

Promised
Valley
Rebellion

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For Lee Ann, David, and my family

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Character List

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Chapter 1

Soon after Blue Sky, his sister Rose Leaf, and the prince, Morning Sun, came of age, they incited their people to rise up against their king and the people he'd chosen to help him rule their kingdom. The three of them were as certain as the coming and going of the seasons that they had good cause to do what they did. Where it would take them, though, they couldn't foresee.

As for Blue Sky's part in it, he believed he was only doing what any person—having stumbled upon the truth of certain matters, as he had—would've done for his sister and the prince.

It was their rebellion before it was his. And he loved them both.

When they were still children, Rose Leaf decided they should stage a play. They performed it during one of the king, queen, and prince's frequent visits with Rose Leaf and Blue Sky's family after the morning's full-moon ceremony in their people's town. The king and queen rode in the royal cart to what their people referred to as the "home village," which was where Rose Leaf and Blue Sky's family lived. Morning Sun always walked, leading the oxen.

The drama in the village orchard included a wedding in which Rose Leaf played the bride. She'd talked her and Blue Sky's best friend, the prince, into playing the groom.

Blue Sky couldn't help but notice the looks on the faces of all four of their parents when they realized where Rose Leaf's tale was taking them. It was easy to see they were far less amused than the neighbors in the audience. And the amount of wine and beer the villagers had consumed that day couldn't adequately account for the difference.

One of Blue Sky's roles was as the official who blessed Rose Leaf and Morning Sun's marital union. Their people called those officials "tellers" because they not only remembered and retold the stories handed down to them by their ancestors and the gods, they also told the people, often without being asked, what the gods wanted them to do to retain their benevolence—as well as the valley the gods had promised them they could keep during their good behavior.

The drama closed with Rose Leaf and the prince in one another's arms.

Blue Sky, in his role as the chorus, explained that they'd reached the end of their lives, after having spent so many happy years together and producing so many descendants that only the tellers with the best memories and mathematical skills could be certain of either number.

When the play was over and the neighbors, having laughed and wept, went home, the parents of the cast members were quick to praise Rose Leaf for her dramatic skill.

Tall Oak, the king, told them he was always glad to see the people entertained and their minds relieved, at least for a while, from having to dwell on more serious matters.

Then Blue Sky and Rose Leaf's father, who was known as Green Field, took Rose Leaf's hand and made a remark the likes of which none of the three children had heard before.

Green Field often frowned, as if he suffered some secret pain. He spoke deliberately, though, as older people who'd retained the respect of their neighbors did.

"I want you to always remember this," Green Field said to his daughter. "There's nothing wrong with your becoming the wife of the prince in your play. But you've also got to realize you can never actually marry the prince in this kingdom."

Rose Leaf and Blue Sky's mother, who was called Gentle Brook, and the queen, who was known as Rainbow Evening, nodded their heads in agreement.

They were first cousins who'd grown up, as first cousins usually did, in the same village. Neither having a sister near their age who'd survived her infancy, they'd become best friends.

Blue Sky was aware that many men found both of them as desirable as women coming of age who hadn't yet gone with a man and carried children in their bodies.

"And you," Tall Oak said, his hand on Morning Sun's shoulder. "You can never have Rose Leaf for your wife. I could never approve it."

Blue Sky, who was named after what his people took to be a heavenly sign that the gods were pleased with them, turned to the prince and laughed. "Well, of course, they'll never marry."

Morning Sun laughed, too. "Of course not," he agreed.

Rose Leaf laughed as well. "No," she said, looking Morning Sun up and down. "I'm certain my husband will be more pleasing to

the eye than he'll ever be. I'd much rather have beautiful children than be married to a prince."

Peaks rose on either side of the promised valley like jaws held open in death. A river wound back and forth down the middle of it like a spilled gut.

The flat land on either side of the river was fertile. The top layer of black soil went deep. Rains almost always came timely in the growing season. The "valley people," as they called themselves, found it impossible not to believe the gods favored them.

They grew wheat, barley, lentils, grapes, apples, and other crops on the valley floor. On the low mountain slopes where their ancestors had cut down the trees, they pastured their cattle, sheep, goats, and, for the few who had them, horses. From the forest on the higher slopes, they took wood for heating and cooking, as well as for building their clay-daubed houses, granaries, and barns.

