

The Timber Valley War, pt 6
The Heat of the Battle

by Ted Blasingame

(DF 24 H)

The summer sun was shining fully on the grass plains, the rain clouds having finally moved on to other lands to the east. The evaporating moisture from the rain-saturated ground made the air steamy and so humid that breathing was difficult, especially to the army of troll warriors attired in metal armor over their regular clothing. The underground dwellers were not used to the sun or heat; their dark and damp caverns maintained a constant, comfortable temperature throughout the seasons.

The captain of the troll army removed his helmet to get a fresh breath of air, but he got little relief from it. "What are they waiting for?" Slacker growled irritably as he sheathed and unsheathed his wide sword repeatedly. "They've had us surrounded for half the morning. Why don't they attack so we can get this started and over with?"

His second in command gripped his own weapon, a spiked mace, and felt as if its weight had increased. "If we don't start fighting soon," Redrock replied, "we won't be in any condition to do much in this heat."

Slacker looked over at him and scowled darkly. "Maybe that's what they're waiting for," he said. "They know we have a superior fighting force and are armored against their weapons, so they want to weaken us first."

The allied tribes of elves, humans and rebel trolls had completely surrounded Catgut's army in the small grove of trees out on the grass plains of the Upper World. All were armed and some of the elves were mounted on wolves and grasseaters. Even a few of the humans rode atop horses they'd brought with them from the valley. The number of fighters in the alliance matched that of the troll army, but none had made any move to advance on those surrounded.

Redrock swallowed and looked at Slacker. "Did anyone bring water?" he asked.

"Not that I know of," the captain said. "We weren't planning to stay out here long, just long enough to slaughter the enemy and go home."

Redrock turned to his leader and thumped the captain's armor with his metal gauntlet with a sharp ring. "You're the one leading us," he said in a huff. "Why didn't you think about provisions?"

Slacker faced the arrogant subordinate and rung his own metal glove against the other's helmet. "I've never been out here before, you idiot! I didn't know this would happen!"

"Who're you calling an idiot, stinkwind?!" Redrock ranted back. "You're in charge and didn't plan out our attack. You didn't think ahead. Didn't you provide for any surprises by the enemy? What kind of leader are you?!"

"One that was appointed your leader by the Queen!" Slacker kicked his companion's armored knee, which did nothing more than make noise. "I'm in command!"

"Oh yeah? She probably felt sorry for you, ya whiner!" Redrock said with a kick of his own.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Slacker roared at him as he raised his weapon.

Skyflame shielded his eyes from the midmorning sun at the sound of metal hitting metal and stared out across the hazy plain. Season was on wolfback beside him and handed him a water skin. The leader of the elves on this mission took a long swig of the cool liquid and kept his eyes on two trolls in metal clothing who appeared to be arguing.

Everyone get ready, he sent openly to those under his command. ***Rockhammer was right about giving Catgut's army time to cook in their armor and get on one another's*

nerve. **Skyflame** handed the skin back to his best friend and sent again to the others, **Tell the humans and trolls nearest you that the battle will begin soon and to be ready for it.**

Season readied his spear. With the trolls in armor, he didn't know how he was going to get through to their vitals, but he felt he'd have more luck with this weapon than his short bow. He ran the fingers of his left hand through his curly blond hair and then wiped away sweat from his brow. He thought he could feel his brains boiling inside his head from the overhead sun. He had been out on the plains many times, but he was a born forest dweller and sorely missed the cool shade of the trees. Earlier, his arm had brushed up against his belt buckle and had felt just how hot the metal had become in the full sunlight. He wondered briefly how the armored trolls could stand being encased in hot metal clothing.

Skyflame, Windrace sent openly to the chief's son, *several fights have broken out between some of Catgut's trolls.* He was on the far side of the surrounding ring, out of sight from the elfin leader.

Good, Skyflame replied. *We have two arguing together on this side also.*

Skyflame? Twill's sending entered the conversation. *Rockhammer just had me tell Seralle that we've waited long enough. With Catgut's forces probably hot, tired and irritable, they should be disoriented fairly easily.*

Okay, Skyflame replied. *Tell Rockhammer that he'll be the one to give the signal when he thinks~*

He faltered in his sending when Seralle gave out a loud battle cry in his language. At once, the humans responded with their own cries and surged forward from all directions toward the middle of the ring. Not to be left out or behind, Rockhammer yelled out his own command for his trolls to attack.

"Now!" the lead troll yelled. "Kill them all!" The response was instant as the rebels ran toward the armored army with their weapons drawn and kill-lust in their eyes.

