

Promised
Valley
War

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For Lee Ann, David, and my family

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Notes

A **character list** appears at the end of this novel, beginning on page 239.

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 are mostly persons who “go with” members of their own gender.

The “**valley people**” are prehistoric farmers who live in an especially fertile 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 “**town people**” are the valley people who live on a river bluff and run the kingdom under the direction of the king, the chief warrior, and the first teller.

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

It began in the last sunlight of a summer day on the eastern side of the mountains at sunrise pass. Shadows were long and tapering like the claws of a raptor, a hawk the size of a god perhaps, grasping the earth and the humans living upon it as if they were helpless prey.

According to his people's laws, Blue Sky was in forbidden territory. But one day the previous spring he'd decided the prohibition needn't apply to him. And after the rebellion his sister, Rose Leaf, the prince, Morning Sun, and he'd led earlier that year, not even the king could disagree with him on that point.

Blue Sky was in the ravine below his people's mountain guard post. If he encountered any kind of trouble with hill people there, he'd be on his own. None of his people could come to his rescue. He'd told the guards on duty he was going to see Wandering Star, the enemy who'd become his companion—contrary to the laws of both his people and the hill people.

Approaching Wandering Star's tent on the bank of the brook beyond the thicket, and no longer within sight of the guard post, Blue Sky saw a man's shadow poking out from a clump of bushes.

Blue Sky wondered if Wandering Star had hoped to amuse himself by leaping out at his unwitting farmer friend and giving him a damned good scare.

When Blue Sky, Rose Leaf, and Morning Sun were children, they enjoyed frightening one another, often pretending they were hill people, hunters drawn to the valley by their unnatural and evil desire to roast a farmer child over a fire like a kid, lamb, or calf. Blue Sky and Rose Leaf agreed the best-tasting child of them all would be the valley people's prince, Morning Sun.

Except for their royal family and their officials, who occupied a bluff-top town, most of Blue Sky's people were settled in farming villages in the valley their gods had promised them. They raised, cared for, and used for their own purposes cattle, sheep, and goats their ancestors had tamed. In their fields and orchards they grew wheat, barley, clover, lentils, apples, grapes, and other plants their ancestors

had learned to cultivate to provide regular and generous supplies of sustenance for themselves and their livestock.

Wandering Star's people roamed the mostly barren hills on the other side of the mountains surrounding the valley. His people's able-bodied men and older boys hunted animals running wild and free. Their women, old men, and children gathered plants they happened upon, which likewise grew wild and free. The stories of their ancestors and gods had convinced them that farming was unnatural, evil, and forbidden.

Stopping to peer around a tall shrub toward the source of the shadow, Blue Sky saw his childhood fears revived. The man casting the shadow wasn't Wandering Star. Like all the hill men other than Wandering Star, this stranger had a beard and dark curly hair falling to his shoulders.

He turned and saw Blue Sky, who already had his spear aimed at the hill man's belly.

Although the hill man had his own spear, it was pointed at the ground, uselessly.

If Blue Sky had wished to do so, he could've killed the hill man, then and there.

But the hill man might've had comrades lurking nearby in the shadows. Hearing the hill man's screams, they could've come running and easily overwhelmed and killed Blue Sky.

The hill man was leaving himself vulnerable, keeping the tip of his spear near the ground.

The valley people's warriors learned in their coming-of-age training that if an adversary in such a situation made even the slightest motion to raise his spear, they should instantly impale him.

Maybe the hill people had a similar rule. Blue Sky hadn't thought to ask Wandering Star about that.

Blue Sky suddenly realized who the man was: the lead hunter in the ravine the previous autumn, the hill man who'd initially disregarded Wandering Star's warning cries not to take his hunting party any higher up the mountainside and risk death at the hands of the farmers.

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Then the man looked up at the farmers' guard post and saw Blue Sky and his equally brave or foolish comrade, Spring Rain, ready for bloody battle all by themselves, but still holding back their arrows when they easily could've let them fly.

