

CHARLES COLEMAN FINLEY

A DEMOCRACY OF TROLLS

"LET GO."

Windy tugged her shoulder free from Ragweed's grip, cradling the baby protectively between her milk-heavy breasts and the wall of the cave. "No."

"We took a vote and voted you should put the baby down."

"Mosswater is dead, so his vote doesn't count."

"That's true. Mosswater is dead," Ragweed said flatly, remarkably unmoved by his brother's demise. He ground his jaw so hard the big flat teeth in back squeaked.

The sound annoyed Windy. She turned to snap at him and saw his face darken with a new idea.

"But the baby's dead too!" he said triumphantly. "That's why you should let go of it."

"Let's have another vote."

Ragweed smiled, showing off his gray, cracked teeth. "That's a idea. All those in favor of you putting down the dead baby?" He raised his hand. "And those against?"

Windy raised hers. "It's a tie. So I can do what I want."

"Hey! Wait a moment--"

Before he could protest, she stood up and leaned forward on one long-armed knuckled hand. The Sun had just sunk low enough so they could go outside again. She left the overhung ledge of the cave, pressing past the tree and through the overgrown shrubs. Leaves wet from a night and day of rain brushed against her, and water ran in little rivulets down her back, filling the cracks in her skin. She lifted her head into the branches to inhale the sharp clean scent of the pine needles. Droplets rolled over the hard angles of her cheeks in place of the tears she refused to cry.

Windy walked to her favorite open spot on the slope in the long shadow of the mountain's sheltering spur. From there she peered over the pines into the meadow below, and, surrounded by shade, watched the last light flow out of the valley. Uncheered by the dying Sun, she rocked the baby in the crook of her massive arm.

She glanced up to the mouth of the cave. Ragweed dug in the dirt with his big knobby fingers, then shoved his hands into his mouth. The soil was rich in spots where leaves and needles piled deep enough to decay and the rain sent worms swimming toward the surface. That had to be what Ragweed ate. Windy stirred the compost with fingerlike toes and a fat red wriggly worm squirmed out. She left it alone. She had no appetite.

Ragweed turned his head in her direction, wrinkled his nose, and snorted.

"It's already starting to stink!"

She smelled it too. Her nose was sensitive to the scent of dead things, a main part of her diet. She knew her baby was starting to rot even though it had been dead less than a day. "I like the way she smells! And I'm not putting her down!"

Ragweed shrugged, then resumed his digging.

Windy stared at the little forlorn creature limp in her arms. She had been such a lively baby, so adventuresome, afraid of nothing. Hardly feared daylight at all. She used to crawl away at the first hint of darkness. So last night, when the rain poured down, and she crawled out of their crowded crack of rock, Windy listened to her laugh and took the chance to rub butt with Ragweed. She was just getting excited herself when she heard the bigtooth lion's roar and ran out to rescue her daughter.

She chased the bigtooth off at once, but by the time she reached her little girl it was too late. Her daughter's skull was crushed, all soft, pulpy, and misshapen. Like a rotten pumpkin. Windy had eaten pumpkins once, near one of the villages of the black-haired people. But now, thinking of her baby, she'd

never eat pumpkins again, no matter how tasty they were.

She felt like she'd never do anything again.

The last finger of light lingered on the green face of the meadow. Ragweed strolled over and sat down beside her. He noticed the worm twisting in the leaves, picked it up, and offered it to her. She stuck out her tongue to show she wasn't hungry, to say no. He popped the worm in his mouth, chewed once, and swallowed.

"It's almost dark," he said. "We should go down to that turtle shell --" that was what he called the cave that people built themselves to live in "-- and see if Snapper's still there."

"Why?"

Ragweed shrugged. "Might be something to eat."

"Those animals might try to kill us, the way they killed Mosswater last night when he went to warn them about the lion."

Ragweed scratched his head, then probed one of his nostrils with a carrot-sized forefinger. Stirring up his brains in search of an idea, she guessed.

"We could try to scare them away," he offered.

She had guessed right. "We've been trying to scare them away for months," she reminded him.

"That's true," he said slowly. "They're probably pretty scared by now."

He didn't seem to notice her answering silence. She sagged on her haunches and studied him thoughtfully. Ragweed was the handsomest troll she'd ever seen -- he had a beautifully shaped head that sloped back to a nice point, a brow so thick you could hardly see his eyes beneath it, no neck to speak of, arms like the trunks of trees, and a belly as round and dark as the new Moon. Short, bristly hairs ran down between his shoulders and into the crack of his buttocks. Just looking at him used to send shivers up her spine and make her feel all juicy inside. She'd flirted with him, and he'd responded, and she was as happy as any troll could be until she became pregnant and realized that Ragweed was not the sharpest rock in the pile. He only looked smart compared to his brother, Mosswater. Of course, she couldn't be that much smarter. Before it was time for her baby to be born, she let Ragweed and Mosswater persuade her to come down out of the mountains to this stupid little valley. Ragweed grunted. "When Mosswater and I came down here a couple years back, the turtle shell didn't have Snapper in it."

"Well, this year it did!" She'd heard the same statement a thousand times before and she was tired of it. But more than that, she wanted to blame Ragweed for Mosswater's death -- Mosswater was stupid but very kind, and used to bring sweet little slugs for her baby -- and she wanted to blame Ragweed for the baby's death too. She wanted to blame somebody, anybody, because if it was somebody else's fault, then it wasn't hers.

Ragweed rooted idly in the dirt. "I'm hungry."

Windy sighed. She'd heard that a thousand times as well. She stood up. Doing anything was better than doing nothing. "Come on. Let's go down to the turtle shell. Maybe they'll be scared off. Maybe we'll find something to eat."

He clapped his hands. The crack echoed off the mountain walls, scattering birds from the trees. "That's right!" he said. "All you need is some food, then you'll put that baby down."

They walked down the familiar slope. They'd varied the path some every night looking for new sources of food, but there were only so many ways to go. Ragweed turned over logs and broke off pieces of stumps, but they were the same logs and stumps he'd searched a dozen times before. They hadn't seen the carcass of so much as a dead sparrow in two weeks; it had been a month since they'd found that deer before the wild dogs got to it. Ragweed paused to snack on a nest of termites, then a bunch of grubs and crunchy hundred-leg bugs inside a stump. She waited for him to stuff his face. When they continued on their way, he grabbed the lower branches of trees and chewed the leaves off the ends. The rain moistened them up a bit so they didn't taste so chokingly dry. The scent enticed Windy, but not enough to make her eat.

They arrived at the wide meadow beside the pond and Ragweed waded into the water to slake his thirst. Windy's throat was terribly parched despite the drippings she'd licked off the cave roof, so she followed him, holding the baby out of the water as she bent down to take a drink.

Ragweed splashed over and rubbed his hands on her bottom.

"Thhpppt!" Water sprayed out of her mouth. "Stop that!"

"Nothing to interrupt us now," he leered.

She ignored him, bending to take another sip. He reached around and squeezed her breast.

"Yow!" Windy hopped away with a splash, bared her teeth, and smacked him with a backhanded swing.

"Hey!" he hollered. "What did I do?"

"That hurt." She turned away, sloshed out of the pond, and started her three-legged gait through the woods without him. Her breasts ached like a bad tooth. They'd been leaking all evening and she didn't know what to do. She guessed they'd dry up in a few days, but right now she'd rather step in fire than have him touch them.

Ragweed hurried to catch up. They crested the chestnut ridge where they'd sat most nights through the late spring and summer. Mosswater had been the only one brave -- or stupid -- enough to approach the turtle shell night after night. But he was that way. He did something one time and then got stuck doing it over and over even if it didn't work because he couldn't think of anything else.

The rain-heavy breeze carried good scents. Windy smelled the fruit ripening on the pear trees away down the valley. Off in the direction of the sunset, toward the river, she thought she sniffed something dead, maybe drowned in yesterday's flood. Small, but still a good meal if she'd been hungry enough to go looking for it. She turned her head the other direction toward the little hollow of land where the cave was. She smelled Mosswater strongly above all else, and the faint scent of the lion, and goat's blood a couple days old. The squash were ripening, and the corn, and the beans inside that little thorn wall. And then she smelled something else ....

Ragweed caught the same scent. "Hot diggety!" he shouted, making an enthusiastic scooping motion with his hands before he ran down the hill.

"Fresh rotten meat!"

"Be careful!" she cried out. But Snapper was dead, the one that came out and shouted at Mosswater and threw fire at him. At least she thought he was.

Holding her baby tight to her chest, she ran after Ragweed.

Ragweed stopped beside his dead brother, whose body sprawled face down in the mud. Windy paused beside him and only then did her ears, which were better than the average troll's, certainly much better than Ragweed's, detect the high-pitched crying. When Ragweed turned to enter the cave she tripped him, grabbing hold of his wrist so he couldn't break his fall. As he squawked, hitting the ground, she rushed past him and inside.

The odors hit her first. The dead man -- Snapper -- and the dead woman. There was something wrong with the woman's flesh. The smell of baby poop and urine were also strong. Windy wrinkled her nose, swiveled her head around until she saw the woman's corpse in the corner with the baby sitting there chewing on her hair. Its eyes were shut, so tired it could barely sit up straight as it cried.

Ragweed burst through the doorway behind her. "Ho there! Save some for me!"

He shoved her down and she kicked at him. He dodged her foot, hopping ponderously over her outstretched leg. She dropped her dead daughter, dove under Ragweed's groping arms, and slid across the dirt floor on her tender breasts to grab the crying baby first. She curled around it protectively.

"Go ahead," Ragweed said, clearly disappointed. "It's not much. Won't fill your belly up."

The baby continued to wail as it snuggled into Windy's arms. It rubbed its face around her breast until its tiny mouth closed on the hard pebble of her nipple. It didn't have much of a suck compared to her little girl, but then it

didn't need much of one either.

Ragweed picked up the woman's hand, stuck the fingers in his mouth, and chewed on them. After a couple crunches, he spit them out and dropped her arm. "This one's still warm, but she's been sick. Ought to let her rot for a couple days. She'll taste better with bugs in her."

Windy wrinkled her flat nose again. The dead woman was this baby's mother; she suddenly felt quite protective of her. "Go chew on Snapper then," she said.

"He's been dead longer."

"All gristle, no fat, like enough," muttered Ragweed, but he crossed the room. Windy caressed the baby's head. It had such beautiful black hair, disguising its misshapen skull and lack of a brow. Large -- gorgeously large -- eyes in the painfully flat face stared right at her before they fluttered shut. The ache in Windy's heart eased as quickly as the soreness in her breast.

"Ack!"

Ragweed jumped back so hard he fell on his bottom. He bounced up and retreated across the room to Windy's side.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Go look for yourself! I'm not getting near it, not if it was a rotten mammut on a hot summer night and I hadn't eaten anything in ten days."

