

THE SONG OF THE TRIBE

by Jason Kristopher

Death, as tall as the sky, roared toward the Tribe, and thousands died every moment. Where it passed, shreds of broken and bent corpses were all that remained. Great swathes of their number, ripped apart as grist for the mill, and Death kept coming. Enormous and red and implacable as the earth beneath them or the sky above them, Death slaughtered all in its path.

It was only when night fell that the slaughter ceased. Those who had spared wondered if their turn would come the next day or the one after that. Those at the edges of civilization had heard rumors that this had happened before. Rumors that Death would miss some, and that the young would live on. The young, who were too small to take, would be the ones to rebuild.

The night wind blew and brought the pleasant aroma of rain. Rain meant salvation, for a time, and the hope that this would be the last Reaping. That Death would leave the Tribe to grow, to reclaim their land, to tend their young, as the Maker willed. Rain nourished, and healed, and brought renewal. Rain was joyous.

But rain alone could not stop Death. So the Tribe's elders whispered back and forth, their discussions a soft sigh upon the wind. They wondered how they could halt the beast once and for all. How could such as they affect something so unyielding, so massive? It was a force of nature unto itself, and they had to do so much as slow it down with all their plans and schemes.

Untold numbers dead, and nothing they could do would keep the Reaping from returning. Nothing would keep more of the Tribe from the mighty jaws of Death. So the elders devised a new plan. For their young, they fashioned carriers, light and durable and quickly caught by the night wind as it blew past. The wind and the carriers would carry their young far and wide, far from here, and from Death.

The Tribe would die, but their young would have a chance at life, far from their home. It was said that long ago, this was how the Tribe had arrived in this place, and perhaps that was true. The eldest of the elders had passed the memory on, from his eldest and so on, down through the seasons.

When the sun rose the next morning, and Death returned to resume its Reaping, the Tribe sang the song of their people. The song of all those who had already gone to meet the Maker, and all those yet to come who still would. They sang with all the power they possessed, and let Death come for them. They watched the last of their young float away on the early morning winds, flying higher even than Death itself.

The Tribe would live on, even if it were elsewhere.

Lillian sat atop her red tractor and yawned as she pulled into the first field of the day, waving a floating cotton seed away. The crop waved in the wind, and the humming sound made her smile as she drove the tractor through the field.

What a good crop this was going to be.