

Promised
Valley
Conspiracy

RON FRITSCH

For Lee Ann, David, and my family

Copyright © 2012 Ron Fritsch

All rights reserved

ISBN: 0615739253

ISBN-13: 978-0615739250

Front cover photograph © iStockphoto.com/Brett Charlton

Back cover photograph © John Moll

For information address:

Asymmetric Worlds
1657 West Winona Street
Chicago, IL 60640-2707

www.promisedvalley.com

Notes

A **character list** appears at the end of this novel, beginning on page 261.

The “**tellers**” referred to in the Promised Valley series of novels perform several functions. They remember and retell their ancestors’ stories. They preside at full-moon and change-of-season holidays, as well as at mating ceremonies and funerals. In place of the king they hear and decide disputes among the people. They’re mostly persons who “go with” members of their own gender.

The “**valley people**” are prehistoric farmers who live in a fertile river valley. They believe the gods had long ago promised it to them in return for their good behavior and obedience.

The “**hill people**” are the hunters who roam the mostly barren hills beyond the mountains surrounding the valley. They believe the gods promised the valley—with the abundance of prey in its mountain-side forests, lake, and river—to them.

The “**river people**” live in a seacoast kingdom south of the promised valley and travel up and down the river on rafts to trade with the valley people.

Chapter 1

Blue Sky, for the valley people, and Long Arm, for the hill people, had brought an end to the most recent warfare between their peoples.

They'd accomplished the cessation of fighting even though neither was his people's ruler. Blue Sky was the son of the valley people's regent. Long Arm was the chief warrior of the hill people's king.

They made their peace agreement at the end of the day of the last battle of the current war they both knew their peoples had unwisely decided to fight.

Blue Sky and Long Arm had no choice, though, but to leave out of their accord the fates of Rose Leaf, the hill people's princess, and Morning Sun, the valley people's prince.

Rose Leaf, having been abducted from her own people in her infancy by Blue Sky's and Morning Sun's fathers, had spent her childhood among the valley people as Blue Sky's sister. Neither Rose Leaf nor Blue Sky had known they weren't siblings. Neither had Morning Sun.

Even though Blue Sky was, and Rose Leaf appeared to be, the children of farmers, they were the best friends of Morning Sun, the valley people's prince. In the previous war with the hill people, Blue Sky's father, Green Field, the man who later held himself out to be Rose Leaf's father as well, had saved the life of Morning Sun's father, Tall Oak.

The life saved was that of the valley people's prince who became the valley people's king later in the war, when the hill warriors killed his father in battle.

After Tall Oak reluctantly assumed the duties of a king, he and Green Field—who “whispered instructions in his ear,” their people liked to say—led their people to victory.

They and their comrades killed or chased away every hill warrior who'd dared enter their valley.

With the promised valley intact and safe once again from their

enemies, the people soon regained their prosperity. They farmed fertile land, and the rain goddess, if she existed, was especially kind to them, providing just as much water as they needed for abundant crops and well-fed livestock—cattle, sheep, goats, and, for those fortunate few who had them, horses—year after year.

Meanwhile their enemies, eschewing agriculture as unnatural and therefore ungodly, hunted and gathered in the barren hills surrounding the valley and often starved to death in winter.

Blue Sky and most of the valley people wished, condescendingly perhaps, that wasn't the truth of the matter.

By the time Morning Sun and Rose Leaf came of age, they'd decided to marry, raise children as beautiful and happy as they were, and live the remainder of their lives together.

Blue Sky, who'd fallen in love with the prince for the same reasons Rose Leaf had, became their champion nevertheless.

He and others among the valley people chose to defend Rose Leaf and Morning Sun's right to marry and have children together, even after it became known that Tall Oak had forbidden their mating because Rose Leaf was the hill people's princess.

Many of the king's highest officials would've liked nothing better than to see Blue Sky dead. He was the son of a farmer, and yet he freely told the people those officials were corrupt and therefore didn't need to be obeyed.

All the valley people knew he could do that only because he was Green Field and Gentle Brook's son—and it didn't hurt that the prince favored him.