The hill man turned his companions around, giving up the deer they'd trapped in a thicket. He made Blue Sky and Spring Rain heroes in the eyes of their comrades and people—even though they knew they weren't and objected to the undeserved praise.

Now the lead hunter was staring at Blue Sky again, this time a spear-length away.

Blue Sky couldn't help but wonder if the man also recognized him.

"Leave the ravine," Blue Sky said, quietly, using the hill people's words he'd learned from Wandering Star, motioning in the direction of the lower entrance to the ravine.

The hill man backed away from Blue Sky, dragging the tip of his spear along the ground.

After he reached a safe distance, he picked up his spear, turned, and gracefully ran away.

Sprinting along the brook, he nevertheless startled Wandering Star, who'd been sitting at his fire preparing an evening meal. He was waiting for his farmer companion, Blue Sky, who'd defied his people's gods and laws, gone with an enemy hill man every chance he got, and become his friend and lover.

Wandering Star stood up and watched the intruder leap over the brook and rush from the ravine.

"He was back there, hiding in the bushes," Blue Sky said, pointing with his spear. "He was staring at you. I surprised him when I came along. I could've killed him, but I didn't. I let him go."

Wandering Star frowned.

"He was the leader of the hunters who came here last autumn," Blue Sky said.

Wandering Star nodded. "My people call him Long Arm."

“What was he doing here?”

Wandering Star’s scowl deepened.

“Are he and his comrades looking for game?” Blue Sky asked.

“Maybe. But if they are, they didn’t let me know.”

“Would they usually let you know?”

“Yes,” Wandering Star replied, clenching his teeth.

He and Blue Sky sat down on the flattened log he used for a bench.

Wandering Star had chosen to shave off his beard, as all the valley men did, and cut his hair the length Blue Sky had his, with just a few curls covering the upper parts of his forehead, ears, and neck. The valley people wondered why Wandering Star’s people hadn’t punished him for doing what the farmers did. He said his people had no law governing beards and hair length.

Neither did the valley people. After the recent rebellion, all the older boys and men among the farmers started letting their hair grow to the length Blue Sky grew his. So did the older boys and younger men among the court people, including the prince, and the younger tellers. The men who still refused to let their curls, often gray now, cover any part of their foreheads, necks, or ears were the older men among the court people and the tellers—those who’d opposed the rebellion.

The tellers—who were almost all of the men who went with men, and some of the women who went with women, and had no children to raise—remembered and retold the people the stories and laws their gods and ancestors had handed down to them. Blue Sky was spending his encampment year in the mountains, after coming of age, with the apprentice tellers on sunrise pass.

Staring at the lower end of the ravine, Wandering Star assured Blue Sky that Long Arm hadn’t come for the same reason Blue Sky had.

Long Arm and his mate had seven living children, five others having died in their infancy. But Long Arm and his brothers and cousins were among the best hunters his people had. Despite their many children, they never worried about starvation, even at the end of a harsh winter.

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“I don’t know why he was here,” Wandering Star said. “I have no idea why he didn’t tell me he was in the area. I can’t imagine why he’d be interested in what I’m doing.”

“He didn’t seem surprised,” Blue Sky said, “when I spoke your language.”

Wandering Star, still scowling, turned to look at Blue Sky.

“That’s the last thing,” he said, “I wanted to hear you say.”

Early the next evening, Solemn Promise, the hut-mate of the prince in the encampment for the court people’s sons on the other side of the great canyon at sunrise pass, approached the hut Spring Rain and Blue Sky shared in the apprentice tellers’ encampment. Many Numbers, who’d come up to the pass to spend the full-moon holiday with Spring Rain, his mate, was with them at the table they kept outside the back door facing the forest. As he always did when the three of them prepared a meal together, he was giving Spring Rain and Blue Sky meticulous instructions.

