite Council Rock.

Nightstep got to his feet as they smashed the troll's head all over the stone. They dumped the lifeless body and ran to find another troll to kill. The elfin chief looked around at the battles taking place about the holt. Troll and human bodies were lying lifeless randomly in the lush grasses of his home. Starlight and a hobbling Fable fought back enemies from entering the openings in the still-burning thorn barrier. So far, the fire hadn't yet spread to the hometrees. Nightstep looked around and saw Mooncrest beheading another foe. Even from this distance, he could see the battle-madness in the prankster's eyes. Not far from him, Ferret and Hatfeather were battling back-to-back with three trolls who were determined to avenge their two comrades who lay at the elfin sisters' feet.

Mooncrest turned and saw them. He let out a loud, angry yell and rushed to aid them. LongKnife bounded from the Father Tree and sprinted as fast as his aching legs could take him. As he ran, he leapt over a troll's body not quite dead. The injured warrior grabbed LongKnife's ankle and tried to upset him. In a quick reflex, the elf swung his sword and quickly jabbed the sharp blade through the assailant's chest. Panting, he looked to where he'd been headed.

Ferret was gaining on her opponent, but the troll saw a small opening in her defense and took advantage of it. The razor-sharp tip of his broadsword cut through her stomach and was immediately washed in red. Ferret gasped and doubled over. The troll raised his weapon again and his arm muscles bunched in preparation for the final stroke. She tried to step back away from her attacker, but the pain was too intense. She looked up into the troll's eyes as genuine terror took hold of her. The large warrior didn't hesitate as he grinned and shoved his weapon into her chest, ending her life quickly .

A hoarse bellow of rage behind him drew his quick attention, and he turned as Mooncrest bore down on him. The troll had been well trained, but the elf had arrived too suddenly. Mooncrest plunged his sword into the tunnel-digger's shoulder and twisted, causing his prey phenomenal pain. He found, however, that the blade was now stuck in bone and couldn't get it free, so he wrenched the troll's own weapon from his weak hands and shoved it's point up through his jaw. The troll dropped like a rag doll.

Hatfeather had witnessed her sister's murder and went berserk. She jumped at another troll and screamed wildly as she dug her sharp fingernails deeply into his eyes. She had her legs wrapped around the troll's middle and continued to gouge deep furrows into her victim's face. The warrior frantically tried to get her off, but it was no



use, she was attached solidly.

The third attacker had just delivered a severe kick to Mooncrest's side and was about to jump on the fallen elf when he noticed what was happening to his comrade. He turned while the prankster was down and threw his sword at Hatfeather. LongKnife arrived just as the blade entered her lower back and continued through until it also impaled the troll she clung to.

"No!" LongKnife yelled. He held his bloodstained sword out to the side and rushed the murdering tunnel-digger. In his fury, however, he failed to notice that a warrior had broken through another hole in the thorn barrier and was aiming a crossbow at him. The troll he bounded for hesitated a moment as Mooncrest stood up and faced him wearily from the other side.

LongKnife screamed out suddenly. His eyes flew wide and he fell to the ground, his forward momentum rolling him over twice. He came to rest against the troll's feet. ***Syla...!*** He gasped, and faintly saw the crossbolt protruding from his chest through clouded eyes.

Onen! Greeneyes screamed, abruptly torn from the deepest part of her healing trance. For the briefest of instants, their Recognized souls were joined, then the tiny healer felt him die.

Mooncrest leaped around to put the troll he faced between him and the one with the crossbow. He snarled and bared his teeth venomously. He yelled at the top of his lungs and leapt on the troll, swinging at the warrior's blade, knocking it from his massive hands, severing them from their arms. Mooncrest didn't stop there, as he continued hacking until the his foe's screams were abruptly silenced. He chopped until only a mass of bloody flesh rested at his feet. He panted heavily and turned to face off with the crossbow archer, who was reloading for another shot.

The troll didn't get his second chance. Nightstep appeared behind him and drove his sword into the warrior's ear. He collapsed like a sack of stones. The chief's battle-torn clothes were almost totally red from blood. He removed his blade and wiped it on his shirt.