Skyflame grimaced and sent out to the elves, *This is it ~ Go!* As those on horse or wolfback bounded in for the battle, the others on foot took their time heading in as a second wave. Skyflame sent back to a small group that had remained behind, *Goldenbraid, Trilight ~ prepare yourselves for wounded.* Then he put his full attention to the task at hand.

Slacker swung his metal glove at Redrock and bellowed, "I'm in command! Me! Catgut put *me* in charge! You have to do what *I* ~" Between the pounding of metal on metal, a new sound reached the troll leader's ears. Shouts and yells were from all directions in the clashes of battle. He looked around him and saw humans, trolls and elves already engaged in fighting with his own army. He cursed Redrock for distracting him when the enemy was already coming for them and quickly picked up his helmet. He screamed out loudly inside the dome as the sun heated metal burned into his large ears. He snatched it back off just as quickly, but as he did Buckeye rode his grasseater over him. The troll tumbled twice under the horse's hooves, but he managed to escape harmful damage thanks to the armor.

Buckeye stopped his mount to slash at Redrock, but his sword only deflected off the metal head piece. The elf sent a simple feeling of horror to the animal under him and the horse spooked and reared up on the troll. Buckeye smiled to himself as the hooves struck down again and again and he saw the domed helmet buckle under those powerful legs. Redrock fell back and rolled a few feet, but he wasn't really hurt. The metal had pinched together at the eyeslit and he now had no way to see his enemy.

Slacker shook his head of stars and then looked up at the silhouette that cast its shadow over him. Buckeye swung the long sword loaned to him and caught the troll in the left side of his neck. The blade stuck in Slacker's spine and the troll collapsed to the ground, his lower body suddenly paralyzed. Buckeye left the sword where it was and took off on his horse to escape another troll bearing down on him. Redrock managed to pry his mangled helmet off his ears and when he could see again, his first sight was of his leader. Slacker was still alive, but wasn't

moving anything except his eyes. The subordinate shook his head with a wry grin and picked up Slacker's helmet to replace his own. Once he was fully armored once again, he turned from his former leader and jumped into the battle going on around them.

Slacker worked his lips, wanting to call Redrock back to him, but he couldn't make himself use the little breath with which to voice it. The wound had cut several blood vessels, but his windpipe was undamaged. He felt no real pain, but knew he was bleeding badly and would soon die. In the few moments he had left, all he could do was watch the fighting and listen to the yells and screams around him. And, he was afraid.

When Seralle reached his first armored troll, the memories of the destruction of his village came freshly to mind. As weapons he had his metal-tipped spear, plus one of the trolls' own spiked maces. He didn't think the spear would get past that shining metal, so he dropped it as he approached the troll and hove the mace with all his might. The troll tried to block the falling metal ball with his broadsword, but the force behind the human's blow knocked it from his hands and the stubby spikes pierced the armored chest just enough to dig into his sternum. The troll fell over backward, but Seralle didn't give him a chance to recover. He raised the mace up again and drove it hard into the same dented spot in the armor. Blood burst from the split metal and the human stood up panting heavily through a wide, wicked smile.

Rockhammer's first opponent was a small runt of a troll, and while he wore the protective armor, he yelled in fright and turned to flee. Hobnob was a jeweler and had no experience in combat. He had actually taken no part in Catgut's rise to power, nor had he any backbone to leave his job to rebel against her. He had been an apathetic little troll who really didn't care who sat on the throne as long as he was left to his craft. Unfortunately for him, he had been forced to take part in the battle and he was terrified at the slaughter going on around him.

Rockhammer knew none of this. All he saw was one of Catgut's armored toads and his only intent was to kill. He grabbed Hobnob's shoulder and spun him around. When their eyes met, the larger troll shoved his short sword into the eyeslit with a satisfying *crunch*. He abandoned the jeweler's body as another armored hulk charged him.

Skyflame and Season worked together to run down a troll. At first the armored figure had bolted toward them, but after a moment of close fighting, he had turned to run for some help. The elfin pair kept an easy pace with the metal-weighted troll and closed on him. The domed helmet didn't afford a wide field of view and it was an easy thing to drop a woven bag over his head. The troll stumbled and fell against a sapling oak and dropped to his knees. Skyflame mustered up his memories of Blackfire's death by Catgut's blade as he and Season wrestled to get the troll's helmet off. Their opponent had lost his crossbow in the fall and could only lash out with his metal arms. One armored fist caught Season in the side and two of the elf's ribs broke.

