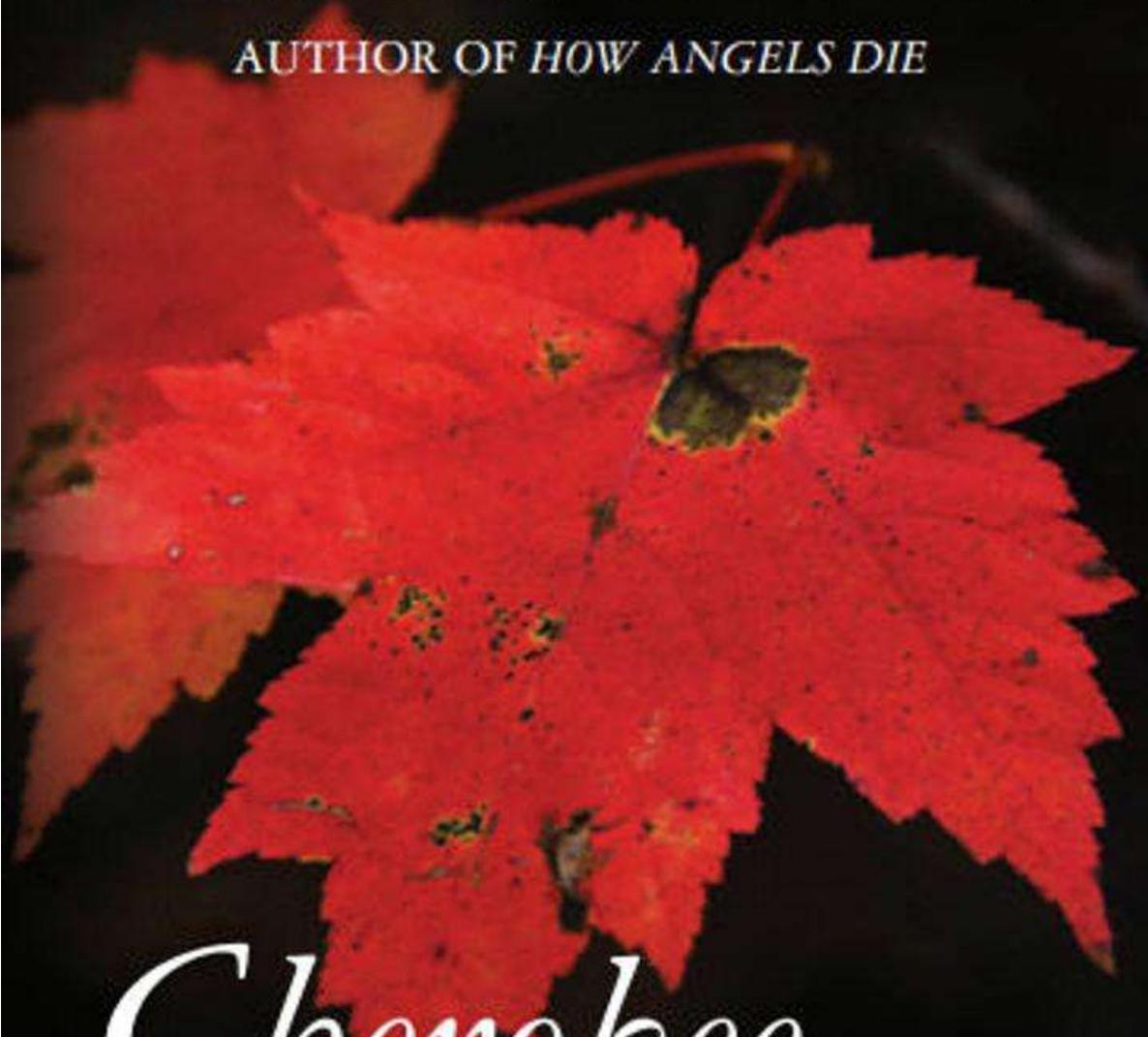


DAVID-MICHAEL

HARDING

AUTHOR OF *HOW ANGELS DIE*



*Cherokee
Talisman*

Cherokee Talisman

A novel by
David-Michael
Harding

Cherokee Talisman

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A
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For
Chris

A son-in-law through Courtney's choice
A son through ours

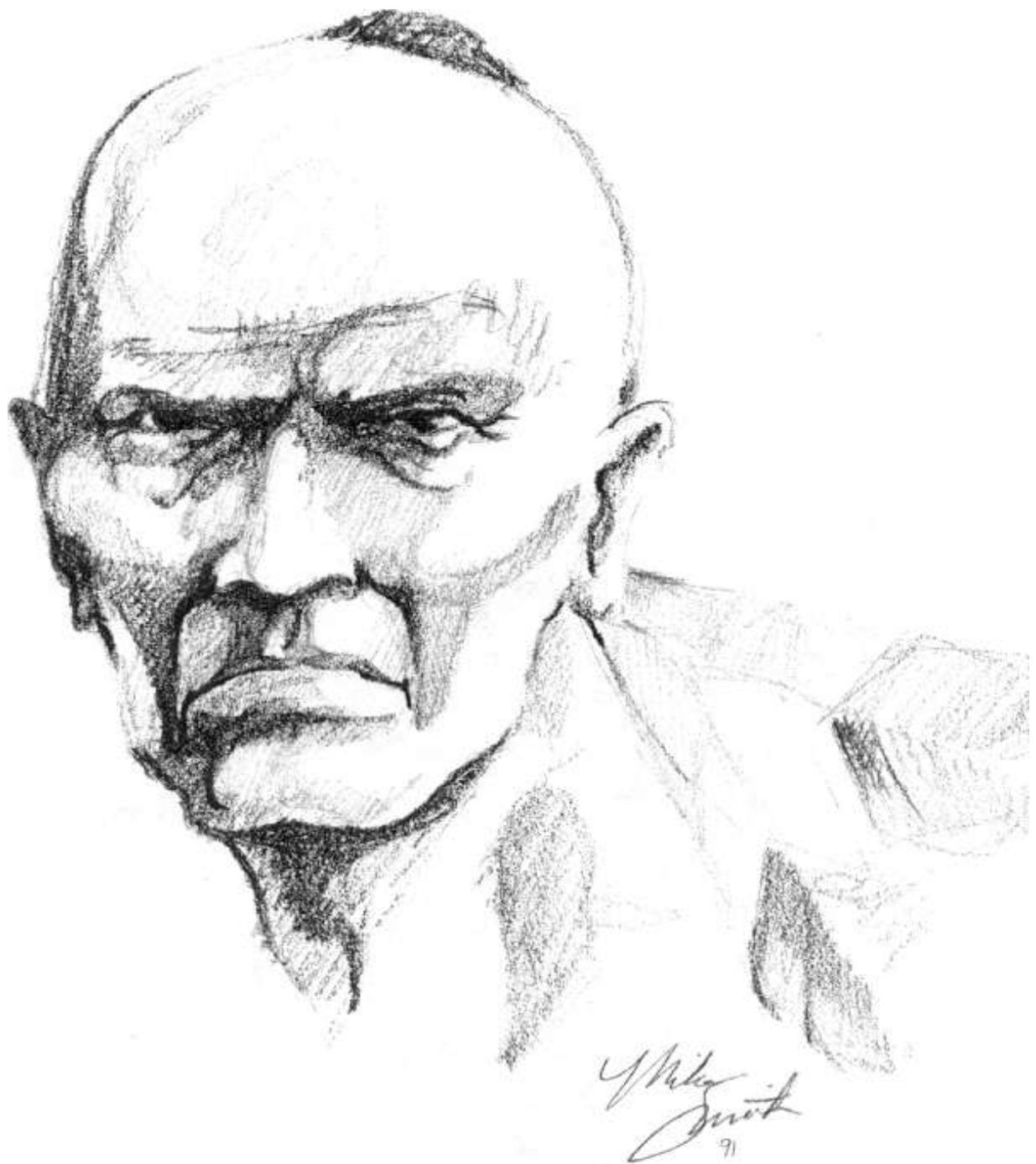
FOREWORD

There are few places more beautiful than the Cherokee homeland in the fall of the year. It is during the fall that our Creator paints the leaves on the maples and oaks, making the forests a colorful display of beauty. It was also in these same forests that many Cherokees lived, loved, and died. Our history as a people was so affected by the Trail of Tears that many historians begin the telling of our story at the Trail of Tears moving forward, and those who walked through those forests of maples and oaks are all but forgotten.

David-Michael Harding, in his novel *Cherokee Talisman*, takes the reader to our homeland in the fall of the year, in such a way that the reader can almost smell the earth and see the beautiful colors of the leaves. It is a glimpse of oneness with the land that Harding conveys to the reader so that the love of our homeland, and the desire to protect it, can be felt by the human spirit and understood. *Cherokee Talisman* brings to life characters from our history and through a flare for fiction and historical research, Harding tells their story. Cherokees that might be painted by racist misconceptions as blood thirsty savages are humanized by Harding, making them heroes of a very real time in our history forgotten by man, and preserved by few. History is written by the victorious, but when almost forgotten historical characters are brought to life, and their stories told, they are preserved for the ages, and in this preservation David-Michael Harding has succeeded.

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Bill John Baker

Tahlequah, OK
November 2012



"Dragging Canoe"
Cherokee War Chief

PREFACE

Tsi'yugunsini ("Dragging Canoe") was one of the greatest Native Americans to have ever lived. His home was in the Smoky Mountains of current-day Eastern Tennessee. He was a highly skilled Cherokee war chief who lived, loved, fought, and died during a time when the United States was still struggling in its infancy. We look back at our nation's history during the latter part of the eighteenth century as a time of expansion, perseverance, and strength of American character. *Tsi'yugunsini* looked at the colonials as invaders, thieves, and terrorists.

Britain's King George was an invader as well, but he was four thousand miles away while the American settlers were pushing for expansion into Cherokee territory. When the Revolutionary War broke out in earnest *Tsi'yugunsini* sided with the British, choosing the devil at a distance over the one at his door. This may explain why he is not remembered and how victor's justice has clouded our past.

Tecumseh, another tremendous Native American, from the Shawnee Nation, also sided with the British, most predominantly in the War of 1812. For reasons as simple as timing and the sound and spelling of their names or as complex as their travels and influence, Tecumseh is recognized and commercialized while *Tsi'yugunsini* is less than a footnote. In the years following the Revolution the two men fought together against the new Americans in the Chickamauga Wars. They believed the total unification of all Native American nations against the new country was the only way to salvage their unique way of life. They were right, and Tecumseh championed the philosophy until he died in battle in 1813. His dream never came to be. If it had, a map of the United States may look decisively different.

However, over two hundred years after *Tsi'yugunsini's* death, one notion of the great chief remains. It is well documented from the 1775 treaty negotiations at Sycamore Shoals that *Tsi'yugunsini*, in absolute opposition to any land succession, boldly proclaimed that the names of the indigenous nations and their people would be forgotten or mispronounced by the expansion-minded colonies and their history. Today, of the over five hundred distinct nations that once comprised the United States, less than a handful are remembered. The same holds true for the men and women of those lands who served their people with distinction.

Interestingly, a vast number of our states, cities, and rivers still carry Native American names and while these are repeated countless times a day, the pronunciation is often scrambled and the origin forgotten, just as the great chief predicted. His own home region of Tennessee is derived from the Cherokee word *tanase*. Even the most widely visited national park in the United States, The Great Smoky Mountains, owes its name to the Cherokee who referred to the range as *shaconage* (shă-con-ă-gee) "place of blue smoke." Perhaps a greater, and sadder, testament to his tremendous foresight is that his declaration applies to his own name.

The chief's name has been written several ways — each one of which impacts its spelling and pronunciation for English speakers. I have attempted to present the Cherokee (*Tsa-la-gi*) names as accurately as possible and suggest the English reader sound them out as written. The historical representations are accurate as a reflection of recorded history; however, there are gaps filled from my own pen as is the nature of historical fiction. I am certain my adaptation is consistent with the time, events, intent, and outcome. My respect for the Tsalagi nation and others referenced in this novel are such that I sincerely apologize if I have unintentionally misrepresented any person or event.

I would like to credit the *Cherokee-English Dictionary* by Feeling, Pulte, and Cowen, © 1975 by the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, and *Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* and *Myths of the Cherokee* by James Mooney from his material collected in the late nineteenth century originally published by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1891 and 1900.

Wa-do.

David-Michael Harding
November 2012

Note: Pitch and emphasis are important elements in the Cherokee language. The “ts” sound might be described as a blur between the English sharp “ch” and soft “j.”

Tsalagi (T͡sǎ-lǎ-gee) Cherokee
Tsi'yugunsini (T͡siʔ-u-gũnsiʔ-ni) Dragging Canoe or Dragon
Totsuhwa (To-tsooh-wǎ) Redbird
Ama Giga (ǎ-mǎ Gi-gǎ) Bloody Water, Totsuhwa's grandmother
Galegi (Gǎʔ-lě-gee) Blacksnake, Totsuhwa's wife
ahwi (ǎhʔ-wi) deer
osiyo/siyo (siʔ-yō) hello
wado (wǎʔ-dō) thank you

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PROLOGUE

Autumn comes late in the Carolinas. Summer willfully drags her feet which pleases some and riles not but a few, including the trees which are anxious to change their hues, rid themselves of summer's trappings and rest in the coolness of the fall. Flies are permitted by the lingering summer heat to continue harassing the horses and livestock who have waited out the long season in anticipation of the cold that will drive the insects into hiding. The whitetail deer, browsing beneath the impatient trees, are also tormented by the flies and without the long tails of their domesticated neighbors are given to sprints through the thick brush to escape. These rushes and the pestering insects can give way to doom as the deer's concentration on the flies and escape coax their senses away from high alert. Then a hunter, his body wrapped in the tanned hide of his quarry, slips on silent feet through the disgruntled trees. His black hair hangs loose around his cinnamon brown face shielding it from the flies like a horse's mane. When the breeze is right, when the distance is right, he sends an arrow carefully honed under his own hand from a bow that was his father's into the deer's distracted heart.

The flies that gather gorge themselves on the blood that is pulled by gravity alone down the quiet deer's side. The heart is still. The hunter comes upon the body and sits several feet away watching for signs of life. When there are none he moves to the deer and rests his bow across the soft brown hair of this animal that has given the hunter's family continued life. He crouches at the deer's head and cups his hand under the dead mouth. Water from a leather bag pours into the hunter's hand and to the deer's lips.

"Thank you, my friend," he says tenderly. "This will help you on your journey." And the flies walk across the hunter's hands leaving the blood that has collected on their feet.

The murmur was low and soft. Its belly was formed of quiet words passed from mouth to ear and accentuated by subtle gestures with black eyes and russet hands that only the Cherokee picked up and understood. The broad meeting room encompassed the entire building and needed two fireplaces to ward off the cold in winter. Tonight both burned small fires more for light than heat. Contentious words would soon raise the temperature while smoke from the fireplaces masked the woody smells of men who had traveled far. The room itself glowed as countless candles and lamps struggled to drive away the darkness. More than usual were present as the murmurs continued to banter about the offers and terms of the treaty. Tsi'yu-gunsini, translated by the English speakers as "Dragging Canoe," looked into the abundant flames and thought them wasteful. His adversaries — Richard Henderson who represented the Transylvania Land Company, John Sevier from the government, and Col. Daniel Boone, the mediator for hire — enjoyed the light. Sevier himself had directed the extra lamps into place.

"I want to see their faces," he had said.

The light did what it could, but the beams were generally ineffectual in aiding the cause of the white men seated around the long, rough-hewn benches and dining tables. But a single match would have shed enough light on the face of Dragging Canoe to indicate his thoughts on yet another treaty. The Cherokee, known to themselves and other Indian nations as the Tsalagi, were being asked to make land concessions again.

Dragging Canoe was a powerful man, strong in body and even stronger of mind. His name had been given him because of his rugged determination. As a small boy he had struggled to drag a long, heavy war canoe to the river intent on following his father, Attakullakulla, and other warriors into a battle. Since that day his battles had been many and his name became Tsi'yugunsini — "the canoe, he is dragging it". Most Cherokee names evolved. His was no different. Adversaries played on the name "Dragging," and modified it to "Dragon." A war cry from the Dragon's mouth resembled a fiery burst and meant a brutal death to any within reach of his weapons. The skill that laid waste to many lives over the years had vaulted Dragging Canoe to the level he now maintained. All chiefs envied his command and prowess at war but some chided him for not making peace when the battles were going to the enemy. Regardless of the attitude of his peers, his warriors followed him with a fervor few other leaders, red or white, would ever enjoy.

Another young chief, Doublehead, a distant cousin of Tsi'yugunsini's, was six years younger and also opposed the selling of more land. Doublehead had a growing power base in his own village as did most localized chieftains consistent with the governing style of the nation. His older brother, Utsi'dsata or "Old Tassel," was a powerful leader, close in stature to Tsi'yugunsini's father, Attakullakulla. Yet Attakullakulla was "Uka," the First Beloved Man of the Nation and as such held a delicate sway over all the chiefs present.

Doublehead's opposition was not as vehement as Dragon's or as violent. On another day when it would profit him more directly Doublehead might not speak out against the process of deeding land to the whites, but today he would support his relative's attempt to rally the chiefs in the room against the signing. Tomorrow might find the two at cross-purposes. Tonight however, they would be shoulder-to-shoulder though Dragon would take the lead.

Irrespective of their enthusiasm both men stood at odds with the senior ranking members of their families as well as most of the other influential chiefs in the brightly lit murmuring room. Attakullakulla, referred to by whites as "Little Carpenter" for his slight frame as he was much smaller than his son and also for his ability to craft treaties, was cautiously supportive yet came to the dis-

cussion with his own agenda. He had been a sound fighter in his younger years but from his earliest days he measured his accomplishments against his political aspirations. Over time, victories and losses alike enticed him to seek trade and compromise with the men of light skin with wide eyes who came over the mountains. Unlike many others he had learned to speak their language and welcomed the unique trade goods they carried, especially their weapons. During better days he had been courted by the arriving peoples and burdened with presents. But time eroded the esteem in which the white men had once held Little Carpenter and protection of the British king gradually waned until he was left to deal with land-hungry men and out and out butchers. Attakullakulla made these things known to his son, his triumphs and his tragedies, and thus shaped the young chief's mind.

Tsi'yugunsini's lessons did not lead to a direct hate of the white men who encroached on the land but rather the results that followed their intrusion. A cycle quickly began, wrought by Dragon and his warriors which brought destruction to the settlers despite the earlier intentions of either group. Through the years Dragon had fought side by side with a great many men — red, white, and black. And though he did not attack the colonists who came in the first days, instead learning the art of trade from his father, their increasing number and abuse of the land and his people distilled itself to a hatred of the constant flow. Soon that hatred began to spill from him with the cut of every worthless treaty. A paper line would be established — a boundary no colonist could cross. But the lines quickly blurred. Then the numbers outweighed the names on the paper and a new treaty with more land was requested. Refusals had resulted in wars — wars the numbered white people, better armed and supplied, would invariably win. So a new pact was signed in an attempt to save the heart of the nation from the interlopers. And this is how it had gone. Today was just another knot in the rope that Dragon felt tightening around the throat of the Cherokee.

As a champion for the nation, his passion was for his people, not against the men who now tried to see his face in the fire and candlelight. If he had indeed felt a rage against them, their scalps would be hanging from his lance by morning. But through his father he had come to grasp their purpose and learned it best to follow and understand their devious intentions than to be blindly led. And on those days when Dragon's pursuit of understanding frustrated him and begged him to pick up his gun, Attakullakulla had tempered his fire. But the peaceful chief, currently dressed in white to symbolize the same, was losing ground to the son who would much rather don the red robes of a war chief and advance on this enemy who professed to be a friend.

Dragon had been witness to a number of these treaties through the years. As a boy and later a young man he had accompanied his father to many such meetings. On the heels of the signed documents he had watched white settlers creep into Cherokee hunting territories and multiply until they were like locusts. They took game off the land in huge numbers and cleared the trees for their farms. A single cabin grew into a town and quickly sucked the Cherokee lifeblood out of the forests. The white-skinned people trapped incessantly, robbing furs from the villages of Cherokee. They stole trade and stole outright. They took much and brought little. And what they did bring into the lush valleys were notions peculiar to him. The strongest of which was the purpose of this latest meeting and the meal laid out before him — ownership of the land.

White people claimed to have ownership of the land, as if they held dominion over it. He had abandoned any measure of comprehending this peculiar white-way years before. Even now as the thought seeped through his mind again, Dragon smiled slightly at the absurd notion. The land could not be owned. Does anyone own the sky? Do they pretend to own the water that flows? The wind? The rain? Trees? Stones? The soil? No one can own the land. The Tsalagi understood that the earth was provided for them. If they took care with it, it would support them. The ground would give enough of the Three Sisters to feed the people. The revered Sisters — beans, corn, and squash — would spring from the dirt each year and there would be plenty for all. And then the ground

would rest and the people would dance on its back and sing songs of praise and thanksgiving for the Three Sisters and the land that had provided them.

In the cool forest the land gave life to deer, bear, and elk. The wolf hunted there alongside the Cherokee. Each took only what they needed. When they had, they gave thanks to the deer that would feed his family — be they wolf pups or Tsalagi babies with black hair and dark eyes. By feeding the deer and harboring its young, the land provided meat to the nation. Do we own the deer? The grasses they eat? The land beneath their hooves? Dragon no longer smiled. These men were strange — strange and selfish. And stupid for thinking they could own the land. But own it or not, they had come and continued to come and the numbers grew with each season.

He stepped away from the soft conversations of his brethren and walked to the log wall. He squatted down, his back to the wall, feet flat on the floor, his knees high in front of him. This had always been a more comfortable way to sit than on the chairs and benches the whites favored. He lifted a hand and stroked his lips gently as his mind raced on ahead of the negotiations that whirled around his father and continued in lesser stages at lesser levels on the outlying tables.

With his finger, graced by a scar and hard yellow at the knuckles, he caressed the deep pockmarks on his cheek. Many years before an evil spirit had infected him and he had nearly died. Thousands around him had perished. Their skin had blistered and they were torched with fever. Dragon understood little of this evil spirit apart from knowing that the shamans who had kept the tribes healthy from the time the Great Spirit had given them life now failed. Since the arrival of the whites the Cherokee had been decimated by sicknesses the plants in their forests could not or would not defeat. Dragon considered that the guardian spirits who had protected the nation and given it many tremendous victories over their enemies, were now punishing the Cherokee for these treaties that allowed the whites onto land meant for Cherokee. On bad days, he often thought that it wasn't just the trading of their ground that had angered the spirits, but that the anger was brought on by the mere presence of the white people. This was land the Creator had meant for Tsalagi feet to tread. No white feet were intended for these woods, mountains, and valleys. The Cherokee should have driven them off or killed them outright when they first appeared. Yes, on bad days he felt this way. And today was a bad day.

Dragon stood slowly and slipped along the wall to the door. John Sevier and Richard Henderson, making their rounds, encouraging the Cherokee chiefs with each step, were in his path.

Sevier stuck his hand out across Dragon's chest. "Where are you going, Tsi'yugunsini? There is rum left to drink!"

Dragon dismissed the arm with only his eyes. "I have had enough to drink."

"Then stay and talk some more," Henderson said as he leaped into the conversation.

"I have had enough talk as well."

With that Dragon stepped away. Sevier grabbed his arm, something Henderson would have liked to have done, but fear stopped him.

"Listen, my good friend," Sevier continued in a hushed voice. "These things will happen. It's up to us to make the best treaty we can for your people."

"Do you truly care for my people?"

Sevier looked at Henderson before his shifting eyes returned to Dragon. "Of course I do."

"If that is so do not promote this treaty. Or any other."

"Now hold on," Henderson said. "This is a good deal for the Indian. There's silver, horses, and land for everybody."

"The Tsalagi do not need your silver or your horses."

"Maybe," Sevier continued. "But we do need that land." He paused and measured the ensemble around him and the safety it could afford against the Dragon. "And we'll have it."

Dragon watched Henderson for a moment to gauge his reaction before looking back sternly to Sevier. Again the eyes of the chief pushed away the white man's hand.

"That tongue of yours will one day betray you," Dragon said quietly.

Henderson realized that his partner had stepped too near the flame. "Look," he said with a nervous smile over feet that began to shuffle. "I'm sorry. What John means is that it appears the treaty will come to fruition — in one form or the other. The Transylvania Land Company is not here to cheat you. I want to make the best deal for both parties. I want everyone to leave Sycamore Shoals a winner. You can help make that happen."

Dragon's eyes left the white face and peered out over the men in the room. They settled on his father as Henderson continued.

"Dragging Canoe is a great chief. His people respect and admire his words, as do we. Tell us what we can do and we'll do our utmost to accommodate you."

Dragon spoke. The words were meant for Henderson, but also for Sevier and his role in the treachery. "You can leave these valleys and not return."

At that Dragon stepped toward the door. His movement caught the notice of most of the men in the ongoing meeting. He made eye contact with none, but the sentiments of his soul were scribed in the taut muscles of his scarred face. Henderson and Sevier, as well as those Cherokee who, plied by rum and gifts, favored the treaty, were pleased when Dragon opened the door and was swallowed by the night outside. Boone was pleased as well.