"That's... the last... of the invaders." Nightstep said between breaths. Mooncrest stared at the troll his chief had just killed and walked toward the body, his sword raised and his eyes crazed. He would have hacked away at it also, had Nightstep not grabbed his arm. ***That's enough! He's already dead!*** The prankster's teeth were clenched as he tried to push past Nightstep. He wanted more blood! Nightstep slapped him hard once and sent to him again. After a moment, the madness in Mooncrest's eyes softened as his chief lock-sent with him, forcing his will on the prankster.

Mooncrest lowered his wide sword and closed his eyes tightly. A moment later, he looked around at the death spread all over their home with moisture trickling down his cheeks. He walked over and knelt down next to LongKnife, whose eyes were staring lifelessly. He brushed his hand over his friend's face and closed the eyelids. He looked at LongKnife for a moment and then at Ferret and Hatfeather, choking back a sob. He stood up and asked Nightstep, "Why?" he asked weakly. "Why is all this happening?"

The chief knelt next to Hatfeather and removed the instrument of her death. He set the sword aside and laid her on her back. He did the same with Ferret and LongKnife. "Why?" he repeated. He didn't have an answer.

He stood up and began walking toward the Father Tree, where Deta knelt in the doorway, resting his weary body against the side of the opening. His face was ashen — more so than usual. ["The tiny green-eyed one..."] he said fearfully, ["has fallen, dead but alive."]

"No," Nightstep said under his breath as he rushed up the steps. ["Was it the enemy?"] he asked. The human chief shook his head. Nightstep pushed past him into the room. Rofea sat on the side of the bloody sleep furs, gently laying the small healer on her back. The two Preservers were on the man's shoulders.

Rofea looked up at Nightstep, tears in his large brown eyes. ["She just threw her head back and collapsed,"] he said. The elf knelt next to her and brushed a few strands of hair from her face. Most of those he'd left outside were now gathering into the room.

Greeneyes?** he sent tentatively. Somehow, he didn't expect a response. ***Greeneyes! Answer! She was alive, but her mind was locked away from him. He looked at the Preservers. "Pebble, what happened to Greeneyes?"

The tiny winged creature fluttered over to his outstretched hand and landed on it. "Greensoft highting fall when mate fall," it said remorsefully.

Nightstep looked up at Dawnwatch, who'd emerged from her and Wildwood's hiding place. "She must

have been sending to him when he died,” he said in a near whisper. “She may have felt his pain...”

Rofea couldn't understand the soft musical language of the elves, and was getting impatient. [“What's wrong with her?”] he asked. [“If it weren't for her warm magic, I would have lost my leg. What can I do for her?”]

Nightstep was momentarily silent. It amazed him that a human could feel gratitude and friendship to an elf. This alliance was still odd to him. It took him a few heartbeats to come up with the words in the man's language to answer him.

[“With my people,”] he explained, [“life-mates share a special kind of magic which binds them together. When Greeneyes' mate died, she felt it as if it had been herself.”]

Rofea looked suddenly at the still healer. The only move she made was the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed. [“But — her mate was my friend, LongKnife,”] he said with deep emotion in his voice.

Nightstep nodded. [“That's right,”] he replied.

[“Then, that means...”]

[“LongKnife is dead. He was trying to save someone else's life.”]

Rofea was a proud hunter of the Ke L'Rhatan and had proven himself to his tribe many times. Deta had only seen the large man cry one time in his life — when he'd found his mate and child dead on Rock Span several years earlier. Rofea didn't make another sound, but he let the tears fall freely as he reached over and took Greeneyes' hand in his own.

[“Can anything be done for her?”] he asked hoarsely.

Nightstep shook his head slowly. [Not now. Perhaps, when our people return from the Upper World, there may be one who might be able to help her.”]

[“The one with the long, golden hair?”] Deta asked.

[“Yes,”] Nightstep admitted. Seeing the old human, he remembered something. [“Chief,”] he said slowly, unwilling to give him the news, [“I'm afraid that your daughter, Wilsa was~”] Before he could finish, the aged man was crying.

After a few moments, Deta lifted his head. His eyes were glistening in the pale candle light. [“Wilsa... And what of Keena?”]

[“Here, father,”] his daughter answered from the doorway. She leaned against Two Star, who had helped her across the holt. She coughed and doubled over in pain. The troll who had kicked her had broken something inside. Grassy stepped up to her and helped her over to the crowded furs. In the absence of a healer, Grassy's mending skills would have to do. First-aid would keep the wounded holding on until either Goldenbraid returned from the Upper World, or Greeneyes woke up. Deta and Keena embraced and cried in one another's arms.