Season yelled out in pain and fell aside, his arms cradling his injured ribs. Skyflame growled and bared his teeth like his father was apt to do as he put his full weight into his grip on the helmet. When the dome came off, the troll looked up with kill-lust and madness as the elf tumbled backward with his prize. Through the pain, Season looked up at the enemy's roar of rage and recognized the doorkeeper to the caverns.

Skyflame stood up and drew his sword, but Wormhole had already lunged at him. He tackled the chief's son and Skyflame's sword arm was pinned underneath him and the blade knocked into the grass, out of reach.

Wormhole raised a metal fist to pummel the elf's face, but his eyes suddenly rolled back up into his head as his left ear magically sprouted a metal shaft. Skyflame stared dumbly at the troll a few heartbeats until he finally regained enough of his senses to roll the dead doorkeeper off him. He saw Season drop a crossbow as a new wave of pain hit him.

Hold on, Season, he sent as he tried to gently lift up his friend. ***I'll get you to the healers.***

Fishnibbler limped on a broken foot away from his assailant. He was in the midst of the fierce fighting all around him and had just been hit in the kneecap with a small mace. Two crossbolts stuck shallowly out of his gut, but nothing vital had been hit. His foe seemed to falter with fatigue, and although Fishnibbler was in a lot of pain, he managed to hobble quickly to his opponent and pound the pointed end of his rock pick into the troll's back armor. His adversary fell and jerked spasmodically for a moment and then became quiet.

Fishnibbler collapsed beside the dead troll and fought for breath. Before he was able to gather much of a respite, another armored troll fell back on top of him in a headless, bloody heap. A human grinned and raised a huge troll-made broadsword and didn't seem to care if this other troll wore armor or not. Fishnibbler raised his arm and tried to tell the human that he was an ally, but the blade came down between his eyes and the head split open like a ripe melon.

Belcher was tiring, from the heat, humidity and the fighting. He was perhaps one of the best troll warriors of the underground domain and he had already made several kills of all three races of the alliance. Two trolls had gone down under his superior skill, one of which was the runt, Doppo. Three humans had died under his massive battle axe and one elf had put up a terrific fight before the troll got past his blade and crushed the life out of him with powerful punches sheathed in forged metal alloy.

The huge troll stepped over the body of Oakstaff toward a small group of rebel trolls running toward him and mimicking a human's battle cry. Before he began to fight he searched the faces for his son. None of them possessed the face he wanted, so he hefted his axe again against the three attackers. He was fatigued in the heavy armor but was not going to allow himself any kind of defeat until he had the head of his elf-loving son.

Rainforest and Redlace fought side by side, linked through sending as they moved as one against their three opponents. A few steps away Knifeblade was using a stolen mace to bash at his adversary, but was having little luck until a human knocked over the troll with a running tackle. With the armored enemy down, Knifeblade pounded the metal helmet until it was crumpled into a size smaller than the troll's head within. Rainforest cried out when a troll's sword ripped open her left arm and shoulder, but she didn't allow him any closer. The pain seemed to clear her mind and she redoubled her attack against him.

Torisen ran out across the grass plain away from the grove in mortal terror. He had witnessed the brutal slaughter of a human he was aiding and he had managed to kill the troll with an arrow through the dome's eyeslit. He'd never killed a troll before and it upset him so much that he had begun to shake all over. No one was currently after him, but the pony tamer fled across the grass as if he were pursued by the whole troll army. He didn't even know which direction he headed, but he didn't care. He had to get away.

Hushleaf and Whirlwind rode their grasseaters across the plain at two trolls who had broken away from the fighting and were running for the valley. Whirlwind whipped a rope circlet above his head and then tossed it forward. It snared a troll around one foot and the elf heaved the rope back. The troll upset and fell on his face with a noisy clank of metal. Whirlwind held tight on his mount and to the rope and urged the animal into another run. The troll was dragged through the grasses back toward the fighting.

Hushleaf tried to run over the troll he pursued, but despite the armor the warrior managed to stay out from under the deadly hooves. He was hot and tired and stumbled often, but the troll was determined to escape. When he saw the small rocky hill ahead, the troll suddenly gained

speed. It was the passage back into the caverns. Hushleaf and his mount suddenly broke off the pursuit and headed back toward the battle.