Rose Leaf, Morning Sun, and Blue Sky's rebels, who ultimately included Gentle Brook and Green Field, succeeded. They did so by persuading the farmers the hill people were as human as they were.

Consider, they argued, Rose Leaf herself—and her intellect, beauty, and compassion.

The most recent war between the valley people and the hill

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

people arose after Long Arm, leading his brothers and cousins, cleverly abducted both their own people's princess and the valley people's prince.

The hill people's king, Lightning Spear, held them among his people, against their will.

The persons Rose Leaf and Morning Sun lived with, though, were Long Arm's family—who quickly came to love them as much as Blue Sky and the valley people did.

At the end of the last battle, fought on sunset pass, Blue Sky had given himself up to Long Arm, who was free to kill him if the valley people reneged on their promise to let the hill people's warriors drag their dead down the slope on their side of the mountains.

The valley people were the victors in that day's battle and in the previous battle in the upper gorge. Both had been defensive battles they'd fought to salvage at least their upper valley—and prevent the genocide the hill people's king had promised them if they didn't leave it.

The valley people had lost the war, though, in the first battle on the hill people's plain. Their unimaginable defeat that day forced them to give up their lower valley. Its farmland and pastures were twice the size of the upper valley's.

The valley people's current chief warrior, Many Numbers, had asked every family he encountered, with as much sympathy as one chosen to achieve the aims of the god of war could muster, and as often as possible with Green Field at his side, how many of their family had perished in the battle.

Based upon their answers, Many Numbers concluded that one-fifth of their people who were alive before the battle were now lying on the plain, unburied. That one-fifth comprised almost all of the valley people's able-bodied men.

As the hill warriors went about their work after their defeat on sunset pass, carefully keeping the severed limbs and heads of their

dead comrades together with their bodies for fitful burial, Long Arm, using his foot, had forced back into its proper shape the arm Blue Sky had broken at the end of the fighting.

Long Arm also tied splints around his enemy's arm, using the clothes and spears of his dead comrades, to hold it in place until it had a chance to heal.

Despite the many cups of pod-tea Blue Sky had drunk, he passed out from the pain.

But after he came to his senses again, he made his truce with Long Arm: the hill people could have the lower valley, and the valley people would keep the upper valley.

They knew their peoples—their rulers as well as their ruled—would readily assent to those terms. The huge numbers of able-bodied men on both sides killed in the three battles up to that point had horrified their peoples into wanting no more killing, no matter what its justification might be.

Blue Sky and Long Arm therefore did what they did knowing they could get away with it.

They also knew they were only buying time before the next warfare between their peoples. But during that time, they and others among their peoples would be free to imagine the renewed hostilities might not be fought as previous wars between their peoples had been waged.

In those wars the valley people and the hill people simply killed one another for being the other—and nothing else counted.

“Here's what a broken arm in a war does,” Blue Sky said to the older men he was working with the morning after he incurred his injury and brought the fighting to an end.

Some of his co-workers were the same age as his father, Green Field, now the regent of their people, whose laws had elevated him to his position against his will.

The older men could clearly see on Blue Sky's face evidence of the physical pain he suffered.

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

“It puts me,” Blue Sky said, “in the company of the heroes of the previous war.”

“We aren’t heroes,” one of the older men responded, spitting out his words. “Heroes aren’t merely people who do what they’re expected to do. Wounds in a war don’t make a person a hero. Everybody who fights in a war suffer some kind of wound. You found that out yourself.”

“I agree,” Blue Sky said, looking the man in the eye. “But that and perseverance, like your own, do make you heroes. You received your wounds in the war you fought when I was an infant. Despite them, you lived on. And you, along with the women, older children, and surviving able-bodied men of this most recent war, brought it to an end. Thanks to you, our people still exist.”

The older men looked at one another and rolled their eyes. The regent’s son often made strange remarks.

This time it was obvious he was doing it to avoid the truth. Nobody in his kingdom had imagined he’d kill as many hill warriors in the battles at the upper gorge and on sunset pass as he did. Nobody had imagined so much of what happened in those battles he’d calculate in advance—relying upon the persons who had the most useful knowledge and insight as to how they might accomplish their victories.