Nightstep looked over to Rofea. [“Will you stay here and watch over Greeneyes?”] he asked.

[“I will,”] the man answered, [“because she's my friend, and because I can't walk.”]

[“What do you mean?”] Grassy asked as he rummaged through the salves Greeneyes had sitting near the bloody furs.

Rofea looked down at his wound, and then glanced up at the mender, shrugging his shoulders. [“I don't have enough strength to stand, and I've lost enough blood to make me weak, despite her magic healing.”]

[“Well,”] Grassy said, kneeling next to Keena, [“I'll be here if you need anything.”] Nightstep nodded his approval and looked around those near him. He hoped there would be no more attacks soon.

***Trace? Morningdew?** Nightstep sent to the scouts.

***Yes?** answered both, almost in unison.

Any sign of more trolls? We've taken care of these who paid us a visit.*

Haven't seen any others,* Trace replied.

Nor have I,* sent Morningdew.

Keep your eyes and ears open, you two,* Nightstep told them. ***I'll send someone out to relieve you in a little while.**** He looked over at Grassy, who was wrapping cloth bandages around Keena's middle. The human female was blushing, since she'd had to remove her top garment for the mender to work. Nightstep was momentarily puzzled until he recalled that the five-fingers were rather modest of their bodies.

“Anyone not requiring Grassy's attention leave the room so he can have space to work,” he said. Most everyone exited the tree. There was work to be done in the holt.

Nightstep was the last to step out into the morning air. He saw Mooncrest setting Jag down against the

great roots of the Father Tree. LongKnife, Ferret and Hatfeather had already been placed there. The prankster wept openly, for Redlace's brother was as harmless as a child. He had found the lovable elf strangled with a short length of rope and the sight had almost been the end of him. Foxvine and Starlight had the body of Wilsa between them, bringing her to rest beside the other fallen humans and the dead Timber Folk.

Nightway and Stormer were dowsing the last of the flames that had burned several places through the thorn barrier. Had it not rained recently, the fires might have spread more rapidly. Idly, Nightstep wondered why he hadn't seen them during the battle, but then realized that neither were fighters and had probably hidden away somewhere. He knew Silverleaf and her newborn daughter, Teal, were in an upper chamber of her hometree with the recovering Rogue. Through quick sending, he touched the minds of the other non-fighters in hiding and made a mental list of the tribe's survivors.

The elfin chief walked over to the Minnowbrook and knelt beside it. His reflection in the little running stream appeared tired and weary as he cupped his hands to drink. High Ones, he hoped it would be over soon. He closed his eyes for a moment as he removed his torn, bloody shirt and discarded it. He splashed his face with more water and then looked out across the holt.

With all the commotion around them he probably should have missed it, but the sight of an arrow sticking out of a human corpse nearby caught his attention. Trolls didn't use arrows other than the short stubby darts they fired from their crossbows. Nightstep walked over to the body and knelt beside it. He broke off the aft end of the deeply embedded shaft and then examined the feathers. He recognized the fletching immediately and growled angrily to himself.

"Silverhair..."

Inside the Father Tree, Two Star sat next to Greeneyes. He'd moved her away from the central pit of sleeping furs to allow the wounded room to rest. He now had her in a small side chamber, laying comfortably on a clean fur. Her breathing was regular and her heartbeat strong. Physically, there was nothing wrong with her. The elder brushed her brow with a damp cloth.

Both Preservers were unusually quiet. Two Star knew the tiny healer had some kind of control over the small creatures and had never understood it, but knew that whatever she felt had silenced them. Pebble sat in her hair and quietly patted the soft strands. Shimmer sat on Greeneyes' stomach, bobbing up and down slowly with her breathing. Two Star thought it was a bit odd that neither Preserver offered to put her in a cocoon, as they'd proposed to do with Duskdew.

***Greeneyes... *** he sent. He didn't know how to generate a response, but felt he should try. ***Greeneyes, *** he sent again, ***please come back to us. *** He really didn't know what to tell her. His feelings were in a whirl as he tried to sort them out. He wasn't aware of it, but those emotions were being sent along with his words.

