

Keeneyed & Crystal: A Cherokee Novella

By Christopher Winn

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For Karen Winn,
who taught me to read and write,
and told me the land I grew up on once belonged to the Cherokees.

Chapter One: Raven Mockers

"Sequoyah was always in the wilderness. He walked about, but he was not a hunter. I wonder what he was looking for."

-Jack Frederick Kilpatrick, *Sequoyah: Of Earth and Intellect*

Circa 1815 AD

The silversmith applied a final dab of polish to the patinaed clock case atop his workbench. Shifting upon the stool, he dragged the lamplight a hair closer and stretched the crippled knee beneath him. The toe of his worn boot briefly tapped the backdrop—pine logs fixed together by cogged joints. His palms still bore calluses from notching these himself.

Glancing up wryly as his companion riffled through the freshly inked papers stacked at the opposite end of the bench, he teethed the perpetual pipe stem aside to murmur,

"What else did they say?"

The little daughter frowned, brought knuckles to chin quizzically, blinked deeply. "They said the Provider gave the red man a book and the white man a bow, but neither cared for the gifts they were given. They ended up *ex—ex—*"

"Exchanging?" the father clarified.

"Yes," the daughter nodded.

"Hmm," he replied, shifting the pipe stem back into place.

"I don't understand *this*," she declared, driving a fingernail down definitively upon the end of a page.

"Tell me how it starts."

She grimaced before taking up the paper and flexing it for dramatic effect. "This, is what the old men told me, when I was young."

"A boy, Ayoka," he corrected gently. "Not *young*."

“When I was *a boy*,” she repeated.

“Go on.”

“In the beginning, all things had a voice, and lived alongside people, in peace.”

He nodded affirmatively while slicing a fresh strip of cotton with his freshly whetted blade.

“But people grew, and grew, until they covered the earth, and the animals lacked room. So man invented weapons to kill them, and was—*what?*—in his treatment of them.”

“Careless,” the father clarified. He placed the clock case in his lap and applied a bit of elbow grease to its finish.

“The chief of the bears called a counsel, to decide what—to do. The bears decided to make a bow, with which to kill man. A bear...*sacrificed?*”

“Yes.”

“—himself, so they could make a bow of his bones, and a bowstring of his entrails. But their long claws,” she giggled, “were clumsy in shooting it. ‘Without our claws, we shall all die!’ the bear chief proclaimed. ‘We must use what nature gave us, and leave the inventing to man.’” She looked up. “I can’t read the next part.”

He set aside the rag to reach for his dogeared matchbox. “It says we would be at war with the bears still if they had done otherwise, and so we pray for their pardon whenever we must shoot one to survive.”

The daughter nodded and gingerly set the paper back atop its precarious stack.

Flaring a flame, he dipped it into the pipe bowl and took a long meditative drag. “The bears were given the bow, and chose not to use it,” he pondered aloud. “It is ill-advised that we do the same with the book.”

Glancing over and observing her glum expression, the silversmith leaned forward and placed his elbows upon the bench to massage his aching temples. "You read well," he eventually commented. "Now go play while there's still daylight. I need to rest my eyes."

Watching as she hopped and skipped out the doorway, he dragged once more upon the pipe stem before dumping the bowl's meagre contents out upon a silver ashtray. He had kept this one due to a slight warping which rendered it unfit for sale. He ought perhaps to melt it down and reuse the base contents, but he had grown rather fond of the little luxury.

Placing the clock case prominently back upon the bench, he rose somewhat unsurely from the stool, dimmed the lamplight to extinction, and hobbled his way over to the little cot in the corner. As he kicked off his boots and draped a weary arm over his eyes, it dawned upon him again that his daughter would be—perhaps already was—the first literate Cherokee child.

As he slept, he dreamed of the ancestors.

Circa 30 AD

Four times the boy churned his stick counterclockwise within the stream, head knelt before the auspicious rays of dawn, intently watching the uniform circumference he cut upon the surface while feeling the shifting pebbles and clinging algae below. With each rotation he sung a prayer, digging his toes ever deeper into the sacred ground of the riverbank, and upon the final circuit he jerked the instrument into the center of this rippling and held it still.

"Long Man, I attend to you. Yours is the power to remake my soul. It will become as lengthy and deep as yours. It will be filled by cisterns."

Trailing off, he allowed himself not even a blink as the circle continued its cycle unaided for a brief instant. The water grew quite clear, and he held his breath as a small snapping turtle flitted upwards and briefly breached its shell before diving back downwards and disappearing.

Withdrawing the sacred stick, the boy snapped it over a knee in frustration.

Their lonesome enclosure lie just shy of this riverbed—four upright saplings divested of their branches, and between them porous basket-weave for walls. An old bearskin cradled an even older man within it alongside the glow of a convex fire. This was bricked in by stones, its coals fueled with live balsam needles—tonic for the lungs. Sweat had pooled about him until he lay not upon but within it, and in that compact damp and dark came unwelcomed thoughts of a second birth.

In erratic sleep the entirety of his body was aflame, and he absently asked of his late Mother and Grandmother if stars do in fact burn. From their veiled vantage, they listened attentively but held their peace. The bared fangs and bristling necks of canine Sirius and Antares warded those divine junctions from his untimely soul.

