

## The Valley

He always thought he would die surrounded by his brethren, his daughter, and his mate. He was wrong. He was lying in a field in the Valley, and the bison had come on him in such a quickness he didn't have time to get out of their way. He almost made it to a tree, but they were fast. The right side of his body was trampled. Bones broken and muscles flattened by the force of a thousand pounds. He was able to drag himself to the tree and prop himself up on the hard wood of its trunk as the bison rushed past. The pain was unbearable. He stayed there trying to wish it away, but he was not successful. He found it hard to breathe. He waited for death and hoped it would come before the moon bear owned the sky.

He was alone in his end time. His mate and his daughter died of the sickness that made them cough out slimy waters and die in babbles of confusion. He covered them with flowers and buried them.

Their deaths were days apart and his grief froze him to the ground. He was lying in the high grasses of the western fields until the bison came upon him, stampeding hoofs fleeing from some unknown danger. He tried to get out of their way, but one cuffed him with its shoulder, and another ran across half of his body.

He fell unconscious until the sun was high in the sky. He woke up thirsty and wondered if the sun bear would take him or the moon bear. He felt hot in his head and his throat was dry.

The sun bear he reasoned, would be his savior and his killer. He closed his eyes against the brightness and tried to remember better times. He fell into a fevered sleep and when he woke again, it was dusk, and the tall ones were there. Behind them were their wolves, sitting impatiently. Hoping they could take his meat and tear away his tasty guts. He could see them drooling but faithfully waiting until their masters gave the sign.

One of the tall ones, a woman with gray hair and the marks of the moon written across her dark forehead cried out and fell to her knees in front of him. He recognized her from the time he spent with the tall ones. Kell is what she was called. He tried to say her name, but he always had trouble with their language. The guttural sound he made was close enough to make her bare her teeth in that strange way they showed pleasure, but she had tears. She stood up quickly and went to a young man and brought him forward.

The young man had tan skin and blue eyes but was tall and had the dense brown hair of his mother. Kell told the young one that the man that lay before him was his father and the young man nodded, staring into his face to try to see the resemblance. At that moment he knew the sun bear was allowing him to see his half-blood son, before taking him into the brightness.

Kell took a skin from another and pressed it to his mouth. She poured in water, and he swallowed. The water was bitter and smelled like earth and rotted wood. A few moments later his pain eased, and the tall ones were able to move him to a more comfortable position. The woman put dried red berries in his mouth and motioned for him to chew and swallow. When he did, she gave him another long drink of the bitter water.

He remembered how they found him when he was a young man, and he was covered in a bearskin and eating handfuls of termites by a willow tree. And how they were scared away at first, thinking he was a bear but then seeing he was not, they approached him, and he shared the termites.

They allowed him to hunt the bison and the red deer with them and in turn, he showed them where the salt licks were and showed them a cave with pools of clear water and showed them the best fruits to eat. He lived with the tall ones for a long time, eating their burnt meat,

warming by their earthen pits of embers, sleeping in his bear skin with Kell and the wolf pups next to him, until a leader ascended who didn't want him there anymore.

He went back to his people, and he didn't see Kell until this time. She didn't know he was the last of his kind from the Valley. Neither did he

The sun bear came down to him and lifted him into its warm arms. The tall ones dug a place in the ground and laid his body in. They pulled up flowers and threw them on his chest. They covered him with dirt so the animals and flies would not eat his flesh.

The tall ones sang death songs for him as they walked away. Kell and her son lingered behind and walked on after the others led their wolves back to the hunt.

Thousands of years later, his bones would be found. Covered with grass and hard earth. Lying in the Valley. The New Man Valley; the Neanderthal Valley