As a mediator Boone realized that now there would be one less dissenting voice and a strong one at that. Just as surely, the opposite side felt their case weaken as the door closed behind the disgruntled chief.

The moonlight replaced the flames of the oil lamps and glistened across Dragon's black eyes as he moved hurriedly away from the light in the doorway. He paused beneath the overhang at the corner of the building as his sharp eyes adjusted and scanned the village. Dark shadows moved occasionally from here to there, militia making their rounds and others supporting the feast inside. Against the moonlit sky were the trails of smoke spewing lazily from the many fireplaces burning throughout the complex. If there were Shawnee nearby, they could find this town with ease, Dragon thought, and shook his head at the indiscretion of the settlers.

Habit forced Dragon to lean around the corner of the cabin and glance down its long side. There was no real reason to be on alert apart from being in the company of white men, but Dragon's nature and his experiences seemed to always find him not far from preparation for combat. His senses had rewarded him many, many times and tonight proved no exception. Against the wall of the meetinghouse cabin was a figure peering in and about the clapboards of a closed window.

Dragon was absorbed by the darkness away from the cabin and effortlessly glided through the night until he was silently positioned twenty feet behind the voyeur. The figure was thin and short, perhaps five feet tall at best. In all likelihood this was just a nosy woman. The warrior relaxed, thinking himself unnoticed and moved to slip away, his departure as secretive as his arrival, but the figure spoke and the words halted him.

"Don't mark it," the figure whispered.

Stayed by a frail voice and surprised he had been found out, Dragon listened in the dark for his next direction as his hand instinctively felt for the knife at his hip. But as the words themselves sunk beyond the knife and his surprise, he realized that words such as these could not come from the mouth of an enemy. A moment more passed and no further orders were issued. Dragon eased closer to the shape against the window.

"Please don't do it," the form suddenly whispered again.

Again the voice brought Dragon up short. But here, closer, his ears told him the voice was young. Careful examination by the pale light also showed the powerful chief that the speaker was

even shorter than originally considered. And most surprising, the words were apparently not meant for him — at least not meant to be heard.

Leaning against the building was a young boy about seven winters old. Dragon's whispering orator was perched on a teetering box struggling to see through the cracks of the rough shutters that comprised the window. The boy spoke to the cracks in unheard whispers sent to the Cherokee chiefs reclining at the tables. "No. Don't do it," the boy breathed again.

The boy was so intent on his spying mission he did not hear the soft soles of Dragon's moccasins as he stepped up from behind. The chief was displeased that anyone would eavesdrop on the meeting he had abruptly abandoned, regardless of the message in the child's hushed tone. Dragon reached out with his foot and deftly kicked the box from beneath the boy. The scattering box made little sound as it tumbled across the grass. So dulling was the grass that the men inside were uninterrupted. The boy however, was ready to suffer a harsh fall. A single hand snapped out and clutched the boy's bare arm before he had fallen a few inches.

"Yuh-wa da-nv-ta! I'm sor-" the boy began to yell until Dragon's free hand clasped over his mouth. Both of the child's hands jumped instinctually to Dragon's hand covering his mouth. The warrior did not tell the boy to remain still with a word but instead tightened both hands and shook the boy slightly as the youngster dangled in mid-air.

The lithe body went limp and his hands dropped away from Dragon's. The man shook the boy once more but less so in order to insure understanding. The boy shook his head yes beneath the powerful hand.

Dragon slowly removed his hand from the boy's mouth as he lowered the child to the ground.

"Ga-dode-tsa do? What is your name?" Dragon asked forcibly.

The boy was still reeling and frightened by the big man in the dark.

"I have spoken to you. Why do you not answer me?"

"I am sorry," the boy replied, all the while still searching for courage amid the answer to the question. "Da-qua-dov...Da-qua-dov To-tsu-hwa. My name is...My name is Redbird."

"Of what clan are you, Totsuhwa?"

"Paint."

"That is a good family. Why does a Paint sneak through the dark and spy on his chiefs?"

"I was trying to see the meeting."

Dragon took the boy's shoulder and walked with him toward the front of the cabin. When Dragon stepped into the light of the moon Totsuhwa realized under whose hand he had fallen and he shuddered.

"Are you cold, Totsuhwa?"

"N-no, great chief."

Dragon stopped. "You know me?"

The boy was nearly afraid to acknowledge that which had already slipped from his tongue. "Yes."

"Who am I?"

"You are Tsi'yugunsini, great chief of the Tsalagi."

"Is that who you say I am?"

Encouraged and emboldened by his conversation with the warrior, Totsuhwa forgot himself. "Yes! You have fought many battles to defend our people. You have killed many Chickasaw and Creek and Shawnee. Now you kill the whites! That is why they call you 'The Dragon!'"

Dragon patted Totsuhwa's shoulder as he began to walk again. "You do not like the whites."

"No. They lie and steal."

Dragon smiled in the dim light of the moon. "Your father has raised you well."

“My father is dead.”

“Which battle?” Dragon asked as though the cause of death was a foregone conclusion, as indeed it was.

“My mother told me a place called Oldfields.”

“The Chickasaw.”

“Yes.”

“Your mother has given you your history then.”

“She used to, but now she is asleep in the Darkening Land to the West. I stay with my grandmother and her people.”

“Where was your mother taken?”

“A spirit made her very hot and her skin break. Our shaman could not keep her from the West.”

“I know this spirit. He rested on me, but I was strong and drove him away. And still he left his tracks on my face like a deer in the snow. When he comes to me he sees his mark and remembers that he cannot defeat me. Now I can walk among the dying and he dares not touch Tsi’yugunsini. This I have done.”

“I would like to defeat the whites like you defeated the spirit.”

Dragon stopped walking away from the cabin. “Why do you say this, Totsuhwa? Have they harmed you?”

“I see them in the woods near our village. They take many deer my grandmother says the Creator sent for Cherokee arrows.”

“That is why you asked the chiefs to not mark the leaves, the things they call ‘paper?’”

“Yes. And when we play away from the village they chase us and throw rocks. Some friends have gone to the forest and not returned.”

“Are you afraid of the white men?”

Totsuhwa dropped his eyes from the warrior for the first time in several minutes. “They have frightened me many times.”

“Do you run from them?”

The boy’s chin stayed tucked. He wanted to lie but could not. “I have done so.”

Dragon looked around the dirt courtyard of the village square. Not seeing anyone close by he squatted down in front of Totsuhwa and lifted the boy’s chin.

“Totsuhwa,” he said as he pointed to the boy’s skinny chest. “Rabbits grow to become panthers. The whites know nothing of this magic. The rabbit sneaks through the dark and whispers cunning thoughts to his friends,” Dragon said as he now pointed back to the cabin window. “And they learn and grow strong. When the rabbit grows into a panther he will not run. Understand?”

Totsuhwa nodded in the darkness. “I think so, but I hope there are deer in the forest for the panther to hunt when it is grown.”

Dragon looked away, beyond the boy back toward the cabin. He rose to his full height still staring down the meetinghouse and without another word walked away from his audience of one with a stride that was deliberate.

“Are you going back into the meeting, Tsi’yu-gunsini?”

“Yes,” Dragon answered without stopping.

Totsuhwa’s chest began to swell. The great chief had walked with him and spoken his name. Now he was going to defeat the white men for him.

From the edge of the dim light near the cabin door, Dragon stopped and turned back to the boy. “Why are you not beside me?”

The question perked Totsuhwa’s ears, but his feet didn’t know what to do.

Dragon held out his hand and motioned quickly just once. “Are you still a timid rabbit?”

The boy shuffled hurriedly up near the warrior who had stepped away at the first movement of the small feet. Totsuhwa did not speak to Dragon again but heard the great chief declare as he opened the door to the meetinghouse, "You should have ahwi, the deer, you were meant to eat."

Most eyes ran to the door as Dragon walked inside. The eyes stayed with him and failed to notice Totsuhwa in his shadow. Henderson and Sevier had rejoined Boone at the front of the room. Dragon walked back to the side of the few dissenters and sat in the odd chairs. Totsuhwa took up a slight position along the wall behind Dragon but had hardly been in place before an attendant to another chieftain took his arm and urged him toward the door.

"This is not a place for you. You are bold to come here, but that boldness will serve you better on another day. Return to your mother and tell her to keep you in the fields until you are ready."

Totsuhwa's eyes were wide as they jumped from the would-be sergeant-at-arms to his guardian, but he made no attempt to move.

The warrior looked down at the boy as his own face measured the surprise of Totsuhwa standing as before. "Has the turtle taken hold of your feet?"

Still Totsuhwa moved nothing save his eyes which continued to dance around Dragon.

"Or have the worms filled your ears?"

Totsuhwa pointed weakly at Dragon's back as he spoke to the evictor. "Tsi'yugunsini..."

The word was only strong enough to gently tap the great chief on the shoulder. Dragon turned slightly in the awkward chair and nodded to the attendant. The acknowledging nod was returned and a comforting hand replaced the one that would have shown Totsuhwa out.

"You have powerful friends, little one. You will stay, but be still like the eyes of a snake. Your friend has taken the talking stick and is rising."

What talk had lingered in the room now ceased. Dragon was standing proudly and allowed his eyes to make contact with every face in the room as he gently held the elaborate stick decorated with beads and color-stained thin leather fringe that symbolized that he alone could speak. His eyes made no distinction from face to face, white to red, ally to traitor. They asked only to be heard. When he had visited upon each face in the room he looked behind him at Totsuhwa. There was no smile and little sense of recognition, only the same request that he be heard — heard and remembered.

"A-na-da-nv-tli. Brothers," Dragon began as he turned to face the assembly. "Listen to my words. We have seen whole Indian nations melt away like snow in the sun before the white man. They leave scarcely a name of our people except those wrongly recorded by their destroyers. Where are the Delawares? They have been reduced to a shadow of their former greatness.

"There was a season when we had hoped that the white men would not be willing to travel beyond the mountains. Now that hope is gone. They have passed the mountains and have settled in land the Cherokee have called home. Now they wish to have that action approved by treaty. When that much has been gained, the same spirit that carried them over the mountains will lead them upon other land of the Cherokee. New lands will be asked for. New concessions will be forced and coerced by gold and treachery. Finally the whole country which the Cherokee and their fathers have so long occupied will be demanded and the last of the Ani-Yunwiya, The Real People, once so great and strong, will be made to seek shelter in some distant wilderness.

"My dreams whisper that once there, the nation will be permitted to stay only a short while until they again see the advancing banners of the same greedy host that courts us now. And then, not being able to point out any further retreat for the miserable Cherokee, the extinction of the whole race will be proclaimed."

Dragon allowed his words to reach into the hearts of all. He calculated the next words and weighed them against the outcome. In the end, Totsuhwa's deer tipped the scales and the war chief continued.

“Should we not take all risks and suffer all consequences rather than allow further loss of our country? All risks, all consequences to insure that Cherokee deer remain in Cherokee land to feed Cherokee children? Such treaties as you speak of may be all right for those of you who are too old to hunt or too old to fight. As for me, I have my young warriors about me. We will have our lands. A-waninski. I have spoken.”

The threat was thinly veiled. The “consequences” was war with the white men.

When Dragon had finished he signaled by laying the talking stick on the table in front of him. He turned away without looking down and walked defiantly again to the door. As before, all eyes followed his step. Totsuhwa, unsure of what to do but certain he did not wish to remain in the cabin minus his guardian, walked behind his chief.

Sevier motioned after Totsuhwa. “Let the children follow him and his ideals.” He smiled and whispered to Henderson, “Silver and horses will work on men.”

But as Dragon neared the door, other chiefs, taking a cue from Totsuhwa, stood and fell in behind the boy. As Dragon and Totsuhwa cleared the building, every Cherokee, including Attakullakulla, followed. In moments, Henderson, Sevier, and Boone and were alone in the cabin.

“Yes, Sevier,” Boone said. “Children follow him and great chiefs as well.”

“But perhaps not that far,” Henderson finished. “I will talk to Attakullakulla tonight. He knows that what we are trying to negotiate is right.”

Sevier was annoyed. “Right? I don’t give a goddamn about what’s right! Colonel Boone? First thing tomorrow morning, you go fetch some rum from the quartermaster. Start handing it out for breakfast. Then we’ll meet here tomorrow for supper. By God we need this treaty!”

“We’ll have it before we’re through,” Henderson said as he continued staring at the door. “We’ll have it.”

“You’re damn right we’ll have it,” Sevier said as he began scraping his papers from the table. Then he paused and looked at Colonel Boone. “Why are you still here? Shouldn’t you be out there plying the vote? Christ, what do we pay you for? Go on!”

Boone moved as close to Sevier as Dragon had been less than an hour before. His words were different but came from the same part of a not so dissimilar heart. “John, I suggest that you not push these people. You’ll do what you want. But now I’m telling you. Don’t push me. You’ve got all the cards. I know it. You know it. And the Indians know it. I’m just bringing together the inevitable. But me? You don’t know a damn thing about me. So don’t try me. Don’t try me.”

The colonel walked away leaving only two men from the mass and mix that had been present minutes before. He moved slowly. The disrespect he’d been shown was difficult to swallow, but it was washed down by the knowledge that horses and gold would be its chaser and that soon he would venture west, away from his own trespassing kind and all manner of treaty talk.

When Boone had gone Henderson turned to Sevier. “You’d better lighten up on him, John. I wouldn’t test him or these people.”

“To hell with him and to hell with these people. You think I care about him? I don’t give a good goddamn about him or those savages. And neither do you so save your care and concern. Okay, Richard?”

Henderson didn’t hesitate long. Sevier had known his intent from the start. “You’re right. I don’t care what happens to them - after we get this treaty signed. But right now Colonel Boone is all we’ve got.”

“And rum,” Sevier laughed cynically.

“That’s true. But since we are in agreement about these savages I need to assume that we are also in agreement on the present condition of our scalps. If you want to keep yours where it is and I know I wish to retain mine, I say again, let’s not insult these people. There wasn’t a one in this room

tonight who wouldn't take our hair if it profited him. I'm certain that Attakullakulla can be included in that group and I wouldn't put it past Boone to take a white man's scalp if he had a mind to."

Now Sevier smiled outright. "Probably so. He's been so long in the wilderness he can't remember what side he's on. And how about the Transylvania Land Company? How do you suppose they feel about the Indians?"

Henderson hesitated over his own papers but smiled through the side of his mouth. "We'd kill every one for a single acre of land just to have them out of our way."

"I believe you would, Henderson. I believe you would."

"You've killed plenty of Indians haven't you, John?"

"I've killed a share in my time. And if you're asking me if I'd kill them over this land the answer is hell yes. I've killed them for less. It's for the good of the country."

"Good? This has got nothing to do with good. It's about land."

"I realize that, Richard."

"Land equals money. When this is said and done it's about money. Good or bad. Right or wrong is immaterial to me. And you."

"Don't lecture me, Henderson. I've fought these people. I've seen what they do. They're animals. And yes, when it's done we'll have your precious land, but it is and always has been about good and bad. We've got to drive these savages out and make way for civilization. Sooner the better and the more completely we drive them out the better."

"By 'completely,' you no doubt mean annihilation?"

Sevier paused only a moment. "Preferably."

Henderson shook his head in faint disgust and finished with his own papers in a huff then stomped off toward the cabin door.

"Would that bother you, Henderson?" Sevier called after him.

Henderson did not hesitate or pause to answer until he had already opened the door. Only then did he look back over his shoulder. "No. No it wouldn't," he said before walking out and leaving the door open.

Sevier watched him go and began shuffling his papers again. "I thought so."

The small town had already absorbed the Indians by the time Henderson and Sevier parted company. A few lingered in collecting shadows and were already cornered under the tongue of Colonel Boone. The colonel was less impassioned than his Cherokee counterparts and much less well received. He spoke respectfully and was listened to, but he soon left the Indians to the darkness and retired.

Dragon had not lingered for the others. He marched away from the enclave to a patch of woods several hundred yards distant. Totsuhwa mirrored his steps and walked alongside his chief through the dark. Neither stopped nor spoke until they had arrived at Dragon's camp. A number of young men lingered about the site and drifted close to hear their leader. But they would be disappointed as his first words were not meant for them.

"Totsuhwa. Tsa-li-si, grandmother, will be searching the settlement for you."

"She thinks I am asleep with the ponies."

"Do you wish to deceive your grandmother?"

"No."

"Then you must go."

"Yes, my chief."

The boy moved with no small measure of reluctance and despite the lack of light Dragon could see his disappointment. The chief allowed a few slow steps before his voice reached out.

"Totsuhwa. Come."

The boy did as he was instructed. He was a little afraid, but interest, respect, and absolute awe outweighed it.

“Totsuhwa. The rabbit has begun to die. The panther has begun its birth. Do you understand these things?”

The small naked chest swelled up. “Yes, I do.”

Dragon motioned to another warrior as he addressed Totsuhwa. “Where does tsalisi sleep?”

Though the darkness prevented the others from seeing exactly where he was pointing, Totsuhwa raised his hand and pointed toward the buildings. “The Paint have a camp on the far side. We have traveled with them.”

“How is tsalisi called?”

“She is A-ma Gi-ga.”

“I know of her and her medicine. Your grandmother is powerful. She is very wise. Peace and war chiefs alike travel across the nation to take counsel from her. They have heard of Ama Giga’s strong relationship with the Spirit. They say He speaks to her often and directs her steps.”

“She teaches me.”

“You will be wise to listen, Totsuhwa. You will be wise to listen.”

A young man had come up beside Totsuhwa during the exchange. Dragon addressed him over the amazed face of the boy.

“Go to Ama Giga and tell her that Totsuhwa sleeps beneath the trees of Tsi’yugunsini.”

The young man sprinted off into the night without a word. Dragon walked a short distance to a dying fire and squatted beside it. As he began tending the flames, sticks of wood were placed within his reach by the attending warriors. As the flames grew higher, the circle of light spread out on the men around it. The circle was deep. Totsuhwa wondered at the many men who seemed to materialize from nowhere as they crowded tighter around the fire. Dragon poked the sparking branches and began to address them.

“Tonight, even now as we sit here, these trees are being taken from us. Sevier and Boone will promise horses and gold,” he threw another stick into the fire, “silver and whiskey provided by Henderson. Minds will grow weak with the whiskey and tomorrow there will be many to mark the white man’s leaves.”

“That is true, my son,” came the voice of Attakullakulla buried behind the crowd. Dragon’s eyes diverted from the flames only enough to find his father as the elder walked through the parting warriors with his own entourage. Doublehead was beside him.

The two men joined Dragon beside the fire and sat in silence. Totsuhwa sat wide-eyed in the growing flames across the fire pit from Dragon and watched as the three chiefs sat adjusting burning tree limbs in the fire for no reason. Attakullakulla stared through the flames over to the boy his son had brought into the circle then his eyes drifted upward until his head was leaning back and he was staring nearly straight up into the rising smoke. While seemingly looking for an answer in the twinkling embers floating up into the night sky, Attakullakulla began to sing softly to himself.

It was a song Totsuhwa did not know. The voice never rose above a whisper, but it captivated all the men and the one boy in the circle. The old chief chanted for a few minutes then the song fell away from his lips and he brought his eyes back down to the fire. Once again he was staring through the flames at Totsuhwa.

“The Everywhere Spirit has whispered to me. He knows the plight of the Tsalagi and has given me an answer.” Then Attakullakulla turned to his son. “You cannot stop the treaty for the land.”

Reverence for the First Beloved Man of the Nation caused the men nearby to bite their tongues. Dragon was hardest pressed, but he offered no rebuttal.

The elder then stood over aching knees using Dragon's shoulder for support. "Tonight I will sleep in the arms of the Everywhere Spirit and He will clear the answer He has provided. When the sun wakes we three will go to water and I will relay to you the Spirit's voice. Let there be no more talk of these things tonight."

Attakullakulla patted his son's shoulder then stepped away from the circle, his son, Doublehead, and their warriors. He was escorted by several men for some distance and then he drifted further into the trees away from all the warriors and there, in the forest of the Cherokee, slept the sleep of those who wait on the Spirit.

Dragon stood abruptly as did Doublehead. "Totsuhwa. Why are you not at my side?" he said with a smile as he reached out as though to put his hands on the shoulders of the boy.

Totsuhwa scrambled around the fire and jumped in front of the man most feared by the settlers not far away. As Totsuhwa waited, a log popped behind him and a spark landed on his arm. The slight burn made him jump instinctively and brush at his bare skin. Around him, Doublehead and the warriors laughed slightly. Dragon looked at them smiling and at the boy.

"Standing alongside Tsi'yugunsini places you near the flame." Dragon patted the men's shoulders nearest him. "These warriors already know this. Now you know it, Totsuhwa. And still you wish to remain?"

"I do."

"Good," Dragon said as he now put both of his hands on the skinny shoulders in front of him. "The rabbit continues to die. Come and rest. Tomorrow I will meet with my father while the ones below sleep with their whiskey."

Without another word the warriors moved from the fire and began slipping to the ground beneath their blankets. Dragon and Doublehead walked some distance from the flames and were taken in by the trees. They stopped near a small pile of provisions. Each man unfolded a few blankets on the ground in no apparent fashion. Dragon handed a few to Totsuhwa as he stretched out on his blanket bed. As the chief unfurled a heavy blanket and let it fall over himself he allowed his body to relax and closed his eyes. Doublehead had done the same.

Totsuhwa wrapped himself in the blankets while still standing then lay down alongside Dragon's feet. While his mind raced with the events of the night and the words he had listened to, he heard the great chief's breathing grow deep. He thought that he would not sleep, that his eyes would be held open by the presence of the Dragon, but seemingly in a single moment Totsuhwa was stirred by low voices and the crackling of a fire. The blankets Dragon had used were folded haphazardly and stacked except the heavy one which had been thrown over Totsuhwa, but Dragon and Doublehead were nowhere in sight. The boy knew instantly that the men had gone to water as Attakullakulla had directed the night before.

Going to water — quiet baths in the cold water of early morning — was a tradition among Totsuhwa's people. He knew from Ama Giga that it was a ritual done to purify the mind and body before a ceremony or other special event. As a boy he would not be permitted unless he was sick; perhaps this was why Dragon had allowed him to sleep. Whatever the reason Totsuhwa knew that Attakullakulla, Dragging Canoe, and Doublehead were somewhere in the river — called the Long Man by the Tsalagi — preparing themselves for something unusual.

Earlier that morning after going to water Dragging Canoe and Doublehead had listened reverently to Attakullakulla speak about the treaty that would be placed on the table that evening.

"The Spirit has once again given you tremendous wisdom," Doublehead said.

Doublehead was instantly disappointed in himself for answering so quickly. Quiet thought was an admirable trait among men. He had gained some respect in his village, but he was also known for being harsh and making rash decisions as he had just demonstrated, as well as decisions that suited himself rather than the people. He wanted the loyalty Dragging Canoe commanded.

Attakullakulla wanted it for him as well which is why the old chief often called the two young men together and looked for his son's strengths to influence the younger Doublehead. So far it hadn't worked and upcoming events would prove it fruitless.

Dragging Canoe had heard the same words that morning from his father but made no offer of acceptance or denial. Instead he watched the water flow in front of him. He gently dipped his hands and stared as the droplets formed and ran from his skin. Attakullakulla gave his son ample time as a show of respect due a growing war chief. The water on his hands was nearly dry when Dragging Canoe replied to the divine strategy Attakullakulla had delivered.

"The words of the Everywhere Spirit are undeniable. I am a lowly warrior, Father. I will speak out no more against the treaty as you have proposed here this morning. Yet, though my lips will seal themselves off from the words within, through me those words will grow strong. And should the white men abandon their leaves or beseech of us more land I will no longer feel the restraining arms of the Spirit's words to you. And when my last words have settled on their ears I will send my warriors' arrows into their hearts and with my knife I will lift their hair."

"It is right to be watchful of the whites," Attakullakulla said. "When my days as a warrior are past you two will lead our people. During those days you will find it difficult to battle a foe so many and so strong. I pray the Spirit guides you then as He has guided me.

"The words I will speak are done to protect our people alone. The ways of those beyond the Cherokee Nation are not our ways. This treaty will cause trouble for many but not the Tsalagi. It will send the settlers to the north, away from the heart of our homes.

"Doublehead, go to the town and tell those that attend Judge Richard Henderson that I wish to see him."

Doublehead rose from the water's edge with the understanding that conversation between father and son would continue in his absence. "Do I request Sevier and Boone?"

"No. Sevier is a butcher who disguises himself as the government and Boone is nothing to us. He will war with the highest bidder then go the way of the wind."

"I will find Henderson though I am sure he is still sleeping like an old woman."

"Wake him but be civil. He is a part of our protection though he does not realize it is so."

Doublehead left without looking again at Dragging Canoe. He was only a few feet out of earshot when Attakullakulla stood and looked down at his son. But the son out raced the father to words.

"Do you understand, Father, deep within your heart, in the furthest part where your blood mixes with our ancestors and our heritage, free from any influence of the whites, that this treaty and the Spirit's plan, will not hold back the white men for long?"