The river left the valley through a narrow gorge at its southern end. Another upstream chasm actually divided the kingdom into two valleys. But because there was a passageway for people, livestock, and carts on one side of the river in the northern gorge, the two valleys together were taken to be the one the gods had promised them. The tellers, who kept track of such things, said the upper valley had about half as much land usable for fields and pastures as the lower.

A person could go out of or come into the kingdom only by riding a raft through the lower gorge or climbing over a mountain pass. Individuals foolish enough to leave the valley, though, gave up any claim to the protection of the kingdom—and sooner or later, they met their deaths at the hands of the people who lived in the hills beyond the mountains.

The "hill people," as they were known, would kill a valley person upon sight. The valley people learned that as children, as soon as they were capable of learning anything, even before they began working in the fields and caring for the livestock. If their people ever let down their guard, hill people would come into their valley and slaughter them all—old people, women, and children included. The tellers made certain every valley child understood that.

The hill people neither kept animals nor planted crops. They lived at the mercy of land untended and beasts untamed. When they spoke, the valley people couldn't understand what they said. Nor did

they honor the valley people's gods. They instead worshiped strange, unreasoning deities—perhaps the hell gods themselves. The hill people's ceremonies supposedly made no sense, seeming more on the order of what children would think appropriate to do and say.

To keep the hill people out of the kingdom, the valley people maintained encampments and guard posts high in the mountains all around the valley. Their warriors, looking down on the other side like hawks in the sky, had one purpose: to kill any hill people who attempted to pass.

In the end-of-summer ceremony in their people's town, all the males in the kingdom who were coming of age presented themselves to the king. For the following year they'd be the guards, living in the encampments and protecting the kingdom from the hill people.

Even the prince had to do guard duty. It was how boys becoming men also became warriors. After the year of guard duty was over, the valley people's laws required every able-bodied man to continue practicing the arts of war with the other able-bodied men in his village. Green Field still practiced with his neighbors.

The village boys watched and attempted to do among themselves what the men were doing. During the year before their encampment, they practiced with the men as if they were already men, using spears, bows, arrows, and shields they'd either inherited from their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers or made themselves.

That was the valley people's army: all their able-bodied males of age, prepared to fight whenever war came again. And the gods in their stories, at least in the versions the tellers repeated, had left them with no reason to doubt it always would.

Morning Sun and Blue Sky were still infants when the hill people, apparently believing they were numerous and skillful enough to drive the farmers out of their valley, started the last war. Rose Leaf came into Green Field and Gentle Brook's family during the fighting.

Tall Oak, then the eldest of three princes and heir to the kingship, and Green Field fought side by side. Their comrades said they both killed far more than their share of enemy warriors.

The hill people began their invasion at sunrise pass in the eastern mountains, as they invariably did in the tellers' stories. The pass was a three-day journey, most of it through mountainside forest,

from the valley people's town, which was on a steep bluff above the river a short distance north of the lower gorge.

Green Field and Tall Oak were in the front rank of the warriors defending sunrise pass.

Although the army successfully held off the hill people in the first day of fighting, that evening, the king, Tall Oak's father, ordered his warriors to begin falling back to the town.

Tall Oak, Green Field, and a number of their comrades fighting in the foremost ranks begged the king to rescind his order. After he denied their plea and dismissed them, they went among the warriors, insisting they disobey the king and keep fighting at the pass.

They believed the hill people could be stopped in the mountains, there was no need to retreat, and the king, listening to cowardly advisors, had grievously erred in giving his order.

The army stayed put that night. The warriors spent their time, though, endlessly discussing what they should do, rather than starting their retreat or getting as much sleep as they could before the battle resumed.

When the fighting began again the following morning, the front ranks once more held their ground. The rear ranks, though, belatedly decided to obey the king and retreat, soon causing the middle ranks and even many of the warriors in the front ranks to change their minds as well.

Tall Oak and Green Field, both of whom later almost always refused to discuss the matter, soon found themselves cut off from their comrades and surrounded by enemy warriors.

Ordinarily, hill warriors immediately killed valley warriors in their grip. But that time, for some reason, they didn't kill their captives but took them prisoner.

When Green Field once chose to speak of the matter with Blue Sky, he speculated that the invaders must've realized they had the farmers' prince. He said some of his and Tall Oak's comrades who'd witnessed the capture began shouting, "They've got the prince! They've got the prince!" Green Field thought their extreme agitation must've tipped off the hill people to the truth.

Another time, though, he told Blue Sky it was possible the hill warriors somehow knew what the valley people's word "prince" meant. He'd heard them apparently saying it themselves.