Windy carefully cradled the suckling baby to her, took a step forward, and then almost turned to stone. She didn't need to get any closer to see the amber-colored ampules strung around the dead man's neck. They were magic, sunlight trapped in warm ice. If either one cracked accidentally it could kill them both. She hopped backward so fast the baby lost the nipple. Its eyes flew wide open.

"You'll have to share it now," Ragweed said.

Windy kept one eye on Snapper's body as if he might leap up and attack her.

The baby stretched its neck, trying to get its mouth back on her breast.

"Share what?"

"The live meat."

"No!" She dodged his sudden grasp, bolted out the door and into the yard. He chased after her.

"We always share meat," he said.

"This isn't meat -- it's a baby!"

He slouched back on his haunches and laughed. "Don't be crazy! You're just sad because you lost your girl. You don't mean to keep that thing."

She hadn't realized that was exactly what she meant to do until she heard him say it. "I can. And I will."

He thumped his knuckles on his chest to frighten her. She wasn't impressed and frowned at him until he gave it up. "If that's how you feel," he said, pacing in a circle around her, "then we'll just have to take a vote. All those in favor of eating the live meat, raise your hand."

He threw his hand up into the air, looking around the way he always did at meetings to see who was voting with him. She ignored him, and, gently as she could, switched the baby around, so it could drink from the other sore and swollen breast.

"All right then, everybody in favor of keeping the meat for a baby, raise your hand."

Windy lifted hers as she looked down, making a kissy mouth at the child. It stopped sucking long enough to laugh and reached up to touch her face.

"That's two against one," she said. "We win."

"It can't vote!"

"Well, it raised its hand." She really just hoped to confuse and distract Ragweed, because even if Mosswater was still alive and they both outvoted her, she wasn't about to give up this new baby. She reached down to tickle its belly and saw it was a boy. "He heard you, and he raised his hand. So there."

"But --!" Ragweed sputtered off, then slammed his hands down, splattering mud everywhere.

The baby jerked at the sound, but she made another kissy mouth and a smoochy sound and he giggled again. His eyelids seemed very heavy as he swallowed gulp

after gulp.

"You aren't going to keep that thing, are you? It's an animal."

"Is not." He had eyes just like her darling girl, she decided. Whatever he was -- whatever people were -- they were more than animals, even if they weren't trolls.

Ragweed circled her. "It's a maggot, that's what it is."

"He's a big strong baby." To be truthful, he wasn't big or strong. But he was a baby and now he was her baby.

"It's a maggot. It's little, white, and it wouldn't make a mouthful, and you found it crawling on a dead body. Maggot, maggot, maggot!"

"He is not a maggot!" She threw a clump of mud at Ragweed but it missed and smacked wetly against the side of the turtle shell.

"Well, it ain't a slug." Ragweed hurled a mudball back at her, with better aim. She ducked, blocking it with her free arm, as he wandered over to the garden and shoved a half-ripe gourd into his mouth. He turned over some leaves near the bottoms of the plants. "Slugs have stripes," he said sullenly around a mouthful of pulp and seeds. "Least some do. The tasty ones."

He grazed through the garden without offering anything to her. Windy rocked her massive forearm until the baby fell sleep. After a while she rose and ate a little also. Her hunger had returned. "What are you going to do about Mosswater?" she asked.

Ragweed looked up at the sky. It was getting late. He shrugged. "Thought I'd drag him back up to our cave, shove him in the back."

"Maybe tomorrow night?" Windy hated this time of year, when the nights were too short and too warm without enough time to do anything but eat.

Ragweed knuckle-walked over to his brother's corpse. "I don't want to come back here tomorrow."

"Maybe we could put him in the turtle shell with Snapper."

"Huh." Ragweed poked the dead body. "We could do that."

Windy felt so relieved she paused to empty her bladder. She didn't want to come back here tomorrow night either. She helped Ragweed drag and push Mosswater's body through the narrow doorway. While Ragweed laid his brother in the corner farthest from the door and window, she picked up her daughter and placed her beside the dead woman. She tucked the hand with the missing fingers under the little girl, and draped the other arm across her body. She carefully avoided Snapper's body.

Ragweed waited in the doorway. "You done?"

She nodded and walked outside with him. He stood upright on his hind legs and craned his neck around, looking for stones. "Let's seal up the whole cave," she said.

"With what?"

She waved her hand at the mounds of wood and thorn that surrounded the little cottage. He grunted and set to work. Windy moved the smaller pieces for fear of disturbing the baby, slight though he felt in her arms. They filled in the little hole and the big hole, and heaped mounds around the walls. Windy scooped up clumps of mud with her free hand and packed it in tight around the holes. When they finished, Ragweed walked around it, lifting his leg and spraying. The scent would scare off scavengers and protect their dead.

"Now we have to hurry if we aren't going to get caught out in the Sun," he said.

She looked up. He was right. They raced across the high ridge and she could smell dawn in the air. They halted briefly in the meadow to drink from the swollen pond and she noticed the lion's scent. It too had been here to drink in the night. She decided to blame it for her daughter's death. Then she looked at the child she held.

It's going to be all right, she told herself. Ragweed will let me keep the baby. They would return to the mountains among the hot springs and the good smell of sulfur, away from all the people. Things would be just like they were before.

"We should leave this valley," she said. She thought about her own mother. "We

should go home."

"Not until the pears get ripe," said Ragweed, pushing aside the brush in his hurry to hide. He squeezed his huge bulk through the narrow crack, then rolled over on his back and rubbed his big round belly. "The trees full of pears and nobody to eat them but us. I don't want to miss that! They won't be eating any pears back home."

"That's a long time from now," she said, squeezing in after him. "What are we going to eat until then?"

He bared his teeth in a half-grin. "I don't know about you, but I'm hungry for a little maggot."

She turned her back to him and wrapped her arms around the sleeping child.

"YOU AREN'T going to keep it, are you?"

"Him, not it, mother," Windy answered through a mouth full of blueberries. Her large fingers circled the branches, scooping off another bunch of ripe fruit while her mother did the same beside her. The older troll's downy white hair contrasted sharply with her gray skin in the moonlight. "And yes," Windy said, "I am going to keep him."

"We'd heard tales, from Crash, when he went down into the people valleys last year, but I didn't believe him. And then you finally return with it." She frowned.

Windy looked across the bog. Her little boy played in the scrub grass with two little girls his own age but twice his size. Sometimes she scarcely believed it herself.

"Four winters, five summers," her mother said, reproach in her voice. "It's a long time to be away, even if you were ashamed."

"I'm not ashamed." She shoved the blueberries in her mouth and chewed. "We were going to come back that first winter, but the baby --"

"Maggot," her mother interrupted.

She swallowed. "That's what Ragweed calls him."

"I know. He's been telling everyone, but we'd already heard it from Crash. So what do you call it?"

Windy had called the baby by her daughter's name for nearly a year but the boy never answered to it, maybe because she only whispered it to him in his sleep. And then Ragweed called him Maggot so often that it was the only name her boy responded to. She sighed. "Maggot."

Her mother made a rumbling hum in her throat. She plucked the berries off the branches one by one, filling her cupped hand. "Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three for a handful. I can still count higher than anyone else. And faster too. Heh! So that first winter?"

"Terrible." Windy wanted to explain how she tried to leave Ragweed but couldn't, how there was never a good time to sneak away, not so he wouldn't notice. "It was terrible."

"Why?"

"Before winter even, the baby grew so cold. His skin turned all blue at night." She shivered. That winter bloomed into another summer before she found the courage to take her frail child among the icy peaks, and while they hunted food night to night and fattened up again, that summer rotted into winter, and before she knew it four years had passed by as swift as midsummer nights. "So we stayed down in the warmer valleys."

"You should have let it die."

"Him, mother."

"No. It."

Other trolls hulked through the blueberry patches, eating steadily without talking, filling their bellies while the darkness lasted. The children strayed farther away in their play. Maggot was a delicate child, his skin so thin she could practically see through it. The risks he took could stop her heart. She followed after them, conveniently escaping the prick of her mother's comments. A rock outcropping capped the slope. Windy waded free of the blueberry patch and went to sit by the stones. "Talking with the stupid dead" they called it, because the stories said that these rocks were trolls that let themselves get

caught out in the Sun. The best thing about the stupid dead, Windy thought, was that their mistake was always worse than yours.

"Hi, stupid," Windy said, patting the rock as she sat.

Distant mountains formed walls on either side of the high plain and the dark sky, close enough to touch, gave it a comforting cavelike roof. Bringing her son up here for the first time brought back all the memories of her own happy childhood: the bleak beauty of long winter nights -- her favorite season before she became a mother -- when clusters of the bitter berries on mountain ash gleamed bright against the white skin of windswept snow; the scents of rhododendrons blooming under slivered spring moons, laurel at midsummer; huckleberries, blueberries, teaberries, and cranberries, each in its season, as many as she could ever eat; fogs so dense she could open her mouth and drink water straight out of the air, with unexpected frosts even in the summer that cooled her toes while she foraged. She hadn't realized how much she missed the smell of bobcat spray until she came up here and caught a whiff of it again tonight.

Maggot played with the girls on the slope below the blueberry bushes along the edge of the bogs where cranberries grew and the grasses turned all shadow-tipped in autumn. Windy looked beyond him. A herd of giant elk grazed about a mile away, their wide flat antlers rising and falling in silhouette against the sky. She counted seventeen elk before their heads jerked up in unison and they darted away. Leaning forward, she saw a dyewolf bolt out of the grasses where the elk had been.

Dyewolves hunted in packs. Where there was one, there were more. "Maggot," Windy said. She didn't speak loudly. Her son's ears were as powerful as a troll's eyes.

He stopped playing and waved to her. The two girls looked up the hill, confused by his actions.

"Stay close by," she said, for his ears only. "There are dyewolves hunting." He smacked his lips with a nod of his head, as if he already knew. Then he put his hands to his mouth. "Awroooooooooo!"

It sounded enough like a dyewolf's cry to send a chill up her spine. He could mimic almost anything. She saw his head turn first, and then the girls'. When she followed their eyes and concentrated, she heard, faintly, the dyewolf howling in return. "Stay close!" she shouted at the top of her voice.

He waved to her again and she felt better. After that the girls pretended they were scared, running away as he howled like a dyewolf and chased them. The sight of him and the sharp faint shriek of their laughter made Windy smile. But she remained wary. A pack of dyewolves could bring down a solitary full-grown troll. Her son was so much smaller and weaker than the other trolls.

On the steep edge of the slope a stunted grove of red cedars leaned away from the constant wind. When the girls ran in that direction, followed by Maggot, his shoulder-length hair whipped by the hard breeze, Windy was relieved. She could sniff the air and not smell wolves or other dangers in it.