Solemn Promise had accompanied Morning Sun and Rose Leaf on some of their visits to the apprentice tellers’ encampment, but he’d never come on his own.

“Morning Sun had guard duty this afternoon and evening,” he said as soon as he was within earshot.

Even the prince took his turn on guard duty during a full-moon holiday. When he did, Rose Leaf usually spent the time with Blue Sky, Spring Rain, and Many Numbers. They were expecting her to join them for wine, the supper they were working on, and all the gossip she and Many Numbers had lent their ears to in the valley since the last full moon.

“The prince,” Solemn Promise added, referring to the man he shared a hut with, “didn’t show up for it.”

Many Numbers, Spring Rain, and Blue Sky laid down their blades, bowls, and spoons. They couldn’t imagine Morning Sun skipping guard duty. He always loudly insisted upon doing what every other guard in his encampment did. He was thankful, he told his

comrades, his mother and the court people weren't close by during his encampment year to remind him of his many princely prerogatives. He would've considered it especially shameful not to show up for guard duty.

"Why didn't he?" Blue Sky asked.

Solemn Promise was trembling. Heavily sweating, too.

Spring Rain handed him a cup of water.

"Nobody knows," Solemn Promise replied. "That's why I'm here. We went to the clearing. Neither Morning Sun nor Rose Leaf was there. They weren't with the women, either. We've searched all through the forest, yelling for them. We can't find them anywhere."

Blue Sky, Spring Rain, and Many Numbers stared at their visitor.

"We were hoping they were here," Solemn Promise said.

"They're not here," Blue Sky told him. "We haven't seen them all day."

They promptly sought out all the others in the apprentice tellers' encampment, asking if they'd seen Morning Sun or Rose Leaf that day. None of them had.

The rules of the valley people's army were clear in a case such as this. They were required to send a messenger to the town at once.

"I'll go now," Many Numbers said.

"I'll go with you," Solemn Promise said.

They decided to walk all night and all the next day. They'd stop only once to sleep. They planned to reach East Land's village late in the afternoon of the second day.

They'd pass through Blue Sky's village to break the news to his parents, Gentle Brook and Green Field, who'd held themselves out to be Rose Leaf's mother and father throughout her childhood.

Then Many Numbers and Solemn Promise would proceed to the town. There they'd inform the king and the queen that the prince and the woman he was to marry that autumn were missing.

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Blue Sky hadn't stayed with his hill-man companion the previous night. Wandering Star wanted to look for Long Arm and find out why he'd been in the ravine, and he didn't wish to wait until morning to do it.

After Many Numbers and Solemn Promise left sunrise pass, Blue Sky went down the ravine to the brook. Wandering Star, though, wasn't in any of the places Blue Sky usually found him. His campfire had gone out.

Blue Sky decided to wait for him. He stayed all that night in his lover's tent, fitfully falling asleep and dreaming Wandering Star had returned and was lying next to him, their naked bodies curled together.

Blue Sky woke several times with a start, horrified to find himself fully clothed and alone.

Sunrise came. Wandering Star still hadn't returned.

Blue Sky hadn't previously imagined how dark a dawn, even one dazzling his eyes with its brightness, could seem.

Upon learning that Wandering Star as well as Morning Sun and Rose Leaf had disappeared, all of Blue Sky's comrades except Spring Rain carefully avoided him.

Blue Sky couldn't hold their silence against them. He could see they were afraid opening their mouths to speak to him would only reveal fears they had no wish to confirm or confront.

Dawn came four more days, and Wandering Star hadn't yet returned to his campsite.

And Morning Sun and Rose Leaf were still missing.

Whether the gods had anything to do with it or not, the world in which Blue Sky lived began to make no sense to him.

The rebellion had ended early that summer, when the king, Tall Oak, and the people agreed that Morning Sun could mate with Rose Leaf even though she wasn't Blue Sky's sister or the daughter of

Green Field and Gentle Brook but was in fact the hill people's princess. After that, Blue Sky had often brought Wandering Star up the ravine to the apprentice tellers' encampment. Tall Oak had told Wandering Star he was free, if he wished, to live among the valley people.