The troll kept running, but collapsed from exhaustion as he reached a flat slab of stone. He removed his helmet and gulped air as he tried to stand. He made it to his feet and then pressed his hand to a certain mark on the rock. The stone door should have swung aside easily, but it remained solid. He tried it again and began to whimper as he realized he might be trapped by the elf on the thundering beast. He darted around the hill and saw the valley. If he couldn't go back underground here, he'd have to take his chances down the sheercliff pass and finding one of their hidden entrances there. He didn't want the weight of the armor slowing him down, so he began removing it.

As the last piece came off and was discarded, he heard a sound behind him. The troll spun around and saw Sapphire and Twill approaching him with weapons drawn.

"Your door was left standing open," Twill said with glaring eyes, "so we sealed it shut for you."

"Rockshapers..." the troll gulped.

"Surrender to us," Sapphire commanded him.

"No," Twill countered. "My daughter died in his caverns. I *won't* accept a surrender." He held up his short, wide double-edged sword and pointed it at the troll. "I will take off only a little of him at a time, to be sure."

Twill, Sapphire sent and put a hand on his shoulder. ***Nightstep said we were to spare any who surrendered.***

He hasn't yet surrendered, Twill replied. He rushed toward the frightened troll and slashed with the sword. The razor tip cut cleanly across the troll's throat, but only shallowly. The troll tried to scream, but his vocal cords no longer worked. His hands went to his throat as he began choking from panic.

"Twill, leave him alone!" Sapphire exclaimed.

"He hasn't surrendered," Twill said again in a triumphant voice. "I'll spare him if he can tell me out loud that he surrenders." The rockshaper moved forward again, taking lazy swipes with his blade at the retreating troll.

The warrior tried in vain to voice his surrender, but he only gurgled as the sword swung closer. He stumbled to his feet and tried to run, but Twill harried him at every turn. He was forced backward and the mad elf laughed every time the sword nicked his target.

"Twill, stop!" Sapphire yelled. "This is cruel!" She tried to get in front of him, but he stopped and stared hard and deep into her eyes.

"That's right," the male rockshaper agreed, his teeth bared in fierce anger. "Softwill's death was cruel." He shoved his way past her and in his glare, saw nothing but the troll. "This is *it*, cub-killer. Your time is up." The warrior spun around to run, but stumbled downward. The ground gave away under his feet and the troll toppled off of the sheercliff rim. Sapphire and Twill looked over the edge in time to see the body bounce off of a sharp outcropping and tumbled out over the forest. The troll disappeared through the branches of a dense tree, and even from this distance they heard the cracking of limbs below and then silence.

Twill stepped back away from the edge and calmly wiped the blood from his blade onto the grass at his feet. When Sapphire gave him an angry look, he simply smiled in satisfaction and said, "He never did surrender."

Goldenbraid withdrew her fingers from Ivory's forehead and cried into her hands. The wounds had been too severe for the healer to mend and Ivory had died from the multiple stabbings. Trilight felt no less remorse for Ivory or Goldenbraid's failure, but he kept his calm as he dressed his troll patient's shoulder wound.

"Healer," Trilight said softly, "you couldn't help her. There was just too much damage and blood loss." He took her hands in his and continued when she looked up into his caring eyes.

"But, you *can* help our friend here. I've dressed his wound, but you need to do more for him." The healer nodded to him and wiped away her tears. Trilight moved away to attend to Ivory's body as Goldenbraid looked up at the troll.

"I'm sorry," Dripstone told her. "I've never killed anyone before. If I hadn't hesitated, I might have rescued Ivory before that warrior could do so much to her."

Goldenbraid let the tears fall again as she put her hands on his shoulder. "You tried, Thunderfoot," she reassured him. "You tried courageously and put up a good fight for her. She couldn't fault you for that." The healer did her best to calm her mind to use her talent to, once again, heal this troll's wounds.

"I... I killed the warrior," Dripstone said quietly, "but not soon enough."

Goldenbraid! Trilight sent in pain and shock. The healer snapped out of the beginnings of her work 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 in severe pain. 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!*"

Belcher strode forward and motioned to the younger troll. "Get up and fight me, mump!" he said with a wicked smile. "It's time for papa to punish his disobedient offspring." He was weaving on his feet and the fatigue was strong in his voice, but his eyes were clear in their intent.

Dripstone stood up and tried to ignore the pain in his shoulder. He gripped his short sword in his good hand and swallowed. He motioned Goldenbraid to get behind him and the healer obeyed. "Belcher," he said with a shake of his head, "your army has lost and you're tired. Surrender now and the alliance will spare you."

The large troll laughed sarcastically. "Ha! I'm going to split your head wide open with my battle axe and lick the brains off with pleasure!"