Windy sniffed again, taking in the scent of the trees. Down in the valleys the red cedars reached great heights, but here the tallest barely overtopped a full-grown troll, although, thinking about it, that still made them the tallest plant around. But they were twisted and deformed by the unrelenting pressure of the constant wind, the west face naked and all their tattered branches stretching east. On bad nights, the gusts could tumble trolls and send them rolling across the bog.

Windy watched her son, his pale skin luminous in the partial moonlight. Her son was also a creature from the valleys. She wondered what it would do to him to grow up here in troll country, whether he'd end up deformed in some way like the cedars.

Her mother climbed the rocks, sat down beside her, and pointed to the trees.

"Do you know what those look like?"

A trollbird settled on Windy's back and began picking nits off her skin. She stayed still not to disturb it. "They smell like the big cedars that grow

farther down the slopes. I was just thinking about that."

"No, that's not it." Her mother stretched out a long arm, grabbed the branch of a blueberry bush, and collected more of the juicy blue-black fruit. "They look like the killing leaves."

Windy didn't know what her mother meant. "Killing leaves?"

"Once, there were many more trolls than there are now. Some of us lived in the southern mountains then. When I was a young girl, I did." Windy had heard all this before, and didn't care much for her mother's childhood stories. "There were people, blackhairs, also living in the southern mountains then. Too many to count or chase away, but they left us alone and we avoided them. Then other people moved in, just like those who moved into the lower valleys here. The two groups gathered together, against each other, in these big packs. Like dyrewolves on the one side and the little bigtooth lions on the other." Windy had never heard this story before. The trollbird skittered between her shoulder blades. Her skin twitched.

"The two packs, they had these killing leaves," her mother made a three-sided shape with her fingers, "big ones, one leaf on each tree. They carried them. So we crept down out of the mountains to see them. One morning, before the Sun came up, there were all these horns blowing. We hid in our caves all that day but we couldn't sleep because we knew something was wrong. When we came back to the field that night, it was littered with carrion. More dead men than there are berries on these bushes, the smell so thick it made your stomach swell, like to bursting. And the killing leaves in tatters, shredded, lying this way and that, pieces shaking in the wind." She pointed to the cedars.

"They looked just like those trees."

Windy wished she'd never heard this story. "So?"

"People," her mother aimed her finger at Maggot, rolling around with the girls, "did that. Afterward, the winners--the newcomers--came into the high reaches and hunted us. We moved north, and once again men entered the low valleys, and once again hunt us. They killed Mosswater, who was a fine troll almost ready to father children."

"So?"

Her mother's face tightened into a sharp knot. "So? You bring one to live among us. It's wrong. It should be destroyed."

"No!" Windy rose abruptly with her fists clenched. The trollbird whistled and flew off into the night.

Her mother stared at her, as cold as ice. She was the First of the band after many votes, its leader. "You listen to me. You need to get rid of that animal. Then you need to have another child, and by darkness and dew, let us hope it's a boy who can breed with those young girls down there as soon as they're big enough."

"Mother--"

"I'm not done yet!" Windy tensed, but her mother kept on speaking. "Our people have few children and we grow fewer each year. There were fifty-three in our band when you were a baby, and before that there were seventy-one at one time. Seventy-one! How many do you see now?"

Windy couldn't help herself. She lifted her head and counted. Ragweed and seven others, mostly men, down where the blueberries were thickest, another group of ten over on the next hill, and little clusters of two and three scattered in between. Maggot and the two girls. Her and her mother.

"Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four. Thirty-four."

"Thirty-three," corrected her mother.

"That's not a fair question. Frosty took her band and moved away, and--"

"Because the people moved in! They eat all our food and kill us and hunt us away!" The anger faded out of her mother's voice, replaced by weariness. "I see the nights of all trolls drying up, like dew beneath a Sun that never sets." As Windy watched her mother's face intently, understanding for a moment her sense of loss, the old troll chuckled. "Look! The children are playing catch the snake. You loved that game when you were a little girl."

The two girls were running, tossing a snake back and forth between them.



Maggot chased after, grabbing at it, as the girls threw it to each other over his head.

Windy laughed too. It was a good-sized serpent--two, maybe three feet long--with its mouth wide open and fangs snapping at the children's arms. Rocky and Blossom were good girls. Windy was so glad Maggot finally had someone his own age to play with.

The snake twined in the air, looping itself in an echo of the crisscross pattern marking its back--the kind that caused sickness if it bit, which made the game more fun. The risk was small because a fast bite couldn't break a troll's skin and if the snake fastened on an arm and bit slowly, there was always plenty of time to grab the head and pull it off it. Windy remembered one time....

Maggot! "No!"

She drummed a short warning on her chest and ran down the slope. All three children froze in fear, and the snake twisted in Blossom's hand, biting down sharply on her arm. "Ow!"

"I've got it," cried Maggot. He grabbed it behind the head and pulled it off. Windy faltered, then lunged forward. Maggot held the snake up toward her, its long length squirming and twisting around. He kept his grip on it for a second, then let go, and hopped out of the way. Its head turned to strike at him just as Windy's foot came down, smashing it into the ground.

"I caught it eight times," said Rocky, smiling.

"But I caught it eleven!" screamed Blossom.

"But you dropped it four times," Maggot said, "and Rocky picked it up again, and she didn't miss any catches."

Windy patted him on the head. "But Blossom caught it more times, so she wins the game." The snake squirmed frantically in the soft ground beneath her foot.

"But if you take away the times she dropped it, then Rocky wins," Maggot insisted.

Windy wrinkled her thick brow and started unfolding her fingers. Eleven catches, then one, two, three, four drops, that was fifteen. The snake struggled harder so she arched the front part of her foot. When the head squeezed out between her toes, she crossed them and snapped its neck. She lifted the limp snake with her foot to her hand, then offered it to her mother.

"We found it," Rocky complained.

"It's our food," said Blossom.

"You should have eaten it while you had the chance then," said Windy's mother as she took it and bit off half. The bones crunched in her jaw. With a wink, she tossed the other half to the girls. Maggot snatched it first and led them on a chase for it. After she swallowed, she looked up at Windy. "You can't buy my vote with fresh meat, you know."

"I wasn't trying to."

"Leastway, not that little bit." Her eyes grew wistful. "Now a nice bit of rotting carrion --"

"You'll vote however you think best."

"I've already talked with Ragweed, and he's gathering up votes among the men. We'll have enough to exclude it--Maggot--from the band."

"We'll leave then," said Windy.

"Not you, just it."

"Whatever you vote for him, you vote for me. You vote to kill him, you'll have to kill me first. He's my son."

"He could end up carrion," her mother said. "Maybe he'll have an accident. Yes, that could happen. Then you could have more children. We have too few children."

Windy didn't say anything. She noticed the men moving off to the east. The women pounded on the ground and the girls came running. Maggot followed them until Windy beat her knuckles into the sod and told him, "Stay."

He sprinted to her side. "What is it, Mom?"

"Stay with me."

"But Mom!"

She bared her teeth and he quieted down, clambering up her outstretched arm to cling around her shoulder. Sometimes she recalled the way her daughter's fingers and toes dug into her wrinkles and under the cracks in her skin, but she'd grown accustomed to the way Maggot scooted up the outside. She searched through the blueberries until she found his skin, some strange-smelling thing they had scavenged from people, and handed it to him. He wrapped it over his back.

Her mother looked at her in disgust. "Ughh! Why do you carry that stinking thing?"

"Maggot'd be cold without it."

"Then let him be cold. Let him die."

Before Windy could answer, Maggot laughed. "But Grandma! I don't want to die. You're silly."

She grunted and moved off. They needed to be safely underground before the Sun rose to blind and immobilize them.

"Mom," said Maggot, "I want to walk."

"No dear, we're in a hurry." They had lingered almost too long, lethargic in the summer heat. Even so trolls moved quickly when the scent of dawn electrified the air and there was no way Maggot could keep up with the others over this rough terrain for long. She'd learned that the hard way these last few years. Only because of Maggot's recent increase in size and speed had she finally relented and let Ragweed lead her back to troll country.

"But Mom, I want to talk to the other kids."

"I'll catch up with them."

When she did, the girls' mothers scowled at her, their brow ridges sagging like tree branches covered with ice. Windy tried to find words to ease their disapproval, but they ignored her. She lapsed once more into the canyon of silence that had first appeared between her and Ragweed. Whispers and giggles told her that the girls would not be stifled by the awkwardness of the older women.

Rocky was the first to run along at her heels. "Hey there, baby," she taunted Maggot. "Baby riding on your mama's neck."

"Baby, baby, baby," cried Blossom. "Watch out! There's a snake crawling on your back!" She jumped up and tried to snatch away Maggot's skin, but missed, dissolving in laughter.

Windy couldn't see Maggot's expression, but his grip tightened on her and she smelled his uncertainty. "One time, down-down-down," he stuttered, talking to the girls, "in the valleys by the big people caves, we'd been out hunting for food all night and we found a nice big dead humpback."

"A whole humpback?" asked Rocky eagerly.

"Yeah, and Ragweed ate soooo much, he got really tired, and he fell asleep, and I put my skin over his face, so he wouldn't know that it was getting light out, and then, when the Sun came up, he'd turn into stone."

"No you didn't," said Blossom.

"Did too!"

"He's not a bunch of stones," argued Rocky.

"No. Mom took the blanket off his head and woke him up."

Windy smiled. That's exactly what she did do, every single time Maggot played that trick on Ragweed. As the children continued to talk, she admired the way Maggot stopped the teasing by distracting the girls. Then, like darkness failing after a flash of light, she realized that Maggot was taunting them back, reminding them that he'd been all sorts of places they never had. For the first time it occurred to her that he was already smarter than she was -- if you counted backward from eleven, take away four, that was seven. Less than eight. He was at least five or six years old, big enough to live on his own. She'd done everything she could, taught him how to find carrion and other food, how to dig and climb, and all about the history and customs of her people. He sucked all of it in like a lake drinking up a river. But the one thing she couldn't do was make him grow any bigger, any faster.

Reaching up, she took hold of Maggot and swung him down to the ground. "Go on then," she said, picking up his people-skin as it fell.

"Thanks, Mom!" His face beamed at her like the Moon, so bright she almost had to shield her eyes, and then he took off running beside the girls as fast as his little legs could carry him. He looked funny moving upright on his two feet and swinging his arms even though they didn't touch the ground. The girls slowed down a bit to match his pace.

"He's a freak," hissed her mother, slipping up beside her. "An animal." Windy's gaze never strayed from him. "Whatever you want to call him, he's still my son."

They trotted steadily downhill for several miles along a trail that offered glimpses of the river valley far below and a constant view of the mountains in the distant west. They were almost done when Maggot ran up and tugged at her hand. "Mom, I'm tired."

"Here, I'll carry you." She held out her arm and he tugged on it again, but didn't climb up. If he was too tired to climb, then he was exhausted. She lifted him and draped him over her shoulder. He clung to her neck, twining and locking his hands together.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To spend the day in caves, at the bottom of these cliffs."