One full-moon holiday some of the apprentice tellers invited Wandering Star to wrestle with them. His people's rules for the game were different from the valley people's, which required the winner to hold the loser flat on his back until the official counted to ten. The hill people's rules required the loser to voice surrender, admitting he couldn't take any more punishment.

Wandering Star decided he preferred the valley people's rules over his people's, which sometimes left a stubborn or foolish loser with a serious and permanent injury.

Noon Breeze, though, insisted he wanted to fight by the hill people's rules. It was the courteous thing to do, he claimed, with a guest. Besides, he said, it sounded like fun.

Wandering Star reluctantly agreed to fight him, following his people's rules.

Blue Sky assumed he did it only to shut Noon Breeze up.

Because of their size difference, Wandering Star, who was almost as tall as Blue Sky but more slender and sinewy like Spring Rain and Many Numbers, easily pinned Noon Breeze, who was short and scrawny. Wandering Star held him down well past the time when valley officials would've declared the contest over and Wandering Star the winner.

But Noon Breeze wasn't about to give up. Even though Wandering Star dug his knees into his shoulders and resorted to slapping him, as his people's wrestlers often had to do with their most recalcitrant opponents, Noon Breeze refused to beg for his suffering to end.

"Okay," Wandering Star said, "I give up. I can't take any more of this. You win."

Noon Breeze threw his arms around Wandering Star, who was attempting to stand up.

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“You don’t have to get off me,” Noon Breeze said, “just because you lost.”

“You either let him get off you,” Blue Sky said to Noon Breeze, as their comrades snickered, “or you’ll wrestle me under the hill people’s rules. And I won’t give up before you do.”

Noon Breeze reluctantly released Wandering Star and scowled at Blue Sky.

“Who appointed you chief warrior?” he asked.

Another time Wandering Star had accompanied Blue Sky, Many Numbers, and Spring Rain to see Rose Leaf and Morning Sun in the forest clearing where they’d built their cloistered hut.

The hosts and their guests sat on flattened logs in the late afternoon sun drinking wine.

Wandering Star drank, too. He’d been afraid to drink with Blue Sky at first, mindful of the trouble wine had caused his people in the last war. But he soon realized a moderate dose of it caused him no harm, especially toward the end of the day, after there was no more work to be done, and they could take pleasure in other things.

Rose Leaf asked him if the hill people knew whether she, their king’s only child, lived.

“No, they don’t,” Wandering Star replied.

“My mother, Thistle Dew, doesn’t know whether her daughter is alive or dead?”

“No, she doesn’t.”

Rose Leaf sighed. “I wish my mother could be told I’m living with the farmers. I wish all our people could be told the farmers have treated me well—so well they’ll even let me become the wife of their prince.”

Wandering Star looked at Morning Sun and smiled. “You’ve made a good choice.”

“But I know you can’t tell our people I’m alive,” Rose Leaf continued. “Many Numbers said you’d also be required to tell them how you know that. Then they’d have to kill you.”

“I can’t tell the people,” Wandering Star agreed. “But I’d like to let your mother know you’re alive and well.”

“Can you do that?” Many Numbers asked. “Can an exile speak with your people’s queen?”

“I can tell somebody who might get word to her,” Wandering Star replied.

“Secretly?” Spring Rain asked.

“Secretly,” Wandering Star replied.

“Safely for you?” Rose Leaf asked.

Wandering Star shrugged his shoulders. “There’s not a lot of safety among our people.”

“Then don’t tell anybody,” Rose Leaf said. “Is my mother well?”

Wandering Star hesitated. “Do you wish to know the truth?”

“Yes.”

“She refuses to be seen in public.”

“Do you know why?”

“She went into seclusion the day you were abducted. She tells people her life ended when the farmers’ prince and his comrade took you away. She couldn’t have any more children.”