"Don't do this," Dripstone said. He began to concentrate on mustering all his strength into his center being.

"I should have whacked your head long ago, mump, when you first started playing with the little elves. I knew they were trouble from the start, and when the Queen said we were going to totally wipe them out of the valley I volunteered right away." Belcher ignored a string of human words calling out in the distance behind him and hefted up his axe. "Did the elves teach you how to fight?"

Belcher lunged forward and swung his axe with all his might. Normally his victim would have been gutted then and there, but Dripstone sidestepped him quickly and did a tuck and roll away. The warrior paid no attention to the healer and went again after his son.

This time, Belcher feinted a thrust with the axe and then swung the mighty blade from an unexpected angle. Again Dripstone was able to back out of harm's way in a split-second and managed to land the blow of his fist against his father's temple. Belcher stumbled backward but stayed on his feet.

"Heh..." Belcher said mockingly, "you got one in on your pop. Not good enough, though." He swung the axe again and came within a hair's width from taking off Dripstone's head. He laughed and swung again, forcing Dripstone to fall back over the healer's bag of herbs. The younger troll jumped back up quickly as the battle axe split the leather pouch neatly in half.

Trilight looked up at the trolls as Goldenbraid moved to his side and then they both saw something they never thought they'd ever see. Despite his bulk, Dripstone executed a perfect somersault into the air and his whirling boots came down inside Belcher's offensive swinging and cuffed the large troll on the back of his head just under both ears. Dripstone allowed himself a little prideful smile as he spun and landed on his feet, knowing Redlace's patient instruction had finally paid off.

Belcher dropped nose-first to the grass and roared in anger and indignation. He had trouble getting to his feet in the heavy armor and his son took the advantage to kick him in the

face. Belcher grunted as his head rocked back and he lost the grip on his axe as Dripstone hit him again with his doubled fists. The younger troll picked up the heavy blade and raised it with trembling arms and a shoulder that felt as if it were on fire.

"Do you surrender?" he asked between puffs of breath.

"Not on your miserable life," Belcher growled as he got to his knees. "I'm not finished with you yet."

Dripstone set his lips in a tight grimace as he swung his father's heavy battle axe. Slowed by the metal clothing, Belcher couldn't move quickly enough. His head jumped off his shoulders and rolled away as the armored body collapsed at its son's feet.

"Not bad," Rockhammer said approvingly. "Not bad at all."

Dripstone looked up at him and panted heavily in the heat. A small crowd of all three races had gathered, led by Rockhammer and Seralle. He dropped the axe wearily and slowly stood up to face them. The human leader walked over to him and put a hand on the young troll's good shoulder. ["You've done well,"] he said. ["Now you may rest. It is over."]

Goldenbraid looked up from her work on Trilight's leg and glanced around. "Over? It's over?" she asked.

Skyflame moved to the Goldenbraid's side and knelt to face her as Rockhammer continued talking with Dripstone. "We've won, healer," he said. "Only twelve of Catgut's warriors still live, and they've surrendered to us." He wasn't smiling, however. "Are you well?" he asked. "We have a lot of wounded."

"I've treated Trilight's leg," she answered, "but he'll be limping a bit yet until he can strengthen it more. Help him around and he can provide aid to the lesser wounded while I work on those more in need."

Skyflame nodded and stroked his chin unconsciously in thought. "Right away, healer," he said. "Windrace, you and Smoke help Trilight get to those he can help. I'm going to see if I can reach Archer."

Redlace stepped up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I've been in contact with Sapphire," he said. "She's sent Archer news of our battle for him to relay to the holt."

Skyflame stood up. "Good. Do we have a list of our casualties yet?"

"We're still looking over the bodies, Skyflame, but of our own tribe we've lost Knifeblade, Oakstaff, Buckeye, and... Rainforest."

"And Ivory," Trilight added as he got to his feet with Smoke's help. "Has anyone seen Torisen?"

"Not yet."

Away from the elves, Rockhammer talked quietly with Dripstone. The larger troll had cuts and bruises and he had the bloodstains of his enemies all over him, but otherwise seemed okay. "I saw the fight with your papa," he said softly. "You were good, but I'm sorry you had to do that."

Dripstone looked at him and shook his head. "He disowned me, Rockhammer. Belcher wasn't my papa anymore." He struggled for the right words and finally said in a steady voice, "That made it easier to do what I did." He looked at the older troll and added, "You've been more of a father to me over the years than he ever was, long before Catgut showed up."