It was the son who was now obliged to wait. The depth of respect, for both his father and the position he held in the nation would have bid the young chief to wait for a very long time, but it wasn't necessary. The answer was near the elder's lips as it had been from the moment the Spirit had whispered to his mind.

"These things I know."

"And when the future holds hands with the past? What will you have me do?"

"That which is necessary for the good of the people. Tsi'yugunsini, the time is come when the good of the nation does not mean warfare. You have seen that through my eyes today."

"Yes, Father. I have seen."

"Know this thing as well. A man such as you, a Tsalagi chief, the proud son of Attakullakulla, must also do that which your own spirit requires of you."

Dragging Canoe smiled as he looked up at his father. "You know where my spirit leads."

"I know," the old chief said as he likewise smiled. "And in that doing you will become renowned throughout the nation and beyond. Men will fear the whisper of your name."

The smile faded but the words did not. "My son, the Spirit has given me many visions. Last night was just the brush of His hand. Of all the things I have taught you remember this above all - the battle against the white man is lost even now.

"We will make peace, make treaties. We will fight. But the Everywhere Spirit has told me many things. He has said that the way of the Tsalagi is hard. The stones beneath our feet will become our beds.

"The Spirit has opened my eyes. Through the flames I see the white men driving the Indians of all nations like cattle. The old cows and the calves are weak and stumble. The strong young bulls turn and gore the white men, but they are too many. In my vision the white men carry whips that are made of the snake that makes noise with its tail. I have seen them bite the bulls and they die. The ground swallows them and the white men pass over their bones. There is no one to mourn the dead bull when he walks to the Darkening Land because the others have been driven on.

"These things I have seen. You must remember them. Remember them in all that you do. They will not lessen the strength of your bow or dampen the powder in your long gun, but remember them still. And when you have remembered them — have them safely in your thoughts — pass them on to another. Have you heard my vision?"

"I have heard."

"That will be enough."

Henderson was not dressed when an aide advised him that Attakullakulla wanted to see him to discuss the terms of the treaty. As he hurriedly stomped into his boots and stuffed his shirt into his trousers, the chief waited in an outer room. When the land contractor entered he was pulling his suspenders over his shoulders.

"Good morning, Chief Attakullakulla."

Attakullakulla looked at the man as if it were he who had asked to see the chief. This blank stare born out of a fierce countenance brought out a fear in the white man. Perhaps Boone had been right. Perhaps these savages had been pushed too far. The anxiousness was reflected in his voice.

"Was there something I could do for you?"

The Cherokee chief stood straight and spoke very deliberately. "You wish for land."

There was a pause that Henderson thought the chief would fill. When he did not, Henderson proceeded cautiously. "Yes. That's correct."

"The Cherokee control land from the Iroquois in the north to the Seminole in the south."

There was another gap in the conversation and again Henderson tried to fill it. "Yours is a tremendous nation."

Attakullakulla still had not moved but continued describing the wherewithal of his people. "The land reaches from the great waters where the sun is born to the Creek Nation and the wide water over which the sun sleeps."

"Yes, I know. You have plenty of land. Surely what we have discussed is paltry in compare—"

"You will have land," Attakullakulla said to Henderson's disbelief. "I will speak to the others and they will hear my words."

Henderson was flabbergasted. He dragged a chair out from a simple table and plopped down, one arm hooked over the back. "You're not going to oppose the treaty?"

"No."

"And your chiefs?"

"Tsi'yugunsini will not make his mark, but the treaty will be marked by others."

"Including you?"

"I have said."

Henderson was speechless. He rubbed his chin and ran his fingers through his hair as he sought for reason in his guest's early morning proposal. After another moment of consideration he asked outright. "May I inquire as to what brought about this change in my good fortune?"

Attakullakulla was annoyed but compelled to answer. "I have seen the outcome. I want the best for my people, as I always have. The allegiance of my son is not so easily gained. He has been raised to defend his nation. This is what makes him a fine leader. Not today, but time will bring Doublehead and others to your tables. This will not be true for Tsi'yugunsini. I have little doubt that you will have to deal with him for many years. And despite what we do today my heart will ride with him."

Henderson ignored the warning the chief had just given him. "Fine then! Fine! Now, have you considered the parcel?"

"I have."

The land trader was out of his chair. He hurriedly unrolled maps, some rough, others quite detailed and spread them on a wide table across the room. His pointed finger danced and skated from line to boundary and back again, points that carried limited meaning to Attakullakulla. "Now, here are my thoughts," Henderson continued. "This is essentially the border of Carolina. I would like to see us come to terms with this parcel west to northwest of that break. We've discussed this piece in the—"

Attakullakulla stretched his hand over the map and covered the area Henderson had indicated. The chief's free hand drew a large circle around a stretch of land further north. "This is what we will give."

Henderson chinked his neck and contorted his body around to see the piece Attakullakulla had shown. "All right," he said slowly as he examined the map. "Now which river basin are you indicating, specifically?"

It was Attakullakulla's turn to point. "This is where we stand?"

"Yes."

Attakullakulla's finger ran across the paper to the map's north. There, three fingers spread out until they directed to three distinct lines on the page beneath his hand. "The land that surrounds these long waters."

Henderson looked again almost in disbelief. The land under the chief's worn fingers was intertwined by three major rivers — the Ohio, the Kentucky, and the Cumberland — each one an excellent territory. "How far up the basin are you considering?" he asked.

"Your leaves are not enough. The land will run the back of the long waters to my brothers the Iroquois in the north."

Henderson stared down at the maps in wonder. From quick calculations drawn on a pad to the side of the maps, Henderson determined the grant neared five million acres. The figures turned into dollar signs right before his eyes. With the chief's mark on the treaty, Judge Richard Henderson, primary stockholder of the Transylvania Land Company would be wealthy beyond measure.

"Your face is pleased," Attakullakulla said.

"Well, yes. I am pleased. I'm happy to have this negotiation process behind us so both our nations can move on in harmony."

"The payment will be as offered last night. Also, you will relieve any debts my people have with the traders who wait at this place for payment. They know you are about to buy land so they circle like vultures. You will do this?"

"Done."

"And this land is sizable. You will encroach no further. Those words will go on your talking leaves."

"Of course. I will draw them up myself."

“Tonight I will present this to the chiefs at your treaty council. They will agree, except my son, and your treaty will be marked.”

“Thank you very, very much, Chief Attakullakulla. This is a wonderful day for the Chero—”

“Awaninski,” Attakullakulla said absently as he headed to the door.

“Well, thank you. Thank you very much,” Henderson said repeatedly though the last words were spoken to an empty room. “Thank you very much.”

While Attakullakulla had been speaking to the land buyer, Totsuhwa returned to his grandmother with the news of his sleeping at the feet of the great chief, Tsi’yugunsini.

“I have heard,” Ama Giga said as she busied herself around the temporary camp. “You are a chief now I suppose.”

“No,” the boy answered.

“Then perhaps a warrior?”

“Not yet. But one day!”

“Is that day today?”

“I don’t think so.”

“That is a fine thing because the fire requires wood and I dare not ask a warrior to fetch sticks.”

Totsuhwa looked at the dwindling fire and watched a few weary sparks jump meagerly from the slowly dying bed of coals.

“Tsalisi? What is fire?”

“It is a friend to the Tsalagi people.”

“But what is it? How does it come to be?”

“How do birds fly?”

“They move their wings,” Totsuhwa answered, still staring at the cooling fire bed.

“And so it is with the fire. It flaps its wings around the wood you bring to it and makes us warm and cooks our meat.”

“It is not the same. If I put water on the fire it will stop moving its wings.”

“Do you think the bird would not stop moving its wings if you put him under the Long Man? The bird would die like the fire dies.”

“But the fire returns. From where?”

Ama Giga ceased her toiling and lowered her aching bones to the ground. She sat low and held her arms up. “Come to me, Totsuhwa.”

Her request tore him away from the coals. When he reached her she rubbed his arms before slipping her hands around his waist. “You are a fine boy, Totsuhwa. And you will be a fine man. Today you are still a boy, but one night in the camp of Tsi’yugunsini has opened your eyes to the world around you. It is good that you ask these things.

“The fire is a gift from the Creator. He gave it to Water Spider when the Tsalagi were young. You see, the Creator had the Thunderers send down lightning into a hollow tree on an island. Many animals who could swim or fly tried to bring the fire back to the Tsalagi on dry land. Many tried and many failed. But Water Spider walked across the water unafraid. She made a woven basket for her back and placed a single coal in it. This she brought back to our ancestors.

“The flames from a single cooking pit may die, but we will always have the fire because it was a gift from the Creator.”

“Thank you, grandmother. You are wise.”

“It is a story from our heritage. It is not mine. You must tell it to your children one day.”

“Ama Giga? Is the land a gift from the Creator too?”

“Yes. The grandest!”

“And like the fire, we will always have it?”

“It will always be ours to use as long as the people take care of it and the animals who share it with us. The Creator has made it so.”

“The white men will not take it?”

“The white men are plentiful now, like locust in a time of sorrow for the corn sister. But the locusts go. They die from eating too much and go back to the earth. So it will be with the white men. They will eat too much of the land and it will kill them. Then the Tsalagi will reap the harvest once more.”

The boy’s face demonstrated his relief. Ama Giga noticed it and hugged him. “You have been listening to the talk of the chiefs. You have been troubled by it.”

“Tsi’yugunsini has talked about the white men. Last night Attakullakulla received an answer from the Everywhere Spirit. This morning Attakullakulla, Tsi’yugunsini, and Doublehead went to water to talk on the vision the Spirit gave through the fire.”

“Attakullakulla is a fine chief. The fire will have given him much.”

“The fire is our friend.”

“Yes.”

“The Spirit comes to us through it.”

“It may, but not if you let it go out. Now go. Collect the wood the forest has left on the ground for you. Go!”

The old woman sat on the ground and watched her orphaned grandson disappear in glimpses as he dashed through the trees. He would have to venture far to find kindling as the settlement had depleted anything nearby. But Ama Giga no longer worried for him. In his questions and on his face she had seen that he had the invitation of the Spirit and hence, its protection. She wondered if Tsi’yugunsini had seen the same.

When the wood had been collected for the fire and the ponies had been staked over fresh grass, Totsuhwa wandered back toward the camp of Tsi’yugunsini. Doublehead was there holding court with a few braves. He was extolling the benefits of the treaty and in doing so drew a harsh stare from Totsuhwa. The boy looked through the camp, anxious to see the reaction when the Great Dragging Canoe heard Doublehead promoting the treaty within the tree-lined walls of his camp.

“He has gone hunting,” Doublehead suddenly said to him.

“Wado. Thank you. Do you know where?”

“Only the deer know for certain. Tsi’yugunsini is a skillful hunter, almost as good as myself.” Doublehead laughed and pushed the warrior nearest him. “The deer do not hide from us as they know the deed is done as soon as we pick up our bows in the camp.” The other men shook their heads. “It is true!”

The laughter gently subsided. Doublehead looked at the sky and measured the sun on the horizon. “The deer wait for him in the mountains where the sun will sleep tonight. I would go there if you wish to find him.”

“Wado.”

“But do not go into the mountains looking like a deer or Tsi’yugunsini may split your back with his flint!”

That was a troubling thought to the boy and he did not reply as he moved away from the camp to the west.

The sun had crested and dropped the width of his hand before Totsuhwa considered that he might be moving in on Dragging Canoe. The boy had discovered a well-worn deer trail some time before and had begun mirroring it from the side. After each set of ten steps Totsuhwa stopped to listen and look at the forest. He could hear the light quick jumps of squirrels among the litter and the occasional crackling of a bird warning of his approach. His ears directed his eyes and he located the offending sentry in the canopy.

“Shhh,” he said to himself and the bird. “I mean no harm to your friends, but if you cry out Tsi’yugunsini will think me a poor hunter. Ho-wa-tsu. Please.”

The bird fluttered from branch to branch to see the boy more clearly. It watched him as he bid for its silence. This was no threat and the bird was compelled to be quiet, but the damage had been done. The Dragon was moving at the bird’s first warning.

The warrior understood that the cry from the bird would have gone up because a perceived threat was in the woods. It could be a man and the presence of so many whites near the village meant that the trespasser would likely have fair skin. Dragon adjusted his thinking further still and thought that perhaps due to his stance on the treaty it was he who was now the hunted.

Totsuhwa moved methodically from beneath the irksome bird. He continued mirroring the trail, stopping periodically to listen. His steps were now as light as falling snow. There was a sense in him that he was nearing his quarry.

Dragon sprinted hard through the trees but scarcely made a sound. His strides brought him in a wide arc until he was back near the game trail. He hid himself behind a large tree and waited. When his acute ears brought him the soft sounds of a step he deftly loaded an arrow and pulled back on the bow. Shadowed movement brought his hands, eyes and the meticulously honed jasper red flint point together on a slight break in the trees three steps ahead of his pursuer.

Back at the settlement, Henderson had summoned Sevier moments after Attakullakulla left. “We’ve got it! We’ve got over five million acres! Attakullakulla just walked in and said yes. Just like he did it every day. And it amounts to pennies.”

“What parcel?”

The maps came into play again as Henderson spun them around on the table. “I haven’t drawn up the papers yet, but according to the chief we’re talking about all three river valleys — the Kentucky, Ohio, and Cumberland. All to the north.”

“I thought you wanted this section?” Sevier questioned as he pointed to a stretch of land between South Carolina to the southeast and the proposed tract to the northwest.

“I did — that is, I do, but I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. That parcel is minuscule compared to what I’ve got. I’ll get this section to the northwest then parlay this smaller tract into it. You’ll see.”

“Christ, Richard. That is a lot of land. Hell, it runs clear to the Iroquois territory up north.”

“Damn right it’s a lot of land! And that means a lot of money. The Transylvania Land Company will be selling off land grants for fifty years behind this deal.”

“Transylvania Land Company, my ass,” Sevier said laughing. “That company is you and you know it.”

“Well, I’ve got some partners to think about.”

“Bullshit, Richard. You’re the same as me. You’ll take care of you and that’s about the extent of it.”

“Be that as it may, John. When that treaty gets signed tonight all of us are instantly wealthy. I’ll see you get your share as long as you keep the British off my ass until I can turn the green in those valleys into gold.”

“I’ll hold up my end, but it won’t be easy. There’s a lot of talk about a revolt against the king. These damn colonists are a heady bunch.”

“They’ll calm down when they find there’s five million more acres to settle. All those revolutionary types will move west into this newest frontier. Hell, we’ll sponsor Colonel Boone to lead the way!”

“Well, let’s get the thing signed first before you give that Boone any more money. I don’t think he’s done a damn thing for us.”

“Boone’s all right. He’s ready for a new frontier, that’s all. He’s just the man to pave the way into this settlement for us.”

“True. And works for a beaver pelt! Doesn’t much like the Indians any more than we do. I’ll bet that son of a bitch Dragon doesn’t have many more scalps than our Colonel Daniel Boone!”

Dragon’s tally was about to increase by one. He had held the powerful bow taut for nearly a minute as he waited for his prey to clear its cover. The arrow left Dragon’s release hand as the boy began his step into the break in the trees. The recognition of Totsuhwa came in that fraction of a second between the release of the arrow and the arrow’s clearing of the bow. In that beat of a hummingbird’s wings Dragon jerked the bow with his lead hand and affected the weapon’s flight.

Totsuhwa froze as did the warrior’s heart in the instant before the arrow stung a tree inches in front of the boy’s chest. The shaft of the arrow was still quivering in the tree when Totsuhwa’s wide eyes followed its embedded flint to its fletching, the nock and beyond. The arrow was pointing from its mark in the tree backward to the man who had propelled it. Totsuhwa’s grandmother had been right about the Spirit’s intervention in the boy’s life.

Tsi’yugunsini’s hands were as they had been the moment he had sent the arrow. The release hand still rested by his cheek and the bow was still held out in front of him, shielding himself from Totsuhwa’s trembling face.

The bow eased down and Totsuhwa found himself staring into the fierce eyes of the Dragon. The boy’s own eyes had remained wide open and had yet to blink. A sizable portion of Totsuhwa’s mind and body told him to run. He may have angered the mighty chief and he could slip a second arrow from its quiver in a breath. If he had not upset the war chief, he had certainly embarrassed himself for stumbling within range without notice. Uncertainty reigned until Dragon’s arrow draw hand motioned for Totsuhwa to come.

The youngster’s bare feet had just begun to move when Dragon held up his hand to stop. Totsuhwa did and waited for his next direction. When it came it was that same hand pointing to the arrow in the tree. The boy understood. Arrows that flew straight and true, crafted by the archer himself, were valuable. Totsuhwa began wrenching the shaft of the arrow back and forth in an intensive effort to free it. The flint had bit deep and releasing it without snapping the shaft was difficult for the boy’s small hands. Afraid of failing while his chief watched, Totsuhwa dug at the bark around the point with his fingers until small pieces gave way. After considerable effort the arrow followed.

Totsuhwa held the arrow triumphantly over his head in both hands while a broad smile beamed from below. Dragon nodded then gracefully padded his hand up and down for the boy to approach quietly. Totsuhwa carried the arrow in front of his naked chest and looked around him as if suddenly conscious that there was still a hunt afoot.

Dragon watched the boy approach and took notice that he took great pains with the arrow, carrying it in both hands as if a slight bump could shatter it. When Totsuhwa was close Dragon held out his hand and received the arrow. It was an old one, still ramrod straight with tight feathers and a sharp point. He examined it for damage. Arrows were difficult and time consuming to make. Ones as right as this old friend were treasures. The hunter opened his quiver and carefully slipped the arrow inside with its brothers. Only then did he begin to walk deeper into the woods speaking softly to Totsuhwa as he tagged along.

“Thank you for bringing the arrow,” Dragon said behind a faint smile. “I left it in that tree near you. It was lucky for me you stumbled upon it.”

Totsuhwa’s face flashed ashen as he recalled the strike of the arrow. “Lucky for me too.”

Dragon didn’t miss a stride but slipped his arm around the boy’s shoulder. “Yes, lucky for us both.”

The walk through the woods seemed to move away from a hunt for some time. Dragon was taking in the sights and sounds of this forest that he realized would soon be lost to his people. Totsuhwa simply delighted in being by the great chief's side. In time the hunter returned and began to walk lighter and with more purpose. The boy mimicked his every move as he fell in behind. Not many steps had passed before Dragon brought the pair up on the ledge of a narrow wooded gully. He motioned Totsuhwa to the ground behind a rotting stump that was perched on the ledge. Totsuhwa was instructed with a hand signal to be still. Dragon crouched for a few quiet minutes and surveyed the small ravine before lowering himself to the ground beside the waiting boy.

"You did well to track Tsi'yugunsini," Dragon said in a hushed voice. "Many have tried to do so and have not been as successful."

"Probably some of those that did find you wished they had not," Totsuhwa said as he remembered the arrow striking the tree.

Dragon smiled broadly. "I imagine that is true."

The boy lowered his chin slightly, but his eyes stayed on the master. "Did I ruin your hunt?"

"No, ahwi will always wait for the arrows of Tsi'yugunsini. This is a good place. They will come if we do not think strongly of them."

"Think strongly of them?" Totsuhwa echoed.

"Yes. If you concentrate on the deer they can hear your thoughts and will shy away. They will give themselves to us for our needs, but we cannot insult them by telling them what they must do. Rather, we must hunt them skillfully for they are born of these woods as are the Tsalagi. Keep your thoughts clear."

Totsuhwa closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the stump. His brow furrowed after a short while. He opened his eyes, dropped his head and looked up at Dragon. "It is hard to not think."

The Dragon smiled again. "Relax and think of Ama Giga and the things she has taught you."

Totsuhwa remembered the conversation with his grandmother from that morning. It wasn't long before Dragon touched his arm.

When Totsuhwa opened his eyes he saw Dragon slipping the old arrow he had wrestled out of the tree from the quiver. The practiced hands loaded the weapon and moved in absolute silence around to the side of the stump.

Totsuhwa listened intently, making sure not to move unless directed. He heard a light step in the old leaves that lined the gully. It was a deer. But as quickly as the thought came he dismissed it with remembrances of his grandmother. Dragon looked over his shoulder, smiled, and nodded as though he had seen into Totsuhwa's mind and witnessed the quick exchange.

Then the teacher pointed with his eyes and a slight motion of his head for Totsuhwa to look into the ravine. The boy moved like molasses until he'd turned and just his eyes cleared the jagged dark brown top of the stump. There in the small gorge below them was a fine buck weaving slowly toward the hunters. Its steps were dainty among the debris of a hundred seasons and its nose nudged the ground as it walked. The brown and white tail flipped back and forth lazily much like the deer's carefree ears. There was no alarm in the air, no dangerous scent in its nostrils, no reason to be afraid.

The hunters watched the animal browsing through the tiny valley, each step bringing it nearer to the arrow being drawn back. Totsuhwa's eyes darted from the deer to the bow and back. He didn't know when the release would come and wanted to be certain to witness the hit. Had he been older and more familiar with the hunting ways of the Real People, he would have been signaled by Tsi'yugunsini's whispered words.

"Yuhwa danvta. I'm sorry." And the arrow silently exploded from the bow. Totsuhwa saw the arrow slam into the deer's side just behind the animal's shoulder. He also heard it hit. There was

a resounding thud that stunned the animal before any realization of pain struck it. The blow staggered the deer to the side, but it recovered in a flurry of scattering spindle-like legs. When the feet were collected the mortally wounded animal began a sprint; however, it was short lived. The run through the trees snapped the protruding shaft off the arrow and wrenched the flint point deep in the deer's heart causing more damage. In mere moments the loss of blood dropped the animal to its knees to rest, but the rest would be an eternal one. The deer would rise and race no more. Before the hunters reached it the deer was dead.

The exuberance of youth had propelled Totsuhwa over the stump and down into the gully before the deer had regained its footing. The dying animal had taken no notice of the boy, but Totsuhwa was on its blood trail like a hound. Dragon followed but at a leisurely pace. He knew he had hit the mark. The deer would not go far and the blood would lead him there quickly enough.

When Totsuhwa came upon the deer he stopped. He looked for signs of life as he purposely shied away from the head. Though the buck had only velvet covered nubs for antlers at this time of year, he did not want the animal to see him if it were still able to jump and run. But the deer would never run again and it took only a few minutes of observation for Totsuhwa to see that was the case.

Dragon came upon the animal as the boy was considering getting closer though he had yet to move. The bow and quiver were carefully set aside before Dragon pulled a small animal-skin water bag from around his back. He walked to the dead deer and crouched low by its head. Totsuhwa followed him and knelt alongside examining the deer and watching the chief.

"We must give ahwi water for his journey to the Darkening Land," Dragon said as he poured a small amount of water into his cupped hand beneath the deer's mouth. "It is right. We thank you, friend. You will feed many Cherokee for many days. Perhaps a baby will be kept warm by your coat. You are a fine friend and we thank you."

"And the Creator who sent us ahwi?" Totsuhwa offered.

"Yes, and we thank the Creator of all things who has given us this meat for our food and this hide for our clothes." Dragon stroked the deer's face with the water that remained in his hand. "To-hi-du. Good peace."

When the deer had been sent to the Darkening Land, Dragon retrieved his weapons and handed them to the boy. "Look along the trail for the shaft. It has been a fine arrow. The feathers may still be of use."

Totsuhwa carefully held the chief's prized weapons and walked gingerly back into the gully looking from side to side for the splintered arrow. Behind him Dragon hefted the deer onto his shoulders. With the legs together across his chest he began walking down through the mountains toward his camp.

After some effort the broken arrow was discovered. Totsuhwa was anxious to catch up to the Dragon, but the weight of the chief's bow in his hands was too tempting. When he slid the pointless shaft into the quiver he exchanged it for a complete arrow, handcrafted by the great Tsalagi war chief. Fingers never meant to do so notched the arrow in the strong bow. He spied a nearby tree and held the bow out before his face. Totsuhwa pulled on the arrow, but the sinewy cord and the tightness of the bow proved too much — he could scarcely budge it. A few more meager attempts were enough. He had held the powerful weapon that had killed many times. That would have to do.

Totsuhwa caught up to Dragon in the foothills before the encampment. He only nodded to the chief when he caught his eye, much like Dragon had done to him, to signify that he had found the broken shaft. There was no conversation but the boy was beaming when they strode into the Dragon's camp.

Doublehead was still sitting around a crackling fire with a group of other braves. "You went to the woods empty-handed and have returned with a deer and a cub!"

“The deer you have seen,” Dragon said. “But you mistake a cub for a panther. This one has tracked me in the forest when you yourself have failed to do so many times.”

“And for being a great warrior he is rewarded by toting your bow?”

“Again you do not understand what your eyes see. Our game is so heavy it takes both my hands to carry it. Totsuhwa has the bow to protect us from a marauding bear or lazy Cherokee like you who sit and talk instead of hunt. You might try to steal the meat we have earned and then Totsuhwa would have to shoot you with our arrows.”

“I see then. But we are yet rewarded, are we not, my brothers?” Doublehead said to those around him. “We sit and discuss the future of our nation and the food comes to us.”