The farmers’ prince in the last war with the hill people was now the valley people’s king, Tall Oak, and his comrade was Green Field. Hill warriors had captured them, but they’d escaped, taking the hill people’s infant princess with them, seeking revenge for having their testicles removed upon the hill king’s order.

“My mother still has my father,” Rose Leaf said, “even if they can’t have more children.”

Her father, Lightning Spear, had lost his manhood the first day of the war. That was the reason why he’d decided to inflict the same wound on the captive enemy prince and his comrade.

Wandering Star scowled. “Your mother detests your father. They live in separate tents.”

“You must detest him yourself,” Rose Leaf said. “He sent you into exile.”

Wandering Star took her hand. “You should know what your absence means to our people. They lost the war and the king’s only child at the same time. If your father dies without a male heir from

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you, the kingdom will probably go to a man most of our people live in fear of.”

Wandering Star explained that Lightning Spear was the king of all their people as well as the chieftain of their most numerous tribe. His closest relative, other than Rose Leaf, was arguably a distant cousin called Thunder Hunter, the chieftain of the second-most-powerful tribe. Wandering Star liberally used the words “cruel” and “bloodthirsty” to describe him.

Wandering Star turned to Morning Sun. “You’re very fortunate,” he said. “You get to choose the person who’ll be your mate, and she gets to choose you.”

The hill people had the same law the valley people had, requiring parents to choose their children’s mates. The hill-people’s king and tellers, though, enforced their law.

“My father would choose my mate for me?” Rose Leaf asked.

“He would,” Wandering Star replied. “He’d force you to become the mate of some chieftain’s son, whether you desired him or not. Maybe one of Thunder Hunter’s two sons.”

“Well, would I find them attractive?” Rose Leaf asked, not without giving the prince a naughty smile as she looked his finely muscled body up and down.

“Not the older son,” Wandering Star replied. “He’s called Dark Storm.”

“What about the younger son?” Rose Leaf asked. “Is he pleasing to the eye?”

“That’s War Cloud. Very pleasing to see, yes. Pleasing to live with? Not at all, I’d say. He’s as brutal as his father—maybe worse. He begs his father to let him execute people.”

The princess, Rose Leaf, no longer amused, took Morning Sun’s hand.

“Then I’m glad I’m living with the farmers in their valley,” she said, her dark brown eyes tearing. “And I can only thank the gods for sending Green Field and Tall Oak to rescue me.”

Shortly after Spring Rain and Blue Sky began their guard duty on the fifth day after Morning Sun and Rose Leaf went missing, Blue Sky saw something moving in the clump of bushes where he'd first spotted Wandering Star the previous autumn.

Blue Sky rose to his feet, yelling his hill friend's name.

Wandering Star hurried up the ravine to the guard post.

He'd returned earlier that morning but hadn't wanted to reveal himself to the guards who'd preceded Blue Sky and Spring Rain on duty.

"I was afraid they'd kill me," he said. "They'd have every reason to."

He appeared to Blue Sky as if he might be ill, too fevered to stay asleep for long.

"My people," he said, "captured Morning Sun and Rose Leaf."

Blue Sky's comrades had prayed to the gods they'd never hear those words spoken.

Wandering Star explained how his people did it.

One warm afternoon the previous spring, Long Arm and his family were encamped below sunrise pass. Long Arm walked up to the pass to invite Wandering Star to join his family for their evening meal. They'd killed a deer that morning.

He was still at a distance when he saw Wandering Star bathing naked in the brook outside his tent with a beardless young man—a farmer. Wandering Star had shaven off his own beard, too.

Keeping himself unseen, Long Arm moved close enough to hear what they were saying. The farmer was attempting to learn the hill people's language by using it every time he spoke.

Long Arm, who could understand almost everything the farmer said, learned that he'd come down a hidden gully in the ravine from the valley people's encampment above it.