Surely nobody had imagined he could persuade his cautious father to go along with his radical arguments—especially that their people needed to give up, for the shortest while possible, their lower valley, and save themselves in their upper valley.

Despite his people’s abundant praise for what he’d done, he couldn’t admit he was their hero. That was because he didn’t believe he was.

He’d done what he did without giving thought to what he otherwise knew was true: killing other humans—and the hill people were unquestionably humans—always raised the question whether the person who did it had done so with a self-serving intent peoples other than his own might well consider evil.

In that view, since Blue Sky’s purpose in killing so many hill warriors was merely to save himself and his people from extinction, he was as guilty as he was innocent.

The people, though, wished to believe the father and son who’d

saved them from that fate were heroes.

And the more the father and son insisted they weren't, and had only done what they had to do in the story their people would later tell about the time they lived in, the more their people became convinced they were.

After their victory in the early-autumn battle on sunset pass, which resulted in Blue Sky and Long Arm's armistice, the valley people had one important task to perform before they returned to the valley floor.

Most of the tree trunks they'd rolled down the slope maiming and killing the hill people's warriors had ended up wedged among boulders in the uppermost band of the rough terrain below. They needed to get them back to the ridge in case a hill people's king should ever decide to march his army up his side of the pass again.

If there was a next time, the farmers might not have more than two days to assemble their army. They had to have the timbers already in place.

As soon as they were certain the hill people's army was leaving, they began their work. They wanted Lightning Spear, the hill people's king, and Thunder Hunter, the brutal chieftain of their second most powerful tribe, to see what the hill people could expect if they chose to mount another attack on sunset pass.

It didn't hurt that the two hill people the valley people had come to admire—Long Arm, Lightning Spear's chief warrior; and Wandering Star, Lightning Spear's bastard son and the hill man Blue Sky loved—could also see what the valley people were doing.

The hard work was looping ropes around the tree trunks to extract them from their resting places. With his arm broken at the end of the previous day's battle—and set back in place by Long Arm as both of their peoples watched—Blue Sky couldn't help much with that.

Leading his father's stallion pulling timbers up the slope, though, was something he could do.

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

The slope on the hill people's side of the ridge line was too steep for the horses. So the valley people tied long vine and leather ropes to the trees and pulled them up the hill people's side of the slope by leading the horses down their people's side.

They ran the ropes over the stony ridge line where it was relatively smooth and rounded. They avoided its more jagged sections.

The youngest boys and girls Green Field had allowed coming up to sunset pass as auxiliaries with the army stationed themselves on the ridge line. They liberally coated the ropes with tallow the valley people otherwise would've used for cooking food or making candles. The youthful lubricators with their good eyes could also tell when they had a rope so frayed no amount of grease would keep it from snapping before they saw it again.

Blue Sky's horse-leading comrades that day were mostly the oldest men among the auxiliaries. They'd fought alongside his father and Tall Oak in the previous war and survived it, but their injuries had precluded their fighting as warriors in the present one.

The day Tall Oak's army set out to rescue Morning Sun and Rose Leaf—or, failing that, the king and Sturdy Limb, his brother and chief warrior, had promised, to “teach the hill people a damned good lesson”—Blue Sky saw several of these men in tears.

Now, leading his father's stallion, listening to their stories, he could imagine how they must've felt being left behind. Their sons, nephews, cousins, neighbors, and even some of their brothers, were going off to fight their people's eternal enemy, who'd abducted their beloved prince and his mate-to-be. They, though, were staying home with the women and children—as if they were cowards.

For all the good they could do the kingdom then, they later told Blue Sky on sunset pass, they'd thought they might just as well already be in their graves.

Their injuries in the previous war, though, had also saved them from almost certain death on the hill people's plain and given them the chance—along with a number of women, older children, and survivors of the battle on the plain—to defend their people on the cliff-top above the upper gorge, and later on the ridge at sunset pass, with fatal trees, tree limbs, and boulders aimed at their eternal foe.

They'd also lived to see horses pulling the missiles up to the places where their people needed them, and to be among the first to

realize they could never survive as a people without the assistance of those creatures.