Dragon had not stopped walking. He, with Totsuhwa following, was nearing the far side of his camp. “As so many times it has happened. You are wrong again, this time on two charges. This meat does not come for you. It is for the lodge of Ama Giga. And you are not discussing the future of the people. You are discussing treason. Enjoy the grasses you pick for your meal and the white man’s silver in your pockets. Perhaps if you beg Sevier he will trade you some meat for it.”

Dragon laughed as he walked away from the men. A few of the warriors stood and looked longingly after the deer. “Do you suppose Ama Giga will feed two hungry hunters?” Dragon asked the boy.

“Oh, yes! We have few to hunt for us. She will welcome our fine friend,” Totsuhwa said as he patted the dangling leg of the deer.

Ama Giga waded into the carcass even while she continued to thank Tsi’yugunsini. She and her sisters in the Paint clan began skinning and carving up the deer with quick well-practiced cuts seasoned with an air of celebration. Though the task could have been accomplished in several minutes due to the clan’s experience and skill, the women lingered over the deer for two hours or longer, relishing the coming together.

Dragon stayed only long enough for the women to sever the deer’s hindquarters. He asked for half of the rump and was promptly given it. With the leg and attached meat slung over his shoulder, Dragon picked up his bow and quiver to head back to his camp. Totsuhwa was watching the women do their cutting and the chief at the same time.

“Doublehead will cry if I leave him hungry,” Dragon said.

“He might,” the boy laughed.

“More importantly, I need my warriors to eat meat. They must have their strength. We do not know yet what tomorrow will bring.”

The comment brought both the chief and the little boy back to the realization that the laughter of the day would soon be overshadowed. The sojourn into the hills had been a pleasant respite from the concerns over the treaty, but when the mountains had given way to the town, the white men and their wants were still there.

“Help Ama Giga with her work, Totsuhwa. And thank you for your company on the hunt. You did well.”

The war chief left with the meat for his men and Totsuhwa saddled up near his grandmother and waited for her instructions as he continued watching the matriarch of the clan dive her hand into the belly of the deer. She fumbled around blindly before withdrawing her bloody hand which she immediately held out to Totsuhwa.

“Here, my son. Tsi’yugunsini will have need of this. Clean it well and take it to him.”

The boy looked in his hand and saw the flint point that had nearly taken his life and had captured the deer’s. He clutched it tightly in his fist and sprinted off to the long water.

The cool water rinsed away the blood and hair from the arrowhead as well as from Totsuhwa’s hands. In the shallows where he squatted the water was running slow and was only about a hand deep. Totsuhwa laid the arrow point on the bed of the river and took his hands away

but kept them coiled in case the current might try to steal the chief's possession. The reddish jasper color of the flint stood out from the gray stones of the river bottom. The arrowhead had a hundred sides, the result of the flaking and chipping that had formed it, whereas the river stones were smooth and round from years of being caressed by the flow. The flint was hard-edged and sharp, the river stones soft-edged and dull. One could never be mistaken for the other nor could one fit in the other's world.

"Could a river stone be an arrowhead?" Totsuhwa thought to himself. "And how long would a flint arrowhead survive in the Long Man before its edges were worn down?" These were things he must remember to ask Ama Giga.

The water had done its job nicely. The arrowhead was clean and fairly shined. Totsuhwa fingered it over and over and thought about how Tsi'yugunsini must have fashioned it — flaking the reddish stone with repeated well-placed chips, cracks, and strikes. Then the boy's thoughts raced on to the enemies it may have struck down for the war chief. Considerable death had been carried on the wings of this piece of flint, but Totsuhwa could only suppose how much. In his imagination an interest that bordered fear came out as a slight tremble in his hand. He suddenly looked around the riverbank as he imagined the appearance of those lives claimed by the glistening stone. It was time to return the arrowhead to its owner.

When a sprinting and gasping Totsuhwa broke into Dragon's camp he drew no attention. Not that his running and panting would not normally have done so, but rather because there was no one there to see him. It seemed that Dragon, Doublehead, and the other men had gone to the settlement. The treaty process was underway. As soon as the realization came to him, Totsuhwa dashed off again, though his breath had yet to recover from the race away from the ghosts at the river.

The treaty meeting had begun as a feast of sorts. There was a considerable amount of food, but the primary article on the menu was liquor. Henderson wanted to insure the signatures Attakullakulla had promised made their way to the parchment and thought of no better way to lower the resistance of the Indians than by lowering their sensibilities. Primed by rum, any resisters would quickly give way to pledges of silver and horses.

Dragon had known since the early morning conversation with his father that the treaty would be approved, but he was prepared to argue against it for principal and to insure the men in the room — white and red — knew his heart. His father's plan, provided by the Spirit and laid out to Henderson, would sway the others, this much he clearly understood. On another occasion, with less at stake, even he would have found himself aligned with his father's strategy, but Dragon understood that it was temporary at best and at worse would ignite a firestorm of war and bloodshed that would rain down on the Cherokee people for years to come. Attakullakulla's proposed land grant to Henderson included little of the Cherokee's truly sacred homeland. Though a small portion was a far-reaching Cherokee hunting territory, the vast millions of acres the crafty chief was about to sell to the Transylvania Land Company were occupied by the Shawnee Indian Nation, a fact Attakullakulla knew very well. Little Carpenter had once again skillfully reinforced his name as the crafter of treaties.

"My friends," Richard Henderson began as he stretched out his hands in an attempt to quell the boisterous collection of men. "The great chief, Attakullakulla, has brought a proposal to the table that is most accommodating. The land suggested will satisfy the colonists of this nation that grows around you for many, many years. In exchange, the Cherokee people will be paid handsomely and can be assured of the protection of their sacred homelands. As a bonus, Attakullakulla and I have agreed that the Transylvania Land Company will assume any outstanding debts you and your people may owe to the traders who frequent this post and other Cherokee land."

There was a favorable murmur through the throng.

“I have taken the liberty of preparing the necessary documents. They are here before me and await the marks of the leaders of the great Cherokee Nation.”

Henderson offered a quill to Attakullakulla who was seated nearby. The chief took the feather but laid it on the table in exchange for the talking stick. The chief stood and held the ceremonial piece close in front of his waist as he addressed the assembly. Though he spoke English, these words were in his native tongue and he spoke quickly so as to confuse Boone and others who knew some of the language.

“My brothers. Doublehead or myself have spoken to each of you concerning this leaf waiting for our marks. You know the terms we have agreed to. You know the land we speak of and its owners.”

Boone had understood this much and thought the chief meant himself and his people. He was confused when catcalls and war yelps went up from the warriors in the room who had fought the Shawnee many times.

Distracted by the outburst, no one took notice of Totsuhwa as he crept into the room and around the wall until he was behind Dragon. The room was crowded and the walls nearly full, but he found a quiet spot where he could watch the red and white faces and nervously cradle the arrowhead in his hands.

The eruption subsided and Attakullakulla continued, now speaking even quicker. “This treaty will pit two enemies of the Cherokee against each other and move them away from warring with us.”

Henderson grabbed Boone’s arm. “What’s he saying?”

“Something about getting away from war.”

“Good. That’s good.”

Attakullakulla kept on. “They will have only energy and weapons and hate for each other and will leave the Cherokee in peace.”

Henderson and Sevier both looked to Boone. He whispered to Henderson who in turn whispered to Sevier, “They want peace. This gives the Cherokee peace.”

“The leaf will keep the white men to the north, away from land the Creator has provided the Cherokee. It will give them land for a hundred years. Granting our nation one hundred years of peace.”

Boone leaned to Henderson’s ear. “He says the treaty will give the Cherokee a hundred years of peace.”

“Great!” Henderson said softly before repeating what Boone had told him to Sevier. “I love this man, even if he is an Indian.”

“I will put my mark to this leaf,” Attakullakulla said. “For all the nation to see that today we insure the land that our fathers hunted will remain.”

The crowd voiced their approval as Attakullakulla exchanged the talking stick for the quill but grew eerily still as Dragon rose to his feet.

“That son of a bitch!” Sevier whispered to Henderson as the talking stick was handed around the tables to Dragon.

“Relax, John. We’ve got Attakullakulla. That’s enough. Let the Dragon have the floor for a few minutes and pound his chest. He’s just a brute, a relic, a throwback to the past. Fortunately for us, his father sees the future more clearly.”

“The great Attakullakulla has spoken,” Dragon began when the baton reached him. He spoke slower than his father had, both willing and anxious to have his words translated. “We all know him to be a champion for the people. He is a fearless warrior and leader of brave men. Tonight however, the wise eye of Chief Attakullakulla does not see. The peace we seek through these leaves will not last. It will not last the hundred years. It will not last ten. It will not last one.”

Boone scratched his chin and squinted as he struggled with the Tsalagi language. He leaned toward Henderson but was met by his hand.

"I don't give a damn what that savage says," Henderson said with a sly smile. "He won't stop the treaty. You can keep his Indian gibberish to yourself."

The colonel leaned back into his own chair and picked up a piece of beef with his fingers, successfully tuning out anything the Dragon might say.

"Those who are caretakers of the land will rise up. They will fight the settlers, yes, but will also hold the Cherokee responsible for what we do today. Would we not do the same if another nation gave away our land?"

"And the greatest concern is not the nations who live in these lands now, but those that will. These wide eyes will...not...stop!" Dragon said as he pointed fiercely at Henderson and Sevier. "They will not be content until their people sleep in every Cherokee village and the Cherokee are forced to sleep with the dogs if we are allowed to sleep at all!"

"I respect my father. I respect my chief. I will say no more on this treaty for that respect, but Tsi'yugunsini will not place his mark alongside that of his father's. Awaninski."

The talking stick was passed back to Attakullakulla who took it but immediately set it aside for the quill. He dipped the quill in a small bottle of ink and proceeded to make his mark on the treaty papers. When he had done so, he purposely spilled a small amount of ink on the table. Then he stood as other chiefs approached.

Some touched their thumbs to the ink and then to the paper near Attakullakulla's mark while others made their own distinct marks or copies of a few letters as their name. Dragon remained seated and noted each face. There would be no retribution against the signers. Perhaps the day would come and Dragon knew it would, when they would regret the decision they had made.

But tonight the agreement had been reached and the past, regardless of how recent, could not be undone. Dragon would have to let the night pass and several others after. He was certain he was right about the Shawnee and the unending thirst of the white men, but he could do nothing more tonight.

Henderson had gotten the last mark necessary on his documents. He was beaming as he blew across the parchments to dry the inkblots from the Indian's thumbs.

"Well, Colonel Boone," Sevier said as he leaned back in his chair. "That's another one down. How many more to go before we own the whole damn thing?"

"Can't say. Reckon it depends how big the parcels are."

"How big the parcels are," Sevier laughed. "I think we ought to get Henderson to make a few changes in that paper he's got right there. Hell, I'd make it read for all the land from Canada to Mexico and call it legal."

"The Spaniards and the French might have something to say about that."

"To hell with the Spaniards and French. And to hell with these cursed Indians too!" Sevier dropped his chair forward to the floor. He leaned heavily on the table across in front of Henderson. "Mark my words, Colonel. Before this is over, we'll have it all. We'll have it all! There won't be a Spaniard, a Frenchy, or an Indian left. You'll see. Know how I know? Because of men like this fellow right here." Sevier pointed painstakingly at Henderson who was rolling up the treaty for safe-keeping.

"Men like this are going to insure that every clump of dirt between Canada and Mexico, and the ocean and the Mississippi River, gets sold. And before they can sell it, they gotta steal it. Got to get that precious treaty paper. And you know what, Boone? I'm with 'em. I threw my lot in with those boys long ago, and I'm not ashamed to say so. I've made money and there's a lot more to be made. To hell with these savages. And the Spaniards. And the French."

Sevier mumbled on over another glass of rum he partially spilled while pouring. Boone said nothing but continued to eat and drink, unconcerned about this treaty or any other.

The rest of the men in the room were returning to their meat and drinks as well. Dragon was sitting almost alone, the chiefs on either side having turned their chairs slightly away in order to engage those nearest in more pleasant conversation. They wanted to talk of the money, the hapless Shawnee and the hundred years of peace, not the bleak future Dragon suggested.

Totsuhwa saw this and brought himself up to the side of the great warrior. The arrowhead clenched in his hand would be his inroad. "Great Tsi'yugunsini," he said softly as though waking someone from sleep.

The chief moved only his head and looked at the boy. A little hand came up and opened, revealing the freshly scrubbed flint point.

"Ama Giga said you will have need of this."

Dragon looked at the arrowhead and nodded. "Yes. Ama Giga is right." Then he looked across the tables to the gathering celebration of white faces. "I will have need of it and many like it, I believe. Many, many like it."

Totsuhwa remained at the Dragon's side, his hand still open holding the arrowhead. When Dragon's attention broke from the white men, he saw that he had left the boy standing. His own hand covered Totsuhwa's and closed the small fingers around the piece of flint.

"That is for you to keep. For you to remember this day," he said sadly before adding with a smile. "And our successful hunt together."

A few loud yells went up from the rum collected in the bellies of men relieved to have the treaty process complete.

"This is no place for warriors such as us, Totsuhwa. It is time to pack our camp and leave this place."

Dragon was beaten to movement by Henderson who stood and raised his hands again to quell the crowd. "Friends! Friends! May I have your attention please?" Caught off guard, Boone choked down another mouthful with a belt of whiskey and translated reasonably well for the men present.

The room continued to rumble for another minute before Henderson's pleas restrained it. "Friends, before we continue to enjoy the fruits of our labors tonight, there is one small order of business I wish to address." Henderson unrolled a second set of documents as he continued. "The land we've discussed this evening will do everything the great Chief Attakullakulla has said it will. However, one indisputable fact remains — this section is an island to the Transylvania Land Company. It's far to the north and does not border any of our existing claims. As it stands I will have to walk across the ground of my brother, the Cherokee, to reach this new land."

The blood in Dragon's body ran cold. He knew where Henderson was headed, several did, but it seemed only Dragon cared, or cared so deeply that the icy blood quickly turned and began to boil. Totsuhwa witnessed the change in the countenance of his chief. He held the arrowhead gift tightly and unconsciously took a few steps back. There had been much compassion in the words from the man to the boy, but words would not shelter him if Dragon flew into a rage.

"What I propose to my brothers is a bridge — a bridge of continued peace, a land bridge from my holdings that surround us to this new territory in the north. I am prepared to pay handsomely in order to insure the peace we have made here today."

Dragon leaped to his feet. He stomped the floor in defiance of what he was hearing. There was no more fierce and deadly a look as Dragon put forth at that moment. "We have given you this!" the lethal warrior screamed. "Why do you ask for more? Will you never be satisfied?" Dragon brought his fist down hard on the table. If he hadn't captured everyone's ear beforehand he had it now.

“You have bought a fair land. When you have this you have all! No more. No more! The Cherokee will sell no more land!” Dragon pointed ominously at his father. “You see, Attakullakulla? One hundred years? The ink is not yet dry on your treaty and they are after more land. They will not be content until they have driven us beneath the earth as they have the elk.” Dragon motioned around the room to his people. “We all know that there is no more game left between the Watauga and the Cumberland. They have driven it out or killed everything sent there to live.”

Now Dragon returned his attention to the white men, Henderson in particular and pointed with a hard hand at the marked sheaf of papers that constituted the neatly rolled and tied treaty. “When you venture into that land you will find its settlement dark and bloody.”

The war chief spun away from the table. Tested warriors parted like children before him as he stormed out of the meeting. This time no one followed. Even Totsuhwa hesitated to go after his chief; afraid that to follow too closely on the heels of a man such as Dragon caught in a tempest might be perilous. So he waited, shrinking back against the wall and listened to Henderson and Boone apply salve to the wounds ripped open by the tirade. The words were more silver and more promises exchanged for more land, the “bridge of peace”.

Totsuhwa held the arrowhead of the chief and understood each translated word. From the wall, small and unnoticed, the rabbit moved ever closer to death while Totsuhwa wondered if he alone had heard the Dragon’s predictions as the second treaty was ratified.

While the boy held his spot at the wall, Tsi’yugunsini held court with his warriors a short distance away. Only a small number were present at their temporary camp. Others had not made the journey and still others reveled in the food and drink at the town. Dragon would not admonish them tonight for he knew their hearts. The young men would take drink and meat where they could but when Dragon gave the call to arms each one would be present and ready to kill the white hand that had poured the whiskey.

Dragon’s words were succinct. “When the sun wakes we will leave this place.” With that, he moved away from the continually burning fire and threw his blankets across the ground.

Some time later Totsuhwa slipped into the camp. He did not see Dragon’s face among those at the dwindling fire so he walked to the spot where he had slept at the Dragon’s feet the night before. There he found his chief beneath a pile of blankets, sleeping. He would venture no further tonight. Tomorrow he knew the camp would be broken and the warriors would melt into the forest. In the move back to their villages, Totsuhwa understood that he might not see the great war chief again. From the last outburst at the treaty council he knew the Dragon would likely be at war with the white men, though the remainder of the chiefs would not follow. All but alone in his absolute defiance even the great Tsi’yugunsini would be vulnerable.

Totsuhwa slept alongside his grandmother that night, the chief’s arrowhead clutched in his hand. When she stirred at first light the boy rose with her. He hurriedly rekindled the morning fire then sprinted off in the hopes of seeing his new friend before the mountains had swallowed him. He was disappointed when he reached the temporary campsite and found it abandoned. Without hesitating, Totsuhwa jutted back and forth through the camp checking the ground like a dog circling for the scent of a rabbit. There were fresh tracks leading to the settlement. Perhaps the boy would catch the warrior band there.

The town was up early. Several Indians were squinting hard against the light, their heads wracked by the effects of the rum and whiskey from the night before, but all were moving. With the treaty process completed there was little reason to be here, for the Cherokee or the land traders. Each was anxious to get home and enjoy the spoils the preceding days had brought.

Richard Henderson, John Sevier, and Colonel Boone were collected on the stoop in front of Henderson’s quarters. When Dragon and two additional warriors entered the complex the white men caught sight of them. Dragon’s companions left the chief after a brief conversation and went to

a trading post to secure provisions. Dragon had seen the white men as soon as his foot touched the ground inside the confines of the village square. He knew they were watching and in all likelihood plotting. Dragon was correct.

“We ought to have him thrown into irons right now,” Sevier said with a tight jaw.

“On what charge?” Henderson quipped.

“Disrupting the public peace. Threatening an officer. Drunk and disorderly. Treason. Hell, I don’t care. That son of a bitch is going to cause a lot of trouble.”

“Treason?” Boone asked.

“I said I didn’t care for what. He’s holding back the growth of a nation. That’s plain enough. I call that treason.”

“The growth of your nation or his?”

Henderson laughed. “Relax. We’ve got our treaty. We’ve got the land. And speaking of that land, Colonel Boone, I’d like to offer you a commission to lead a group of settlers up there.”

“I might be convinced to head up that way for a spell.”

“Fine. Draw up a manifest of provisions, etc., and I’ll present it to the board of the land company. I’d like to see you get underway as soon as possible. Some decent maps of the place would go a long way. It’ll speed the sale of farm parcels. Also adds some credibility to the place. Makes it appear more inviting to settlers if they think roads and towns are coming along right behind them.”

“I reckon you’ve got it all figured out, eh, Henderson?” Boone smiled.

“Well, I hope we got a lot of it figured out. We’ve done this once or twice before and that’s generally how it goes.”

“I’ll tell you something, Richard,” Sevier thrust into the conversation. “You’d better have a plan in mind for that goddamn Dragon over there. Mark my words, that son of a bitch is going to be a thorn in our side until the day he dies.”

“Well, John, if we’re lucky some unfortunate accident may befall the great chief.”

“And remove the thorn,” Boone added.

“Exactly,” Sevier echoed. “And remove the thorn.”

Totsuhwa hit the square just as the trio finished their declaration. He saw Tsi’yugunsini right away and beyond him the source of his consternation. Dragon started to walk toward the three white men and their unheard discussion of him as Totsuhwa trailed to the side. As Dragon reached the group Totsuhwa set himself up in a dark shadow beside the stoop so he could hear and see without being seen himself. As ever, the arrowhead danced in his hand.

“Good morning, Chief Dragging Canoe,” Henderson offered profusely. “What a wonderful day, is it not?”

“The sun is warming, but it is not a good day,” Dragon answered.

“No?”

“No. It is a sad day for my nation.” Dragon looked around and caught sight of a pair of half-drunken Indians staggering onto the unmarked village square. “Though not all of its people can see it.”

Henderson smiled broadly and stepped down to the chief. “What if,” he began, “now just what if you are wrong? What if Chief Dragging Canoe is the only one out of thousands of Cherokee who is against the settlement of this land because he is wrong?”

“I am not wrong.”

“Yes, but what if? What if you could see the future and in it you saw this countryside awash in quaint villages. Schools for children. Churches to worship God. Fields of corn waiting to be harvested.”

“These things I have seen, but it is not the future. It is the past. There have always been villages in this land. Cherokee villages. Where the Spirit speaks to us. Where our children learn. Where our corn grows. But you have burned our fields, ridiculed our Spirit, and killed our children.”

“Now hold on there, Mister all high and mighty,” Sevier threatened.

With Sevier’s step, Dragon’s hand slipped to his knife.

Boone tightened and reached for his own.

Henderson stuck his arms out across the chests of the white men. “Hold it! Hold it. Everybody relax. Just relax. John, Chief Dragging Canoe is still our guest. A little decorum if you please. We may not agree with him, but he deserves his say.”

“He’s had enough say.”

“Not now, John,” Henderson said. “Now is not the time. We’ve had a good night. No sense spoiling everything we’ve worked for. Don’t want a martyr now, do we?”

“Chief Dragging Canoe,” Henderson continued loudly. “I welcome the great chief’s opinions — though I do not share them, nor apparently does his father and rest of his nation. I welcome them nonetheless.”

“Are you headed home, Chief? Don’t let us keep you. Thanks for stopping by.”

Henderson retreated back toward his rooms, gently nudging Sevier ahead of him and pulling Boone along behind. “You’ll have to excuse us, Chief. We are preparing to outfit Colonel Boone here for an expedition into our newly acquired territory. We’ve a great deal to do. Please excuse us.”

Totsuhwa moved a few steps to watch the white men as they neared the door. To his surprise he heard Tsi’yugunsini laugh. The sound stopped all three men on the porch as surely as a rifle report. As all three turned back to Dragon, the chief shook his finger at them lazily.

“You have purchased much good land.” He laughed cynically. “But I am afraid you will have trouble if you try to live there.”

Dragon turned away smiling and immediately held out his arm toward Totsuhwa. The boy jumped out of the shadow and the chief placed a hand on his skinny shoulder as they walked away from the bewildered men and the treaty.

When their steps cleared the town Totsuhwa looked up at the Dragon. “You saw me in the shadow from the start?”

“From the start.”

“You have good eyes.”

“I do.”

A few short steps passed and Dragon still smiled the smile he had gained at Henderson’s door.

Totsuhwa inadvertently washed it away in an instant. “Tomorrow we will fight the white men?”

“Tomorrow we will fight the white men.”

“Then you will need this,” Totsuhwa said as he held up the precious arrowhead.

Tsi’yugunsini glanced down without stopping. “Yes, thank you,” he said though he made no move to take the point. “Its brothers will take many whites off the land, but my warriors and I also have the white man’s guns. Even now, my men trade for more rifles, shot, and powder with silver given by Henderson. We will use their own weapons against them.”

Tsi’yugunsini motioned to the arrowhead. “It is a powerful weapon. Many have felt its cut.” The chief’s words affirmed Totsuhwa’s ghosts by the water but he was not done. “Remember, it is yours now. A reminder of our fine hunt.”

The boy had no words but stared at the gift, unable to banish from his imagination its violent history.

Tsi'yugunsini stopped and put one hand on the boy's shoulder as he pointed more deliberately to the arrowhead. "Do not be afraid of this stone," Dragon said as though he had read Totsuhwa's mind yet again. "It is strong but you are its master now. It contains great power of life and death. To our enemies it is death. To our children it is the life that comes with the food it brings. Carry it with you and it will protect you with these powers. Its time as a weapon has past. It is a talisman now to your spirit. Take Tsi'yugunsini with you and take what Ama Giga teaches and you will be a powerful warrior and shaman to our people." Dragon hesitated and looked with gentler eyes at the boy. "We will go separate paths, little panther. This is your protector and a reminder of our hunt and perhaps a reminder of Tsi'yugunsini."

It was true that the fight would begin before long. Within days Tsi'yugunsini's tomahawk would be deep red to the handle in white blood. Hair that was once near blonde and light brown would hang in mats of dried black blood from his belt. Totsuhwa would not see these things. Reluctantly he followed Tsi'yugunsini's orders and stayed with Ama Giga. They both understood that there was much for him to learn from his wise and experienced grandmother and also much growing that needed to be accomplished before he could ride with the war chief against the invaders.

Between now and that day, Totsuhwa would learn the mystical ways of a shaman priest, a Tsalagi medicine man, and carry the spirituality of Ama Giga and the Real People to the next generation. The day would eventually come when he would take his place alongside Tsi'yugunsini as one of the premier warriors in the Cherokee Nation and yet his knowledge of the ancient medicines and mythology of the people would always overshadow his much-heralded skill in combat.