The hill warriors took Tall Oak and Green Field to their main encampment on their side of the mountains just below sunrise pass. They presented their captives to their king.

Green Field further guessed that the king, not knowing which of the two captives was the valley people's prince and having no way to find out, decided to have them both killed the next day. The delay would give more of their people a chance to observe the once-in-a-lifetime event. Green Field and Tall Oak could see the crowd at the camp was steadily growing larger.

That evening, though, the hill people began imbibing the plentiful stores of the farmers' wine they'd happened upon at the pass. Unaccustomed to the charm of the beverage, they were soon quite drunk. Even the warriors guarding Tall Oak and Green Field nodded off, intoxicated.

In the stories the valley people told afterward, Green Field reached out with his foot, toward one warrior's spear. Using his toes, he painstakingly worked the weapon back to himself. Getting his hand on the spear, he cut the leather straps binding him and Tall Oak to a tree—and slit the throats of the three guards, who were waking and opening their mouths to scream for help.

The two captives fled, returning over the mountains to the valley as heroes.

On those rare occasions when Green Field spoke of his and Tall Oak's capture, he'd only say they undid their bindings, killed their guards, and escaped together.

They reached the town on the bluff just before the hill people's warriors surrounded it.

Older persons, women, and children among the valley people had to hide with the livestock in the forest, spending much of their time keeping wolves away from the calves, lambs, and kids.

The hill people's army laid siege to the town. Most mornings, they'd send warriors up the slopes, one day on one side and the next day on another. The problem for them was that every time they mounted an attack, they lost many more warriors than the valley people did.

In spite of the disparity of the losses, the hill warriors stubbornly fought on. Their siege, which began in the spring, lasted through the summer and late into the autumn. During that time they went from one end of the valley people's kingdom to the other, burning and destroying villages and crops and killing any valley people or livestock they came upon.

Although many of the farmers' warriors were killed or wounded, their army held off the hill people's army until the first

blizzard of late autumn began. After that, it became apparent the hill people no longer had enough warriors to mount another attack.

With the old king dead and Tall Oak in charge, the valley people took the offensive, driving the hill warriors down the slopes of the bluff, chasing them through the forest to sunrise pass, and killing any of those who still had the strength and desire to fight.

Despite the valley people's devastating loss of warriors, noncombatants, livestock, and crops, they won the war decisively, forcing all the surviving hill warriors back over the mountains and into the hills beyond.

There, the valley people's tellers said, they and their people lived out their wretched lives in pathetic ignorance, hunting scarce wild beasts and whatever edible plants grew on the rocky terrain they roamed, never settling down, often starving, often dying young.

At war's end, not only was the old king dead, but so were the old queen and their third and youngest son, the one who'd just come of age and the one the people might've loved the most. The old king and queen's only daughter who'd survived childhood had died before the war.

Tall Oak begged Green Field to help him rule the kingdom. Green Field was to be the king's chief warrior, which was the highest position in the kingdom other than the kingship itself.

The chief warrior commanded the army and enforced the king's orders. He also carried out punishments for those who broke the laws of the kingdom. In some cases, he might have to confiscate the wrongdoer's property. In others, he'd be required to cage, beat, whip, or execute the offender. In every case, he and his deputies would have to impose the punishment in full view of the people, for their instruction as well as their entertainment.

Green Field, having saved the life of the prince, now the king, was more than a hero. The people made it clear they wanted him to be their chief warrior as much as Tall Oak did.

Green Field's father, mother, and only sibling, a younger brother, were also killed in the war. Green Field therefore inherited his family's fields, pastures, livestock, house, granaries, and barns. He refused to accept Tall Oak's appointment to become chief warrior.

He also left the people, who could see what was coming, in voiceless shock.

Tall Oak decided instead—most reluctantly, many of the older people would say—to follow custom and appoint his surviving brother, Sturdy Limb, to be his chief warrior.

That didn't stop the king, though, every time a matter of any importance arose, from asking Green Field what he'd do if he were the king. Nor did it keep Green Field, as well as Gentle Brook and Rainbow Evening and later their three children, from giving him their opinions, even if at times they told the king something he didn't wish to hear.

As children, Rose Leaf and Blue Sky would laugh whenever they went to their people's town for a change-of-season or full-moon ceremony and saw Morning Sun sitting high on the dais with the king and queen, dressed in the linen Rainbow Evening and the court people made him wear.

Most of the farmers refused to wear linen, considering it fit for affectation only. The court people and tellers, though, had no such concerns and wore it, especially at ceremonies, whenever it was warm enough to do so.