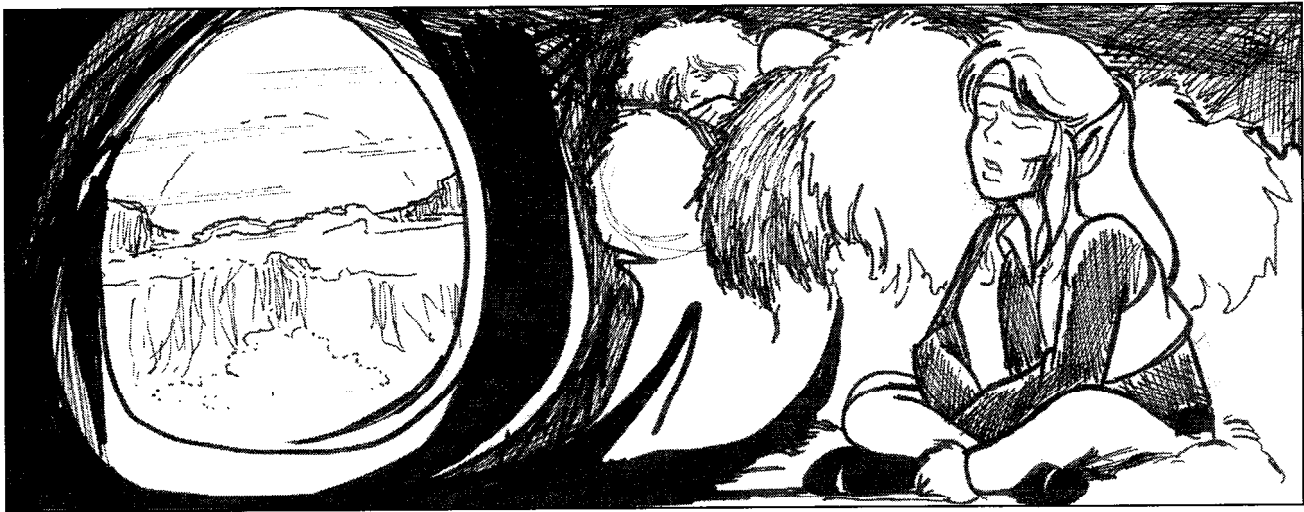
***LongKnife is with the High Ones now. He and the others are where they belong. Please come back to us — this is where you belong, and you are loved very much. *** Two Star rested his forehead on her thigh and exhaled deeply. Shimmer flew over to him and landed on his shoulder, patting his ear as if to soothe him. The elder smiled inwardly at the gesture. However, he continued to send to Greeneyes.

Now he knew what Quicksilver had gone through when Duskdew had been near death. The little flirt had believed that she had already died and fled her body. But, Greeneyes wasn't wounded. She knew she still lived. Perhaps she was willing herself to die, in order to join her Recognized lifemate.

Two Star found that the words couldn't come, even in sending. He was at a loss, so he merely sent his feelings. He knew that she picked up on emotion with a sensitivity that amazed everyone around her. He sent love to her — his fear for her and the others — his sorrow for his dead tribesfolk — his loneliness for Goldenbraided's presence, and much more. He didn't know how long he stayed there, but eventually he fell asleep.

Two Star awoke at the touch of a hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see Dawnwatch standing next to him. She held a hot bowl of broth for him. He smiled and thanked her as he took it. He sat on the floor beside Greeneyes' bed and drank hungrily. As the midwife left the small room, he noticed that a bit of morning light was filtering down to the holt. If all went according to the plan, a battle in the Upper World was about to begin, if it hadn't already.

Silently, he wished his lifemate well, for her job as a healer would be tough, even if she did have Trilight with her. Mooncrest's brother had had an intense longing to be a healer for quite a while, but since the talent never



emerged, he had taken to studying the skills of a mender. Trilight had been diligent in his studies and could be relied upon for medical assistance if neither of the healers were available. He had an excellent bedside manner and a caring spirit for those he helped. With the expected battle, she would need him.

Two Star started suddenly when he felt something in his hair. Both of the Preservers were in sight, so it wasn't them. He reached up slowly and wrapped his fingers around a small hand. The hand grasped his in response.