"What cl --"

The word dropped off in midair as they came to the top of a steep wall of rock nine hundred feet high.

"Wow." He said that last so quietly she felt only the air of it stirring against her neck.

A trail wound back and forth down the cliff's face. The older trolls descended quickly, digging their toes and fingers in the rock for vertical shortcuts in the places where the rock allowed. Those who left the blueberry patches earliest were already at the bottom when Windy began her climb, pressed against the wall of stone. "Hold on tight," she told Maggot.

He smacked his lips for yes, rubbing his forehead against the back of her neck as he squeezed tight.

She took the easiest path down this wall sacred to the trolls. The story her mother told was that the trolls were born underground, of the Earth itself, in the deep caves when all the world was covered with snow, living in the water and eating the fish and bugs that swam there. Most believed that the caves at the bottom of this cliff were the ones that trolls emerged from, like infants from their mother's womb, when they came out into the wider world.

Windy wondered about the story as she made her way down the trail. It was too dry a place to live and few things swam in the cavern waters. The redwall and the mountains beyond it held back the clouds in the sky so that almost no rain fell here. But it was still a safe place: the caverns stretched back for miles beneath the mountains, so deep that no people or other predators could ever find them there. All the things that trolls had ever stolen from people were stored there, in hordes cached in such odd comers that some of them had not been counted in a span of lifetimes.

"Hey, Mom," said Maggot.

"Yes?"

"Hey, Mom."

"Yes?"

"Hey, Mom, look at that."

"Look at what?" asked Windy, face against the stone, as her feet reached out to find the next toehold.

"The girls're daring me to join them. Can I?"

She twisted her head around to see them. The girls were showing off, getting back at him for his adventures by climbing straight down the wall. Every young troll did that at least once, usually about the time they were as big as the girls. But Maggot was not every young troll. "No," Windy said firmly. "You can't do that."

"Aw, Mom," he said, but he didn't budge.

"You're a good boy."

"I'm not a boy. I'm almost old enough to be a grownup, even though I'm as small as a baby. That's why Grandma wants to me to die and all the other grown-ups want me to go away."

Something as big as a rock caught in her throat. "What do you think about that?"

"I tell them you won't let anything hurt me." He nuzzled his face against her.

"'Cause you don't."

The burden on her shoulders grew heavier as she continued her downward trek. The air around her changed, charged with the tingling feel of daybreak. When she reached the bottom of the slope, she looked up and saw the Sun shining high on the very top of the cliff face. The wall had lost the blue-gray tones of night and turned into startling shades of red and orange, streaked with white near the very top. It glowed like fire.

Then she noticed the two girls. They'd also seen the light, before she did, and they'd frozen in a spot some fifty or sixty feet up the wall, one above the other.

"Come on down!" she yelled at them. "Hurry!"

"I can't!" cried one. The other just cried.

Their mothers had noticed them missing also and paused on the trail down to the caves. Blossom's mother, Laurel, shouted to the other trolls, calling for help. Windy didn't know her too well, but she'd been friends as a child with Rocky's mother, Bones. Bones ran to Windy's side and called up at the girls.

"Come on down! The mouth of day is chasing you!"

And indeed it was. The Sun trickled down the face of the rock and the night at the bottom grew thin, an insufficient darkness. Windy paced nervously.

Bones tried to scale the cliff but the lower reaches were climbed over. The rocks were loose and dusty, and the slope of debris more difficult to climb than the bare rock farther up. It couldn't support the weight of a full-grown troll. She was no more than twenty feet up when the rock gave way underneath her and she slid down in a shower of gravel and stone.

"Don't look up!" Windy yelled to the girls, but it was hopeless. Their eyes were fixed on the sky as the teeth of the Sun closed already over all the uneven upper reaches of rock. Her heart pounded rapidly with worry, but when she turned to the other trolls she found them arguing.

"Someone needs to go up the trail and climb out across to them," said one of older males, a big troll named Stump.

"And get caught in the Sun?" someone answered. "Not likely!"

"Leave 'em there," offered someone else. "They'll come down before the Sun reaches them."

"What if they don't?" asked Blossom's mother, Laurel.

"Let them jump," said Ragweed. He'd been blunting his compassion on Maggot for years.

"We can't leave them." Windy's mother's deep voice overpowered the others.

"Those girls are important to the band."

"Let's vote," said Stump.

"Fine! All those in favor of trying to rescue .... "

By the time they decided as a group to get something done, it'd be too late.

Windy knew they'd have to act now but she didn't know what to do.

Maggot stirred on her shoulder. "What's wrong, Mom?"

"The girls are caught up there. If the sunlight reaches them, they'll fall asleep and drop. Even if they could hold on, the Sun would shrivel them up." Rocky's mother ripped away huge chunks of friant rock in a frantic effort to carve footholds in the stone. Windy stood below her. "If the girls fall," she promised, "I'll catch them. I'm right here with you."

"Thank you," Bones said. Her feet slipped before she'd climbed twice her height.

Windy braced and caught her. The impact knocked her backward and she felt Maggot's weight slip from her shoulder and roll free. That was something

they'd practiced. If she ever fell on him, he'd be crushed. She extricated herself from Bones and looked around to make sure that he was all right. When she didn't see him, she started turning over rocks.

"Maggot! Where are you?"

"He's up there."

Windy lifted her head and saw him halfway to the girls, spidering up the cliff. The skin wrapped around his neck gave him that hairy appearance. She jumped after him but Bones grabbed her. "Don't! You can't make it. You'll fall."

"But he doesn't know how to climb a wall that high!"

"Could fool me."

Windy held her breath. Maggot reached a tough spot and crossed horizontally until he found another handhold above him. He did everything just like she trained him, keeping three feet on the wall at all times. If anything happened to him ....

Along the trail to the cave, the other trolls finally voted to rescue the girls, with her mother leading the vote. But no one volunteered to go get them except Stump, and her mother thought Stump was too heavy and wanted someone else to make the climb. So now they were proceeding to another vote.

Windy shook her head and looked helplessly above her as Maggot overtook Blossom and began talking to her. He put his hand over her face and it was enough to break the Sun spell. She resumed her journey down, keeping her eyes on the ground the whole time.

Bones caught her off the wall and hugged her. "I was so scared!" Blossom said, tears pouring down her face, and then she squirmed away from them to go find her mother.

Higher up on the cliff, Rocky wouldn't budge. Maggot talked to her, Windy could see that much. He pointed down but Rocky refused to turn her head. He tried to cover her eyes and she shook her head free.

"She'll come down any moment now," Windy said soothingly, eyeing the slow advance of sunlight down the stone. Most of the trolls had headed off for the caverns without waiting to see if the other girl could be saved.

Bones chewed on her knuckles. "She's so timid, so much more timid. I don't know if she'll make it."

Windy's mother and Stump joined them at the base of the wall. Stump paused briefly to look up at the two motionless figures. "Looks like I still have two to rescue after all. I better hurry."

He headed up an older trail -- a dead end that Windy had forgotten -- that would take him near their position. Windy watched him make his way up, wishing she'd thought to try that way herself, when she heard her friend gasp. She craned her neck around just in time to see Maggot slip. She screamed, but he pressed himself flat and found another foothold some ten feet farther down. "What happened?"

Bones covered her mouth. "She hit him."

"Of course she did," said Windy's mother. "The stupid boy threw that nasty skin over her face!"

Windy noticed her mother's choice of the word boy, but didn't comment. "Come down!" she cried up at her son. "Come down now!"

He ignored her and inched his way back up the rock. Stump was at the proper height on the trail, but he had a hundred foot horizontal climb to reach them. As he began his slow way across, Maggot started yanking on Rocky's feet.

"He's going to pull her down," gasped the girl's mother. "Stop! Stop! Wait for Stump!"

"I don't think that's what he's doing," whispered Windy, not quite sure herself what he did attempt. Although the skin covered her eyes, Rocky still wouldn't move.

"Hold on!" shouted Stump. "I'm almost there!"

But he wasn't close at all, having reached a spot where his toes could find no hold. Windy's mother tugged at her arm. The whole eastern sky glowed orange above the rim of the mountains. "Come!" she said, her voice as hard as

granite. "We saved one girl and we must go down to the caverns. At once!"

"Wait," implored Windy.

The deep shadows of the canyon barely shaded them and she too felt the compelling need to run, but then Maggot's plan worked. He took Rocky's foot and put it in a lower toehold for her. She shifted her weight down to it and the spell was broken.

Slowly at first, then more quickly, they came climbing, sliding down the rock face. Stump called encouragement on his own speedy descent to the trail. The children were halfway down when a peregrine falcon, flying out of the Sun, dived at them curiously. With the day fear on her, Windy expected them to be dislodged by the plummeting bird but they didn't even notice it before it veered away.

"Come on, you're almost here," called Bones.

Rocky pulled the skin off her face, letting it flutter to the ground as she scampered down the last part of the slope and into her mother's arms. Bones swung her daughter up on her back, and hurried off with Windy's mother down the trail for the caves. Windy backed away, under the trees between the cliff and river where night still lingered. "Keep coming, Maggot! I'm right here for you!"

His little spider arms and legs trembled as he moved cautiously from hold to hold. Stump slowed in his dash down the trail. "Your son's a good troll," he said as he passed Windy.

"Thanks," she answered, looking up at the frail little figure clinging two dozen feet up the wall. He fell.

She lunged forward to catch him, cradling him in her arms and hugging him tight to still his shaking. The skin on his chest and under his arms and on his thighs was scraped raw. His fingers and his toes were bleeding, and his teeth chattered. She picked up his skin and covered him as she hurried toward the refuge of darkness.

"We saved them, didn't we?" he said proudly.

"Yes we did," she whispered, in the voice that was just for him.

"You're a good troll."

"I'm the best troll. Even Stump's not as good as me."

Her mother waited for them, frowning, just inside the cave. The gray old troll took one look at them and yawned. "I suppose it's too late today to call for any votes. Let's wait and see what sunset brings." Windy smacked her lips in agreement.

"But you let go of Ragweed. He mates with someone else."

Windy lifted her head, smacking her lips again, relieved. When her mother snorted and moved off into the deeper dark, she rocked Maggot in her arms.

"I'm never going to let go of you again, you hear me?" she whispered.

He laughed at her and struggled to get loose.

THE ROAR OF the waterfall filled Windy's ears even though she was still too far away to see it. She paused in the bluish night, scratched her broad nose, and breathed in the faint, distant mist. The tang of spruce and hem lock needles mixed with dozens of smaller, nearer fragrances but she didn't smell the single scent she sought. Somewhere along the way she'd lost track of Maggot.

He'd been gone two whole nights. True, he was old enough to take care of himself now, but she fretted when he disappeared in the daylight. She wanted to stop him and knew that she couldn't.