The prince would see Blue Sky and Rose Leaf in the crowd and begin laughing himself. One of his favorite responses was to close his eyes and squirm on his seat as if he were struggling not to break wind, even as his uncle Sturdy Limb announced Tall Oak's latest decrees.

A disapproving glance from Rainbow Evening would often bring Morning Sun's antics to an abrupt halt. But as much as Rose Leaf and Blue Sky liked and even admired the queen, it never stopped them from doing everything they could to get the prince started again.

"You have all the fun," Morning Sun would complain to them. "I'm the prince in this kingdom and have to do what I'm told to do. But you farmers do anything you please, and you get away with it."

Blue Sky and Rose Leaf were quite certain Morning Sun was wrong about that. They could get away with it not because they were the children of farmers but because the farmer who was their father had saved the life of Morning Sun's father, now the king, in the war.

If other children had tried to openly do in court what Blue Sky and Rose Leaf did, Sturdy Limb's people would've promptly removed them, and not without giving them a good cuffing on their way out—even as their parents, astonished and humiliated, watched. And as their siblings and cousins looked at one another and smirked, pleased with

themselves for so skillfully concealing their own participation in the misbehavior.

But Green Field and Gentle Brook's two children didn't have to worry about their being removed or, heaven forbid, slapped by the chief warrior's men in front of their mother and father.

Morning Sun did have good reason, though, to regret he'd been born the prince. For one thing, he was the only person in the kingdom who needed his parents' approval before the tellers would conduct a ceremony officially blessing his marital union.

Long ago, the tellers said, all parents arranged the marriages of their children. More recently, they still did so, but only in the sense that they were the people who usually asked the tellers to bless the unions their sons and daughters had chosen to enter into. Nobody in the kingdom could imagine the tellers refusing to conduct a wedding ceremony for two adults simply because their parents had objections to it, well-founded or not.

In fact, many of the people refused to believe the gods ever said parents had to choose mates for their children. The gods had ordered them to honor their fathers and mothers, but they'd also said people could never truly be happy living together if they didn't love one another.

Down to Tall Oak's father's time, though, the kings said the old law still applied to their children. He'd refused to let the tellers bless the union of his daughter, Tall Oak and Sturdy Limb's older sister, to a son of farmers who was quite pleasing to the eye but was widely rumored to have wanted the marriage only for the purpose of living at the court with people waiting upon him.

Shortly after the king's refusal, the body of Morning Sun's aunt was found floating in the river. The royal family insisted she must've accidentally fallen into the water. Everybody else believed she'd walked into it, drowning herself because she couldn't have the man she loved.

Strangely enough, the farmer never married anybody else. He was sometimes seen at his lover's grave, alone. He died fighting in the last war, but not without killing a great number of hill warriors. He threw himself at them, his comrades said, as if he didn't care if he got killed.

Most of the valley people's new men came back from guard duty alive. There were a few years within recent memory, though, when some of them hadn't.

Morning Sun and Blue Sky had long since decided, if they were to die doing guard duty, they wished to spend their last moments at the other's side. That way, they believed, they'd always be brave, do what needed to be done, and not disgrace their families. So they'd planned to do guard duty together, the two of them sharing an encampment hut.

But one day during their coming-of-age summer, Blue Sky had to tell Morning Sun they couldn't do it the way they'd assumed they would.

They'd spent parts of that full-moon afternoon with the younger men and older boys in the home village, performing the chores expected of males their age in the preparations for the feast.

Morning Sun, being the prince, could've opted out of the chores, but he never did, saying he was pleased he could do in a village what the court people wouldn't let him do in the town.

He and Blue Sky had spent the other parts of the afternoon in wrestling, spear-throwing, and running competitions with the other younger men and older boys, who considered it a great privilege to be working with and competing against the prince.

Blue Sky had made it known he didn't share their opinion on that subject.

Now he and the prince were by themselves, bathing in the village creek.

Rose Leaf had made several pointed remarks about the way they smelled.

The creek was pleasantly warm. It began as a brook high in the eastern mountains, joined others as it came down through the forest, made its way among the treeless slopes where livestock grazed in their pastures, and wound past the home village in the summer as lazily as a snake at dawn. It emptied into the river just before the larger stream flowed beneath the bluff where the valley people's ancestors had built their court and town.