Long Arm also figured out that the farmers sent their apprentice tellers to that encampment. And the youthful farmer was an apprentice teller who was infatuated with his new hill-man friend.

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Wandering Star had once been a teller himself.

But that was before Lightning Spear expelled him from the tellerhood and exiled him from his people for publicly expressing his increasingly favorable views of the farmers, who needn't, he was telling their people, be their enemies.

His exile, though, hadn't stopped some of the hill people, Long Arm's family included, from using his services as a hunting guide and gratefully sharing their kills with him.

Blue Sky, the youthful farmer who spoke as rebelliously as Wandering Star did, was also the warrior who'd refused to retreat from the farmers' guard post the previous autumn.

Long Arm privately told Lightning Spear what he'd observed.

The king asked Long Arm to spy on Wandering Star and his farmer friend.

Long Arm did his job well. The two people he was furtively observing never suspected anybody was just outside Wandering Star's tent listening to them.

Long Arm eventually began to understand what they were saying even when they were talking in the farmers' language. Now he could speak it as well as Blue Sky, Spring Rain, and Many Numbers, having Wandering Star for their instructor, could speak the hill people's tongue.

Long Arm overheard Wandering Star and his farmer friend conversing about a young woman called Rose Leaf, who'd just recently found out, thanks to Wandering Star, that she was the hill people's abducted princess. She and Wandering Star's friend had spent their childhood as sister and brother. In the course of his eavesdropping, Long Arm figured out where the farmers' prince and Rose Leaf had built a hut they shared during her full-moon visits to sunrise pass.

After Long Arm heard Blue Sky tell Wandering Star his people's king had ordered the guard post moved so their guards would have a view of the gully, he warned Lightning Spear they had little time left to take advantage of the situation and rescue the princess.

The king told Long Arm to do whatever he needed to do to bring her back to him unharmed. And he also wanted the farmers' prince, preferably alive.

Long Arm enlisted his younger brothers and a number of their cousins to take part in the raid. But first they needed to capture Wandering Star and deny him any opportunity to assist the farmers, who'd become so friendly with him they'd invited him to live in the valley with them.

Long Arm and his men were closing in on Wandering Star one evening when the farmer companion unexpectedly happened upon the scene and spotted Long Arm, who'd sneaked around Wandering Star in the shadows to prevent him from escaping upward in the ravine.

After the farmer left that night, and Wandering Star ventured forth from his tent to find out what was going on, Long Arm and his men captured him at spear point.

They found Rose Leaf and the prince where Long Arm had figured out they'd be. He'd deduced from what he'd overheard, but still not without some effort, which campfire was theirs.

Long Arm and his men tied leather straps in and over the mouths of all three of their captives, to keep them from calling out to the farmers' guards. They led them down the gully, out of the ravine, through the hills, and over a barren plain to Lightning Spear's encampment.

"I'm sorry," Wandering Star said. "I'm sorry I didn't know what Long Arm was doing. I'm sorry I wasn't able to stop him and his men from taking Rose Leaf and Morning Sun."

"Have they been harmed?" Blue Sky asked.

"Not yet," Wandering Star replied.

"Not yet," Blue Sky repeated. "What will Lightning Spear do with them?"

"He says Rose Leaf will live with our people, whether she wants to or not. She's our princess, and she'll never live with your people again. But he won't let her be harmed. He hopes she lives a

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long and happy life. She's his only child. He says she'll enjoy all the privileges of a princess. Her first son who survives his childhood will become our next king."

"What will he do with Morning Sun?" Blue Sky asked.

Wandering Star, still in the guard post with Blue Sky and Spring Rain, looked away from them, toward the hills where his people lived.

"What will your king do with Morning Sun?" Blue Sky repeated, raising his voice.

Wandering Star turned to Blue Sky. "Lightning Spear says he'll order him killed."

"Why hasn't he had him killed already?" Spring Rain asked.