Blue Sky knew he and his able-bodied warrior comrades, with their simple-minded and blood-soaked finishing-off of wounded and trapped enemy warriors, had done less to keep their people alive than the women, children, healing warriors, old men, and horses had.

And yet, due alone to the great number of enemy warriors Blue Sky had killed—as if he were crazed, even though he'd had no wish to so abruptly end his opponents' lives except to save his own and his people's—the valley people considered him a hero.

Blue Sky believed that was a mistake and often said so.

But every time he did, his people merely laughed—as if he'd once again said something so extraordinary its only possible purpose was to amuse.

The farmers who lived in the valley their gods had promised them had blundered into a war with their enemies, the hunters who roamed the hills beyond the mountains surrounding the valley.

The farmers' king and his officials, who ruled from their bluff-top town above the river, had incited their people into sending their army out of the valley to attack the hill people. The valley people's army consisted of all the able-bodied men in the kingdom—except the four of those who'd openly made their opposition to the war known.

The hill people had monstrously abducted the farmers' prince—as well as the woman he loved. The farmers had agreed he could marry and have children with her—even after they'd belatedly learned the woman he wished to marry and have royal children with was the hill people's princess.

Her ostensible father and mother, Green Field and Gentle Brook—who were Blue Sky's father and mother—as well as the king and queen themselves, had kept it a secret. They'd done so to guarantee that Rose Leaf remained alive in a time of revenge—a time when killing their enemy's princess would've made great sense and given them profound satisfaction, even if she was an infant who shared

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

none of her father's or her people's guilt.

The valley people and the hill people imagined their gods—who appeared, to those among their peoples who cared to notice, to be the same gods for both peoples—had given the valley to their people alone, to the exclusion of their eternal enemy.

The hill people hunters believed their gods forbade farming. And that was all that mattered to them.

Although the valley people thought their belief in gods who permitted farming made them superior to their enemy in every way that mattered, the hill people had handed them a military defeat even the valley people's most disturbing dreams hadn't prepared them for.

Only a small fraction of the valley people's army, all of them severely injured, had survived the opening battle of the war and returned to the valley.

The vast majority of their warriors still lay unburied on the hill people's plain where the battle was fought. Wolves, vultures, and ravens had feasted on their flesh.

So fared the army that included all but four of the valley people's able-bodied men.

One of those able-bodied men opposed to the war was Green Field, the farmer who'd saved the life of Tall Oak, then the prince, in the previous war with the hill people. Another was Green Field's son, Blue Sky, the prince's boyhood friend who'd been led to believe that Rose Leaf was his sister.

The other able-bodied men opposed to a hasty use of force against the hill people were Many Numbers and Spring Rain, two of the tellers the people respected and admired the most, the orphans Fair Judge had raised in the home the valley people provided for children whose parents were dead and whose relatives declined to raise as their own children.

The four dissident men and their three women allies—who were Gentle Brook, Blue Sky's mother and Green Field's wife; Fair Judge, the teller the people insisted upon calling by a name she never would've chosen for herself; and Rainbow Evening, the queen no less—had argued that means other than an all-out attack on the hill people should've first been employed to gain the return of the prince and the woman he loved.

Tellers memorized and retold the stories their people's gods

and ancestors had handed down to them. Tellers additionally heard and decided, in place of the king, disputes among their people. Spring Rain, Many Numbers, and Blue Sky were tellers. They were also men who spent their nights with men.

In the face of the dissidence of the four able-bodied men, Tall Oak and Sturdy Limb had decided to leave them home. The chief warrior then chose to say in court, knowing all their people would soon learn of his remark, “We’ve always left out of our battles and wars the older men unable to fight, the women, the children—and the cowards.”

The people had forgiven Green Field and Gentle Brook for pretending that Rose Leaf was their daughter, not the hill people’s kidnapped princess.

During the previous war with the hill people, she, Morning Sun, and Blue Sky were still infants. Green Field and Tall Oak, having been captured by the hill people, escaped and took her with them, intending to kill her. When they realized they were incapable of killing an innocent child, they could only take her home with them and keep her identity a secret. If the valley people had known who she was, they would’ve instantly killed her.