Morning Sun was lying on his back near the water's edge, holding on to a low-hanging limb of the tree behind him, the water rippling over his naked body as if it were stone. Blue Sky was sitting

on a submerged boulder next to him. The sun had deepened the umber hue of their bodies even as it had lightened their dark brown hair.

They were two of the tallest and strongest youths coming of age that summer, having gained their advantages, as the farmers' livestock did, from their ancestors.

The court people had made Morning Sun shave for that morning's ceremony. Shaving was something else the prince liked to complain about. It was another instance of the farmers having it so much better in their kingdom than he did.

All the men and older boys shaved their beards, but farmers and their sons, especially if they didn't go to the town very often, shaved as seldom as the people they lived with let them. But not the king, court people, and tellers—and certainly not the prince. He didn't dare appear in public with hair showing on his face.

The valley people learned as children that hill men, backward in every way they could imagine, kept—indeed, flaunted—their beards. This was additional proof they took their commands from the gods who lived in hell. When gods of that ilk appeared in the valley people's stories, they were often stroking their beards, proud of themselves for some evil they'd cleverly accomplished.

“Why do you complain?” Blue Sky asked. “You don't enjoy looking at that face of yours in your mirror?”

“No,” Morning Sun replied, “I don't.”

Blue Sky laughed. “If you were a handsome prince,” he said, “you would.”

The court people had another rule. They wouldn't let the hair of a male member of the royal family cover any part of his face, ears, or neck. The males among the court people and tellers scrupulously followed the rule themselves.

The males among the farmers, on the other hand, felt themselves free to cut their dark brown curls to whatever length and in whatever shape they pleased, as all the valley females did.

Some of the farmers, usually those most likely to neglect their chores and drink, fight, and fornicate to excess, seldom cut their hair, letting their curls bounce up and down on their shoulders and swing to and fro at the sides of their faces as if they were hill people.

Many valley people thought the rule for the royal family favored Morning Sun. Despite Rose Leaf's dire prediction to the contrary, he was ending childhood with the high forehead, wide-set eyes, prominent nose, full lips, and broad, chiseled jaw they favored in a man. His closely trimmed curls hid none of that.

“You don’t think women find me desirable?” the prince asked his best friend.

“No,” Blue Sky replied. “I don’t.”

They could’ve claimed a frightening thunderstorm was raging, and they still wouldn’t have trifled with the truth more than they both already had—and the sky was cloudless all day that day.

The farmers liked to tell a story concerning the time when Morning Sun began growing facial hair, and Rainbow Evening decided he needed to start shaving.

He surprised the court people by insisting he’d make his own razor. He wouldn’t listen to their arguments that a prince had better things to do than grinding and polishing flint.

He hotly told them they wouldn’t need to teach him how to do it either. His farmer friends would do that. Green Field and Blue Sky did, too.

Morning Sun followed up on that decision by grinding and polishing his own spearheads and arrow points, the smoothness and hardness of which impressed even the most accomplished stone craftsmen in the kingdom.

“You’re talking nonsense. We’ve got to do encampment together. You and me.”

The sun was nearing the high ridge of the western mountains as late in the afternoon and as far to the north as it ever went, and Morning Sun was emphatically refusing to accept what Blue Sky had told him when they were bathing in the creek.

“I’m sorry,” Blue Sky said. “Think about it some more. It’ll be best for both of us.”

If Blue Sky hadn’t openly wondered if the court-people’s hair rule wasn’t as pointless as a hard rain in winter and let his own curls cover most of his forehead, ears, and neck, he might’ve passed for the prince’s brother.

They were driving Blue Sky’s family’s livestock home from their pastures. Walking behind the animals was all they had to do. The kids, lambs, calves, and foals were still too young to attempt to wander away from their mothers. When they got older, a tap with a stick now

and then would be needed to teach them to stay on the path and out of the fields.

The farmers who had pastureland constructed fences of fallen branches, small trees, and shrubs to keep their livestock in their pastures and their neighbors' livestock out. The fences couldn't, though, keep the animals on overgrazed plots from making every attempt to join neighboring herds and flocks in their more abundant pastures. Intrusions often led to accusations and harsh replies, sometimes to fighting among the men and boys, sometimes to the intervention of the tellers and the chief warrior's deputies, sometimes to visits to the town to argue the matter before the king.

In order to keep wild animals where they belonged, the valley people maintained a wall of boulders and stones separating the highest pastures from the forest. The wall, which extended all around the valley, was held in place by horizontal tree limbs tied with vine and sinew to upright tree trunks dragged down from the forest and buried in the ground as if they'd grown there.