Wandering Star was taking Blue Sky's and Spring Rain's questions like well-aimed arrows. They could see on his face the pain he felt each time one of them hit. Spring Rain's query had apparently caused him so much discomfort he couldn't put words together for a reply.

"Why aren't you still a prisoner?" Blue Sky asked him, impatiently. "Did you escape? Why couldn't Morning Sun and Rose Leaf get away with you?"

"I didn't escape," Wandering Star said. "Lightning Spear ordered me to come back here to deliver a message to your people's king."

"A message?" Blue Sky asked. "What possible message does your king have for ours?"

"Lightning Spear is offering a deal," Wandering Star replied, his voice faltering.

"A deal?" Blue Sky asked.

"He'll trade your people Morning Sun for the valley."

"Where are the gods?" Spring Rain asked, a believer committing blasphemy.

"That's Lightning Spear's deal?" Blue Sky asked, his booming voice befitting someone of his brawn. "He'll order Morning Sun killed unless we give him our valley?"

"He assured me he'll do that," Wandering Star affirmed.

“That isn’t a message,” Blue Sky spat. “It’s an ultimatum—an evil ultimatum.”

“I pleaded with Lightning Spear to let Morning Sun go home,” Wandering Star said. “I told him you farmers will never give up your valley. I told him if he kills your prince, he’ll only enrage your people. I said he might regret doing that. I begged him to let Morning Sun go.”

Blue Sky stared at Wandering Star. The two of them had chosen to see through the darkest-night lies their peoples told, and often believed—in which the other people was always the eternal enemy. Now the two rebels could see where their naive optimism had taken them.

“I tried to explain it to Lightning Spear,” Wandering Star began again. “I told him the farmers’ prince and the persons closest to him don’t hate our people. I told him who your father is. I told him even the emasculated comrade doesn’t hate him for what he did to him and Tall Oak. I told him Green Field only wishes none of them had suffered their injuries. I told him Green Field and his mate, Gentle Brook, were good parents for Rose Leaf and raised her well. I offered to lead Morning Sun out of there at night. Then the king could tell the people I’d helped the farmers’ prince escape, and he wouldn’t have to admit letting him go. I’d be a traitor. I’d have to live with your people from then on, but I told him your king has already agreed to that.”

“What was his response?” Spring Rain asked.

Wandering Star shook his head. “He told me if I wanted to help the farmers, I’d tell them to go back to wherever it was they came from. If they did, their prince could go with them.”

“You were right,” Spring Rain said. “Our people will never give him our valley. Not even to get a prince back. This Lightning Spear must not understand who we are.”

Blue Sky was staring at Wandering Star. “Get me over there to Lightning Spear’s encampment,” he said. “There must be woodlands for us to hide in when the sun is up. Show me where Lightning Spear’s tent is. We’ll figure out some way to get me in it at night. I’ll kill him while he’s sleeping. Then we’ll find Rose Leaf and Morning Sun and bring them home.”

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“We can’t do that,” Wandering Star scoffed, shaking his head again. “Lightning Spear made Long Arm his chief warrior. He’s got his huge family guarding Rose Leaf and Morning Sun. We couldn’t get any where near them. Besides, killing Lightning Spear wouldn’t do us any good. Until Rose Leaf gives birth to a son, the person most likely to become the next king is Thunder Hunter. Believe me, he’d be worse to deal with than Lightning Spear.”

Knowing the hill people’s king had Rose Leaf and Morning Sun, Blue Sky wondered why he should wish to live on to see what came next—why he wouldn’t be better off dead.

“There’s more to it than what the king wants,” Wandering Star continued. “My people are no longer what they were. Now they have their princess back—and your prince for good measure. They think the gods have answered their prayers. The future, they say, is theirs. So is the valley you arrogant farmers have pretended you own, where you can live and practice your ungodly farming.”

“Then I’ll take Lightning Spear’s ultimatum to Tall Oak,” Blue Sky said. “I’ll tell him and the people what’s happened to Rose Leaf and Morning Sun. I’m responsible for it. I thumbed my nose at my people’s laws. I went where I was forbidden to go. The people will rightly hate me.”