The elder was up and beside the bed instantly. The tiny healer's large green eyes were half open as if she'd just awakened from a long sleep. She saw and recognized him, but didn't smile. Instead, she cried. Two Star knelt down and held her close to his breast. A moment later, he heard something that had never before been heard in the valley. A voice.

Greeneyes did not send. She spoke. A single word.

The healer's home tribe had discarded vocal communication long ago in favor of the purity of sending. In all her life, Greeneyes had never spoken a word. Until now.

"Beloved..." she said. Two Star felt her grip tighten around him, and as she drew in a deep breath, instinct told him to expect something.

Suddenly, Greeneyes began screaming — keening for the death of LongKnife, and the Preservers joined her mourning with their own loud shrieks. Two Star tried to place his hand over the healer's mouth and calm her, but she seemed to go berserk. He struggled to keep her in the bed.

Then, just as quickly, she ended her screams and cried strongly onto the elder's shoulder. Two Star held her and stroked her hair softly, slowly rocking her as if she were a frightened cub. Within a moment, the doorway to the small room was crowded as folks gathered to investigate the wails of a voice they'd never heard before.

As Nightstep pushed his way through the small crowd, Greeneyes' crying softened to faint sobs. Her body trembled violently from time to time as the emotional pain continued to vent. Nightstep took her in his arms, letting Two Star rest. After a while, she would be all right, but at the moment she needed comfort.

The flickering torch light in the throne room reflected ominously in the Queen's eyes as she listened to the debate. She'd just given an order to a small task force, one that they didn't like. She waited patiently for them to finish.

"It's too dangerous," Hardrock complained. "The results of what you want done could adversely affect the kingdom, as well as the valley. Your mother tried something just as risky long ago, and it nearly caused the complete destruction of the caverns!"

The Queen looked amused. "My mother?" she asked.

Hardrock swallowed uneasily. She always seemed the most dangerous when she smiled. "Cattail was responsible for the collapse of the upper levels of the kingdom — that's why the valley even exists." Catgut sat upright on her throne and gazed casually at the large stalagmites beside her. "My mother isn't here," she laughed, "I am."

“Just the same,” Hardrock continued, “what you want us to do could destroy us all.”

“I don’t think so,” Catgut countered. “And, around here, what I think is all that matters. Now, I can string you up by your lower lip or some other handy extremity and get someone else who will follow orders, or you can do as you’re told. It’s that simple. The choice is yours.”

Hardrock looked at the seven other trolls who stood silently with him. The decision was theirs, as well. He didn’t like it, but in reality, there was no choice. “We’ll get what equipment we need and leave immediately for the south end of the valley,” he said at last.

“Very good,” said the Queen. She felt immensely pleased with herself. She loved this position — holding others’ lives in her hands. With these insignificant grunts gone on their mission, she knew she couldn’t lose this war. The thought made her laugh, and her voice echoed through the chamber.

The morning sun was just beginning to peek over the eastern horizon when Catgut’s army moved into their final positions. Armored clothing of brightmetal glistened in the golden light of dawn as the troll warriors readied themselves for battle. Each soldier was armed with several types of weapons.

There was nothing fancy about the armor. It had been built to cover the flesh from elfin arrows, human spears, and other trollish instruments of war. A thin slot in the helmets allowed the warriors to see their foes, but the rest of the body parts were well protected.

Slacker stood at one end of the long line that stretched around in a half circle of where the Alliance was camped. They would advance on them in a few moments to encircle the oasis and destroy all within. He was waiting for his own passion for violence to build before giving the signal to attack.

He looked up at the sky. All of the night’s rain clouds had vanished and the moisture in the wet grasses was beginning to vaporize into steam as the morning sun warmed the plains. The trolls felt uncomfortable in their garments of armor. It was starting to get humid.

Slacker looked around at the massed host of big, strong, invincible troll warriors and felt confident that Catgut would have her victory, in spite of the Alliance’s effort to thwart her plans. He smiled as he envisioned himself gutting Rockhammer with his serrated blade. That one troll was the instigator of the Resistance and Slacker thirsted for his blood. He could hardly wait.

Now was the time. He waved his sword high over his head in signal. The motion was repeated by every eighth warrior, acknowledging the order. As one, the line of warriors ran through the waist-high grasses toward the oasis of trees, quickly closing in their ring of death.