She continued on toward the Blackwater Falls, her back and shoulders aching. It didn't help that she'd searched for him so long yesternight, she'd been forced to dig under the roots of a windblown tree at dayrise. A whole day sleeping hunched up like that was enough to make any troll sore. Her stomach growled as she walked, reminding her that all she'd eaten in more than a night were the few mouthfuls of mushrooms she sniffed out among the decaying roots. It had been a hard season, with a late frost that killed off most of the blossoms followed by a dry summer that withered up the surviving fruit. For the past few years there'd been fewer animals coming through the high passes

and precious little carrion. The dyrewolves and lions and great birds all fought over the scraps, so the only way a troll got a decent bit of meat was to stumble on it first. She'd said as much to Maggot, and he told her he had an idea and would catch up with her. Now he'd been gone for two whole nights. If his plan was stealing something from the wolves, he'd end up carrion himself.

She sniffed the air again.

He had promised to meet her at the falls. Maybe he waited for her there, his scent lost in the mist. She hurried on, passing through a grove of cherry trees that had given up their fruit -- what little there was -- months ago, in the spring. It was still enough to make her mouth water. There were maples beyond them, the leaves turned crisp with the fall. She found one sprayed with an unfamiliar odor and paused to lick at the stain. It didn't taste fresh, but it wasn't that old either. In either case, it meant some young male troll marking his territory, eager to prove himself. One more danger for Maggot. If Frosty's band was around here, then courtesy required her to let them know that she was coming. Windy reared up and pounded out a greeting high on her chest, a sound so deep it made the air tremble a mile or more away. Bum-ha-da-dura-dura. "A stranger, but a friend," the rhythm said to those who listened.

Not wholly a stranger, in truth, since she and Maggot had passed this way before. But not part of the band either.

Not part of any band.

For too many years, she and Maggot had been rootless, blown about from place to place like leaves in a storm. But she wouldn't have it any other way if it meant losing her son.

She repeated the greeting and sat down. While she waited for an answer, she picked through the long grasses and fallen leaves looking for something to eat. She found nothing and heard no answer so she continued on her way. With all the thunder from the waterfalls, she doubted anyone heard her.

The gibbous Moon sat at zenith, flooding the landscape with pale, colorless light. Not a good night to be out. The panic it caused her was subsumed by her worry for Maggot and the hunger in her belly. The thick canopy of the trees soothed her, but when she reached the rocky, open area around the falls, the light hurt her eyes even if it didn't blind her.

The water dropped sixty feet, half in a single sudden plunge. Flowers of spray blossomed off the dark black rocks. Halfway down the falls, a triangular ledge jutted out at an angle, broad on the left end and blending into the straight drop on the right. The music of the water changed as it poured over this surface to crash among the jumbled boulders.

Unappetizing ferns and vines covered the hillside below the tall spruce trees and hemlocks she'd smelled earlier. Mist hung in the air, moistening her dry, cracked skin. Despite the danger of the moonlight and the trolls she hadn't yet seen, Windy ventured right down to the pool and waded out into the cave-cold water under the falls. It eased her aches and took the edge off her torpor. She bent down out among the slick, dark rocks and drank until she didn't feel thirsty.

She noticed a sluggish silver flash deep in the water. Fish. She stepped slowly over to where she saw them, dangling her hand open-palmed with one finger bent, flicking the pink-nailed tip slowly back and forth like a hapless worm.

A large, juicy trout swam almost within her reach, then zipped away. She concentrated on the movement of her finger, hardly daring to breathe as she tried to tempt the fish back again. It slid in for a second look, gliding into reach of her palm, when something splashed in the water beside her and scared it off. She looked up and saw a group of trolls gathered in the meadow beside the pond. Several had stones in their hands.

She waved to them and climbed out of the water. She counted eleven-four adult females, and three adult males, plus two little ones that made her smile.

Another male and female appeared to be about twelve winters old, the same age

as Maggot. Ready to mate. The oldest female was Frosty, who'd been First of the band for as long as Windy could remember. She also recognized Big Thunder and his son, Little Thunder. The young male was probably Little Thunder's boy, Fart. Although they had started calling him Stinker the last time she and Maggot visited. She didn't remember the girl's name.

"Forgive me for hunting in your pool," she said to Frosty, shouting above the din of falling water. "I didn't see anyone."

"S'all right," she shouted back, looking over Windy's shoulder into the woods. "You still keep that animal around?"

There was no rancor in her voice, so Windy tried to keep it out of her response. "He's my son."

"He was one ugly little monster."

Windy didn't hide the anger in her voice this time. "Not to me."

Most of the others wandered off, turning over logs and rocks as they searched for food. Frosty shrugged, scratched herself, and waddled down to the edge of the pool. "Heard he's traveling by daylight now. Can he really do that?"

"Yes."

The old troll made a strange, noncommittal shape with her mouth. "Well, it's good to see you anyway. Your smell is welcome."

"I like the way you smell also," Windy replied, though it wasn't strictly true -- Frosty had a mossy scent, and there was something growing in the cracks of her skin. Windy wondered where the trollbirds were who plucked out such things. "Where's the rest of your band?"

"This is all of us."

She wouldn't have believed it, except she'd seen other bands dwindle just as fast. "What happened to them?"

"Accidents. Two males caught out in daylight. And then people, blackhairs, are moving through the mountains, heading east. They kill the game as they go, and sometimes kill us, though we chase them away. After they came through last year, we caught the coughing sickness. Ten of us died. Are you looking for a husband?"

"No."

"Because we have no unmarried males. But, ah, if you were willing to share a husband .... "

Windy didn't grab at that fish. "No, I'm not interested."

"Ah, well. We have two children here now, that's more than we've had in many years. It may be getting better soon."

"I hope so --"

"If she's not here to mate," blurted another female lurking behind them, Little Thunder's sister, Rose, "then make her go away! There's not enough food as it is."

Rose wanted to be First, that was obvious. Windy stayed silent.

"I don't see her taking food out of your mouth," said Frosty.

Rose slapped her hands on her chest in the mildest form of challenge.

"She's not one of us. She doesn't belong here."

"We'll take a vote then."

Windy had become accustomed to this ritual. It followed her and Maggot around like a buzzard. She was smacking her lips in acceptance when a flat, familiar drumming sound broke the rhythm of the falls. She turned and saw Maggot striding out of the trees, standing straight despite all her efforts to get him to stoop in a better posture. But her heart leapt up in joy at the sight of him. He was safe. That was all that mattered.

Rose laughed out loud at the sight of him. "He is ugly," she said to Frosty.

"And a runt."

He was very small for his twelve winters, not even six feet tall, although getting close to it. She hoped he wasn't fully grown, though she feared he might be. Most trolls reached their full height by his age. He was undersized in other ways too, all viney muscle with no belly on him at all, and legs so long and slender they looked deformed. His arms couldn't even reach the ground when he bent over, not unless he crouched. His skin was pale and smooth too,



so thin it broke at every quick abrasion. And his bristly black hair had grown long and horribly shiny. It hung down his back with ragged ends where she'd chewed it off.

But ugly?

Never. Not in her eyes.

Stinker, the young male, loped over toward him, bared his teeth, and pounded his chest in warning rather than greeting. It must have been Stinker's spray she smelled. Maggot didn't back down, and though the sound of his little fists on his scrawny chest was as feeble in comparison as the teeth he also flashed in response, something about him made Stinker stop.

"Hey, Fart," Maggot said. "Good to smell you again."

"Hey." The troll's brow ridge rolled down. "You still stink like milk."

Which was an insult. Windy hurried to her son's side, ready to intervene.

"These are our friends, Maggot."

He smiled, a broad and genuine expression that contrasted sharply with the purple moons of sleeplessness puddled beneath his eyes. "Oh, good! I've been trying to catch up with you. I have a surprise."

And then without another word of proper greeting, he sprinted back into the forest. A rock flew through the air behind him -- hurled by Rose -- but it fell well short. He returned a few moments later dragging a buck deer, one of the rare and furtive white-tails with six points on its antlers. It was lashed with lengths of vine to a pair of long poles. She didn't know where he'd learned such things. A troll never thought of new things like that.

The other members of the band came running. The animal was a couple nights old and Maggot had obviously done much to conceal its scent from scavengers. It smelled of mud, and urine, and stinkweed, but underneath all those things, it smelled wonderful.

"Carrion?" asked Little Thunder.

"No," said Maggot, standing upright and staring eye to eye with the comfortably squatting male. She had the sudden realization that he stayed in his aggressive posture all the time simply to be as big as the nonaggressive trolls. "I hunted it and killed it."

Little Thunder hooted in derision. "How? With your fearsome teeth?" He bared his own and everyone laughed.

Everyone except Windy. And Maggot. He bent down and took something from beside the deer. "With these teeth," he said, and showed off the sharpened sticks he'd played with lately.

Little Thunder flashed his teeth again, rising up on his hind legs to his full eight feet of height, and then retreated. Some of the others banged warnings on their chests.

People used sharp sticks like that to hurt trolls, which was why trolls stole them and hid them deep in caves where people would never find them.

"These are our friends," Windy repeated.

"Then let them eat," said Maggot. He smiled at her again.

Hunger won out over any lecture she intended to give. She reached down to snap off the vines that bound the deer to the poles. In its side, she noticed the broken-off point of one of Maggot's sticks. He had to get close to the horns to do that, and she looked over him quickly for signs of new wounds. He'd suffered a lot of injuries in his twelve years. But he appeared fine. The other trolls still held back, although she could almost hear their stomachs rumbling.

"What will you eat?" she asked. They had learned long ago that carrion made Maggot ill. He had to eat meat fresh, soon after it was dead, or not eat it at all. He had so many weaknesses, and struggled so hard to overcome them.

"I've eaten," was all he said. She doubted it. He'd never put on the weight he needed or grown the way he should. She opened her mouth to say so, and saw him smiling at her, as if he knew exactly what was coming next. "I killed a striped-tail the same evening, and ate it myself."

Aha, she thought. Trying something small first, then something bigger. Very typical of him. And not waiting long before the second venture either. Also

typical.

The other trolls jostled for position, pushing the smaller ones back while they waited for her to take first piece. Windy chomped down on the rear flank, severing the hip joint with her massive jaw, ripping the flesh with her nails, and pulled away a whole leg. The others crowded in as soon as she stepped away, jumping back only when the gas-swollen belly popped. The two children licked those parts up off the ground, while every other part of the animal disappeared within moments. Some of the trolls took more than others while a few had none at all, and those looked to steal any loose scraps.

The meat tasted sweet. Windy gobbled it up quickly, shoving moist chunks of it into her massive cheeks.

Maggot circulated among the trolls. They curled their shoulders against him, ready to run away. They didn't know, as she did, that he wouldn't steal their food because he couldn't stomach it. When he came close to Stinker, the troll rose up and growled at him. Maggot dodged behind him and scampered away. She thought she'd seen one of the sharp sticks in his hand, but when she glimpsed him again, the wooden tooth was gone.