The valley people had willfully taken almost no interest in the hill people beyond keeping them out of their valley, and killing as many of them as they could, including those who only encroached in search of food. The valley people therefore hadn’t realized their enemy greatly outnumbered them. Nor had they known that if the hill people’s tribes stood together taking enormous losses of their own, they could destroy the valley people’s army.

After the valley people’s disastrous defeat on the hill people’s plain, and in order to forestall their extirpation as a people, they had to abandon the lower part of the valley their gods had promised them they’d keep as long as they honored and obeyed those same gods.

Because the king and all the others except Morning Sun above Green Field in the line of succession to the kingship were killed in the

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

battle on the plain, Green Field became the regent for the kingdom in the absence of the prince. He appointed Many Numbers chief warrior and Fair Judge first teller.

The farmers still living after the battle on the plain escaped to the upper valley with an army consisting of the dissidents Green Field, Many Numbers, Blue Sky, and Spring Rain; the few survivors of the battle who'd healed enough to fight again; and the new men who'd come of age when summer ended and autumn began.

They bloodily fought off two attempts by the hill people's warriors to invade the upper valley, the first time through the gorge separating the lower and upper valleys, and the second time over the mountains at sunset pass.

The valley people nevertheless immediately began to speculate how long it would be before they'd get back all of the kingdom their gods had promised them. Many Numbers assumed, as Long Arm had, in view of the valley people's losses on the hill people's plain, it would take a generation to accomplish that.

Blue Sky's refusal to obey his people's laws, which he in the arrogance of his youth felt entitled to ignore, had brought the war on. He therefore wished not to believe it would take a significant portion of a generation for his people to return to the lower valley—or for him to see Morning Sun and Rose Leaf alive again.

When they were very young, Blue Sky, as well as Rose Leaf and Morning Sun, lived in fear of the sire of the stallion Blue Sky led pulling tree trunks over sunset pass. They hadn't the slightest inclination to disobey Green Field's and Gentle Brook's strict and repeated warnings not to go near him—which specifically meant they weren't supposed to go into his stall in the barn or the horse pasture when he was present in those places.

One good kick from him, Gentle Brook and Green Field cautioned, and they'd be dead, yet another unfortunate child who never made it to the full flower of adulthood.

The rule, though, didn't apply to Green Field. Somehow, despite the horse's reputation, the two of them worked the fields together many days from sunrise to sunset, and nothing bad ever

seemed to happen. Blue Sky couldn't recall being told the horse had attempted to kick his father or had misbehaved in any other manner.

Blue Sky's early childhood assumption was that his father had no reason to fear the horse because the two of them were friends. His father rubbed down the stallion at the end of a long summer day, kept him well fed and watered, and sheltered him in the winter in a warm barn with new straw in his stall as often as he needed it.

His father let the stallion share the pasture with their mares, and many of their neighbors' mares as well, when they were in heat—often as Morning Sun and Blue Sky watched in awe. No wonder the gods loved horses.

Growing older, the prince and Blue Sky found themselves trying to decide one full-moon afternoon if Blue Sky could sit on the back of that horse and ride him as he did the mares and geldings.

Morning Sun had initially shaken his head. "Your father and mother say he'll buck you off. He'll kill you."

Blue Sky refused to believe it.

"Your father and mother know what they're talking about," the prince insisted. "More than my father and my uncle do, and they're supposed to be running our kingdom."

Blue Sky hadn't yet reached the point in his life where he felt he could openly say he agreed with that last remark—even though he did.

"I'm sure he won't mind if I mount him," Blue Sky said. "The mares and geldings don't. Why would he?"

"Stallions are supposed to be different," Morning Sun said.

"We can see that. But no more different than we and Rose Leaf are different."

Morning Sun smirked.

"He likes my father," Blue Sky persisted. "You can see he does. Why wouldn't he like me?"

Blue Sky finally told Morning Sun he was going to ride the stallion. The prince could go with him and watch him do it, or he could choose not to, as he saw fit. The king, queen, and Blue Sky's parents were in the village orchard drinking wine. Rose Leaf must've been with them.

