

Tarantian

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 New Man's Valley, and the bonasus 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 bonasus 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 the end time. His people had come upon a place where the tall ones had lived and took some of their discarded waterskins. Soon his people became ill and died off one by one. His mate and his daughter died of the coughing sickness that made them hack 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. As he was lying numb in the high grasses of the western fields, they came upon him with thundering hoofs. He tried to get out of their way, but one bonasus 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 body throbbed with pain. 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 they were given 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 was what she was called. He tried to say her name, but he always had trouble with their language. The sounds he made were close enough to make her bare her teeth in the strange way they showed pleasure, but she had water in her eyes. She stood up quickly and went to a young man and brought him forward.

The young man had pale skin and blue eyes but was tall and had the dense dark hair of his mother. Kell told the young one that the man lying before him was his father and the young man nodded, looking closely for the resemblance. At that moment he knew the sun-bear was allowing him to see his son before he went into the brightness.

Kell took a waterskin from another and pressed it to his mouth. She poured in water and he swallowed. He remembered the taste of the water. The tall ones gave it to him before, when they cured him of the coughing sickness. The water was bitter and smelled like earth and rotted wood. A short time later his pain eased, and the tall ones were able to move his broken body 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.

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

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.

Kell told her son the story of how they found his father the first time, 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 bonasus and the red deer with them and in turn, he showed them where the salt licks were and took them to a cave with pools of clear water and showed them the best fruits to eat. He was strong and showed them how he could knock a red deer in the head and kill it with one stroke.

When he fell weak from the coughing sickness, Kell took care of him and gave him the waters that helped him back to strength. 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 Kell didn't see him again, until this time. She didn't know he was the last of his kind from the New Man's Valley. Neither did he.