A few seconds later, in between the sounds of meat being ripped off bones, she heard a pop followed by a howl of pain.

Stinker danced around and around, waving his arms and slapping at his behind. As he spun away from Windy, she saw the stick poking out of his bottom. Maggot must have propped it under Stinker, where the slow constant pressure punctured his thick skin.

She couldn't help herself. She started to laugh and so did most of the others. When Stinker dropped the other haunch -- that was the piece he ripped free -- to grab at the stick with both hands, Maggot rushed in. He scooped up the meat and hurried away to the young female, who sat there with nothing to eat.

It was a courtship gift, all very proper. And, coming from Maggot, not proper at all. Windy's laughter died in her throat.

Frosty frowned in open disapproval. It was a glare so very like Windy's mother it made her feel at home, even though her mother had died during the past winter. The young female appeared stunned, but she made the proper gargling sound in response, grabbed the meat, and ran away to eat it.

Stinker hopped over to Frosty and asked her to remove the splinter. She did, and as soon as it came out, he grabbed some of the ribs from her pile of bones and scooted off. Soon bones crunched by thick teeth and the sucking out of marrow were the only sound in the woods besides the waterfall.

Windy sniffed the air. The mood was mixed. The trolls were glad for the scraps of meat, but Maggot made them nervous. He made her nervous too when he went over and flirted with the girl.

He whispered to her first, drew a laugh, and that wasn't so bad. Then they rubbed faces together, and she bent over abruptly, presenting her sex to him. It was neither swollen nor properly red, and she continued to eat and look around while she did it. Windy suspected that the girl was only trying to make Stinker jealous. But Maggot sniffed at it, stood up, and waved his sex at her face to show he was interested. When he rubbed up against her, the adults were caught between horror and humor. But since neither Maggot or the girl gave off the proper musk, and since the girl was so much larger than he was, they treated it like an uncomfortable joke.

Windy sighed miserably.

She'd always hoped that Maggot would find a nice girl to mate with and settle down. She didn't care for grandchildren so much, but his happiness mattered to her. She knew that she and Ragweed were happy, even if it was only for a short time. She wanted that for her son.

So Maggot's earnestness worried her. However much the other trolls considered the pantomime a joke, Windy knew that he was serious about mating with the girl. The girl noticed it too, at about the same moment, because she squealed and jumped away. When Maggot stood there confused, Stinker growled and charged, shoving him to the ground.

"Wrestle him!" shouted Little Thunder.

The others in the little band took up the chant at once. "Wrestle, wrestle!" Stinker's face wrinkled happily at the suggestion. He reared up on his hind legs, almost eight feet tall and over two hundred fifty pounds, battering his chest with the danger-death warning. "I challenge you!"

Maggot sat on the ground. He looked at Windy, his eyes cold and certain. There were times when she wished he were not so completely fearless or that he would not take risks if she refused them. But what could she do?

She smacked her lips: yes.

He stood up -- two feet and a hundred pounds shy of Stinker's size -pounding death on his chest, using cupped hands instead of knuckles to make a sharper, cracking sound in place of the deep resonant bass.

The adults formed a rough circle around the edge of the glade. Or, rather, a half circle spread out behind Stinker. Windy sat alone in the other half of the circle. The girl hovered on the edge between the two, knuckle-walking toward Windy then back again toward her band.

"You're a baby bird in a nest," Maggot said, snapping his fingers. "I'm going to crush you like that!"

"You're a worm!" screamed Stinker. "And I'm going to squish you like a, uh, like a, like a worm!"

Maggot fell forward to stand on his hands, and waved his foot at Stinker's face. "You're a snake in the grass -- I'm going to break your skinny little snake-neck between my toes."

Some of the other trolls laughed at this. It was a good trick, something none of them could do. Besides, the insults were a big part of the fun of wrestling and Maggot was good at them. Telling a troll he had a neck was like telling a twelve-year-old he smelled like milk.

Stinker was not so good at insults. He grabbed at Maggot's foot like a fish going for a fingernail. Maggot flipped backward and landed upright. Stinker rushed him, but Frosty thrust her long arms between them.

"Are you done talking already?" she asked.

"Just let me at him!" said Stinker.

Frosty looked to Maggot, who bounced up and down a little nervously. He lifted his chin. "Just have him bend over, so I can fart in his ear to see if he knows his name."

"Let me at him!"

"Not until I say ready," she commanded. "Do you both agree to this?"

They did.

"Does anyone vote against it?" She looked at Windy.

Windy refused to raise her hand. Sooner or later, Maggot had to learn what was going to happen to him if he picked fights with other males over a girl.

"Let them wrestle already," hollered Big Thunder.

Frosty turned back to the boys. "There's to be no eye poking, or nose gouging, and no killing, but everything else is fair. Do you both agree to that?"

"What if I smash him by accident?" asked Stinker. "What if I fall on him? He'll squish like a berry."

"What if I rip his head off," Maggot spat back. "What if I rip his head off and drink his brains out of his skull? Not that he has any."

"No killing!" Frosty told Stinker. "You'll fight until I say stop." She stepped back with her arm outstretched, dropped it suddenly, and cried, "Go!"

The first exchange happened quickly. Stinker charged with his arms upraised to strike; Maggot dropped to the ground and kicked Stinker's ankles out from under him. As Stinker crashed into the dirt, Maggot attempted to leap past him for the poles he carried the deer carcass in on -- going for his sharpened sticks, Windy realized-- but Stinker lurched to his feet and thrust his hand out wildly. Maggot smacked into the giant forearm and flopped on his back with a sharp cry of pain.

Stinker took a running leap high into the air so he could crush Maggot. Windy gasped aloud, but her son rolled out of the way and Stinker slammed hard into the ground. Maggot came up with a handful of dirt and flung it into Stinker's face.

When Maggot made another dash for his sticks, Little Thunder moved to intercept him. The delay allowed Stinker, howling and blind, to lurch after Maggot's scent. His flailing hand caught her son's ankle and tripped him. Maggot fell down and Stinker fell on top.

Her son's pale skin glistened in the bright moonlight as he wriggled half-free. He and Stinker roiled over several times in their struggle. The lopsided little circle of hooting spectators moved with the pair as they tumbled down the slope to the side of the pool below the waterfall. Stinker ended up on top, spit flying out of his mouth as he pounded his hands at her twisting, dodging son. Windy's fingers kneaded her breast anxiously. Maggot groped in the mud, then smashed his fist into Stinker's nose. She assumed he had picked up a rock as a weapon, but he hadn't. Instead, Maggot shoved a big ball of mud up Stinker's nostrils, choking him. As the troll curled away gagging, Maggot squirmed free.

Or almost free. Stinker grabbed Maggot's foot with one hand while the other clawed at his clogged nose. Maggot whipped around and she heard a snap followed by a howl of pain -- he broke Stinker's finger to break his grip. "Run," she whispered, hoping he would hear her. "Run, run far away, run fast, and I'll come find you when it's safe."

But he didn't run. He pounced on Stinker's back, slipping his arm under the troll's and pressing his forearm down on the back of Stinker's neck. Windy's eyes went wide. This was a practical joke that Maggot played on her often, holding her arm out of the way so he could tickle her.

"Run," she pleaded.

Then Maggot did the same with his other arm, something he'd never done to her. Stinker spun in a circle, unable to reach Maggot, who perched on his back like a trollbird.

"Rip the maggot's head off!" screamed Little Thunder, and the other trolls screamed with him, slapping their hands on the ground. The uproar made Windy tremble.

"Bite him!" cried Rose. "Bite him really hard!"

"Fall on him!" yelled Big Thunder.

The last suggestion made the most sense, and someone had just suggested that they vote on it when Stinker took the initiative into his own hands -- or rather legs, as his hands flapped uselessly over his head -- and flopped backward. Windy plunged her fingers into the loam and groped for bedrock to root herself to. She wanted to run to Maggot's aid, but knew she could not. Not yet. But as soon as the two hit the ground, she would rush in ....

They did not hit the ground.

Maggot had anticipated Stinker's move. As the troll fell back, Maggot kicked his legs out and landed upright. With his feet planted firmly, he bent Stinker's chin into his chest. Then, with a heart-wrenching cry, he folded the troll over double.

Stinker's skin turned a darker shade of gray. He couldn't breathe. The veins stood out on Maggot's head, like ridges in the moonlight. Windy held her place. All fell silent except for the rush of the waterfall as they watched her son strain his long legs to snap Stinker in half and grind him into the dirt.

Surely, Windy thought, looking at her son, his heart will burst. If his didn't, hers would.

That's when the girl shrieked and rushed forward. She leapt on Maggot's back, slapping and clawing him. "You beast! You, you animal!"

Maggot let go instantly and fled across the glade for one of the trees. He dashed in among the branches and climbed above the height of the trolls. "Hey, Fart," he taunted, between loud, ragged breaths. "Your mama had to run and save you!"

It was all the more effective as an insult because Windy sat there and did nothing. The other trolls howled with laughter, even Little Thunder, as the girl cradled a sulking, weary Stinker in her arms.

"Look at Mama Troll with her baby!"

"Better clean his nose, Mama, it's a mess!"

Windy let go of the dirt, brushed it off her fingers, and relaxed. They'd ridicule Stinker for years for losing a wrestling match to her boy.

Frosty lumbered over and sat down beside Windy. Neither one said a word. Then Frosty reached out and started grooming her, picking off loose scales of skin and crawling bugs. Windy sighed in contentment.

"That was good fun," said Frosty, crunching a big tick between her molars.

"Your son, he fights like a troll."

"He's a good troll," Windy said.

Little Thunder overheard and grunted his approval. "He brought us some fresh rotten meat. That was good. You and your son, you can come visit our band any time you want."

"Visit, but not stay," said Frosty firmly. "We can take a vote, and you and he can argue otherwise, if you insist. But I won't support it."

Windy didn't insist. She'd heard the same thing many times before, from the Sulphur Springs down south to Deep Hole Gorge in the east. "We're just glad for your hospitality. Maybe I could come to your den to sleep for the day and tomorrow night I can tell you what I've seen in the seven bands."

"That smells good. And your son? Where will he spend the day?"

Even Frosty knew that it would not be safe for Maggot to stay there, not until Stinker got over his anger. "He can take care of himself," she said loudly.

"He's a grown troll."

She glanced over. Maggot smacked his lips at her, and descended from the tree. His skin looked like dropped fruit in the moonlight, covered with dark bruises and deep cuts. As he ran off into the woods, she worried less than she had only two nights before. He'd proven that he could take care of himself. She was proud of him, prouder than ever. So why did she feel so sad?

THE AIR OUTSIDE the cave blew wonderfully cold in the mercifully short daylight. In the summertime, cool air inside the cave refreshed her; now it felt warm compared to the winter wind, almost enough to make her feel sluggish. Windy longed to run out and roll in the snow to wake up, but the last wings of daylight still feathered the cave's entrance.