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

Morning Sun went into the horse pasture with Blue Sky. The mares and geldings raised their heads and stared at them. The boys walked among them hoping that might keep the stallion at ease.

The stallion, though, was gazing at the mountains, taking no notice of their presence.

Coming within a house-length of the horse, Blue Sky asked Morning Sun to stay back and let him go the rest of the way on his own. That would keep both of them from being killed if the horse did turn out to be as mean as people said he was.

Blue Sky walked around the stallion so the horse had to see him. Blue Sky didn't want to frighten him with a sudden appearance at his side and make him skittish. Blue Sky walked toward him, keeping contact with his eyes. He reached his arm around his neck the way his father did.

The horse, which had often seen Blue Sky, Rose Leaf, and Morning Sun riding the mares and geldings, accepted Blue Sky's embrace.

Blue Sky stroked his neck. The stallion enjoyed it as much as the other horses did.

Blue Sky took his time rubbing the horse's body, even his male parts, gently.

Blue Sky led the horse to the boulder Rose Leaf, the prince, and he had rolled down from the forest to stand on when they mounted the horses. Still stroking the stallion, Blue Sky stood on the rock with his right thigh against the horse's body.

From time to time, he slowly brushed his right foot upward against the animal's loin, sometimes getting it all the way up to his back, sometimes even letting it rest there.

At the end of one of those maneuvers, Blue Sky let his foot and leg slide over the horse.

Although the stallion was partly supporting him now, the animal wasn't making any effort to throw him off.

Blue Sky took his other foot off the mounting rock and righted himself on the stallion's back.

The horse did a kind of dance for a while, rocking forward and backward.

At the end of which Blue Sky still sat upright on his back.

The stallion whinnied and stood motionless.

Blue Sky stroked his neck, showing his gratitude with his hand the way his father did.

Blue Sky looked at Morning Sun and laughed.

“He doesn’t care,” Blue Sky said. “I told you he wouldn’t.”

Morning Sun didn’t seem persuaded just yet. The horse could still change his mind.

“Get Rose Leaf,” Blue Sky said. “I want her to see this.”

“I see you,” Rose Leaf called out.

She came toward them from among the mares and geldings, where she’d been spying on her brother and the prince.

“I want to ride him too,” she added. “Whether the prince does or not.”

She did so that afternoon. As did Morning Sun, who also chose to ride the horse into the orchard so their parents, astonished and frightened at first, could see for themselves what their three misbehaving children had accomplished.

A short while after that, though, Green Field decided Blue Sky and Morning Sun had grown too big, and soon Rose Leaf would as well, to ride the horses without hurting them. He asked the three of them to promise him from that day forward they’d no longer do it.

They made their promises honestly enough. But it didn’t take them long to decide they couldn’t find any good reason to keep them. They never stopped riding the horses. It was obvious they weren’t too heavy for them, not even when Blue Sky and Morning Sun were fully grown.

Among the three of them, on the other hand, it was a secret strictly kept. They agreed they could tell no one else, not even Morning Sun’s cousins or their friend Early Harvest, for fear Green Field would learn they were disobeying him. It gave them no pleasure to fail to keep their promises to him, of all people.

They found a clearing in the forest far removed from any farming village. They took the horses there and rode them.

They’d often watched them running in their pasture for no apparent reason. They could only conclude it was something they liked to do. In the clearing they discovered the horses liked to do it even with fully grown humans on their backs.

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

The trick was learning how to stay on. Each of them fell off a few times, but the horses, seeming to know something was wrong, almost always slowed down or came to a stop.

One day Blue Sky watched as the horse Rose Leaf was riding increased the length of her stride on her own initiative—and gracefully leapt over a prone Morning Sun, who'd unfortunately just fallen off his own mount.

The three of them agreed, despite what the incident told them about the horses, they could never let anybody else know they'd come that close to killing the prince.

The hill warriors who'd stayed below the gorge during the battle on sunset pass had given the valley people no indication they harbored any desire to attack them in the gorge again. Possibly the valley people's faux warriors parading on the upper side of it had them fooled. Or the hill warriors realized limbs and rocks would've rained down on them no matter who was there.