"Catgut..." Rockhammer repeated as he looked back toward the valley, feeling uncomfortable with the younger troll's praise. "We still have to do something about her."

Redlace pulled Skyflame off to the side. "We have a bit of a problem," he said.

"What is it, more troll warriors?"

"No. I just received word from Sapphire that the humans' chief just died," the red-haired elf answered. "How do we tell Seralle about it unless we reveal that we can send?"

Skyflame shook his head. "We don't tell him," he replied. "He'll have to wait until ~" He stopped talking when the human of their discussion approached them.

["Deta has died,"] Seralle said somberly.

["How do you know this?"] Redlace asked him.

The human's gold eyes were moist, but steady. ["Just a feeling I have. Experience has taught me to believe in such feelings."]

["I'm sorry, Seralle,"] Skyflame told him truthfully. ["He seemed like a good man."]

The human touched the three gold nuggets dangling from a thong about his neck that had somehow escaped damage in the battle. ["This symbolizes leadership in my tribe,"] he told them. ["Deta presented it to me when he fell ill a few days ago. I am chief of the Ke L'Rhatan now."] He looked away at the captive trolls being led across the grass toward the valley. Their armor was gone and all were tied to one another with ropes about their necks, wrists and ankles. He then looked back to his own folk gathering up the human dead. ["Excuse me,"] he said through a tight throat and misting eyes. ["I have to perform a ceremony for my fallen."]

* * *

Queen Catgut rested her chin on her right fist. She sat alone in the throne chamber, bored and irritable. Two days by a troll's reckoning had passed since she sent her troops out to slaughter the alliance, but no word of their victory had yet come back to her.

With all the warriors gone, the other females and mumps in hiding, and her personal guard out patrolling the tunnels, Catgut had no one to talk to. Being alone was no new thing for her. She had wandered the Upper World for years searching for the sunken valley of her memories. There had been no forest inside it the last time she had seen the sheer cliffs, but a jumble of collapsed ground with only the remnants of the grassy plain it had once been a part of.

Catgut's thoughts went back in time, to the underground kingdom long ago when her name had been different. The faces of those she fought against then were lost to memory, but she remembered the events. Her well thought out plans for wresting control over all the domain from King Hardwart had gone well until a miscalculation had practically destroyed them all. Only a handful had survived to turn on her.

The queen smiled to herself. For what purpose she didn't know, she had always had a certain amount of luck following her. Granted she lost that war, but had escaped death with the help of two friends. In time they had discovered another warren of trolls in the mountains to the southeast. They made themselves a part of the new society and after decades of planning and quiet recruiting, she had instigated a division of that kingdom as well. As before, she had made a miscalculation that lost her the takeover, but again she made her escape. History for Catgut repeated itself three more times, each with different kingdoms but all ending in defeat and escape. She took longer each time, to make sure none of the previous mistakes were made again.

Now, she sat upon her own throne a victor, something she had not accomplished in her other attempts. Grubmoss had been easy to overcome. His lust for her had been his undoing and she had taken his place without the same bad luck that had troubled her other campaigns. All that remained to seal her place was to eradicate her domain of any who would oppose her.

The queen paused as a new thought hit her. Perhaps the only miscalculation she had made this time was not figuring in the elves and humans. Neither had been a factor in her other attempts, and as an afterthought realized she would have had better luck if she'd had Grubmoss destroy them for her first. She shook her head. It was no matter to worry about. From her last campaign she had brought with her the secret of armored clothing, a concept foreign to this kingdom. With it to protect her own warriors against the puny elves, primitive humans and ill-conceived troll rebels, they were invincible. How could they lose?

Her thoughts returned to the present and she scowled at the hypnotic flames of a chamber torch. She removed her crown of gold and inset jewels and set it aside. She ran her fingers through her long, deep brown hair and fanned it about her head to let the cool cavern air caress the back of her neck.

"Why haven't I gotten the news?" she grumbled to herself. She put the crown back atop her head and absently fingered the red links of her metal mesh shirt. She looked up at a faint sound and called out, "You there, in the corridor. Come here."

A young adult female troll emerged through the passage curtains and advanced across the large chamber to the throne. She kneeled promptly and responded, "My Queen?"

Catgut studied her with narrowed eyes. She had seen this one before on several occasions. Her short curly hair framed a comely face. She was dressed in a crimson hooded cloak that hid the rest of her. She looked up at Catgut with calm brown eyes.

"What is your name?" the queen asked her.

"Bee-nest." She enunciated it distinctly, as if she wanted the monarch to remember it.