Some of the other trolls walked up from the deeper recesses of the caverns, rubbing their eyes. "Is he back yet?"

Windy opened her mouth and thrust out her tongue.

The trolls frowned, but not much. One of them chewed on a big-eared bat that had fallen from its perch high up in the cave. Sometimes the trolls threw stones at the bats to knock them down. Thousands hung upside down on the tall ceilings of the caverns, night creatures like the trolls and hard to catch in the summer when they flitted around too fast for the eye to follow. They seemed to sleep all winter long and were easy to capture. One in the mouth melted away to nothing like snow. A whole pile of them didn't add up to a decent meal though it was something crunchy to snack on.

Windy sighed. Winter was the best time of year for a troll. It was easier for her to stay active in the cold, and the nights were so long that there was enough time to eat and play. Best of all, it was the season of meat: weaker animals succumbed to the harsh temperatures and foundered in the deep drifts, leaving plenty of carrion for the trolls. She scratched the back of her neck, then her elbow. Scales of gray skin floated through the air like snow. That was the only problem -- their thick skin dried up and came off in big flakes that left the skin beneath pink and raw.

She thought of Maggot's thin skin, no longer so white, scorched brown by the Sun, rubbed raw by the wind, with so little fat beneath it she wondered how he stayed warm at all. In comparison, her own itchiness didn't seem like such a big problem.

The last trolls straggled up from their day's sleep. There were no children in this band -- the last had been killed by a cave bear during the summer -- and none of the females were pregnant. Yet these seventeen individuals constituted the largest remaining band of trolls in all the eastern mountains. Windy knew of nine at Blackwater Falls, and seven each in the bands at Deep River Gorge

and Sulphur Springs. There were some farther north in the Black Rock country, some said, or toward the Big Deep Water. The Piebald Mountain remnant from way down south had moved north a few winters before, looking for a place without people. It was believed that there were many far to the West in the mountains beyond the sunset, but no one living had ever seen them.

A shadow fell across the cave's entrance. As the trolls surged toward the promise of darkness, a thin, almost skeletal figure entered.

One of the girls gasped. "What an ugly troll!"

"He's beautiful!" snapped Windy. The girls dissolved in giggles, and she realized she'd been had.

Maggot was still short, not quite six and a half feet tall, and painfully thin at a little over two hundred pounds, but he had grown as big as could be expected. He was eighteen or nineteen winters old now -- Windy had lost count of the years. His pale skin was covered with more scars than she could count or remember. The new and fading marks overlapped each other, from the numerous deep scratches left by the nails of other trolls to two long purple worms across one thigh left by a big-toothed lion he'd killed. Some of them he'd never explained to her, nor had she asked him to.

Ragweed snorted. He was the biggest male in the band, grown round-bellied with age and presumably wise. He stood next to his current mate, a pretty young girl named Cliff, and glared balefully at Maggot. His nose wrinkled and he shouldered his way forward.

Windy sniffed and smelled the same odor, of many people, but no one stood there except her son. "Maggot?"

He stepped out of the light into the dark and she saw him clearly then. He wore something on his feet, not just wrapped animal skins but things shaped from the forelegs of deer. They had the people scent on them, as did the skin across his shoulders.

"Showing his true odors," said Ragweed, looking over to Windy. "And this is the troll -- I use the term loosely -- you want to be First?"

Before she could answer, one of the younger trolls called out. "Got any ripe meat, Maggot?"

Her son inclined his head toward the cave entrance. "Part of a humpback." The other trolls looked expectantly to Windy. She lifted her lips, like someone with her mouth full, to say "go on," and they all shoved past her to pour out of the cave.

"Where did you get those?" She indicated his new skins.

"I scavenged them, how else?" He handed her the old metal knife he'd used for the past three years -- something else he'd scavenged. "I replaced this tooth with a new one," he said, showing her the one in his other hand. "You take it."

"Thank you," she said. Her fist enclosed the tooth.

"Keep this one with you," he said.

"This time I will." He'd given her such gifts before, but in truth it wasn't as sharp or as effective as her own claw-like nails. And it was always hard to remember where she left such things when she went outside. If she could hold onto it through the night, she'd take it deep into the cavern when she went to sleep at dayrise. There she'd add it to the piles of similar baubles the trolls had accumulated over tens of lifetimes, counted beyond memory. She gestured to his covering skins. "Why tonight?"

He crinkled his nose, signifying uncertainty. "Because," he said. Then, "I was cold. These were warm."

"But tonight you're supposed to challenge Ragweed for First of the band! You've worked so hard to make the others accept you as one of them. This just reminds them of the differences."

He ran his hands over her skin, as if picking for parasites. There weren't any in this cold. She did the same for him. They sat like that a long while, touching each other without speaking another word.

"I am different," he said finally. "If they accept me, it'll be because of who I really am."

She didn't know what to say to that, so she rose. "We should go. The vote will be at midnight."

"I'm ready."

"Aren't you thirsty? Don't you need to go down to the lake inside the cavern and get a drink?"

"No, I'm fine."

They stepped outside. A waning thorn of Moon pricked the horizon. Nothing remained of the humpback except the poles Maggot carried it in on and a few stray bits of fur and bone. A new pole, with a pointed leaf of metal on one end like those stored in the deep caves, lay propped against the stone. Maggot picked it up to carry with him. A tramped-down trail led across the deep snow to the vale, through several miles of forest filled with pine cones and acorns for anyone willing to dig them up.

"Let's cut over the hills to join the others," said Windy. She'd eat something later, when her stomach settled.

"That smells good," said Maggot.

Fluffy flakes of snow swirled in the air. There was no trail to follow this way. Windy's broad flat feet buoyed her up across the deep drifts, and her wide hands helped support her weight. She moved along quickly on all fours. She still expected Maggot, as thin and small as he was, to glide across the surface, but his narrow feet continually broke through the crust of snow. As they crossed the naked ridge, Windy heard wolves howling.

Maggot looked over his shoulder. "I should've brought my snowfeet," he said. Windy paused for him to catch up. "Are they something else you scavenged, with all the rest of this?"

He smiled at her. "I scavenged the first ones years ago. I've been hiding these things from you, and the others, for years. Mostly caching them in the trees, like carrion."

She didn't know what to say except, "Good. That's smart."

The wolves howled again, much nearer. Windy sniffed the air, but scented nothing upwind. She hoped they were timberwolves -- she'd never learned to tell one wolf's howl from another. Dyrewolves could be deadly.

Maggot smiled grimly. "The winter's been long and hard. Much of the meat I've taken for you would've fallen to them."

Windy glimpsed the pack gliding through the distant trees like wisps of brown-gray fog. A canny old female led three, no, four males. Another handful-plus-two trailed behind. Dyrewolves, just as she feared. A pack could easily bring down a single troll or even a pair. It had happened to Bones and her mate a few winters past.

The snow cracked, and Maggot sunk to his knees. Windy went back to help pull him free.

"They're slow," he told her. "They tire quickly. You should run ahead and join the others. You'll be safe."

"I can't do that!"

He stopped in his tracks and turned toward the trees. "I can climb, they can't. Neither can you. Eventually they'll go away."

"I've always stood beside you."

He snorted, troll fashion. "Now's a good time to change your habits."

Before she could run or Maggot could bolt for the trees, the baying dyrewolves bounded across the snow. They almost appeared to be swimming, the way they paddled their paws to stay afloat on this cold white lake.

She shoved her son toward the trees. "Run! Save yourself!"

Maggot laughed and placed his back against hers, his knife in one hand, spear in the other. "It's always been the two of us against the world, huh, Mom?"

A little smile shadowed her mouth. Before it faded away, the dyrewolves closed in, spreading out in a circle. She smelled uncertainty on them, and hunger, but no fear, neither from them nor Maggot. The only fear she smelled was her own.

The wolves scented it too. Two of them dashed in and snapped at her, but stopped short when she bared her own teeth and snarled back.

She'd never been this close to a dyrewolf. Their bodies were stocky, with short, powerful legs. They had thick ruffs around their necks, and fur streaked gray, white, and brown. But it was their massive heads, all out of proportion to the rest of their bodies, that made her most afraid. They had shorter snouts than the timberwolves or wild dogs, with teeth like sharp stones in their bone-crushing jaws, and wild intelligent eyes. They smelled like death.

As the two wolves stopped short of her, three others attacked Maggot. The old female lunged at him first, but it was a feint. He swung his knife at her in counter-feint, and when the old male made the real attack, Maggot thrust the spear through its neck. Blood gushed out, turning the snow pink. Maggot twisted the spear and pulled it free to jab it at the third beast while the wounded one yelped and crawled away.

The dyrewolves withdrew a short distance. "Let's go," Maggot said. "Down this way, toward the vale."

She smacked her lips in assent, and one of the males dived in to fasten on her arm. "Aiiieee!"

Others leapt in at Maggot. She heard him shout as he drove them back, but all she felt was pain as the dyrewolf's teeth sank right through her flesh. She drove her fist down onto the soft snout. The wolf snarled, and its yellow-eyes squeezed shut, but it didn't let go, so she pounded again and again as the wolf shook its head dodging the blows, and when that failed to free her arm she thrust one of her long sharp fingers deep into a yellow eye. It popped like a grape under her nail, squirting its warm juice across her hand, so she thrust further into its brain. The dyrewolf shuddered and died but still it didn't let go.

She pried with her fingers until the dead animal's jaws cracked. She stopped screaming as she dropped it to the ground and swiveled around to answer the next attack.

If any of the other wolves had charged in, they could have pulled her down and killed her. She saw now that they hadn't only because Maggot had held them away. His footprints formed a protective circle around her, and he stood poised with his spear raised. Half a dozen animals bled from cuts to their necks and faces.

"Step away from the dead one slowly," said Maggot, his voice as sharp as his weapon.

She did exactly as he told her. They were scarcely out of arm's reach when the dyrewolves surrounded their dead companion, licking at the bloody snow and baying.

"Keep moving, faster now," Maggot said tersely. "If you pack snow on the wound as you go, it'll help"

She noticed the blood pouring down her arm. Something felt wrong with the bone. Numbness stiffened her fingertips. Without slowing down, she scooped up handfuls of snow and packed it as Maggot told her, clamping her good hand down tight on top of the wound. It eased the burning and staunched the bleeding. She found it difficult to walk on two feet, but she shuffled along until she found and followed the deep trails in the snow made earlier by the other trolls.

She'd never felt so close to her own death before. She trembled from it, and yet, as they left the dyrewolves behind and climbed the low rise between two peaks to descend into the larger valley, it all seemed unreal, something that had already happened in the distant past. She was changed, but she did not know how or why.

"Have you fought them before?" she asked her son. "Alone?"

