

The First Story

Bellico could belch loud, louder than anyone in the band of hunters and gatherers. Only three seasons before he had joined the men to drink beer beneath the Wise Tree but by now his beard had turned from silk blond to black and due to his mimicking the stances and gestures of the older men, he appeared to have lived beneath the limbs of the Wise Tree for more years than in fact he had. Were someone to say too much about the Spirits, Bellico would belch. Emo, the oldest, might laugh or turn his head as if to listen to Bellico and that would allow for the subject to change. But as with Spirit talk in time of plenty, the distraction of belching also had become worn and near meaningless. After the seasons went from cold to cold to cold again, the men of the band rarely thought Bellico amusing. No one told him to stop because he had passed his tests, which allowed him to sit beneath the Wise Tree and drink beer with the men. He had full membership but listening to his noises had grown tiresome nonetheless.

It was on a waning afternoon that Bellico stood before the fire, drinking from the new gourd and belching that Emo, sitting across from him, leaning against the Wise Tree, looked across the fire, between Bellico's knees, and in the wavering of smoke just above

the fire, saw someone coming on the North Trail. Emo's eyes had never been strong and with the image dancing in the fire wind, he squinted and called to the others to look.

"It is Rok on the North Trail," said Cob. "He has stopped and is talking to the women at the Children's Fire. He is pointing back the way he came."

Emo had heard enough. He stopped squinting. He remembered that Rok had told him that he intended to walk out across the grassland to the large river beyond. Rok had said he'd look for small game and see if there was a better campsite near the larger river. "Give me the gourd, Bellico. Rok will be thirsty."

Bellico handed the new gourd across the fire. Emo tossed the remnant beer over his shoulder against the tree trunk and, leaning toward the log dugout, ladled enough beer to quench any man's thirst. Bellico turned his back to the fire to look at the man on the North Trail. No one spoke. Bellico failed to belch even by habit. Rok's physical appearance was enough to quail any comment.

He stood a full seven spans tall, still strong and slim but at the moment he looked as he had rolled down a high hill. His face was bruised; his hair both on his head and body was matted with dried blood. His knees were caked with blood and dust and through the hair on his legs, they could see why he limped. The bruise on his thigh was the size of a hand.

"Have you killed a man?" Emo called out to him before Rok reached the fire.

He wrinkled his nose as to say that he hadn't. "No. May I have the gourd?" Rok asked, reaching the shade of the tree where the men sat in a near circle round the fire.

Emo stood and passed the full gourd over the fire to him. Bellico had not moved. Rok, still holding his spear shaft on one hand, took the gourd with both hands and

slopped a mouthful of beer over the lip of the gourd. "For the Sprints," he said then he drank. He stopped to take a breath and then drank some more. Emo had guessed correctly in filling the gourd. It was enough for a thirsty man. Rok handed the gourd back and then without thinking he belched, startling Bellico into a blink and a flinch. All the men laughed except Rok and Bellico. Rok saw no humor in what he did but then he had not spent the last hour listening to Bellico. Still holding the spear shaft in his hand, Rok walked away from the fire and steadied himself by holding to an over-head branch of the Wise Tree.

"No, sit!" Emo said. "Sit here next to me!"

"My body hurts were I to bend it to sit. I should stand"

Cob, who had been watching, could wait no longer. "What was it that happened on the North Trail? You have not bathed in the River Spirit. And dust and grass fall from your hair. Did you fight with a Spirit?"

Rok wrinkled his nose to signal, he had not, and indeed a leaf fell from the bush of hair covering his head. "I walked to the Big River to look for a campsite. The place is good. Firewood lying everywhere. Easy gathering for the children and the women. And were we to run short on fish caught in the pools of the drying stream here, there are large pools with enough fish for days and days of food."

"I am tired of eating fish," Bellico said and then he swallowed air and belched.

Rok looked at him for a moment then said as if he expected the remark, "I will change your diet. We eat rhino tonight."

Cob and the rest muttered. Although surprised, Bellico remembered to belch.

"Did you find a freshly dead rhino?" asked Cob.

“No, I killed it,” Rok answered.

“Alone?” Emo asked half surprised and half expecting to be laughed at for asking.

“Alone.”

“It takes three men, perhaps four, working carefully together to kill a healthy rhino,” Bellico snorted in disbelief.

Rok held his spear hand at eye level and passed the shaft to the other hand, revealing a fistful of rhino wool caked with blood. All the men exclaimed in awe, except for Bellico, who hardly knew what to make of it. No one had killed a rhino alone.

“Sit, sit!” one man shouted. “How is it done? How can you be alive? Could the rhino see?” And others in amazement also wondered how it could be possible although to a man they believed him.

“Oh yes,” laughed Rok in a way that mixed amusement with pain. “His eyesight was perfect. More than perfect, he saw me before I saw him!”

“You must sit!”

“I can’t. I hurt.”

“Give him beer!” “Yes! He is dry.” “He hurts!” said several of the men. They were impatient. “Sit and tell what happened.”

The Wise Tree had low spreading branches as do live oaks and Rok made his way along the low branch by walking his hands along the rough bark of the limb as well as watching the low spot where the limb nearly touched the ground.