Because the work required the efforts of many people working together at the same time, each village was responsible for the maintenance of a section of the wall. If a village failed to keep its section in good repair, the tellers and court people would arrive and take a portion of each family's grain to compensate whoever was willing to do their work for them.

Blue Sky and Morning Sun ran into a group of children coming in the other direction from a neighboring village, on their way to fetch their livestock from their pastures. When they saw who Blue Sky was with, they let their siblings and cousins know with a well-placed elbow or a whisper.

"The prince," Blue Sky, reading their lips, could tell they were saying.

The boys among them wore their hair the way Blue Sky had chosen to wear his.

Morning Sun didn't let his anger toward Blue Sky stop him from greeting each of the children by name, finding all sorts of reasons to flatter them, even telling them to be certain to cheer for their village's coming-of-age athletes in the summer games ahead.

"But what if they compete against you?" one of the older boys asked.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Blue Sky interjected. "You'd actually consider cheering for a farmer against the prince?"

Morning Sun and the village children looked at one another and laughed. It wasn't the first time they'd gotten a taste of Blue Sky's sarcasm.

The children had something to tell their siblings, parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles when they got home. They'd spoken with the prince, the same coming-of-age prince who'd sat on the dais with the king and queen during the ceremony that morning dressed in linen.

He'd joked and laughed with them and remembered their names—as he always did.

It sometimes saddened Blue Sky to know many of his people thought Morning Sun was somehow better than they were simply because he was the prince. On the other hand, Blue Sky couldn't see how the desire of a prince to be loved by his people and their willingness to give him what he wanted could harm the kingdom.

The only people living outside the valley who were allowed to come into it were traders from a kingdom that lay to the south, where the river supposedly flowed into a body of water so vast no mere human could see land on the other side of it. Plying the stream on rafts pulled by oxen, the river people brought pottery, salt, linen, and other goods—like the polished stones the valley people used for mirrors—to the riverbank below the town to exchange for the farmers' surplus grain, lentils, wine, meat, hides, and cheese.

At some point in the past, the river people had insisted the valley people preserve meat with salt if they wished to get full value for it. Drying the meat wouldn't do. Eventually, the farmers used salt to preserve all their meat, unless it was winter and they could keep it frozen with ice. This state of affairs pleased the river people since the valley people could only get the salt from them.

On the other hand, the farmers wouldn't consider closing a deal until they found out what their cousins and neighbors were getting for the same things, and then they'd have the nerve to ask for even more. Although the river people invariably complained about the unfairness of the deals the farmers were forcing them into, it never stopped them from coming back. Only the last war could do that, and even then their return quickly followed the valley people's victory.

The river people always came in groups sufficiently large to keep at bay the hill people they encountered between their kingdom

and the southern gorge entrance to the valley. But they seldom reported trouble. The hill people were apparently indifferent to their comings and goings.

The men and older boys among the river people chose for themselves whether to shave or let their beards grow. All those who came to the promised valley, though, were newly shaved. They didn't want their hosts—with their surplus stores of grain and other products of their fertile soil and hard work—mistaking them for hill people.

The valley people had a law prohibiting the river people from proceeding north of the town. Because of the law, it was difficult for the river people to deal directly with the farmers, including all the upper-valley farmers, who lived more than two days from the town.

Instead, the river people had to trade to the court people most of the goods destined for the upper valley and the northernmost part of the lower valley. The court people then transported the goods to the north using their own rafts and carts. As a result, the northern farmers had to put more into a deal than what the river people would've asked for, or the farmers living in villages closer to the town would've agreed to.

Many years previously, Gentle Brook and Green Field had taken the position that the old law made no sense and was unjust, and they often urged Tall Oak to change it.

As Rose Leaf, Morning Sun, and Blue Sky grew older and more clearly saw the disadvantage it imposed upon their friends living in the upper valley and farther north in the lower, they made their adamant opposition to it known.

In their private conversations with Tall Oak, he freely conceded the law was irrational, but he also insisted there was no way he could change it. He claimed that the court people with whom he, Rainbow Evening, and Morning Sun were required to reside would make life miserable for them. They might even connive with the river people and tellers, as they could, to cheat the king and army out of their tribute share.

And if that happened, Tall Oak insisted, the kingdom would fall.

But the farmers, wherever they lived in the valley, disagreed. Even the lower-valley farmers living near the town on the bluff, who were unaffected by the law, sympathized with the farmers the law hurt.

The prince was on their side, too.