"Why are you not with the other females?" Catgut sat back in her throne and asked coolly. "You should be preparing for the victory celebration."

"Oh, but I *am* ready," BeeNest replied. She stood up and opened her cloak. She wore a tiny loincloth to cover her privates and nothing else, though small erotic symbols had been painted onto her greenish grey skin. Catgut nodded her approval.

"I take it you have mated before?" the queen said with a laugh. BeeNest merely smiled and nodded as she refastened her cloak about her. Catgut looked up suddenly at the sound of running feet. Eight troll warriors burst through the curtains and moved straight to the throne. They spaced themselves around her in a protective manner.

"What is this?" Catgut exclaimed irritably. "Get back to your posts!"

"They're coming!" one of her guards said in a frantic rush.

"Who is?"

"The rebels!" another guard replied. "They killed two of us before we could get away!" He had his large serrated sword out in front of him as he turned his back to the queen. The other guards took up similar stances as BeeNest moved back to a dark corner of the chamber.

Catgut stood up in shock and she suddenly felt cold. Rebels? How? Through her army and with her armor she had won, hadn't she? The answer burst into the throne chamber through all three entrances into the room. Rockhammer came forward boldly with mixed members of the alliance. Nightstep and Skyflame was just behind him on his right with Seralle and Tana on his left. Others poured into the large room.

Catgut's guards gripped their weapons nervously when the invaders stopped just a few paces from them, but did not attack. The queen sat down slowly and gripped the armrest of the throne tightly. Her mouth gaped open widely for a moment and she then shut it to swallow. She had made another miscalculation, it appeared, her luck once again in motion. No one in the room spoke, but all had their eyes upon her, save the eight guards.

Rockhammer smiled and raised his chin. "Your reign as queen of the Underground is at an end," he said in a voice quiet, but that carried easily throughout the chamber. "Surrender the crown and we will make your death as painless as possible, Catgut."

The queen closed her mouth and then sat up straight on *her* throne. "I command here, Rockhammer," she said just as quietly. "I do not know how you won against my armor, but I still hold the final battle. I'll not give up so easily."

"What choice do you have?" Rockhammer said with a laugh. He gestured toward her eight remaining subjects. "Can these guards save you when your mighty army fell under our swords?" He looked into the frightened eyes of her closest warrior and said, "She is not fit to lead you. She makes too many bad judgements."

The guards looked uncomfortable and indecisive. Catgut realized it and stood up. "I *challenge* you, Rockhammer," she said in an authoritative tone as she pointed at him. "Fight me. Just you and I," she hissed. "The winner takes the kingdom!"

Rockhammer raised his thick eyebrows. Now, *here* might be a good fight. From watching her the past year, he knew she was no ordinary trollop. She was physically equal to any warrior in the kingdom and would not be an easy conquest. He appeared to consider the offer, but finally laughed with a shake of his head.

"A tempting offer, Catgut," he said, "but not worth the bother. You are already defeated."

"Am I?" she asked with a menacing grin. "My vengeance will lash out at you even should you kill me." She sat down again and said cryptically, "You had better find a way to grow gills."

Rockhammer sheathed his sword and put his hands on his hips. He shook his head and replied, "If you refer to the task force you dispatched to the south end of the valley, I have no worry."

Catgut's stare soured and froze like a stone mask as Hardrock moved out of the crowd to stand beside Rockhammer. "Your plan to stop up the river at what the elves call the Black Hole and flood the valley was too risky," the old troll warrior told her. "The caverns would have been flooded as well."

Rockhammer put his arm across Hardrock's shoulder. "He and his group joined our alliance last night," he explained.

One of the guards turned to face Catgut. "*You* were going to kill us *all!*" he exclaimed.

Another guard looked up at the queen in anger. "Your judgement's worse than Grubmoss' ever was!" His words reverberated in the cavern. "Only *Cattail* would have done something so stupid!"

The queen had shrunk into her throne from their tirade, but at the mention of that name she lashed out with a boot and kicked him in the eye. "You fool!" she shrieked. "I *am* Cattail!"

"Then it's *all* your fault!" yelled another. "Then *and* now!" Catgut hissed and slashed out at her body guards with a knife she had withdrawn from the furs covering the throne as they attacked her. The chain mesh armor she wore under her robes helped her survive most of their stabbing attempts, but others in the room swarmed on the throne to get a chance at her. She shrieked as some weapon found its mark but was silenced as more joined it. Trolls stabbed, slashed and pounded the queen's body until parts of her were separated and scattered about the room.