In the days when Totsuhwa's training took root beneath Ama Giga's hand, the fledgling collection of colonies up and down the land collected themselves and waged war against their British masters. Dragon had been at war against the colonists and any other white faces that had the misfortune of crossing his path since the day he and his band rode away from the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals and Henderson's promises. The war chief would find a willing ally in the British who responded by supplying him with guns and ammunition to be used against the settlers seeking autonomy from King George. This support temporarily stymied the Dragon's attacks against British outposts and saved the lives of many unknowing and unwary red-coated soldiers who drifted too near Dragon's weapons. The new Americans however, would not fare so well.

Fueled by his growing hatred of all things white, Dragon ravaged homesteads and travelers with heartless, bloodletting abandon. His war cry froze gun-toting long hunters and made grizzled mountain men cower to their knees like frightened children. The answer to their pleas would be the wrenching of his tomahawk from their split skulls and an unceremonious wiping of their brains on the grass. With a deft cut around the head of his victims the Dragon would scalp both soldiers and civilians. Men, women, and children alike fell under his knife and reaffirmed with frightening intensity the name the whites had hung on him.

Though it was he himself who made no distinction between soldiers and children, justifying to his heart and to any critics that no whites had ever given Cherokee babies quarter, the red coat officers who gave him gunpowder also gave him still more incentive with active trade for the hair of colonists. This bounty drove settlers into a frenzied fear for their lives, which the British hoped would in turn drive them to the king for protection and end the colonial rebellion. By supporting Dragon and his ruthless war parties operating out of the Chickamauga River Valley, the men from across the sea used him as both an executioner and as a wedge of fear between colonists and the new United States government.

Ironically, Dragon and his men found themselves aligned with the Shawnee from the northwest for the first time in either nation's history. As a consequence of Attakullakulla's deception of Henderson and Boone's subsequent attempts to settle the land, the Shawnee raised up against the

colonists. When the British Empire began returning the fight against its revolting colonies, the Shawnee Nation welcomed the advance. Later, when Dragon's warring Cherokee met their Shawnee compatriots for the first time along a skirmish line fighting for the British and them all aligned against the American colonists, each party would eye the other nearly as often as they did the overt enemy. Only when the Shawnee leaders discovered that the Cherokee chief was Tsi'yugunsini, who did not sign the treaty at Sycamore Shoals, did they allow the continuing uneasy truce.

Many years later, when they were abandoned by the British, the nations continued to war together against the new Americans. It was then that a young Shawnee chief, Tecumseh, studied the ways of battle with the great Tsi'yugunsini and, after forging a friendship that would endure through their violent lifetimes, took his knowledge back to his own people to form one of the most powerful Indian nations on the continent.

While the Shawnee accepted Dragon and his barbarous warfare, his own people suffered as a result of it. When the American Revolution broke out in earnest, the Cherokee had sought to remain neutral. Attakullakulla had no fight with either tribe — the blue coats or the red. He wished only to have his nation left in peace. But the actions of the Shawnee and Dragon's Chickamauga raids on the part of the British caused the warring colonists to paint with broad brushes.

John Sevier was in South Carolina pounding on Richard Henderson's desk as each man reiterated the troubles of the colonies as they saw it.

"Damn it, Richard! Have you heard a word I've said? The British are pushing us from the east, the goddamn Shawnee are raising hell from the west, and that son of a bitch Dragon is massacring anything that moves!"

"I heard you, John! Christ, I heard you! But there isn't a damn thing I can do about any of it. Jesus, I'm fighting for my life here!"

"Fighting for your life? Do you hear what you're saying? The Shawnee are attacking daily. They outflank us, outrun us, outmaneuver us. They say it's like chasing smoke out there. And your old friend Dragon? He's literally butchering children!"

"You think I don't hear the reports, John? But how am I supposed to stop him?"

"You're not. You can't. But Christ, I expect a little more support."

"John. Now it's your turn. Listen to me closely. It is my firm belief that the colonies will win out over Britain. The king just cannot successfully manage a war from England. It's too far. Logistics favor the colonials. They are dug in deep and will triumph, I'm certain of it. When that happens they will turn all their attention to the Indian problem and it too will be eradicated. Now here's the part that's killing me — the goddamn government here, that you are begging me to help salvage, is on the verge of taking away the assets of the Transylvania Land Company. Do you understand where I'm going here? All that land we suffered over to get is about to be stripped away."

Sevier was taken back. "How?"

"The legislature is saying that individuals and private companies cannot buy tracts from the Indians. Simple as that. It all has to be done by the weak and struggling government of the colonies. Goddamn it."

"That sets your finances back a bit, doesn't it, Richard?"

"Don't be flippant, John. I lose, you lose."

"Well there's a lot of land to be taken up one way or the other. By legal means or whatever and it'll all need development, exploration, and surveying. So there's a lot of money to be made still. But these savages have got to be run off it or buried under it first."

"You and your Indians. Why do you hate them so?"

"They're animals. They dance around fires like devils. They talk gibberish you can't understand."

"As do the Spanish and French."

“And they’ll scalp you quick as look at you.”

“A trick they learned from us, I believe.”

“You talk like you give a damn. And there you sit — you robbed them of millions of acres of land and I dare say never lost a night’s sleep.”

“They were always paid following extensive negotiations.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Richard. But in the meantime, I’m pulling together a group of regulars and we’re headed west into the Cherokee Nation.”

“What for? The Cherokee are neutral.”

“That son of a bitch Dragon sure as hell isn’t neutral. We’re going down there to set things right.”

“You’re not going to find Dragging Canoe in the nation. He’s down warring out of the Chickamauga River area. The Cherokee have all but cut him off.”

“It doesn’t much matter who we find. There’ll be a whole lot less Indians to worry about by the time we get back.”

“John, let me say this again - the Cherokee are neutral.”

“An Indian is an Indian.”

“Go after the Shawnee.”

“Let ME say this again, Richard — an Indian is an Indian.”

“The Cherokee are not hostiles!”

“I don’t care! They’re closer and easier to find...”

And so it began.

The horse snickered and shook its head at a scent on the breeze. The horse alongside picked up the same scent and neighed in reply to its familiarity while the two riders in the party sat comfortably on their backs, oblivious to that which the animals had become aware.

The high canopy of the forest looked down with filtered light on the backs of the men and the horses as they moved along at a leisurely pace. In the movement through the trees the sun seemed to flicker casually across the two white faces and the brown leather of their saddles. The day was warm and invited no rush, but had the riders seen what the trees had witnessed and what their horses had sensed, their spurs would have been dripping with the blood of their mounts.

“Andrew, that is a helluva good looking parcel,” Clooney said. “Can it be bought right?”

“You mean cheap?”

“I do indeed.”

“Of course. Were that not the case, I wouldn’t have troubled either one of us to ride all the way out here.”

“Can you get terms?”

“I can.”

“Buyers?”

“Stacked up like cord wood.”

“Very good, Mr. Jackson,” Clooney laughed. “As has become your custom, I am dutifully impressed.”

“We will be able to section off and sell individual grants outright, then use the money generated to make the rather genteel monthly payments to the present owner. Our expenditures will be limited to the first surveying costs and I’ve got somebody lined up for that who will take payment in acreage.”

“Who’s that?”

“John Sevier.”

“I thought he’s been commissioned to hunt down Indian renegades.”

“He has. I think he might be a colonel now, but John’s never been averse to making money, especially with land. He’s had his fingers in more deals than you or I will ever see. I’ve my doubts he’ll do the surveying himself — probably can make more in Indian scalps — but it’ll get done and it won’t cost us one red cent.”

Andrew Jackson, in the role of young land speculator, was about to succeed again. The ink on his juris doctorate degree was hardly dry when he ventured into the land business. There was money to be made as there had been fifteen years earlier when Richard Henderson had negotiated his famous treaties, but he was dead now and hindsight coupled with history to demonstrate to Jackson that the grants had to be made with other white men or via the new government. The United States had been born of blood, but laws now dictated that individuals and private enterprise could not negotiate treaties in any form with the remaining indigenous peoples, just as Richard Henderson had predicted. Therefore, Jackson sought out early settlers who had claims to large tracts of land and Revolutionary War veterans who took their pay in westward territories. He was able to wheel and deal with these men free from governmental interference.

“Well, Andrew, I’m not against making money either but the way you’ve got it set up I don’t think you need me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The landowners want to see that I have the wherewithal to make the payments. And truth be told, I don’t. I’m relying on the quick turnover of the properties to make the subsequent payments.”

“I follow.”

“What I need is someone to partner up with me. Someone who’ll go the down payments and provide proof of solvency before the sellers will consummate the deal. Still follow?”

“Better than ever.”

“I need a partner. You want in?”

A lead ball hit Clooney beneath his left eye before he could answer. At the same time the sound of the report made the horses bolt. A second shot came. Blood spurted from the hole in the wounded man’s face as the second ball whistled by Jackson’s head. Clooney fell backward from his frenzied animal, dead before he hit the ground with a sickening thud. His horse, pulled to the rear by the reins twisted in its dead rider’s hand, stepped backward onto the lifeless body snapping bones beneath its hooves.

Jackson didn’t have time to scream his would-be partner’s name. He fought to regain control of his frightened horse. In the harried movements of the stammering animal, three Cherokee painted arrows whizzed by, severing the small branches off trees that hung nearby.

Safety lay straight ahead in the direction the shots had come from, but the shooters would be reloading. Jackson looked back in a split second at Clooney splayed on the ground with his horse trampling him, still tied to the dead hand. He saw his limits in that fraction of a moment and buried his spurs in his horse’s ribs.

Jackson and his horse crushed through the trees. Totsuhwa saw him coming and quickly set his rifle down and sprinted to intercept him. Dragon saw his adopted son’s intentions but continued reloading his long gun.

When Jackson saw the painted warrior dashing through the woods toward an intersecting point ahead he knew what would happen. His spurs raked the sides of the animal again, but he would not beat the Indian who seemed to be flying low across the ground. Fortunately the forest and his horse cooperated and provided an escape.

Jackson drove the animal through a break in the trees hard away from the racing Indian. Totsuhwa saw the move and pushed to compensate for the change in the direction of the chase but was out maneuvered by the speed of the horse. In seconds the fleet-footed Indian was outdistanced by the scrambling charger and its flailing rider.

Dragon set the primer in his flintlock and brought his rifle to the ready, but the trees again protected the fleeing white man. With no chance of a shot, Dragon ran to his own horse tied nearby and swept his worn body onto its back. As he did, Totsuhwa, strong and exuberant in the prime of his life, flew back through the trees and leaped onto his own horse, his rifle back in his hand. Dragon had the lead as both men urged their animals after Andrew Jackson.

Behind them, other warriors descended on Clooney’s body. Like wolves pouncing for the kill they drove their knives into the corpse to insure the death and satisfy their bloodlust. One took the startled horse and ripped the twisted reins from the dead man’s hand while another sought to free the hair from his head.

An Indian brave ripped Clooney’s head backward, pointing the corpse’s open dead eyes to the clouds. The chasm beneath the left eye dripped blood that was drawn out by movement and gravity alone as the heart had ceased to beat moments after the bullet struck. With a fist full of hair, the brave made one long slicing cut from just above one of the dead man’s ears around through the forehead to the top of the other ear. He pulled the scalp free with a sound of wet cloth tearing. Still holding the partially detached scalp in one hand, the warring Indian put a foot on Clooney’s shoulder and pushed his body forward. With the hair drawn tight away from the head, the warrior made a single slash through the scalp at what had been the back of the dead man’s head. The gruesome procedure was accomplished so quickly it was nearly bloodless. Two cuts in the space of a second and the trophy was hoisted in the air with a resounding triumphant cry.

While the prize was being raised, other men were running for their horses, mounting and galloping off in search of Totsuhwa and Dragon. The leaders of the band were easy to trace. The sounds of their horses careening through the trees helped signal the way for the trailing warriors. Dragon's war whoops echoed through the forest as well as he continued to threaten the terrified Jackson. The heart-pounding, mind-choking scream meant death was at hand and was the last sound a great many white men had heard since Dragon had ridden out of Sycamore Shoals fifteen years before.

The killings and raiding had come in spurts. There were some quiet days at the onset as the treaty settled into the minds of those involved and even after as the Cherokee returned to the way of life they had enjoyed for centuries. But when the Shawnee attacked Daniel Boone and the first settlers, the peace that Attakullakulla had promised would last a hundred years began to unravel.

Eventually Henderson realized the extent of the Cherokee deception but was loath to let on for fear the revelation would further incriminate his already dwindling hold on the land. Before it was over, the government would commandeer the vast bulk of the parcel that changed hands in the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals. Henderson would be given a token tract of land for his time, trouble, and role in the intended deception of the Cherokee.

When the Shawnee land was discovered to be not as welcoming as had been thought, colonists pushed elsewhere for land, just as Dragon had predicted. Settlers and soldiers alike were tracked and hunted by Dragon and a seemingly ever-changing array of faces around him. Warriors came and went over the years and battles. Some were lost to the guns of the ever-encroaching enemy but not many. This was a testament to Dragon's skill in preparing both his men and the attacks. However, disease or the calling needs of their villages took other men down. But when one left for home or for the Darkening Land another rose to take his place. As the years passed and the Dragon's reputation grew with the colonial thirst for land, the new recruits were often Shawnee and even Chickasaw.

This is how it was when Dragon and his raiders came within two days' ride of Totsuhwa's village almost ten years earlier. Several months prior, Totsuhwa, as a burgeoning young shaman, had officiated over the funeral of Ama Giga. With her movement to the Darkening Land, Totsuhwa was without family. So the sixteen-year-old boy put the few possessions he owned — some unique herbs, tubers, and leaves, a few small clay pots of Ama Giga's, and Tsi'yugunsini's arrowhead, into a fawn-skin medicine satchel and slung it and a smallish bow and quiver over his shoulders. Then, with the promise that he would return and bless the village of his birth and training, he rode into the forest of his ancestors in search of the great Tsi'yugunsini.

When the young man and his brief mentor of so many years before met again, timeliness cemented the old relationship. Dragon's pack was fresh from killing but had suffered injuries in the skirmish. Two warriors had been hit by gunshot and a third had been slashed with a saber. The wounds were painful if not immediately life threatening. As always, lack of attention could claim lives days or weeks later. Worse than the wounds was a stomach illness that catapulted through the band as a result of drinking contaminated water. In the rapid retreat from the battle, dry-mouthed warriors sought to ease the pain of their wounded and their own thirst by drinking from a pool they would normally have passed by. The predictable results were debilitating cramps and diarrhea.

The raiders had stumbled their way back into their river valley region for safety, seclusion, and rest. Fresh water did little to ease their malady. When a lookout saw the young man riding upon their hideout, studying the ground as he rode, he wished the rider were a Cherokee shaman. As he realized it was a boy, he cursed. But the curse would not take. In its stead, the wish had been granted and soon the lookout, along with the rest of the men, would glory in the arrival of young Totsuhwa.

Dragon did not recognize the young man at first, but as soon as he was invited to speak, the great chief went to Totsuhwa and put his arms around him. Dragon then held him out in front of him at arm's length and studied the slender frame.

"Totsuhwa. The one who gives counsel at windows. You have grown from a twig into a fine young tree."

"And from a rabbit into a panther," Totsuhwa offered.

The words made Dragon remember and in the remembering there was a smile. "And into a panther."

The two shared the smile for a moment as they looked each other up and down. In the looking, Dragon took note of Totsuhwa's horse and the lone satchel slung over the young man's shoulder. "You have traveled light, Totsuhwa."

"Yes, I took my provisions from the land."

"With this child's bow?" Dragon teased.

"It is the only one I have, but it is good for small game and my arrows are true."

"Yes, but the prey we seek is larger than your rabbits and birds. If you are here to hunt with us you will need a stronger weapon."

"I carry much strength," Totsuhwa said as he pointed to his head then to the satchel.

"Yes, I recall that now. You have been studying with a master. How is the great Ama Giga? Does the Spirit still speak to her often?"

"I believe He does, Tsi'yugunsini. But the words are clearer for her. She sleeps in the Darkening Land for five moons now. There the Spirit can talk to her without the sounds of this world interfering. It was His wish to be able to do so. That is why He called her to Him."

Dragon put his arm over the young man's shoulder and led him deeper into the campsite. "Ama Giga has trained you well. And you have listened to her I see. It can be heard in your words."

"Thank you. But I carry your words as well. That is why I have come. I am here to fight with you."

The walk took the two through a maze of warriors hunched against rocks and nursing themselves in shadowed crevices of the mountain.

"Thank you for coming to fight, Totsuhwa. The Shawnee has sent members of their nation as well. Some from other nations join us daily. We have a strange force, young Totsuhwa." The Dragon smiled slightly and shook his head. "The enemy that encroaches on us all makes old enemies fight shoulder to shoulder. We take arms and powder from the British, the French, and even the Spaniards.

"You are brave, young panther. I know that. But there may be a more useful enemy you can battle for me." Dragon stopped and motioned to his men. "My warriors are taken with a demon. It was asleep in the still water. My wounded woke it in their thirst. Perhaps you could ask the Spirit to strengthen them once more. Our nation has need of them."

Totsuhwa slipped his arm out of the child-sized bow and looked to set it and the accompanying quiver aside. Dragon interceded and took the small weapon delicately. With his hands free to rummage through the satchel, Totsuhwa moved quickly toward the nearest prone member of the beleaguered troupe. As he did, Dragon turned away, carrying the small bow and arrows with points knapped for birds and rabbits.

The ancient remedies in the satchel began the healing process for the small tribe immediately. Totsuhwa made a foray into the woods and returned with other offerings he mixed, cooked, and prayed over until even the most severely wounded raider was resting comfortably. Only then did Totsuhwa go in search of Dragon once more.

He found the war chief sitting on a rocky outcrop with a young man. Tsi'yugunsini was working a long piece of wood with a sharpened stone. "Your warriors are resting," Totsuhwa said.

Dragon neither looked up nor answered as his hands continued to labor over the wood. Totsuhwa would not insult himself or the chief by repeating the words. Rather, he sat down on a slightly lower ledge nearby and watched the war chief's hands work the stone and wood. He looked hard but discreetly at the other young man who was not much older than himself. He was Shawnee.

After a few moments, Dragon spoke without looking at either young man. "You have not lost your ability to track me. The white hunters and John Sevier, they have been tracking Tsi'yugunsini for fifteen winters. Still they come only close enough to die. But you have ridden for two days and walked through the front door of my lodge. You have the same gift you used that day when we took the deer near Sycamore Shoals."

"Wado, Chief Tsi'yugunsini."

"This young warrior," Dragon said as he scarcely motioned to the man beside him. "You know his people?"

"I do," Totsuhwa answered as he now openly eyed the young man with suspicion.

Again it seemed Dragon did not divert his attention from the wood in his hands. "Allow the distrust to slip from your eyes, Totsuhwa. And do so now. This is Tecumseh — a young warrior of the Shawnee who shares our hearts. Today he becomes your brother as he is mine. He shares your desire to learn and your desire to fight. I have made it known that should I fall in battle, Young Tassel, who is called John Watts, will wear my blanket. But Tecumseh and his brother will lead the Shawnee in the fight from the north."

Then Dragon motioned toward the medicine bag. "And you have other talents now. You are a gift to your people."

"I am still young in the ways. But Ama Giga gave me her gifts. I have used them on the men."

Dragon reached down and patted Totsuhwa's shoulder then resumed his work on what would become a strong bow for his returning young friend. "They are not my warriors any longer, Totsuhwa. They are ours. You are our shaman."

It was thus that Totsuhwa took his first steps into the council of chiefs. Dragon took the skills of Ama Giga, deeply set in Totsuhwa's life, and added everything a war leader could.

Years later, now in the woods pursuing Andrew Jackson with a body that had grown from a sapling to an oak, Totsuhwa was both a respected shaman and a feared warrior. No trace of the rabbit remained.

Dragon's shrieks pierced Jackson's ears as the white racer whipped his horse into a lather. The warriors, better mounted and better riders, were closing. The chase through the trees had been a long one and both Jackson and his horse were winded. At last the pair broke from the wood line into the open fields that buttressed a small town. The collection of houses and outlying farms would provide a measure of protection if Jackson could reach them. What he didn't realize was that the devil-may-care attitude of Dragon would permit him to ride full bore into the settlement on Jackson's heels and cut the white man down right in the street. Though he didn't know this reckless part of Dragon's plan, Jackson did glance over his shoulder enough to see the Indian fifty yards behind pushing hard. Totsuhwa, riding like the wind himself, was now three lengths behind his mentor.

The pounding of the horses' hooves and the screams from both red and white men caught the attention of the people in and about the settlement. Out of concerned habit, most of the faces that appeared carried a long gun. When the vicious parade approaching the buildings became evident each collected gun drew down across the field in the direction of Dragon and Totsuhwa. Though both warriors were intent on Jackson, the ducking white faces beyond and the gathering guns did not go unnoticed. Reluctantly, they reined in their mounts as a shot erupted from the corner of a faraway building.

Dragon judged the distance as he eased his horse to a stop just as Totsuhwa pulled up alongside. Neither expressed a concern over the gunshot, though Dragon leaned heavily into his horse and breathed quickly.

"They waste their lead," he snorted as he gasped for his own breath along with the winded animal beneath him.

"They do, but that one," Totsuhwa said as he pointed to Jackson jumping from his horse and sprinting into the nearest house. "That one will not venture into the forest again soon."

Dragon laughed as he pulled his horse around and began walking it back to the woods, still breathing heavily. "I believe you are right," he wheezed. "Did you see how he flailed at the animal? Begging for faster feet? I saw him look back at us. His eyes were big, like this!" Dragon made a contorted face and held his eyes wide open with his fingers. "The eyes filled his face!"

Totsuhwa laughed with him, as much at the face Dragon made as the notion of the frightened white man. The laughter quieted over the heavy breathing of the horses as the animals' sides continued to heave. The two would walk easily for some time.

"Totsuhwa," Dragon began after several minutes. "How long have you been with me?"

"Many winters."

"And have I not taught you well?"

"Yes, Tsi'yugunsini. You have taught me many things."

"Perhaps I am a poor teacher."

"No, my chief. You have instructed me in a great many things," Totsuhwa said with growing concern. "Things I use every day. If I fail it is because I am a poor student, not that you are a poor teacher."

"Hmmm..."

"Why does the great Tsi'yugunsini say these things?"

There was hesitation in the chief's voice. "I am wondering how you happened to miss your shot back in the woods." Then Dragon could not hide a mischievous grin.

Totsuhwa scowled. "I missed because you shot early."

"My man lies dead in the trees while yours enjoys a cold drink of water. How is it I failed?"

"Because you shot early. We were supposed to fire at once, on a count. You shot early and caused the horses to bolt from under my rifle. It was not my mistake."

Dragon only grunted but after a few strides of the horses, he began to look in front of and behind and around Totsuhwa. The younger man looked down at himself, following Dragon's eyes around the horse.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"Nothing. I was looking to see where the scalp is hanging from the mistake you did not make."

Totsuhwa bristled then the two laughed again as Dragon reached across both horses and punched Totsuhwa's shoulder.

"I see no scalp on your belt, Tsi'yugunsini," Totsuhwa laughed.

"It comes to me. See?"

Sure enough, the other members of the raiding party were waiting in the woods. When the two men pulled up in their midst, the brave who had scalped Clooney walked up to them holding the hair up to both of them. His eyes and those of the others looked from Tsi'yugunsini to Totsuhwa and back again to see who would take the scalp and claim the coup. When Dragon reached forward the warriors all voiced their approval. Then the man who had just handed Dragon the scalp looked around Totsuhwa's mount for the scalp the men believed the young shaman would bear. When they saw none, their eyes again looked back and forth between the two men.

Dragon smiled slightly. "He had a good horse."

The band smiled and laughed together as though sharing a good joke and not the missed chance at killing a man. Soon the throng was absorbed by the trees and vanished with no sense of urgency. Experience had taught Dragon that the white settlers would brace for an attack at their homes and would not venture into the Cherokee's forested lair. Later that night the group dawdled around a low, nearly smokeless fire.

"When the sun wakes we must head to the southwest," Dragon began. "We will find the Spaniards there. It is time for them to fill our powder horns."

A sly laugh filtered through the men. The Spanish had several ongoing land disputes with the newly minted government of the United States of America. The conflicts often resulted in bloodshed. Dragon, in a constant state of war against the latest Americans, welcomed the offers of the Spanish ammunition and weapons. He had put them to good use, much to the delight of Spain.

"Tsi'yugunsini," Totsuhwa said. "If Spain defeats the Americans, they will turn on us as the Americans and British have done."

"That is true, but for now we take our weapons where we can and use them against the present enemy."

A young warrior chuckled. "Perhaps we should bury the bullets the Spaniards give us. We can dig them up to use on them if they win their wars."

The snickers that followed were more sinister than humorous. If the Spanish ever took up a side against the Cherokee, the warriors would attack with no thought to the previous aid Spain had rendered.