“You won’t go to Tall Oak without me,” Wandering Star said. “I’ll tell him what my people did. I’ll deliver Lightning Spear’s ultimatum. I’ll also tell him none of this is your fault. You had no reason to guess Long Arm was spying on us.”

“Neither of you,” Spring Rain said, “should go to see Tall Oak. If you do, you’ll get yourselves killed.”

That was more than a possibility for both of them. Tall Oak could order Wandering Star killed simply because he was a hill person—who’d no doubt, despite his protestations, conspired with Long Arm and Lightning Spear in the abduction of Morning Sun and Rose Leaf.

Tall Oak could order Blue Sky put to death because he’d recklessly endangered the lives of the prince and the woman who was to become his mate. Blue Sky was talking while Long Arm was listening, figuring out where he and his men could find the prince and

Rose Leaf. Even if Blue Sky didn't know anybody other than Wandering Star could hear him, the penalty for what he'd done, which was treason, was death.

"If Tall Oak wishes to have me executed, so be it," Blue Sky said. "If any harm comes to either Morning Sun or Rose Leaf, I'll just as soon be dead anyway."

Spring Rain extended his arm around Blue Sky's shoulders. "Don't say that," he begged.

Blue Sky and Spring Rain both knew that if life had taken a slightly different course, as the river in the valley sometimes did, they could've been lovers.

Blue Sky looked at Wandering Star. "But you don't need to die. You can turn around right now and go back to your people. Spring Rain and I won't stop you. You can live a long life. You can forget you ever had anything to do with me or my people."

"And let you die by yourself?" Wandering Star asked. "No, I'm going with you. I helped you endanger the life of your prince. If Tall Oak wants to kill both of us, we'll die together."

"I can't believe what you're saying," Spring Rain said. "Either of you. Let me tell Tall Oak what happened. Let me give him Lightning Spear's ultimatum. He can't blame me for it."

"They'll come and get us," Blue Sky said.

"They won't get you if you aren't here," Spring Rain countered.

"Where would we be?" Wandering Star asked.

"In the forest," Spring Rain replied, "hiding. I'll bring you food. Many Numbers will help me. We'll keep you alive. We'll think up some way to stay in touch with you secretly. So we can always find you, but nobody else will be able to."

Once in a while a valley dweller would attempt to escape a punishment, usually death, by hiding in the forest. In living memory, though, nobody had succeeded. All were soon recaptured or found dead, their bones picked clean by bears or wolves. In the winter fugitives either started a campfire and revealed their whereabouts—the only other fires on the valley side of the mountains were at the guards'

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encampments—or they wrapped themselves in as many hides as they could lay their hands on, but they still froze to death.

Blue Sky embraced Spring Rain. “I’m sure you and Many Numbers would do that. But I’d never let you. Sturdy Limb’s people would follow you. They’d torture you to tell them what you know. Then after they executed Wandering Star and me, they’d use the same spears to kill you and Many Numbers. They’d keep each of us alive, but mortally wounded, as long as they could. You want four people executed instead of two? What’s the advantage in that?”

Sturdy Limb, Tall Oak’s brother, was the valley people’s chief warrior. He’d relished the prospect of personally executing Blue Sky, Morning Sun, and their allies, including Many Numbers and Spring Rain, after what he’d hoped would be the failure of their recent rebellion.

Spring Rain’s tears were trickling down his face like dew on the petal of a flower.

Blue Sky, who otherwise might’ve enjoyed kissing Spring Rain and tasting the moisture on his lips, gently shook his shoulders instead.

“I’m not hiding from anybody,” Blue Sky loudly insisted. “Tall Oak is our king. The gods require him to execute people for their crimes. I can’t blame him if he wants to punish the individuals responsible for the capture of Morning Sun and Rose Leaf. And I, without question, am one of them.”