Someone began cheering and soon the whole chamber reverberated with the sounds. A few moments passed before the commotion quieted again and everyone looked to Rockhammer as he approached the throne. The crowd allowed a figure to move through them and BeeNest stopped before the large troll with the golden crown resting gently across her palms. She handed it to him with a big smile.

Nightstep gave his troll counterpart a smile and patted him on the shoulder. The room grew quiet as Rockhammer lifted the crown high in one hand for all to see. "The queen's reign has ended," he said. "Let's hope our next monarch has better judgement."

As the leaders of the triumphant alliance rejoiced with one another, a tiny cry sounded out from the Father Tree of the elves'holt.

"It's a girl," Dawnwatch said in delight a few moments later as she cleaned off the newborn elf. Mooncrest and Grassy gathered around the midwife to see the child and both were grinning ear to ear. The baby appeared healthy and already had a nice patch of brown hair atop her head. Dawnwatch glanced back to Wildwood and held the newborn up so she could see her new daughter. Wildwood had her eyes closed and her moist brow was furrowed as she continued to push. "You can stop now, Wildwood," the midwife laughed. "Your child has already arrived."

"Dawn... watch," Wildwood said between panting breaths, "I can feel another..."

The midwife snickered and handed the child to her father. Mooncrest held her to his chest and closed his eyes in joy. Grassy gently ran a fingertip along the ridge of the baby's tiny pointed ear. "She's so small," he said cheerfully.

Dawnwatch motioned to Goldenbraid, who was waiting just inside the doorway. The elder healer was all smiles as she came into the main room of the tree and she paused for a heartbeat to get a glimpse of the newest member of the tribe. She then knelt at the new mother's side and put a hand on her stomach. As Dawnwatch's attention was distracted by the whoops and hollers of others outside celebrating the birth amidst the deaths of the war, Goldenbraid's thin eyebrows shot up. Wildwood kept pushing and she gripped the furs underneath her as she tried hard to concentrate. The healer dipped a cloth in a bowl of cool water and patted the mother's sweating forehead with it.

"You're doing fine," she whispered quietly in Wildwood's ear. "Dawnwatch?" she asked. The midwife glanced at her but wasn't really listening as she watched Mooncrest and Grassy exchange the child between themselves and then go outside to present the little girl to those gathered near the tree. Silverleaf and Trilight moved inside to check on the mother after a quick look at the child.

Wildwood opened her eyes as she worked hard and called, "Dawnwatch..." Still the midwife was distracted by the celebration outside and began chatting animatedly with Silverleaf. Wildwood felt the change in the feelings within her and gathered up all her strength for her voice. "*Dawnwatch! Shut up and catch the cub! NOW!*"

The usually sweet and calm natured elf's shout stopped everyone in the tree. Dawnwatch looked back at Wildwood in amazement and then at Goldenbraid. "She has another," the healer said with a laugh. "Do your job, midwife." At last, Dawnwatch finally realized what was going on and then she acted quickly.

Outside the tree, Mooncrest's cheeks were flushed from the excitement of being a new father. A thick crowd of elves, humans and trolls had gathered around him and everyone was vying for a look of the newborn. Somehow Goldenbraid had pushed her way through the throng and made it to his side. ***Hand your little girl to Grassy and come back inside,*** she urgently sent to the prankster. Mooncrest turned and looked at her with a smile. Of course, he needed to attend to Wildwood. He reluctantly gave the baby to Grassy and then followed the healer back to the tree.

He looked up as he entered the room and was astonished to see that Wildwood was holding *another* newborn child in her arms. She looked exhausted, but was grinning widely. Mooncrest looked back out of the tree and saw the crowd was still there around Grassy, then he looked back inside the chamber and at the mother and child. His eyes grew wide and he stumbled over to the furs to kneel next to them. "Wha~" was all he managed to say.

"We have a son," Wildwood told him, "*and* a daughter!"

Mooncrest blinked twice and felt his head grow light. Many lifetimes has passed since twins had been born to anyone of the Timber Folk. It was hard for the prankster to believe and suddenly his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell backward. Trilight caught him with a laugh and laid his brother on the fur next to the one he'd Recognized. Mooncrest came to a moment later from Silverleaf gently splashing water onto his face and he sat up sheepishly. He looked closely at the little boy and then up into Wildwood's grey eyes.

She smiled wryly and then sent to him, ***Surprise!***

To Be Concluded In
"Picking Up The Pieces"