However, before thoughts of warring against Spain took hold, Totsuhwa stepped in. "But I do not believe the Spanish will defeat the settlers. Britain could not and they are stronger than Spain. The red coats have shown us that no power can win a war from across the seas. Invaders are repelled when they have no foothold in the land. And men fight strongest when the ground beneath their feet cradles their fathers and mothers. That is why the homeland of the Tsalagi will always remain with the Tsalagi."

"That is so," Dragon said. "The Creator meant for no feet other than Tsalagi to walk through it. No other feet."

The conversation melted away with the dying embers. One by one the crouching men moved to the ground and gave way to sleep. When the last man was still, Dragon called to Totsuhwa.

"Do you sleep, my son?"

"No, Tsi'yugunsini. I am awake."

"Come to me."

Totsuhwa stood from his place on the ground and walked over to the chief who remained prone near the fire bed. The young shaman knelt beside his teacher and waited. In a few moments Dragon reached up and took Totsuhwa's hand. In the dim light of the fire, the young shaman saw that the hand, like the warrior who possessed it, was wrinkled and worn. Dragon pulled Totsuhwa's hand to his chest and held it against his heart.

"My son, I come looking for the shaman. Is he here?"

Totsuhwa smiled. "I am here."

"Shaman, today when I chased the man through the trees I had great pain in here."

"Sometimes the Spirit puts a burden on our hearts that we must wrestle. The pain--"

"No, shaman. This is a true pain, not a pain of the soul. That pain I know well too. I felt it grip my heart when Attakullakulla moved to the West.

"This pain was in my body and came up my neck. It was as though a stone lay across me and I could not breathe."

Dragon lay quiet for a short time before he spoke again. "That is why I could not catch the white rider for you. My arms were too weak to drive my horse or raise my rifle. Yuhwa danvta. I am sorry."

It was the first time Totsuhwa had seen any frailty in his lifelong hero. The grasp of it was overpowering and made something within him not recognize the truth for what it was.

"You have chased hard today, Tsi'yugunsini. And you have not had meat for several days. We have moved often. These things have tired you. I feel these things myself as do all the men. Tonight we will rest and tomorrow you will lead us to the Spaniards."

"Perhaps the great shaman is right."

"Yes. Listen to your shaman."

"I will listen."

Dragon lay quietly and Totsuhwa slipped his hand off of the man's chest. He stood as his teacher rolled over to his side. The aging chief pulled a blanket over his tired shoulders and tried to sleep.

The shaman returned to his own bundle but knelt only to retrieve a peculiar dried root from his bag. When he crouched again by his mentor, the elder turned his head and asked with his eyes why he had returned. The shaman held out the root near Tsi'yugunsini's mouth.

"Here, my father. Chew this slowly. It will help you sleep and ease the stone off of your chest."

Dragon fumbled for the tuber and took it but dropped it just as quickly. His hand stayed by his mouth as his eyes sought out the safety of his son's face. Totsuhwa immediately caught the root and brought it to the older man's mouth. Dragon curled his lips around the bulb and pulled it into his mouth. He began massaging it with his tongue and nodded an acknowledgment to the shaman.

Totsuhwa gently patted his father's shoulder, stood, and returned again to his temporary bed this time to try and sleep. But the arms of sleep would take their time encircling him on this night. The change in Tsi'yugunsini was dramatic and sudden. As Totsuhwa lay in the flickering low light of the fire he searched his mind for changes in his chief that perhaps he had not noticed or acknowledged. There were none. Dragon's strength and personal command had drawn a veil over any weakness that might have shown itself. If he had experienced these pains before, Totsuhwa had not seen them. He had been with the man every day, nearly every moment for the past seven years and to him, a gifted shaman, there had been no sign.

Totsuhwa raised up from his blankets enough to see the dark silhouette on the ground that was the feared Dragon. If indeed the Spirit was calling for the chief, Totsuhwa would have to stay closer than ever before and use all his skill to ward off the Raven Mocker. He was not prepared to release the hand that had befriended him, taught him much, and become his family. Selfishly, he had no desire to be left alone again.

The next morning the sun's rays ran out ahead as the sun approached the horizon, foretelling the coming of another day. Brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows splashed across a cloudless blue morning sky and rewarded the eyes that peeked through the gritty deposits of the night's sleep.

The men staggered and stumbled to their feet around the dead fire. On rising nearly all immediately made way for the edges of the circle and urinated. Totsuhwa called to them from his bed.

"Bring wood."

The young men returning to the makeshift camp brought relieved faces and handfuls of kindling for a new fire.

Dragon was sitting up with his blanket draped over his shoulders. The cloth that covered him was heavy and had once been bright but now it was dirty and ragged at the edges, worn down by travel and use, not unlike the man it protected. The colorful pattern that remained signified to any who might approach that the bearer of the blanket was a ranking chief. The geometric design

and hues painted a picture of authority endowed by the people. No warrior, regardless of how brave and revered in battle, could toss this mantle over his back. Even at times when the accompanying weather would not request the employ of a cover, the chiefs would often drape their special blankets across their shoulders. The purpose served was like that of the gold braid that set apart the white man's generals. And also like the generals, the chiefs had other blankets, other uniforms, plain ones for day-to-day use. But for Dragon, his constant travel necessitated few possessions and also made the ground beneath his feet home. As such the revered blanket was always with him as it was this morning as he watched his warriors collecting for the day.

"We have no need of a fire. The sun will soon warm you if you are cold."

The men stopped and awkwardly held their gathered twigs. Totsuhwa stood and began retrieving the pieces from the men and placing them in the previous night's fire pit. "You are right, Tsi'yugunsini, but I have need of a small fire. I must prepare a medicine."

"Is one of our number sick?" Dragon muttered.

"No, but there are magics I must have with me."

"Prepare your fire, shaman. We will wait."

The foot soldiers relaxed again and settled back around the ring of the fire pit. They each pulled berries, fruits, dried corn, and venison from their bundles and nibbled their breakfast as they watched the smokeless fire grow beneath Totsuhwa's hands.

The shaman pulled odd leaves from his bag and crushed them with tubers and bulbs that were stranger still. The men shrugged their shoulders at one another, admitting with gestures that none recognized the plants. Totsuhwa put the dried pulp into a small clay bowl and set it on a flat rock near the fire. He added enough water to the pot to nearly fill it and then left the mixture to heat. Occasionally, Totsuhwa would drop in another leaf or a bit of unrecognizable oil, sap, or dust and stir the brew. When the mixture began to set off steam Totsuhwa moved it from the fire with two sticks acting as pinchers on the pot. Then he left the concoction alone to steep.

Dragon lingered by the fire as the others busied themselves with the horses and rolling up their beds. Totsuhwa came and sat near his leader.

"How much longer will the Spanish provide us with weapons, Father?"

"Only the Spirit knows for certain. As I slept, He spoke to me. You are right. They will not beat the settlers."

"When our powder horns grow empty, it will be more difficult to wage our battles."

"It is difficult enough now, is it not, my son?"

"It is."

Dragon looked up into the bright sun now two hands above the mountains. "How are the people?"

"They support us as best they can. It is hard. The colonists and American soldiers attack often. Even the Creek to the west. The Tsalagi have few allies."

"You are a wise man, Totsuhwa. Tell me. Do I make it better for them or worse with what I do?"

There was only a slight pause, but in it Dragon took a complete answer. Totsuhwa saw the expression flash over Dragon's face and answered hurriedly but too late to stop what the silence had loosened.

"Were it not for you, the whites would have overrun every town in the nation. They would have dug holes and planted their forts and settlements along every league of hunting territory many, many winters ago. You have prevented this when others would have meekly traded it away."

"Do we bring hardship to the people?"

"No. We have stopped more attacks on our villages than we have ever invited. Far more. You know this to be true in your heart."

“Yes, but then tell me, shaman. Why does my heart ache?”

“You are tired. When we have reached the Spaniards you will be rested.” Totsuhwa stood and as he did he surreptitiously picked up Dragon’s water gourd. The young shaman secretively cradled the gourd and walked to his blanket roll which he picked up along with his satchels. Then he retrieved the cooling clay pot and walked into the woods unnoticed by all but Dragon.

Once sheltered by the trees Totsuhwa put the water from Dragon’s urn into another and poured the warm contents of the clay pot into the empty gourd. He forced a tight-fitting stick into the opening then pulled it back out a very little bit so it would not be too snug. Then he concealed it once more and returned to the dying fire.

The warriors had collected the horses and were mounting. Totsuhwa and Dragon’s horses were brought for them, befitting their stature. When they had climbed aboard the animals Dragon motioned to the west of camp and the warriors fell in line and moved off. As his adoptive father came within reach Totsuhwa handed him the medicine-filled gourd.

“Your water, my chief.”

Dragon took it and nodded knowingly. No one else paid attention to the pass. Totsuhwa would not embarrass his father. There was no need for any of the others to know their leader was failing.

The next several days passed in comparative quiet for the band of raiders. Totsuhwa was grateful that their scouts, riding on ahead and to the far sides, had not located any settlements or travelers. Dragon rode quietly and sipped from his water gourd on occasion and in the evening he chewed the roots Totsuhwa placed near him. A week into the journey he was stronger. The timing was good.

The line of slow-moving horses and riders heard the sounds of another horse trotting through the trees toward them. As one, the group pulled up and watched the forest ahead, fingers itching across the triggers of long guns and the notches of arrows. The flash of brown skin over the color of a recognized horse eased away the anxious fingers as one of the scouts came into their midst.

“Soldiers.”

Dragon did not ask how many soldiers had unknowingly shown themselves to the outrider. He asked only how far as he pushed his horse to an easy gallop. The distance and location would dictate Dragon’s strategy in the attack — the number of enemy meant little if anything. If what lay ahead was a full regimental column, Dragon would split his force and attack with a small party from the rear side where his men would be facing the sun. When the soldiers reacted to the attack and form up, the larger group of Dragon’s raiders would attack from behind the muster lines, blinding the soldiers with the sun. The soldiers’ officers would be behind their men, closer to the second attacking wave. They would be the first to be killed and the regiment’s plan would die with them.

An attack on such a large force would be quick, unlike the raids on colonial outposts that often turned into a siege. There, Dragon would move his men often and have them show themselves to the white eyes inside the post. He even had the men appear with and without shirts, partially covered with blankets, with their hair pulled back, with it loose, and every variation and combination thereof, in order to convince those inside that the warriors at their door were huge in number. Then the Dragon would attack at night and diminish the foe’s strength. Finally, when he had parried enough to weaken the enemy through lack of food and water, he would set the buildings on fire. Driven out by the heat and flames, the terrified white faces rushed from misery to death.

On this particular day the half dozen soldiers about to meet the Dragon were accompanying an equal number of hunters and trappers. Each group had set out to forage for game. When the parties met in the mountains they merged for a time to trade tales and news and maybe a little tobacco.

The scout escorted Dragon to within sound of the men who were ambling along on horseback, trailing two riderless horses they would use to pack home the game they hoped to kill. The warriors dismounted and crept along silently until they could easily see their prey. Dragon judged the sun, the terrain, and the direction the hunters were headed then turned back into the deep woods.

His war party counted ten strong. Other days it might be many more, some days less, but it always proved to be big enough. The men were well armed and excellent shots. Dragon elected to divide his small band and attack.

While Totsuhwa left with four braves to circle around the pursued soldiers and their temporary companions, Dragon and his group tied up their horses and sprinted through the trees to catch the slow moving hunters. Near the end of the run, Dragon felt the Spirit tightening in his chest.

Totsuhwa's men completed their circling maneuver and left their horses. They too raced through the trees on silent feet until they had caught the travelers. The warriors on either side of the soldiers and hunters strained to see their counterparts in the woods across the way, but neither was successful. Totsuhwa eased his men along through the woods, mirroring the riders but staying very low so as not to be caught with a wayward round from the opening volley.

The shaman had told his band to use their guns for one shot then revert to the faster-loading bows. All of this would come after Dragon had attacked and in the process drawn the backs of the soldiers around beneath the sites of Totsuhwa's guns. Neither expected much trouble dispatching the dozen trespassers on Cherokee land.

Without a signal to his son, Dragon opened fire on the small column of men. His own shot buried itself deep in the brain of the first man to die. The rifles of the warriors on either side of Dragon killed the men on either side of Dragon's target. Other men were hit by lead following those first reports but were still alive enough to scramble for cover.

The training of the soldiers in the group drove them off their horses and into a skirmish line, rifles trained on the smoke that lingered from Dragon's guns. His men had jumped to other cover as soon as they had fired knowing the smoke would betray them. They pulled up their bows as the soldiers' guns fired into the arms of the trees and hit nothing.

The civilian hunters in the party, lacking military bearing, spurred their horses to flee rather than fight. The dropping dead and dismounting soldiers hindered their escape as did the sudden rain of Cherokee arrows from Dragon's side. Several white men felt flint tear their tissue and splinter their bones. A few fell immediately while others spurred their horses or staggered off to die slowly from blood trickling out of their bodies no one could stop.

Totsuhwa watched the backs of the soldiers turn toward him as they took up positions in their attempt to repel Dragon's attack. He would have waited a moment longer, but a settler had escaped the initial onslaught and was whipping his horse over the gathering of dead and dying at the animal's feet. Pressed into early action, Totsuhwa stepped from the safety of the trees and pulled up his rifle. He lined up his sights on the leather-covered broad back of the hunter and a lead ball took flight. It bore deep into the man's spine. Instant numbness caused the rider's hands to fall from the reins and he tumbled headlong from his horse. The animal scampered away, driven by the sounds of Totsuhwa's men firing into the dusty blue backs of the kneeling soldiers.

All but a few members of the hunting party were dead or nearly so. Those that remained trembled as they fumbled to reload their cumbersome rifles. Totsuhwa's band, closer to the men who now spun to face them, leaped from the cover of the trees and sprang onto the hapless soldiers. The speed with which they moved was only equaled by the ferocity in which they swung their tomahawks and war clubs. Hardened soldiers, grown men, screamed like frightened children as the Cherokee, who seemed to be a hundred in number, swarmed out of the trees. In a single heartbeat they were on the men.

Totsuhwa hurriedly set down his rifle after his only shot. He jumped like the others toward the collection of dead, dying, and men about to be so. In the move he saw the man he had just shot trying to pull himself away using one arm. Totsuhwa started for him but nearly ran into a rifle muzzle coming up to fire. He caught the barrel of the gun with the head of his war club and wrenched it up sharply where it discharged harmlessly into the air. Without breaking the stride of the weapon, Totsuhwa brought the club down into the head of the gun bearer while the barrel still pointed skyward. A sickening crunch and moan erupted simultaneously from the stricken hunter just ahead of a splash of blood, brain, and bone. Like his war club, Totsuhwa did not lose a step as he continued on toward the man who was struggling to crawl.

At the moment he reached the desperate man, the cripple struggled to look up from the ground. The sight that loomed above him was terrifying. The lower half of Totsuhwa's face was painted with jet black charcoal. From his eyes upward into the scalp his skin was colored deep burnt sienna made from clay. His long black hair was tied with a piece of dangling sinew in a crude top knot that left the hair flailing wildly as he moved. He was bare breasted, having removed his loose deerskin shirt to prevent it from being grabbed, torn, or bloodied in the fighting. Two wide handprints were on his chest, placed there with the excess colors from his face. The rest of his upper body glistened with a light sweat.

On each arm was a narrow rawhide strap tied just below his shoulders. Under one Totsuhwa had tucked a few sprigs of fresh growth from the trees he had run through – a symbol of life; his. Under the other were three fallen maple leaves gathered from the forest floor – for death; the trespassers'.

There was a wide light colored scar that came around the front of his right shoulder, compliments of a militia bayonet years before. Since then he had mastered his teacher's use of his weapons. Now Totsuhwa often cruelly smiled in the middle of a fight when the arrogance of his enemies at fighting an undisciplined savage was replaced by the shock that this savage could thrust and parry with a wooden war club as well as an English nobleman could with a saber.

Over it all were Totsuhwa's eyes. There was an intensity in them that even startled the hardened men in his band. Whether it was the color on his face or something deeper inside his soul, the eyes appeared to blacken so deeply on the precipice of battle that they looked to be empty holes that led to a deep dark place unknown. They did not blink. And the blackness spread to his face. This is what nightmares were made of.

As the wounded man wrenched himself on the ground to see who had shot him and who would kill him, his legs, useless from the lead ball in his back, twisted below him. Totsuhwa looked into the sweating face of the man beneath him. The trapper trembled as his jaw fidgeted in fear. Sweat rolled down his forehead into his eyes and dripped off his nose into the coarse hair of a scruffy mustache and beard. In short jerky movements the man wiped his eyes with his only working hand.

Screams came from behind as Totsuhwa's warriors descended with a fury on the remaining white men. The eyes of the stricken man darted behind his executioner and saw the carnage that was about to overtake him. Two braves held a wounded soldier up on his knees, three arrows piercing his chest. One steadied the dying man and the other sliced his neck from ear to ear while pulling back on his hair. The gaping wound spurted puffs and bubbles of blood as the dying man breathed his last through the slash across his throat.

Totsuhwa took no notice of the killing behind him. His icy eyes stayed locked on the man at his feet. In a blur he raised his war club to end the man's torment. But when the hunter raised his own good arm above his head to instinctively ward off the blow, something tied to the man's belt caught Totsuhwa's hollow eyes.

Next to the brown, dirty and stained deerskin coat, tucked in a tattered leather belt, was a mass of matted black hair. Totsuhwa immediately recognized it as a scalp, perhaps two or more. Scalps alone would not have riled a vicious interest from Totsuhwa as he knew they could be Creek, an enemy he might himself kill on another day. However, stuck in the dried bloody mess was a short string of what first appeared to be beads. Beads in the hair would have caused only a momentary delay in the war club crashing through the upraised arm and into the man's skull, but these were not beads at all — they were seeds.

As Totsuhwa became more aware of the seeds strung as they were, he lowered the war club. He cocked his head first to one side then the other as he struggled to peer into the dried bloodied tangle of hair. The hunter spied the Indian above him looking at his waist belt. His own eyes ran to the belt as best they could and realized it was the scalps that were captivating his murderous host. As hurriedly as he could, the man ripped the scalps from his waist and held them in a quivering hand out to Totsuhwa.

“Here! Take 'em! I give 'em to you!”

Totsuhwa stared through the scalps to the string of seeds nearly covered in dried blood dangling from the hair and said nothing.

“HERE!” the man bellowed as he shook the scalps.

Totsuhwa reached for them. With great tenderness he slipped his hand beneath the scalps. The hunter released them quickly and withdrew his own hand in a flash.

“There now,” he said somewhat more relaxed but still sweating and nervous in the numbness that held the bulk of his body. “A gift! We're friends. See there?”

Totsuhwa put the war club beneath his arm and used both hands to delicately clean the seeded string in the hair. When he had done so he saw clearly that the string was made up of alternating seeds of corn, bean, and squash carefully woven into the hair. The shaman spoke in reverent tones to no one but the seeds themselves.

“You are the Three Sisters. You have danced in the decorated hair of the one who tended to you. She planted you in the belly of our mother and with the help of her hand, you have fed my people. She was a caretaker, a worker in the fields. A woman who hurt no one.”

The wounded man lay very still while Totsuhwa spoke to the Three Sisters. The man's reaction was quick however, when Totsuhwa snatched the war club from beneath his arm and brought it thundering down. The shaman's aim was for the defending arm he knew would come up. The thick round wooden head of the club struck the forearm with such force it continued on and bounced off the man's chest. The break and contortion of the forearm was unnatural and ghastly. It had given way easily, removing the last vestige of a token defense. The numbness helped alleviate the pain, but the sight of the mangled arm made the man scream in horror.

Completely unable to offer resistance, the hunter lay sweating, trembling, and shrieking. Totsuhwa tucked the scalps into his belt and dropped the war club alongside the prostrate man. The shaman then slipped his knife from its sheath at his waist and grabbed the scraggly hair of the hunter. With the man's head twisted back and screams spewing from his bearded mouth, Totsuhwa scalped him with two rapid cuts.

The sight and sounds of the screaming hairless man brought a temporary halt to anything else that was occurring at that moment. All the warriors stared in disbelief at the man, still living with blood trickling down his face from the hair being ripped from his head. Even Dragon paused over a dead soldier to watch his son as he threw the man's hair to the side, picked up his war club and stomped away, leaving the man very much alive, screeching insanely from the pain.

The man continued to shriek until an annoyed warrior rushed at him with his knife, intent on silencing him forever. The hunter looked through the blood and tears in his eyes at the onrushing brave and welcomed the knife in his hand.

But Totsuhwa would prolong his misery. "No!" he ordered. "Leave him."

The warrior did as he was directed and backed away from the hairless, blood-soaked scalper of women.

The trapper screamed. "Kill me! Kill me! Please!"

But the war party turned their backs. The man continued to scream until the pain and exhaustion overtook him. Still alive, he lay back and moaned, occasionally trying to wipe the blood out of his eyes with his mangled arm.

By now the other members of the man's party were all dead. Scalps were being stolen from their heads along with what weapons they carried, many of which were locked in the grip of death. Whatever might be useful, easy to trade, and easy to carry would be taken. A few trinkets, such as a chain, a pocket watch, or even shiny buttons, would be taken as souvenirs of the raid for the warriors or one day given to their families as gifts. More likely, the pieces would be gambled with and lost and won.

The horses that had not been shot or injured had their saddles loosened then were tied in a line. The first horse was bundled up with what supplies the hunters had carried. It and the others, along with all the tack, would be sold or traded to the Spaniards. Horses that were injured in the fighting were unsaddled and had their bridles removed. They were left to wander and survive or die at the discretion of the Spirit who looked over all things.

The group lingered over the tasks. The stealing was done at leisure and there was no bickering over the items taken from the dead. Over the course of the next several days and weeks, thanks to gambling around a dying fire pit, most of the items taken after the killings would trade hands several times. This was understood, so any piece that sparked an interest in one eye would be duly noted as to who carried it away from the bloody scene that had been the hunting party. When the gambling reached a fever pitch, the piece would be asked for or emerge of its own accord. So it was that buttons and coins, buckles and papers, knives and even a small spyglass entered into the Cherokee economy.

It was several hours before Dragon and Totsuhwa made any move to leave. Totsuhwa had cleaned his knife and war club, but he never again looked in the direction of the man who still, hours later, unwillingly clung to life. Dragon had rested beneath a tree and consigned his warriors to the tasks and pleasures. When a scalp was offered to him he waved it away bestowing it on the bearer. The brave yelped happily knowing the hair would fetch a price from the Spaniards.

When the jobs were completed and the bodies stripped of anything of value, the horses were sent for. On their arrival, the Cherokee horses whinnied at the fresh animals. When they passed close, a blur of kicking feet or a flash of teeth demonstrated the disdain the animals felt for the unusual scent of their brethren. It was as though each band of horses were mimicking the attitude of their owners, but unlike their riders, when the horses had moved together for a while their smells mingled and nearly all animosity dissipated. The riders would never be that forgiving. As Tsi'yugunsini led the group away, Totsuhwa's battered victim still struggled agonizingly for death.

At the same time Dragon's raid had begun on the hunting party, another attack, equal or surpassing in its brutality was commencing two days ride to the southeast. Colonel John Sevier and a rag-tag group of misfits and mercenaries had, with the help of Creek scouts, located a small Cherokee village. All told, the inhabitants numbered about thirty with only a few men of fighting age. When Sevier rode out of the burning village several hours later, the dead Cherokee also numbered about thirty. No one was left to tell the story of the massacre firsthand, but the footprints scattered throughout the smoky embers of the camp spoke volumes. The horses' hoof prints showed metal horseshoes and the riders, running through the lodges with firebrands or rifles, had worn heeled boots. These were white men and white men's horses.

Sevier's renegades numbered nearly seventy. They banded together when Sevier commanded and rode hard until the deeds were done. Then they went back to their homes, barrooms, and brothels carrying the black mementos of their killings dangling from their belts. On this day they would net many scalps, though several would have to be tied together to make one of adult size.

Unscrupulous traders were known to split the scalps of warriors and then claim they were the result of two separate kills. This occasional practice of halving made the trophies small, so when a child-sized scalp was placed on the trading block it was viewed with much suspicion. If it were sold or bounty collected honestly as a child's, it brought less money but with no more disdain at having been wrenched from the head of a child than an adult.

One of those Cherokee children was hanging from the crook of Sevier's elbow as the colonel tightened his chokehold and lifted the four-year-old off the ground. Little hands and fingernails clutched at his jacket sleeve. The rail-thin little girl was so light that when Sevier spun around, the child's body sailed out like a thin leafy branch in a brisk wind. He laughed over the screams of the girl's mother who was being dragged into a nearby lodge. The girl could not breathe so she uttered no sounds, but tears were able to break from her eyes before being whipped from her cheeks by the violent spinning.