It took a number of days for the hill warriors who'd survived the battle on sunset pass to return to their encampment below the upper gorge. Wandering Star, Blue Sky's hill-man friend and the hill king's unacknowledged son, had told them the shorter days of autumn would disadvantage the hill people's army.

Well before dark every evening, their warriors would have to be done with their hunting and traveling, and all of them accounted for in an encampment ringed by Thunder Hunter's warriors. That was in case any of the warriors of the other tribes, Lightning Spear's included, should decide, with winter approaching, to sneak away and rejoin their families.

Some of the warriors of the lesser chieftains would've been tempted the most since their families roamed the hills through which the army traveled on its way to and from sunset pass.

The hill warriors stayed in their encampment below the upper gorge only the remainder of the day they arrived and that night.

Blue Sky could see Thunder Hunter's sons Dark Storm and War Cloud and their teller cousin True Hunter, who all knew how to make their presence known, had once again survived. None of them

appeared to have suffered an injury in any of their day-long fighting with the valley people in three battles in which many of their comrades died.

The next morning most of the hill warriors departed. For several days afterward the valley people watched as their evening campfires moved farther south along the river in the lower valley.

The hill people also left a contingent of warriors at the gorge.

One day Many Numbers invited Blue Sky and others who could see well to go up to the cliff-top with him. He assigned each of them a section of the landscape to count how many hill warriors they could see within it.

Based on the grand total he calculated from the numbers they gave him, he concluded the hill people hadn't left a contingent large enough to mount another meaningful attack in the gorge.

But he was certain they had more than enough warriors to keep his people from breaking out of the upper valley without a ruinous loss of warriors.

The leaf-losing forest turned as crimson and gold as a sunset after a late-in-the-day storm.

The valley warriors wounded in the battle in the mountains slowly healed. The pain in Blue Sky's left arm subsided, and the appendage became as useful to him as it ever was.

A few of their warriors endured permanent injuries. Early Harvest's cousin Good Harvest always walked with a limp after suffering his wound. He often referred to it proudly, though, calling it his proof he'd fought for his people when they needed him most. It didn't hinder his ability to work his fields, tend to his livestock, or train for the next battles with the hill people, whenever and wherever the valley people would fight them again.

And, as was the case with Early Harvest, one of the few valley warriors who'd returned from the battle on the plain despite his injuries, his war-fighting wound didn't seem to diminish the number of young women who made it apparent they enjoyed his company.

PROMISED VALLEY CONSPIRACY

Those valley people who'd survived their encounters with the hill people had reason to rejoice. But they could never forget their many warriors whose bones lay unburied on the hill people's plain.

Likewise, the valley people were glad to learn what Long Arm had told Blue Sky on sunset pass: that Morning Sun and Rose Leaf were well and surprisingly well-treated. It was impossible, though, not to imagine the fear they had to live with.

Rainbow Evening found it impossible to imagine anything else. She rarely came out of the house she shared with Fair Judge. When she did, it was only to sit in the autumn sun with Fair Judge, Gentle Brook, Green Field, Many Numbers, Spring Rain, or Blue Sky.

Whenever Blue Sky was with her, she questioned him about his conversation with Long Arm on sunset pass. Was he certain Long Arm was telling the truth? If Morning Sun and Rose Leaf did see one another, was it as it was on sunrise pass, as lovers? Could they in fact have children?

Or would the hill people's king force Rose Leaf to mate with a hill man she didn't want? Would that king order Morning Sun's execution for no other reason than his being the enemy prince?

It was comforting for the lower-valley people to have the upper valley as a sanctuary and the upper-valley people as their hosts. But for those who'd lived all their lives in the lower valley, the only homes they'd ever have would always be there.

Blue Sky found it difficult to believe his people wouldn't go back to the lower valley—and to the safe and prosperous kingdom where he'd grown to adulthood.

He'd rather be killed in battle, even end up in a bone pile, than abandon hope of his people's speedy return.

And that would require something more than the defensive warfare Wandering Star thought the valley people were so good at.