“Take him beer, Bellico,” ordered Emo.

“Yes,” said several others. “He is dry.”

Bellico presented the new gourd to the hunter, who swirled the beer to the brim to give thanks and at the same time thanked Bellico. Bellico stood between Rok and the fire where the men sat. He belched as Rok put the gourd to his lips. Then he drank and one of the men told Bellico to step aside. In time Rok stopped to take a breath, to belch, to put the gourd to his lips again, and drink. The band knew beer to be both food and drink and furthermore, it was magic. Rok had been very thirsty and now with the second gourd felt the Spirit creep out from his belly to his head and all across his body. He passed the gourd back to Bellico and with no aforethought belched loud enough as if to raise thunder. Bellico took the empty new gourd to the dugout.

Rok leaned against the low branch taking some of the weight off his legs. The magic distracted the pain, which was still with him but seemed to throb from wound to bruise in another direction, in another rhythm.

“The rhino!” called the men as if he had forgotten what they had asked for.

“The rhino,” he said just loud enough for them to hear, who were sitting by the fire. “He saw me first! I walked round a thicket. I did not hear him; he may not have heard me. We were near the North Trail on the plain between here and the Big River where the fish are trapped on the ponds by the falling level water. He was in my lap before I could think. His horn missed. I leaned over his head and planted a point too far to the back of the neck to bring much blood, which did little more than make his head turn to see what bit into him and he roared and I grabbed my life in my chest before it jumped out of my mouth and into my feet. At the same time I took another point from the pouch. Just by swinging his head, he rammed me, he hit with such power to make my breath

break into short pieces, for me to gasp as if trying to breathe smoke and I went rolling butt, back, onto the back of my head across the rocky ground.”

Rok had left his seat on the Wise Tree limb and knelt in the dirt four strides from the men looking at him from the fire as if he had just regained his balance after being knocked for a somersault by the rhino. Emo had refilled the new gourd but held it half-way between the dugout at his elbow and his mouth. They all watched Rok jump to his feet and felt the pain shoot through their bodies as well. Someone belched.

“The beast kept looking for what had entered him at his neck and with a new point, I jumped to his other flank and drawing back with all the strength that terror can fill Man, I struck deeply into his chest, low, and just behind the shoulder. The point with three hand spans of the shaft jabbed between the ribs. The rhino called out and snorted blood. Then he spun toward me and where I planted the last point, while I danced. I stepped in close, while his hindquarters turned away and then I ran as if he had thrown me. I ran for a tree in the thicket.”

And each man watched as he saw the rhino spin round almost on one foot and saw themselves fly into the thicket toward the tree. And in the chaos of branches, briars, and leaves, they listened, “And did he follow you?” Rok was now hidden from the others by the great trunk.

“By then I had reset a new point in the shaft and even in the warmth of the day, I chilled as if in the middle of night away from the fire. I heard a moan just before he crashed the thicket.” Rok stood behind the Wise Tree and peered around the trunk at the men by the fire. All the men heard the thrashing in the thicket, which drown out the loud belch. “And he was in my lap again. The horn passed me when he pitched his head. I was

off balance and fell on to his head back of the horn. I tried to punch a point on the other side, when up came his head knocking me into the limbs of the tree. I had flown up like a flock of speckled screechers. Only I was to come down and I reached out with a hand to push myself away from the horn when the top of his head came up to meet me. When I fell from the limbs the second time, I had no breath at all. I looked for it on the other side of the tree. I had held on to the spear shaft and the point was still set but my breath was lost among the thorns and brush of the thicket. I was done. I kept the tree trunk between myself and the beast. I looked without finding my breath.” He said this looking round on the ground. “He was there.” He pointed to the other side of the Wise Tree. “I was here and my breath came back little by little.” The magic of the beer was gone and only his tired, hurting body leaned against the Wise Tree.

The men by the fire now rose to their feet and yelled, “He will turn round the run you through!” “Look out!” “Can you hear him?”

Rok said he could hear him. He said that the animal coughed and moaned and coughed again. “I waited for him, not wanting to look as he would know around which side of the tree he could charge. If I were to plant one more point into his other side behind the shoulder, I might reach the tubes of blood. The beast coughed again but did not take a step. It could be he thought that I was gone and that would be just as well. I stood there for a time listening to him moan and breathe and cough. I was dry! I was hot and cold! My breath found its way into my body and by then I breathed as I do now, I could not hear him breathe at all.”

The men all standing now took a deep breath. No one wanted to be the first to speak as it might stir the rhino again. Rok would decide. He walked wearily around the

tree trunk and looked at the ground as if the rhino was stretched at his feet. “He had fallen,” he said quietly.

The men now moved, standing upright, some sitting, and more than one calling for the new gourd. “I am tired,” one said. “I hurt,” said another and he limped to where he had been sitting a few minutes before. They looked, one to another, as if they had just walked into the camp by way of the North Trail. Rok leaned against the tree trunk as if alone he killed two rhinos in one day.

Bellico looked up North Trail and saw the women and children returning packing loads of meat. After having heard the first story ever told, he left the men and walked toward the other fire. Soon there would be cooked meat. Without thinking he gulped air and belched.

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