Sevier stopped as roughly as he'd begun and the skinny body flapped from his arm like a flag in a dying breeze. The screams from the lodge were silenced just as quickly while around the village sporadic gunfire and the crackling of growing flames continued. Occasional cries from women splayed on the grass or dirt next to their dead husbands and children came and went as the mercenaries raped their way to murder. Stripped of their last thread of respect and void of any further use, the battered women were strangled, stabbed, and shot until the last of them, once a pretty wife and doting mother but now unrecognizable following the effects of a dozen men, was scalped as she lay nearly naked, covered with dirt and blood. Her body convulsed against the pain and her face scraped the ground. Pieces of torn-up grass stuck to her thighs, held in place by the sweat of others and her own blood. She continued to shake as the blood seeped from her head but no mercy came to touch her until it came disguised as Death.

Sevier heard the quieting of the camp around him. "Any left?" he asked loudly.

"Not a soul," came a reply.

"Not a soul," Sevier said to himself and the dangling child. "Never was a soul in this godforsaken place. Indians don't have souls.

"Do you?" he said to the little girl in the chokehold. "You're just like animals — dogs and pigs."

As he spoke a few of his men gathered. They looked at each other and laughed at their commander's words.

"They're animals!" Sevier laughed loudly as he again flung the girl around.

"That one you got there's a touch young, John. Might fetch a dollar on the block. Make a nice belly warmer in a few years though."

As the group laughed Sevier tightened his hold and the child's face reddened deeply. Spots of red broke the surface of her eyes as blood pushed to the surface. Her tiny fingers and nails clawed again at Sevier's coat sleeve but accomplished nothing. While her bare feet twitched in the air, Sevier grabbed his own fist and crushed his arm around the child's throat. In a few seconds the lithe girl relaxed into unconsciousness and as the others stared, Sevier squeezed harder, sending the youngster to the Darkening Land.

Abruptly, Sevier released his grip entirely and the girl's body fell to the dirt by his feet.

"Damn, John! You are one son of a bitch. That was a little one, that was!"

Sevier nudged the tiny corpse with the toe of his boot. "Nits make lice, my friends. Don't forget that. Best to kill them when they're small. It's easier. They don't have time to make trouble or make others like themselves. Yes, men, nits make lice. That's all there is to it. Let's go."

The men cinched up their pants, tied down the scalps and rode away as though they'd done nothing worse than butcher a hog. A straggler in the group, scurrying around the burning lodges for keepsakes and booty, came upon Sevier's dead girl. He nudged her as Sevier had before. When death prevented a reply he yanked his knife from its sheath and crudely lifted the fine black hair from the little head. With the final cut, the body fell back to the ground in a puff of dust. The treasure hunter raised the scalp as though he had claimed a prize following a valiant battle then looked around and noticed he was alone with thirty butchered corpses.

He scrambled to his horse, but the quickness of his feet frightened the animal and it tried to pull away. The man looked over his shoulder at the dead scattered around the burning village and felt nothing but cold from the growing fires. The horse attempted to rear and the butcher lunged for the horn of his saddle. The bloody scalp in his hand prevented a solid grip and his fingers slipped. The reins were now wet and sticky with the girl's blood and they slipped easily through the man's fingers. He leaped after the horse but only served to scare it more. With a jumping spin the horse wheeled on its hind legs and bolted from the village after the others. The man, still clutching the tiny scalp, fresh sweat streaming down his face, sprinted after it, leaving heeled boot prints on the dusty ground of the camp turned slaughterhouse.

Dragon and Totsuhwa took their band to southwest. The new horses captured in the raid on the hunting party held skirmishes of less and less ferocity with the Indian ponies until the walk became quiet. When a temporary camp had been established, the warriors' excitement with the day and their own massacre of the soldiers and hunters grew along with the fire.

Increasing numbers of dead logs were tossed upon one another until the cooking fire resembled an inferno. Victory yells and yelps sang out in earnest as the warriors danced. They stomped their feet and displayed the trophies from the day. As sparks and floating embers lit the dark sky, the men kicked, spun, and whirled around the fire. They waved the soldiers' scalps at the moon and shook the confiscated weapons in the air in thanks to the Spirit.

Dragon and Totsuhwa sat outside the ring of dancers and watched. Like their warriors, they too were very pleased with the fight, the petulant captured horses, the scalps, and most of all the deaths of the white men. The guns they'd taken from the dead hands would be that many less to fire upon Cherokee villages and the men themselves would be that many feet that would never walk on ground the Creator had not meant for them. Their stores would now nourish Indian bellies and those waiting for the hunting party's return would go hungry. Ahwi would wait in the forest for Cherokee arrows as it was meant to be. It had been a good day.

"Will you dance, my son?" Tsi'yugunsini asked his second.

"No, Father."

"We have reason to celebrate."

"We do."

"And yet?"

"I will not dance so I may grieve for the woman with the Three Sisters in her hair."

"It is right for you to do so."

The pair sat and watched the growing jubilation before them. Each was drawn to the fire. Their eyes locked on the dancing flames behind and about the dancing men. Tsi'yugunsini breathed deeply and brought his son's attention to him.

"Are you resting well, Father?"

“Yes. You have learned the lessons well. Your medicines are powerful. Ama Giga is smiling and proud.”

“She was a wise woman.”

“She was,” Dragon said rather abruptly as he reached into his bedroll and produced his pipe. “And so I will honor her and this day with a smoke.”

Totsuhwa smiled and returned his attention to the fire.

As Tsi’yugunsini prepared his pipe he spoke casually, looking up at the dancers and the flames from time to time. “The fire is a gift to us, Totsuhwa. The Spirit gave us the fire to keep us warm, to cook our food, to burn the fields to make the Sisters grow. In the fire I see a reminder of the Spirit. He loves the Tsalagi people. Our dance is to honor the Spirit, the Creator of all life.”

“Yes, Father.”

“I have heard the white men talk. They see fire and think of a demon. Why is that, my shaman?”

Totsuhwa thought only a moment. He had heard the stories before from Ama Giga and white traders. “They believe if you are a bad man, when you die you go to a bad village. It is a place where fire burns always and scorches the flesh of those who must live there. They are burned yet do not die. They are only tortured.”

“That is a bad place.”

“It is only a story told to make white children obey their mothers.”

“Probably so,” Dragon grunted.

“That is why the whites do not see glory in dancing with the fire. We honor our Creator. They see it as honoring this burning place of theirs.”

“They understand nothing.”

“They are a different people, Father. They do not understand Tsalagi ways.”

“They are ignorant and foolish.”

“They are. They take always and give back never. The Spirit will call them to answer one day for their misuse of His gifts.”

“It is my prayer to the Spirit that He does this soon, while there are Tsalagi left to see it.”

“The Tsalagi people will always be here, Father. We are caretakers of the Spirit’s creation and He has made us a strong people. We will not be driven out.”

Dragon puffed his pipe to life then handed it to his son. When Totsuhwa reached for it Dragon clasped his hands. “Totsuhwa, will you make an oath to me - a solemn promise to an old man?”

“Yes, but you are not—”

“You will not leave our land. Don’t let them drive you from the mountains and valleys given us. In the fire the Spirit has shown me many things. Beyond our mountains is the Darkening Land of our people. Beyond our mountains is the death of our nation. Tell me you will not leave our mountains. Never let anything take your steps onto the flat land to the West, toward the Darkening Land. As long as one Tsalagi who has your spirit remains on the land of our ancestors, the spirit of our people will live through that one. Will you do this for me? Will you not leave our land?”

Totsuhwa stared hard at his father and gripped the hand that covered his. “This thing I will do.”

“Good. Good. Thank you, shaman. Should the Spirit call me I can sleep in peace.”

Totsuhwa held the pipe now and drew on it. He waved the smoke from the bowl across his face with his hand. The smell was rich and warm. He breathed deeply and listened to the cries of the dancers. He puffed several times then handed the pipe back to Tsi’yugunsini. He stood and felt for the black hair hanging from his belt.

“I am returning this woman to the earth.”

“As it should be,” Dragon said as he drew on his pipe before laying it aside. “While you take this woman to the Spirit, I will dance for her and others like her.”

Totsuhwa moved away from the fire pit and disappeared into the woods. He moved deep into the trees carrying the scalp with the seeds tied in it and also his medicine pouch. Dragon meanwhile, began dancing, easily at first but increasing in speed and intensity every few minutes with the encouragement of his men.

Far away from the roaring light of the fire and the noise and commotion of the dancers, Totsuhwa drifted across the forest floor. He used the moon and his sharp eyes to find a peaceful spot in a small clearing. The opening allowed the moonlight to broach the treetops and brighten the ground at the shaman’s feet. He turned and looked up at the glowing disc and followed its light back to the earth. With tremendous care he knelt down and tugged away the grass and its roots and formed a small divot. Totsuhwa set the sod to the side and continued to dig out a small hole. In Totsuhwa’s hands a stubborn rock became a small pick and transformed itself from obstruction to tool before being placed alongside the grass to await its return to the miniscule grave.

He pulled a scrap of deerskin slightly larger than his hand from his pouch and spread it out near the hole. Using both hands for gentleness, he eased the woman’s scalp from his waist and slipped it onto the deerskin. Then his hands returned to the pouch and retrieved a mixture of herbs and seeds from within. He placed these on the deerskin shroud and then folded the hide over itself.

A prayer escaped his lips as Totsuhwa moved the deerskin and its precious contents into the ground. The prayers continued as the loose earth was replaced along with the stone pick and finally the sod. When the job was done, the shaman ran his fingers through the grass to blend it back in with its surroundings. The light from the moon could do little to discern where the grave was. This was how Totsuhwa wished it to be. But while the young Cherokee leader lingered at considerable length in a quiet song over the site, the ferocity of Dragon’s dance began to rival his warriors.

Tsi’yugunsini’s knees pumped up and down - high to his bent chest, his head bowed low to the ground and his arms waving around him like the wings of a soaring eagle. The entire entourage of dancers swayed in a line like a writhing serpent as they weaved their way around the fire. The yells were sporadic, crested above and below by songs and prayers of thankfulness to the Spirit for His intervention during the raid. Weapons were again held aloft in muscled hands as chants filtered up around them and on to the heavens. The prayers thanked the Creator’s hands that had guided their bullets and arrows and thanked Him for protecting each man under Dragon’s command. Driving the prayers was the seemingly fitful dance that matured into a frenzy of thanksgiving. The fire and the Spirit within bathed their sweating bodies in its changing light as an acknowledgment for their gratitude.

The pitch and timing of the singing and the steps rose and fell like waves against a shore. In the ebb of the boisterous but prayerful celebration the men caught their breath and brushed the sweat from their eyes. Though the spring night was cooling, the fire and exertion, coupled with the increasing duration of the dancing petition, drove all the warriors to exhaustion. After a momentary slowing of feet and calming of chants, the flow came upon the men once more and their fervor again approached a pinnacle an outsider might have viewed as madness.

The night embraced the feverish dancers and the quiet shaman still on his knees in the forest. It passed silently as it listened to the soulful prayers of one man and the triumphant songs of others. Totsuhwa asked the Spirit and Ama Giga to welcome the woman who had braided the Three Sisters into her hair. He lobbied his grandmother to find the woman and show her the way to the Darkening Land. Totsuhwa did not wish her spirit to be left wandering, shocked by her early and violent death into not understanding the way. His appeals were long and mournful as the night eavesdropped around him.

The fire snapped at the feet of Tsi'yugunsini and the ground recoiled with his stomp, but the night came only so close to the dancers, held back by the light of the flames. The darkness understood it would eventually win out as the fire and the dancers tired, but tonight it would spend considerable effort in the waiting as the warriors' festive mood carried them to the early hours of the morning.

The earth beneath Totsuhwa had given up the dampness in its grasses to the shaman's knees. He stood and waited for his body to shake off the stiffness wrought on by the hours he had labored for the woman of the Three Sisters. When the ache left him he returned to the camp. There he found the fire dying, the night enjoying its anticipated victory, and Tsi'yugunsini breathing rapidly, lying on his bedroll. Rather than peer down at his chief, he knelt and felt again the stiffness that had secretly remained in his legs.

"Your festival has lasted long, Father."

"As it should. This was a good day for the Tsalagi. Guns and horses have exchanged their loyalties today." The chief smiled through his sweat-covered face. "The Spirit has shown them their errors..." His voice and smile trailed off.

"You have danced much, my Father. Now you will rest."

"I will rest, e-tsi, Mother," and he found another brief smile for his doting son. There was a quiet between the two men for a time. He was loathe to ask but protected by the son before him, Dragon made a request of the medicine man.

"Shaman? Would you have your roots for me? I am afraid my dancing has not pleased the Spirit. He sits on my chest and makes it hard to breathe."

Totsuhwa immediately reached for his bag. He produced a few tubers and placed them on the blanket. "These will lift the Spirit. I will make some drink as well." Before the shaman could rise, Dragon touched his leg and stopped him. It was a moment before he spoke.

"When the whites first came and the people began marking the white leaves to give away the land, there came great sickness among our people. The Spirit brought the sickness to punish the people for betraying the gift the Creator had given." Dragon's finger crept up and touched the pockmarks on his own cheeks. "The evil spirit left these tracks on me so he would remember he could not kill me." Dragon's eyes eased shut and he smiled. "I have told this story."

He took a shallow breath and the smile faded as before. "This pain in me, the weakness has come many times since the last snows. Tonight it is strong. I believe I have offended the Spirit, and He has put this pain in my chest." The powerful chief slowly opened his eyes. "Tell me, Totsuhwa, you are a wise priest of the Tsalagi people — what is it I have done?"

"Nothing, my chief. You have done nothing. You are a hero to your people. Tomorrow you will lead us and for many seasons to come. You will—"

Dragon's fingers moved from his own face to his son's lips. "Shhh... Do not let the rabbit sneak back into your mind, my son. Listen for the Spirit with the panther's ears. Let the rabbit play with the children you will one day father. Tell me what the Spirit whispers to you. For me, I hear Him call. His voice is in the pain that walks through my shoulder and down my arm." Dragon breathed deeply and painfully. "If He wants me, I will go. If I am to be punished, I will accept the punishment."

Totsuhwa collected himself in the eyes of his father. He spoke clearly and slowly, mindful of the words and the teachings behind them. Over them all were the words of the Spirit, channeled through the shaman. "There has been no wrong committed in your heart."

The pause that followed lasted over a minute.

"I have killed many, many times," Tsi'yugunsini said.

"You have protected your people and the land and sought to recoup with death for the lives of Tsalagi men, women, and children lost to the swords and bullets of our enemies."

“So the Spirit does not seek to punish me?”

“No,” Totsuhwa said as he picked up a root and pressed it into Dragon’s tired hand. “If it is time for you to walk to the West, it is to go accept the reward for all you have done for our people.”

“This you know to be true?”

“It is true.”

“You have spoken with the Spirit of this?”

“I have.”

“You have said it then. I can accept the fate that comes to me.” Tsi’yugunsini grimaced, breathed sharply, and then held it for a moment or more. When he breathed again he pressed the plant between his lips and began to rub his arm.

“Are you cold, Father?”

“No. The Spirit is calling.”

Totsuhwa began to rise again and placed his hand on his father’s. “I will make the drink.”

Dragon gripped his son’s sleeve as tightly as he could and held him down. “Remember your words to me, Totsuhwa. Remember your pledge. One must remain. Do not leave our land. Not for a single breathe of time. If you do, the people and the land will be lost. ”

“I will not leave it, Father. A-waninski. I have spoken.”

Tsi’yugunsini released his grip and replaced it with a gentle pat. He nodded his head as a thank you as Totsuhwa moved away to prepare the mixture that would ease his father’s pain.

The preparation was the same as before but was slowed some by the night, which was winning its battle with the drowsy fire. Yet the fire was awake enough to heat the small clay basin and its elixir. Totsuhwa waited for it and in the waiting sought answers for his chief and his people in the Spirit of the calming fire. He saw that the fight against the whites would not continue many more seasons. The enemy was strong and plentiful. What they lacked in compassion for the land and knowledge, they sought to overcome with voluminous numbers.

The Spirit of the once-roaring inferno now crackled softly in Totsuhwa’s ear that the camps of the Spaniards would wane and the Cherokee would be alone again to face the leviathan intruder. The resting blaze also permitted the shaman to envision people in the flames, each walking toward the Darkening Land to the West. And he dreamed there were cries of dying children in the snapping embers.

Totsuhwa literally shook his head at the visions in an attempt to clarify them and show them to be something other than what they were. It was possible that he sought simply to drive them from his mind. Though he had always embraced the revelations granted by the smoke and fire, tonight he secretly hoped he was seeing things brought on by the late hour and the weariness of a long, battle-trying, and blood-soaked day. When Tsi’yugunsini drank his special tea and strength returned to his body, Totsuhwa would ask him about the things the Spirit had just shared with him. Between the two of them they would understand better and decide the meaning of the manifestations for the people.

The brew was warm. The fire had completed its last task before surrendering to the hour. Totsuhwa pulled his hand up into the sleeve of his rough shirt and gripped the small pot with deer-skin-covered fingers. He carried it to his chief slowly and carefully, moving it in a tiny circle to stir the contents. When he got to his adoptive father, Totsuhwa touched his own lips to the top of the clay and sipped at the tea to check it. It was hot but not unbearably so. He blew across the top of the mixture and the steam melted away in the dark night. Then he crouched again beside the resting chief.

“Father. This will ease the burden.”

The great Dragon drank the warm medicine but did not answer.

The morning sun had breached the faraway horizon and was beginning its time-worn ascent over Shaconage (Sha-con-a-gee), the Land of Blue Smoke, the Cherokee mountains. In the valleys the mist that gave the mountains their name was placidly rolling. Totsuhwa had remained by his father's bed throughout what remained of the night. By the time the sleeping warriors, scattered around the camp where they had fallen from their dance, began to stir in earnest, the sun was well above the mountains. The previous day's battle and late night dancing had drained them all and they had each pulled their blankets over their heads to ward off the sun of the new day. Those who thought at all believed Dragon must have done the same, as he had not roused them from their temporary beds. But now in their rising, they came to realize something was wrong.

Totsuhwa was crouching beside their chief. This was not unusual, but from his mouth was coming the soft yet unmistakable tones of a requiem for the dead. A few warriors, still clouded by their dancing and reverie, had staggered off to urinate before stumbling back into the camp. Only then did they hear the gentle lament streaming from the shaman. Now each follower of Tsi'yugunsini knew he was dead.

The first tears on Totsuhwa's cheeks had dried several hours before. He had long ago brushed away the itch they had left in their drying tracks. From the onset he had sung the songs that would alert those in the Darkening Land of the Dead that Tsi'yugunsini was coming. The songs were also meant to tell the Creator that a warrior who had served Him well was crossing over to the other world. Scattered through the songs were chants of encouragement to his father to walk on with courage and pride in his step.

All the excitement and thrill of the day and night before was gone from the faces of the men who gathered around their chief's body. Some sang with Totsuhwa while others quietly crouched nearby. When the last refrain was lofted heavenward, Totsuhwa stood and directed the affairs of the funeral.

Four men began digging nearby. The hole would be about five feet deep and nearly round, perhaps only two feet across. It would be opened at one side to allow for the digging itself and the placing of the body. The preparation of the burial chamber was time-consuming and difficult. Their hands, sharpened sticks, knives, and rocks were the only tools. Before it was completed, every member of the band would have dirt from the grave embedded under his fingernails.

The shadows of the day were growing long again before the crypt was ready. Totsuhwa had gone to the woods and collected strips of tender birch bark and a fistful of maple twigs, which he had placed along with small piles of corn and tobacco carefully resting on large leaves near the gravesite. He had also gently rolled Dragon's body onto its side and pushed his knees up to his chest. The chief's arms were folded in front of his knees and he was completely covered with a deer-skin.

Once the time for interment had come, stiffness had also come to the Dragon's corpse. Four men lifted his body as Totsuhwa draped and tucked the deer hide around him. Tsi'yugunsini was carried to the grave and very gently eased into it so his body sat upright with his legs and arms folded in front of him. He faced west into the setting sun. The warriors stepped back slightly and made room for the shaman.

Totsuhwa squatted by the tomb, uncovered Dragon's head from the deerskin and prepared a small fire of the birch and maple. As he quoted chants learned from Ama Giga, he sprinkled tobacco on the tiny flames. The hymns attached themselves to the light smoke from the fire and rode up to the heavens carrying Tsi'yugunsini's spirit on their wings. The incantations were lengthy — commensurate with the rank of such a powerful chief. In the moments between the narration, Dragon's bow and quiver were placed in the grave with him along with his pipe and his few personal effects.

An underling placed a few more twigs on the small funeral pyre as Totsuhwa wrapped up the corn in its leaf. "This will feed you on your journey," he said as he carefully placed the tiny package in the grave. He did the same with the tobacco as he said softly, "For your pipe."

Finally, Totsuhwa pulled the deerskin back over his father. "When the Spirit greets you, He will see ahwi's skin across your back and know that you are Tsalagi. Then He will welcome you for He will know you for what you are, for who you are."

All that remained beside the tomb was the dying fire and Dragon's blanket. Totsuhwa stood slowly and picked up the blanket as he rose. Then he reached into his medicine pouch and produced the flint arrowhead he had taken from the deer the Dragon had killed with him long ago. He slowly weighed the mantle in one extended hand while the other vigorously rubbed the old arrowhead. He held both talismans as he peered down at his father.

"Thank you, Tsi'yugunsini. For these gifts and all the other gifts you have given me..." His voice cracked only a fraction but he felt it giving way beneath the weight of his father's death. A hard swallow followed, and Totsuhwa's black eyes turned fierce and skirted across the faces of those nearest him. Like scolded children, every warrior dropped his face away from the man who was fighting back tears. Each one turned away from the funeral and moved to the far reaches of the camp or tended the horses or just vanished into the forest to contemplate their own loss while their new leader dealt privately with his.

"When no mother was there, you took me into your family. When I had no father, you schooled me. The seeds of Ama Giga, you tended..." Tears began to run from the corners of his eyes as Totsuhwa remembered all those he had loved and lost.

"I would like to have these days again, Father. But I would have them without the battles. I enjoyed being by your side in each one. It was there that I saw your triumphs over many enemies and it was there that I learned the ways of a warrior, a chief, and a man. But, my Father, I would have enjoyed more the quiet days to come when we would have hunted together, searched the mountains and land together, sang and smoked as one. These are days taken from me now. They are days taken from the grandchildren you have yet to know."

The tears ran unabated now and Totsuhwa lifted his face to the sky to slow them, but only their direction changed and they ran in a constant stream to his black hair. He felt them move deeper through his scalp and let them run out their course. Though the tears were unstoppable, he did manage to hold back the crying gasps for breath his lungs screamed out for.

"The Spirit has called and like a true Tsalagi warrior, you have listened. Your pain is silent now. No more will the white man hunt your steps and haunt your dreams. Now in the West you will know things that have been and things yet to come. Whisper to me, Tsi'yugunsini. Whisper to me in my sleep and in my wakening. Tell me the things I need to know to help our people. Live on through me and help me be a better shaman, a better man."

The proud head came forward until the chin rested sadly on the strong chest. "There was love between us, my Father. Men such as we do not speak of such things to one another, but I say these words now. I love you, Tsi'yugunsini. I should have said these words to your ears before they slept. The chance is lost. Please hear me. I love you. I love you."

Totsuhwa held a silent vigil over the grave for some time. He slipped down and sat in the style of his father as he sang again, whispered again, and cried again. Behind him, the warriors tried to busy themselves doing nothing while each and every one snuck a peek at Totsuhwa every few minutes. At long last, a young brave approached the grave reverently. When he was acknowledged by the slight turn of his shaman's head he asked if they should break the camp.

"No," Totsuhwa said softly. "We will stay in this place to celebrate and mourn Tsi'yugunsini's walk to the Darkening Land of the Dead. When his scent no longer lingers on the ground we will find the Spaniards."

“Yes, Totsuhwa.”

The young man hesitated but did not stumble over his next words. “Do you wish us to cover Chief Tsi’yugunsini?”

Now it was Totsuhwa who hesitated. “Yes,” he said after several moments. And he turned away.

Throughout the next several days the things that passed as conversation were glances, grunts, and nods of the head. A gloom had settled over the wild band and stretched from the sun’s rise to its setting. The men were not anxious to leave the grave and held on longer than was necessary or customary. Each knew that Tsi’yugunsini was not in the ground, but rather that he had walked on to the land of the dead. Yet still they lingered, feeling more attachment to the material body than the spiritual one. Even Totsuhwa loitered. And he might have stayed even longer had he not thought the horses were staring at him one morning, wonder on their long faces as to why they had remained tied and hobbled in one place for so long. Only after looking hard in the faces of the animals did Totsuhwa quietly direct his men to break the camp. Certainly it was time and long since in keeping with their ways and methods of comings and goings. The warriors had the wondering horses loaded and were on their backs in the few minutes it took their new chief to say goodbye again to their old one.

The ride west to the Spaniards was accomplished in decreasing degrees of silence. Each step of the horses, each measured stride, placed an increasing distance between the men and Tsi’yugunsini’s grave. With the gap came the beginnings of an expected detachment that would permit the warriors to again concentrate on life unhampered by the thoughts of death. Until Dragon’s death had run its course through their minds, made its remembering mark and settled into the far reaches, the men were not safe. Once time had worked its magic, the memories could be recalled on quiet nights around ceremonial fires when stories of great chiefs were relayed to children. For Totsuhwa the time would be measured in years. All the while, loneliness and sadness caused brittle fissures to open in his mind.