He moved as fast as his legs could carry him and drew his sword, yelling at the top of his lungs. The circle was closing swiftly and soon there would be no retreat for their prey. *Death to the Alliance!* Other warriors joined voices with his in a rising battle cry.

The response within the oasis was immediate. Shouts of surprise and quickly issued orders could be heard from the copse of trees. Four elves on wolf back and four more riding on grasseaters suddenly appeared out of the shadows at a full run. They were headed straight toward the closing gap in the troll army’s surrounding ring.

The trolls were astonished. It appeared that the eight were abandoning those still camped in the trees. Slacker laughed. It would do them no good. Within seconds, the circle would be complete. The riders were coming directly to their deaths. The trolls yelled, brandished their weapons, and charged the elves furiously.

On the lead grasseater, Hushleaf crouched low on the animal’s back. He clung tightly to its mane, spurring it on for more speed. Right behind him were Torisen and Whirlwind, riding for their lives. Buckeye had gone wide, but was rapidly rejoining the group.

Following those on horseback, Season urged his wolf forward, straight for the barrier of trolls ahead. There was a narrow gap in the line that was near closing. ***Faster!*** he sent to the three wolf riders behind him. Ivory clung to her hat with one hand and had her other buried in the wolf’s fur. Rainforest and Windrace brought up the rear.

Hushleaf prepared for the worst when he neared the trolls. It appeared he would be forced to stop by the warriors, but he slapped the grasseater’s rump and held on tightly. The animal planted its feet firmly in the soil within spitting distance of the tunnel-diggers and released the energy gathered from strength and momentum. The grasseater leaped, and sailed gracefully over the surprised warrior’s heads.

Buckeye tried the same maneuver, but his mount didn’t quite jump as high. The animal’s hind legs struck

a troll, which sent the soldier tumbling. When Torisen's grasseater drove straight at the trolls, the warriors scattered to keep from being run over. A few fired their crossbows, but none of the bolts found their mark. The wolf riders passed through the suddenly wider gap untouched.

Slacker cursed vehemently and threw a stomping fit. By that time, the rest of his army quickly converged on the Alliance's camp. They went into the trees boldly, confident the armor would protect them against anyone waiting to ambush them.

Slacker shouted harshly at the mounted elves who were quickly distancing themselves away from the army. He turned and ran towards the oasis. He would take his revenge by ripping a few heads from their shoulders, and would relish the task. When he neared the trees, Redrock stepped up to him. His second-in-command was angry and confused.

"What's wrong?" Slacker growled. So far, he hadn't heard any cries of pain, and that wasn't good.

"There's no one here!" Redrock exclaimed.

"What?!" bellowed Slacker, "Look for them — they've got to be here! "

Quite by chance, Redrock glanced back out across the hot, muggy plains. His heart skipped a beat at what he saw. "Slacker!!" he croaked, pointing to the direction they'd just come from.

The captain of the guard looked to where his comrade gestured and instantly froze. He couldn't believe his eyes and removed his helmet for a better look. The suit of armor was hot in the steamy sunshine, but it was something else which made him sweat.

Catgut's entire army was gathered at the small oasis of trees, and now *they* were surrounded by the Alliance! Slacker trembled involuntarily. Rising out of the tall grasses were elves, trolls and humans all heavily armed and ready for a major battle. Cries of surprise were coming from the troll invaders.

Slacker looked down at the helmet in his hands and suddenly grinned. He turned back to Redrock and thumped his chest with a ringing of brightmetal. "It doesn't matter," he said confidently, "We've got *armor!*" He could only see his comrade's eyes through the narrow slit, but he could tell he was smiling.

The captain of the guard yelled loudly for his warriors to hear. "We've got armor!" The soldiers immediately cheered as he replaced his helmet. Once it was back in place, he gripped his sword and looked back out toward the waiting enemy. It was time for war.

To Be Continued In
"The Heat of the Battle"

Goldenbraid! Trilight sent in pain. The healer snapped out of the beginnings of her work on him and Dripstone looked up in horror.

"There you are, you miserable worm!" a large armored troll screamed at him. Trilight lay at his feet gripping his freshly broken leg. The warrior ignored him as he stormed toward the healer and her patient. He took off his helmet and discarded it to the side.

"Oh, no..." Dripstone croaked. "It's my father!"