Maggot smacked his lips once. Yes, but it was a small meal, nothing.

Her son was covered by many scars. How had he been changed? She felt faint-headed, apart from herself, as though she floated over the snow.

They entered the sacred glade with its circle marked out by thirteen boulders. The other trolls saw Windy's wound and crowded around to hear how it happened. While she told them about the dyrewolves, Maggot circulated and spoke to Rocky



and her mate, and to Blossom, and Scabpicker and all the other trolls whose votes he hoped to win.

"Let's start," shouted Ragweed.

"I'm ready whenever you are," said Maggot. "You want to be First, so you should go first."

Ragweed scowled, unsure if he had just been insulted. Windy sat down as he trotted around inside the circle of stones, trying to impress the other trolls. He was still handsome, she reluctantly admitted to herself. His gray skin looked exceptionally rock-like against the white snow.

"Look!" shouted Maggot, breaking the spell. "He's running in circles! And that's who you want for a leader?"

Ragweed swerved, rushing at Maggot, rising up to his eight and a half feet of height and pounding his chest. Maggot straightened up as tall as he could stand, stretched out his arms as if to pound on his chest. While Ragweed paused for the challenge, Maggot dropped without warning to four legs and ran around the circle. He didn't go more than a quarter of the way before he stopped to scratch his ass. It was a perfect imitation of Ragweed and Windy wasn't the only one to burst out laughing.

Ragweed laughed along with them, until his brow drooped with belated recognition. "Hey!"

Maggot stood up straight again. "Are we here to vote or wrestle? I can't tell by the way you're acting so far."

"That's enough," said Laurel, now the oldest female of the band, and a former First. "Both of you have ideas for what we should do about our problems.

Ragweed, maybe you should begin. Tell us why we should vote for you to be First of the band."

Windy shook her head, squeezing fresh snow on her arm to ease the pain. Maggot had ideas for the good of the band -- not Ragweed -- and he had talked about them often while Berry, the previous First, died of the yellow water. Ragweed opposed everything Maggot said, more out of habit than for any other reason. Somehow they ended up as the two candidates for First.

Ragweed paced, then paused, then squatted and looked each troll in the eyes.

"You all know me," he told them. "I was born in this band and I've lived here all my life among you."

How conveniently he'd forgotten their six years of wandering, thought Windy.

But he smelled earnest. He'd always had a charismatic fragrance.

"We've faced a lot of problems," Ragweed continued. "Some of you are as old as me. You remember back when we were little trollings there were fifty, sixty trolls in this band. The mountains were ours. We found every bit of carrion, every calf and fawn that went unprotected. Vote for me, and I'll bring those days back. We'll make things like it used to be, when the caves were safe for children and the land was ours to scavenge."

He paced again. "Now, if you don't want to vote for me, you can vote for Maggot. I'd say that he's as ugly as a possum, but that'd insult the possum." Laughter to that. "The worst thing is that he's the size of a trolling, and he still follows his mother around like one, and she covers him up funny."

More laughter at that.

Ragweed glanced over as if expecting Maggot to attack him for these insults, but her son stayed motionless. What was wrong with him? He ought to be roaring his disagreement. She swallowed a handful of snow to wet her parched throat.

"Vote for me," her former husband concluded, "because I'm the real troll.

Thank you."

Three or four of his strongest supporters cheered madly, and pounded their chests in challenges directed at Maggot.

Windy sniffed worriedly. To her, Maggot smelled wonderful, unique. But to the others he would smell foreign, not like himself but like a strange band of people because of the things he carried. Seemingly oblivious to this, Maggot bounded over to one of the boulders and climbed on it to make himself taller.

"Vote not with your eyes, but with your bellies," he began and Windy's spine shivered like a reed. Maggot had trained his voice to make it deep and

resonant like Ragweed's. "Ask not who looks more like you, but who has done more for you. Ragweed is a handsome troll, and I admit that I am skinny, frail, and small. But you're not looking for a mate, with the beauty of a mate, but for your First, and I have been the first to serve you all. Who brings you more mea --"

He jumped as a ball of dung sailed by the spot where he stood. Cliff and Ragweed's other supporters hooted and waved their bottoms at him. Laurel sprinted over on her knuckles. "We'll have none of that now!"

"No muck-slinging!" shouted old Stump, and it was taken up as a general cry. One more ball of dung was hurled half-heartedly, but no more was needed to ruin the rhythm of Maggot's speech. Windy could cry. It would be a close vote under the best circumstances, but now ....

Maggot pointed to her. "Ragweed says that I stand beside my mother and that is true! I'll never deny it. Tonight as I came to this place, dyrewolves attacked my mother -- you see the teeth marks on her arms. But I stood by her to protect her and I will also stand by all of yo --"

"Aw, he bit her arm himself," cried Ragweed.

Maggot turned and bared his teeth at him, then mocked his own small mouth. They'd seen her wound, so a few trolls laughed. But inside, Windy cringed. Her son's unimpressive mouth would lose him votes. Trolls voted for big teeth. He was emphasizing all the wrong things!

But Maggot continued. "Ragweed says he's going to give you more food, more fruit. How? People come into the high valleys, eating everything and destroying the caves where we sleep. I've walked across these mountains, from the head up north to the southern tail and I've seen whole bands vanish in the space of a few years. Who last heard word from the Blue Peaks band? Or the Sinking River band? If we don't want to disappear like the others, without a trace, we need a plan."

The trolls looked around, like someone seeking better tasting food.

Windy shifted fretfully. It was the truth! Maggot told the truth, but the trolls didn't want to hear it. He was losing them.

"What is Ragweed's plan?" Maggot asked. "He promises you that everything will be like it was. If he promised to grab the Sun in his fist and move it backward across the sky, would you believe him?"

He'd lost them! Windy groaned aloud, and when the others looked at the noise she grimaced and held her injured arm. But you couldn't mention the Sun before an election, you just couldn't! She thought her son was smarter than that.

"If you elect me First, I will not lead you back but forward. I will take us and join up with the remaining trolls at the Blackwater and the Sulphur Springs. Together, we can make one large band again and there will be mates for everyone and children will be born. I will teach you to make weapons, to hunt down the food we all must have. And I will lead you against the people who trespass --"

"Can we vote now?" asked one of the trolls. Others took up the call.

Truthfully, thought Windy, most had probably made up their minds beforehand. Laurel called for the vote. Hope soared in Windy's breast when she counted the hands. Ragweed only got seven votes. Then Laurel called Maggot's name and four arms went up -- hers, Rocky's and her mate Skeeter's, and Stump's. The vast majority of trolls had lost interest long before and when the vote was called they wandered away to roll in the snow or dig in it for things to eat. Maggot saw the number of hands up and didn't even vote for himself. Instead he jumped up on one of the boulders, drumming the death tattoo on his chest.

No one paid him any attention.

Laurel declared Ragweed the winner. Three or four of his supporters hollered and cheered. Cliff danced wildly around the circle. Windy rose and went over to thank Rocky and Skeeter.

"If anyone could think past tomorrow's darkness," Rocky said, "they'd know that everything Maggot says is true."

Her husband was the last known survivor of Blue Peaks band. He shaped his lips in agreement. "I'd say we should go elsewhere, but this is still the best band

and our best hope."

"These are hard years," Windy told him. "But daylight is always followed again by darkness. Things will get better."

Stump came over, and started to groom her. "How's the arm?"

"It hurts."

"We'll take care of you," he rumbled. "Your son's a fine troll."

"I'm very proud of him."

He exuded a sprit of muskiness, testing the air to see if she'd respond. His interest surprised her. He examined her arm. The worst bleeding had stopped but the numbness reached way down into the bone. "Yep," he told her. "We'll have to keep you fed, take good care of that."

"It'll be fine." She pulled her arm back and hid it behind her. She musked a bit into the air as well. Not because she was really interested -because she wasn't, she was too old for that foolishness and had spent too many years alone with her son. But she didn't want Stump to feel bad. When he started grooming her again, Rocky giggled and Skeeter shushed her. Feeling embarrassed, Windy looked around helplessly for Maggot and saw Ragweed's supporters chasing him away.

"You weren't baiting him again?" she asked when Maggot came and squatted down with them.

"I wanted to wish him good luck," said Maggot. "But he doesn't want it."

Rocky sensed his agitation and picked considerately through his hair. "In the spring," she said, "people will see how bad their decision was. We'll have another vote."

"Perhaps," said Maggot. His face was wistful, sad. He wore a smile that was less his than the skins that covered him. "Listen, I didn't say anything earlier because I was saving it for the feast when I won. If I won. But it's better this way, because there's more for the four of you."

Skeeter licked his lips. "What is it? Another humpback?"

"People," said Maggot plainly. "A small group crossing from the southern pass. I don't know if they got lost, or what, but the blizzard trapped them, made it hard for them to move. I buried the bodies under their stuff and pissed all over it."

Stump grinned from ear to ear. "Where are they? Let's go!"

"Follow the wind, down the rocky river, where it passes between the high rocks. There's a glade of chestnut trees there." He smiled at Stump. "If you can't find the meat, you can always eat the chestnuts."

"There's a deep rock ledge down there, along the river," Rocky added enthusiastically. "We can spend the day sleeping there and eat again tomorrow night."

The other three stood up and left at once. Windy rose also and black dots swam suddenly before her eyes. When they cleared, she noticed Maggot sitting still.

"Come on," she said.

He stuck out his tongue. "Would you ever eat the flesh of another troll?"

"No!" Something was wrong with him, to make him so stupid. Trolls buried their dead away from light, so that they could pass through the hot day of death and enter again into the long sweet night of life.

Maggot came over and sat beside her. "So will I never eat people flesh." He paused, picked at her skin one more time. "I'm people, Mother. I'm not a troll."

"You're a good troll!"

"I've tried hard. You saw that tonight. I'm a better troll than Ragweed in every respect but one. I'm not a troll."

Sharp pain shot all the way up her arm into her chest. "What will you do?"

"Go down to the western valley where I was born. I've studied people for years now as they passed through the mountains. Maybe I can learn to be like them. Maybe find a band that I can join."

Ah, so that's it, she thought. Maybe it's for the best. She took his hand in hers, and walked up out of the stone circle. "We'll go downstream with the others," she told him. "We'll sleep overday under the rock ledge and tomorrow

we'll continue on our way.'

He tried to pull his hand free; she gripped it as tight as an old root wound round a rock.

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Mom?"

"Yes."

"Mom, this is something I have to do alone. You need to stay here. This is where you belong.'

Stump reappeared on the edge of the hill. He spritzed an odor of worry for her. He was very kind. When he saw she was all right, he gave off another musk.

Maggot had never once given off the proper musk, had never once said that he loved her. And yet she knew that he did, that he always would.

"Go with them, Mom," he said softly. "I'll be fine."

He pulled his hand again, very gently. And she did the hardest thing she had ever done in her life.

She let go.