Stripped by Dragon of the ability to concentrate, he lumbered along on his horse oblivious at times to the world around him. The impact was so marked it clouded his mind and judgment. While the other raiders were drawn away from the death by the passing of mountain ranges, Totsuhwa was caught so deeply in its web it would take stumbling into the camp of the Spaniards to rouse him. Even then, the awakening would not be complete.

Those warriors who had traveled to the Spaniards before recognized immediately that something about the Spanish encampment was different. In his mourning, Totsuhwa did not see it at first but came upon it gradually as he spoke with a man he had dealt with in the company of Dragon many times before.

“Where’s the Dragon?” the Spanish soldier asked as he looked through the deep tan colored faces around him, all still on their horses.

Totsuhwa did not balk. “He waits in the hills.” It was not a lie.

“What for?”

“The bounty on his head is strong. I am here to smell the cheese.”

The soldier laughed. “Go on now, Totsuhwa! We’ve supported you and Dragon for years now. Our people are friends.” He motioned around the camp with both hands. “There’s no trap here. Send one of your riders up to get Dragon. It’s important that we talk. Much has happened.”

Totsuhwa was not ready to have word of Dragon’s death spread through the white world. He had long been aware that the title they had hung on the great chief had brought him much renown and struck fear in white hearts. Having the white soldiers and men like Sevier pursuing a literal ghost would be good for a while longer. It would tax their resources. More importantly, it would keep them awake at night and reaching for their rifles when the wolves howled.

Totsuhwa smiled to himself. For most white settlers, the dark of night was not a necessary element in their fear of the Dragon. When an unseen bird chirped harmlessly under the sun, grizzled hunters and frontiersmen snatched their rifles, hearing instead Dragon and a raiding party just beyond the trees ready to spring and lift their hair with two quick cuts. Now Totsuhwa's smile spilled out onto his face.

"You and I will talk. You can tell me what has happened."

The soldier hardly noticed the first smile to cross Totsuhwa's face in several weeks. He merely shrugged his shoulders and turned to lead the way to a pitched tent. "Suit yourself."

When Totsuhwa dismounted and followed the soldier, the rest of the band slipped from their horses as well. They stretched a tie line and fastened all their ponies to it then began setting about to find the best trades they could for the scalps and trinkets from their conquests. All the while they were vigilant, taking stock of the Spanish camp that seemed less active than normal.

In the tent Totsuhwa and his host began traversing the details of recent events. "Well, amigo, I tell you. Spain and the United States have come to terms."

"A treaty?"

"Yes, a treaty. There are no more disputes over territory and boundaries. Everything's been settled. There's no more war between them and us. Same is true for British and French, from what I hear."

"They will break any treaty they sign," Totsuhwa said resolutely.

"Maybe. Maybe not. It's not for me to say. All I have are my orders. We are to stop all engagements against the United States. And that includes supplying the Cherokee."

"The treaty will not bind them. They only know lies. You should strike them first while they gloat and plan their assaults against you."

"I can't do that, Totsuhwa. You know that."

"Even now I say they are moving against you."

"Listen a minute. What I am going to say isn't meant to be taken personally. I think it's just a fact of life. I know they have made and broken a number of treaties with your people. But... I don't think that will happen with us."

The soldier looked at the open well-worn grassy floor of the tent and it fell to Totsuhwa to spur the rest of his ideas from him. "What gives this thought to you?"

The soldier's face came up but he talked softly, trying to lessen the sting of his words. "Because we are like them. We live as they live. We are white, not Indian, Totsuhwa. Because we are white."

The shaman immediately felt the impact of the words. There was a truth in them he could not deny. It was a moment more before he would react but when it came it was only a silent nodding of his head.

"Take what I've said to Dragging Canoe, amigo. He will understand. And tell him one thing more for me. He too should make peace with the United States."

"Tsi'yugunsini has tried to make such peace. He and his father before him. But there is no iron in the words of these white men or in the white man's talking leaves. We want to live in peace. It is the white man who pushes us, who lies and steals from us. When he feels guilty he puts together a treaty and asks us to put our marks on it. When we do, he is satisfied for a short time but it does not last."

The Spanish soldier lowered his head again. "I know. But I'm telling you as plainly as I can, if you don't seek a peace with them, they will hunt you down. They won't stop until all the Cherokee are dead."

Totsuhwa shook his head. "Yes, I see this. But I think it may be true whether we make a peace or not."

The two men sat quietly for a few more minutes. Totsuhwa rose first. "I am thankful for the trade you have given us in the past. And for the gunpowder. We have put it to good use," he said.

"I'm sure you have. One more thing. I can give you what supplies I can before you go but it is doubtful we will meet again. I am going back to Spain. Back to my home."

"That is a good thing for a man to do."

"Why don't you go home, Totsuhwa?"

The answer took its time making its way up the shaman's throat. "Perhaps I will."

When Totsuhwa emerged from the tent, his men had already learned the sad truth from what few soldiers remained at the site. The warriors had exchanged and bartered for what they could. Some were pleased but most were disappointed as the value of colonial scalps had taken a drastic downturn. Still, the Spaniard was good to his word and gave the men gunpowder, cap and ball, and a few blankets without charge. Totsuhwa thanked him again, shook his hand in the customary fashion of white people and rode into the trees, this time back to where the sun was born each day.

His braves spoke softly from horse to horse as the travelers stretched out in a winding line. Totsuhwa was at the lead, moving with no haste whatsoever. He was as uncertain of where to go as he was of what to do. In short order his leader, mentor, chief, and father had been taken from him along with the lifeline of munitions they had come to rely on. Totsuhwa could continue to fight the settlers without Tsi'yugunsini, but he could not fight, not for long, without the support of the Spaniards, especially with the British and French gone as well.

As the ride east grew into days, Totsuhwa weighed his choices and the probable outcomes. Most reflected death nearby. Perhaps the Spaniard was right. Perhaps he should go home. Unsure even where that might be, he quizzed his men as to their villages and found as many homes in as many directions as there were points on the white man's compass. Without fanfare, he dismissed the warriors. They would fight no more. They would go home.

Moving on alone, Totsuhwa continued east. He had not ridden by himself since he came to Tsi'yugunsini. He patted his horse's neck as a gentle thank you for the animal's company and began singing a quiet song of praise to the Spirit for keeping him alive to see this day.

After Totsuhwa had seen the moon come and go twice since leaving the Spaniards, Chief James Vann, carrying the white name of his father but the lineage of his Cherokee mother, began another journey with a band of armed warriors. One of Totsuhwa's men had met Chief Vann and his company in the mountains of the south as he had been making his way home. He shared the news of Tsi'yugunsini's death. The troupe stopped and sang songs for the great chief and danced around a monstrous fire, not unlike the one on Dragon's last night, as they praised his courage and strength and urged his spirit westward.

Unlike Totsuhwa, who continued to meander to the northeast alone, Chief Vann rode with several attendants in keeping with his rank. He had parlayed his white father's connections into thriving businesses of trade and ferry boats throughout the nation but remained true to the upbringing at the hands of his mother. As such, his fair treatment, fair prices, and Cherokee blood combined with the white world to make him not only wealthy by any standard but, more importantly, respected and trusted by the people. Today he rode with a war party — an extension of Tsi'yugunsini's Chickamauga Cherokee renegades. Their intent was to meet others and form a massive band that would attack the Western settlements. In another day they were joined by Doublehead and his own band of raiders.

The members of Doublehead's pack mixed easily with those who rode with Chief Vann. The news of Dragon's death was shared as they rode along in solemn silence, but within a few days each

group spoke and laughed as they exchanged insults. Doublehead ignored everyone except Vann. He rode up too close to him, and his horse bumped the younger, more prosperous chief.

“O-si-yo. Hello, Chief James Vann.”

“Doublehead,” Vann said as he pushed the horse away with his foot. “Your horse does not mind you.”

“Perhaps he does,” Doublehead said with a laugh as he reined his horse hard into Vann again.

Two warriors rode quickly toward the jostling horse, but Vann held out his hand and stopped them.

“Do not be troubled, brothers. Doublehead’s horse is just a fool. He has learned much from his master.”

The men laughed as Vann pushed away the horse yet again. But the laughter quickly perished under the harsh eyes of Doublehead.

“You mock me in front of the people,” he said. “You have been too long from battle to remember the taste of blood in your mouth.”

Vann all but ignored him. “You are an old man. You are a shadow of Tsi’yugunsini. I think often of him. The people will speak of him forever. You, they have forgotten already.”

Another snicker ran through the group and Doublehead turned quickly to confront the transgressors. Unrewarded, he spun back to Vann.

“Chief James Vann,” Doublehead said matter-of-factly as his tone suddenly changed. “When you have a son beside you — another half-breed — you will make him a farmer of pigs, like you?”

“Go in peace, Doublehead, but leave us. Ride on another path. Take those foolish enough to follow you into another valley.”

“A half-breed who raises pigs does not tell great warriors to come and go.”

“We are different men, Doublehead. Both with Tsalagi blood, but your spirit is twisted.” At that, Vann urged his horse ahead and away from his tormenter.

“My spirit is twisted, you say, Vann?” Doublehead shouted after him as he reined in his mount. “You would have me leave and divide our force. You are no warrior. You are no chief. You are the twisted one!”

Chief Vann didn’t look back but that night around the fire the challenge wasn’t far from his mind.

As the burning logs popped and snapped, punctuation for his words, Vann crouched on the ground and laid out the next day’s plan. “The scouts tell me that in a day’s ride, when the sun is highest, we will come to a white settlement. We will show ourselves and they will hide in the cabins. Then we will conceal ourselves, sheltered from their guns. We will negotiate their surrender. No harm will come to them if they do so. When they come out we will send them back to the east and burn the cabins to the ground.”

Several of the men, from Vann and Doublehead’s bands, exchanged glances. Before their eyes stopped moving, Doublehead was on his feet. “No scalps?”

“No,” Vann said. “There is no need. That is only a cry for more soldiers. Better to have the land than beg for more enemy.”

“You said my spirit is twisted. Your mind is twisted! You will have them by the throat and release them so they can come back. Kill them all. We will trade the scalps for powder and shot.”

“Trade with who? The British are defeated and have moved across the water. The French have retreated north into the snow country. And the Spaniards have gone home. No, we do it this way.”

“Tsi’yugunsini would spare no lives.”

“That is true, Doublehead, but I have asked the Spirit for guidance on these things each night. With our supplies low and our allies gone, we are not to invite the soldiers with our raids. Burning their cabins and pushing them east will do.”

“Not for me.”

“You have decided to ride with me, my old friend, and you will follow.”

“Are you sick with the fever, Vann? The men you free, they will be back before a moon has passed and you will fight them to the death. Many of our men may die. Warriors we cannot spare to lose.”

“We will lose more if the soldiers come. We burn the settlements. That is all.”

“No slaves?”

“No. We protect the land. That is enough.”

“Your father’s blood shows in you. This is white man’s thinking. They will come back and kill our women and burn our crops. Our children will starve, Vann. We must kill them all and take their scalps for trade, wherever we can find it. Kill them. They have broken the treaty.”

“Each treaty. I agree,” Vann conceded.

“Then they all die for all the promises broken.”

Chief Vann looked ahead stoically, instantly removed from the conversation. “They did keep one promise.”

“None,” Doublehead protested.

“No. One. They promised to take our land and they did.”

There was a still minute before Doublehead confirmed his intent. “Yes, and for that they all die.”

“No. They walk to the east. We put their homes to the torch and take their stock and supplies. No more. Awaninski.”

Vann rose and walked away from the fire. His men followed him a short distance and began dropping to the ground to make their beds. Others lingered and looked to Doublehead for direction.

“When the cabins are reached, follow my war club with yours,” Doublehead whispered. “These women may busy themselves with a stolen cow, but our knives will shine in the blood of our enemies.”

Another day passed in relative calm. Throughout, the horses enforced their private hierarchy with snapping hooves and flashing teeth set on bare flanks as the warriors chided one another with verbal assaults and their own coarse fun. As the men rolled their blankets and unhobbled the horses the following morning, a single Cherokee rider appeared in the trees and rode up to Chief Vann, who squatted near the calm smokeless fire.

“In the forked valley. Two ranges south on the water,” the rider said to Vann without pointing.

The chief nodded then asked a question with only his eyes and a slight tilt of his head. The answer was immediate.

“The rising sun sits on the mountain’s shoulder behind the cabins and the Long Man.”

“Good,” Vann replied as he squinted into the early sun. “We will take our next meal by that water. Tell the others to prepare.”

In quiet minutes all were packed and mounted. Vann and the reporting scout casually led the party away from the camp and on to the forked valley. All conversation dropped away before the cabin top appeared. Doublehead did not look at his conspirators. He had said all that needed saying. Rather than dismount and use stealth to their advantage, Chief Vann led the band to the edge of the river some distance from the cabin but in clear view. Men began slipping from their horses to take water, eyeing the building and grounds for signs of life.

The cabin was a simple four-walled log box, but large enough for several families staking a claim together before building their own homes nearby. There was no additional protective wall or buttress surrounding it. The sole window was a leather-hinged heavy shutter with a cross cut through it for maneuvering rifle barrels. The door was the same. The roof was bark and sod. The cabin was stark but functional and stout. Nearby was a crude fence of saplings bound to rough posts with leather straps. It made a rough corral. Inside it was a pair of oxen, two cows, a yearling steer, and three aging horses. All the animals were at the rail sniffing the air of the Cherokee horses and watching. The white eyes inside the house were watching too.

From their place by the river, the Cherokee couldn't hear the scrambling and frantic words inside the cabin. Five men, three women, and three children rechecked the door and window bindings as well as their rifles. In minutes, barrels poked through the windows and took aim on the Cherokee though they were beyond effective range.

Vann caught the movement at the windows but took little notice as he rode slowly into the nearby woods with three attendants. The quartet circled through the trees and dismounted a considerable distance from the cabin. They tied their horses up silently and moved toward the guns on foot. In a few minutes they were at the tree line. By the time they were in place, the main band had melted into the safety of the forest.

"IN THE CABIN!" Chief Vann yelled in halting English. "You are on Cherokee land by the treaties. You go!"

A quick rifle shot was the answer. The bullet snapped through the trees many yards away and high. Vann didn't flinch. He shouldered his rifle as did his escorts — two to his left and one to his right. "The window," he directed to the two over his shoulder. "The door," he said to the other. "Follow with two arrows. Save your powder."

The four men took easy aim. The rifles cracked fractions of seconds apart. The wood of the window and door recoiled splinters as the bullets struck. Nearly before the wood chips hit the ground a hail of arrows began to strike. Four bit the door in rapid succession. Three cracked into the window shutter, while a single slightly errant bolt lodged in the wall of the cabin.

Inside, the women dove to the floor on top of the children while the men crouched and cringed along the interior front wall and listened to the thumps of the arrows. Frightened eyes darted around the single room over the dirt floor. Questions in their eyes and on hushed lips asked each other what to do and what would become of them. There were false words of strength for the benefit of the women and the children, and perhaps the men themselves, but it was clearly just bravado. The men sitting closest to one another along the wall whispered that they would all be scalped as certain as the sun would set. The crash of the arrowheads into the cabin and the reports of the Cherokee rifles still echoed, and their knocking on the house seemed to indicate over a hundred men waited outside and would be prepared to wait them out or rush the cabin as they saw fit.

The senior man in the group stood abruptly and moved to the door. "We have to try for terms."

"Terms? Terms of surrender? With these bloodthirsty savages? There'll be scant terms with these animals."

"Unlikely. They know we'd get a few of them. The Chickamauga Wars cost them a bunch of men. Did you hear that English? These are Cherokee, like as not. They don't have much fight left. This little band is trying to flex its muscle."

"By lifting our hair."

"Hush!" a woman cried out as she clutched two boys, each around five years old.

"Hush up like she says. We'll get outa here minus an axe and a metal pot or two."

"They'll take it all after we're outa the way!"

“Naw. This frontier has growed up a lot. Them fellas know if anything happens to us, the militia will be here in a month and burn this valley to the bare earth. We’ll get out alright. The sooner the better.”

Across the open glade there was no such urgency in Chief Vann’s thoughts. He dropped to one knee and exchanged the bow in his hand for his rifle that rested against the tree he had used as a shield. Vann started to reload it slowly as his men mirrored him. “I wonder,” he said calmly, “what does a man feel when, as warriors, two men shoot lead and arrows at each other in battle? It must make some tremble.”

His men slowed until their movements were barely visible. The pair over his shoulder exchanged puzzled looks before one asked hesitantly, “Chief Vann. You have seen men in battles as we all have. What do you mean?”

“That I have seen a new thing today.”

“Tell us so we can see too.”

“Many times I have watched strong men whither like a vine that needs water as smoke from gunpowder fills the air. Fear of another man’s bullet coming at them makes them shake and shoot into the ground or sky. But today I saw a piece of wood make a skillful hunter shake like a snake’s tail.”

“Where did you see this?”

Vann motioned to the cabin window and the single arrow lodged in the log wall next to it as he laughing looked at the man who had fired from his left.

“You missed the window! The wooden window scared you!”

Vann and the other two warriors laughed out loud and couldn’t stop.

Inside the cabin, the settlers’ faces tightened. “It’s some kind of war cry...”

The warrior who had missed his mark stared intently and squinted to better see the errant arrow. “That is not my arrow. Mine are in the window wood.”

Between rolls of laughter, Vann choked out an answer. “You lie as good as you shoot! I see your markings from here!” And the laughter grew louder.

Embarrassed and as though to redeem himself, the archer quickly finished loading his rifle, took fast but careful aim, and fired into the shutter of the window again. As before, he followed with two arrows in rapid succession, but this time each hit the window cleanly. Satisfied, he nodded at Vann and motioned to the cabin with his bow. The men just laughed harder.

The window under assault opened slightly, and half a white face peeked out through the arrows. “OUTSIDE THERE! We’re leavin’. Don’t shoot!”

Chief Vann immediately broke from his laughter. He made a snap hand gesture and one of the men darted into the trees to bring up the rest of the band.

The cabin door cracked open. “Hello! I’m comin’ on out! Don’t shoot!”

“Come!” Vann echoed. “No shooting!”

“No shooting!” the cabin itself seemed to echo in return.

Chief Vann stepped out from the tree line rather brazenly. He was covered by the two remaining rifles behind him. The leader of the group in the cabin eked the door open enough to inch out but kept one hand on the doorframe to propel himself back inside at the first sign of trouble. As the man emerged, Vann strode across the cleared ground until they were near enough to talk without shouting.

“Name’s Tucker.”

“I am Blue Knife,” Vann lied. “Take up your people and go to the east.”

“We will do just that. Gonna take some time to get packed up and all.”

“We have no time for you. Take up your people and go to the east. Go east now.”

“We need to pack food and such. We have young-uns in here.”

Vann was patient, but others were coming up behind him leading their horses and were less so. "The little ones will make good captives," Doublehead blurted out as if it were a foregone conclusion.

"No," Vann countered. "We want them out of our mountains and away from our waters. They will all go as I have said."

Now Vann shouted at the cabin, Doublehead having provoked him. "Load your backs with three days' food. Come out and put your long guns in the ground. Take one for the hunt. Leave them. Leave the most of the long guns."

"How about my stock?" Tucker said as he motioned to the corral.

"Stock? The cattle and horse? They are payment for breaking the treaties. Leave them. Pack and go. Quickly. No harm will come but do it now."

Tucker retreated inside the door. "Pack up what you can."

There was a short scramble in the cabin as provisions were hastily thrown together.

"I ain't givin' up my rifle!"

"Rather give up your hair? Pack up but quick. I'll stall 'em some."

As the race continued behind him, Tucker popped back out the door. This time he had his rifle in his hand but was holding it loosely by the barrel out away from his body. The sight of the white man carrying a rifle brought twenty guns and half as many bows up to firing positions. Tucker abruptly tossed the rifle aside.

"See there?" he said. "Holdin' up my end of the terms. No gun. Leavin' her right there for you."

Emboldened, a few warriors stepped away from the trees toward the cabin. Tucker took several hesitant steps as if to meet them. Behind him, the rough-hewn door opened and the others in the cabin trickled out. The men came first, carrying their rifles as had Tucker, with slings of whatever food and supplies they could carry slung across their backs and held in their free hands. The women were tight behind them holding the shoulders and hands of the three children.

Vann stepped out further into the glade and pointed with his rifle. "Go east. Stop when you are wet in the big water of King George!"

The Cherokee who understood some English began to laugh. Others, joining their friends, laughed along, though they didn't understand Vann's English. Doublehead looked at them all as though he were the brunt of the joke.

"Fools," he said as he ripped the reins of his horse from an attendant.

The old warrior bounded onto the horse's back like a man half his age, but before he could wheel his horse toward the cabin, Vann had snatched another mount nearby. The two men were an instant apart in their actions — the second reading the intent of the first as they moved like trailing ripples on water.

Doublehead's horse spun toward the cabin as Vann broke behind him. Nearly every man in the war party began their own pursuit of the racing horses as Vann's joking words instantly melted away in their ears. They were filled by the "Ka-la-la!" war cry that exploded from Doublehead as his horse bolted toward Tucker. For his part, the white man stared with a look torn between wonder and shock. In seconds his face caught the hard cherry wooden ball of Doublehead's war club, and the look shattered under the blow.

As Tucker crumbled dead on his feet, Doublehead cocked his arm as his wide eyes caught the nearest man. The horse had not broken its stride and was on the others in an instant. The trespassing settler who wanted both his scalp and his rifle now raised his gun, but the horse was too fast and he was too slow. As the rifle came up, the war club came down. In a heartbeat of time that separated living from dead, Vann's horse rammed into Doublehead's, sending the horse, Doublehead, and intended victim sprawling in a ball of dust, horsehide, and deerskin.

Chief Vann stepped his horse toward the cabin and screamed at the remaining white faces, each paler by what had just occurred. "Go! GO! Leave this place!"

As the small group started to hurriedly shuffle along the cabin, huddling for the protection that came at the hands of the man screaming from horseback, a single arrow whistled by Vann's leg and pierced the nearest woman's cheek. The flint sliced her face with ease, like a thin stick pushed into soft mud. It stopped when it passed through her throat and hit the back of her skull. The woman's hands fell away from the children they had clutched, and she dropped to the ground twitching, the fletchings of the arrow quivering with her body.

Vann traced the path of the arrow back to one of Doublehead's men. He and others were notching more arrows and shouldering rifles.

"No! No!" Vann waved wildly like a man gone mad while behind him a more frightening sight was coming up from the dust cloud of the horse and men Vann had barreled into. Doublehead had never left his horse's back, and as the animal scrambled to its feet, Doublehead came up with it, like an apparition appearing out of the fog of dust.

Vann wheeled his mount once more between the rising horse and the terrified settlers. He reached down and plucked a boy from the melee as freshly launched arrows struck new targets. The boy landed in a tangle of arms and legs across the chief's lap. Vann's horse spun away from the whistling arrows and presented the boy's head as the perfect target to Doublehead as his own horse reached its full height. As before, Doublehead cocked his war club and delivered a snapping crush down on the child's skull. Vann felt the crunch travel the length of the recoiling boy's body followed by the slump of instant death. In its blind search for more death, Doublehead's bloody club was pulled back across its master's chest and took aim at the nearest possible victim — Vann, but this time it was undone by Vann's reaction. The young chief grabbed the back of the dead boy and threw him with one hand at Doublehead and his club.

"What's happened to you, old man?"

As the boy's body fell away, Doublehead glared as an answer. If there was another reply coming, Vann wasn't waiting. He raked the sides of his horse and the animal charged toward the fleeing settlers. The warriors who were hot on their heels were nearly run over. Others who were reloading their weapons stopped for fear of hitting the chief as he purposely placed himself again between the scattering whites and the Cherokee. As quickly as the killing began it was over.

Vann urged the settlers away and corralled the fiery warriors, several of whom were already rifling through the cabin along with Doublehead. Vann didn't look twice at the cabin but repeatedly glanced over his shoulder at the drifting whites.

"They are not to be trailed. I have given my words to this."

"You have given words to a trespassing white man," came Doublehead's voice as he emerged from the cabin. "It means nothing."

For the third time in nearly as many minutes Vann's horse raced across in front of the cabin. He reined in in front of Doublehead.

"My words are strong whoever I give them to. You have allowed yourself to become as bad as the whites. You are no different. Take your men and leave us. I have no time to watch over you and keep you free from briars. You were a good warrior once, Doublehead, but that man has died. You are a baby killer."

"He was a dog!" Doublehead screamed.

"You are nothing to me and nothing to the people. You are not even Doublehead. You are Baby Killer. Now, leave this place."

"I'll leave you women to your chores, but we'll meet again, Vann."

"We will, and I look forward to that day."

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David Harding is a life-long writer whose work has appeared in numerous national publications. He holds a master's degree in education, and currently works as an adjunct professor of writing and resides in Tampa, Florida. Most of his days are spent writing from the cockpit of his sailboat, Pegasus, somewhere off the Nature Coast of Florida in the Gulf of Mexico.