Turning, he raised a hand to guard his sight from Deneb—crowning jewel atop the Tree of Life—and glimpsed instead the shadow of impossible wings adrift above. The silhouette of a heron alighted in those boughs, spraying stardust and starlight, casting uproarious winds that buffeted him, sent him careening downwards.

Back settling gently against the firm grain of a vast tortoiseshell, he sat up to survey the living island lately arisen there amidst an ocean of infinite black, hung by four cords from the vaulted sky. Seven sets of moccasin-clad feet circled about him mischievously, masked boys dancing frenzied, pounding drums. Alycone yawned overhead like a portal, divulging forth the Principle People—his people—their arms laden with seeds, primed to sow this fresh and fertile Earth anew. They traveled eastward, for east is always the way they go.

Now lighter, now darker this procession, like the blinking of eyes, as Red Woman and Grandfather Moon syncopated one another's rise and fall, ever showing the way. Only here below could he espy the figure of a panther which slunk stealthily after Them, sleek coat glimmering white flame,

licking its chops. Seizing a materialized bow, he gave it chase like he once did in youth—but midway upon this hunt he found himself lost in a lightless wood.

Twice therein he heard a masculine voice calling, and thought his pupil sought him.

“Here I am,” he whispered, from the hut and the heavens.

But when the call came thrice he discerned it was another, and said a little louder, “Let us sit down together.”

He could almost feel the foreign knees brush against his and hear the billowing of the stranger’s lungs. Its figure shone softly by the firelight like tarnished silver.

“I am Talks With Wind,” the old man acknowledged hoarsely, “whose mother is a star.”

“And I,” the newcomer replied, “am Sequoyah, whose mother will be of the Paint.”

“Will be?” Talks With Wind pondered.

“Your quarry has a great head-start, Uncle. From my vantage, it has already sunk its teeth into our People.”

“I do not understand,” the old man admitted. “Is this medicine of the rabbit, that you speak as man and move as spirit?”

The smell of tobacco drenched the lodge as Sequoyah rekindled his long-stemmed pipe. “Mine is a medicine that grows in all seasons and is impervious to all elements. It is one of throatless voices heard at great distances—leaves that talk, stones that cry. By it our People may limp on, merely crippled by that panther’s bite, where They would otherwise be utterly destroyed.”

Talks With Wind considered this stoically. “What have I to trade a one such as you?”

“When a river is dammed, it may be forked?” Sequoyah proposed.

The old man hummed agreeably.

“Then work the medicine of the beaver.”

The young pupil pressed his ear against the hut, listened to the old man carry on with his one voice as though it were two. He marveled at the scent on the air, for his teacher's pipe and leaf hung safely within a pouch upon the middling branch of a nearby tree. Stealing towards it, the boy took a cautious pinch from within and cast it into their campfire. Stooping, he peered at the smoldering wad to divine inauspicious presences. It burned rightly, without splutter or stormy plume. Its vague smoke trail, however, seemed to rise in the dual helix of a whirlwind as it drifted northward.

North could be troublesome—an old Raven Mocker on the move. The boy quickly commenced a chant, eyeing the stakes which he had planted about the lodge, whittled points tilted upwards, with anticipation.

"Listen!" he boasted for the sake of any night-goers. "In the Frigid Lands above you repose, oh Red Man. We have prepared arrows for the soul of those who sing wickedness. They are lying along the path. They shall steal his soul as we hasten along!"

His youthful voice and memory momentarily waived.

"Listen!" he called again, this time louder to compensate for his carelessness. "In the Frigid Lands above you repose, Oh Blue Man! We have prepared arrows for the soul of those who sing wickedness. They are lying along the path. Quickly they will cut his soul in twain!"

Running a palm nervously down his utterly hairless and already scar-spangled torso after just thirteen winters, the boy circled the hut to see if any of the stakes were missing, and found that one was—though he may have counted awry. Satisfied, the fledgling wizard twirled his tomahawk saucily.

Sequoyah appraised the boy through a slim crack in the lodge wall. "Eager, but a streak of fear runs through him."

"That is why we call him Chipmunk," Talks With Wind explained.

By dawn's early light the boy crept in and dosed the lodge's fire. The meaningful sizzling of those coals stirred the old man awake.

"Is it the seventh day, nephew?"

"Yes, Uncle."

They did not look at one another.

"There is much to do. You have the comb?"

Chipmunk produced the small, precious implement of pointed bone from his medicine bag.

"You will make the scratches now, as I have done when you played ball." Talks With Wind shed his bearskin coverings, presented his bare chest and arms. "Neither of us shall play ball again."

Chipmunk nodded as he carefully stuck the comb points into his teacher's flesh and left deep yet unbloodied stripes over his chest and down his biceps and forearms.

"To water now, Uncle?"

"To water."

They hobbled naked and four-legged down the embankment, the elder leaning heavily upon the younger, each feeling smooth pebbles and sharp shards leave imprints upon the leathery soles of their bare feet until the reprieve of soft, squishy mud seeped between their toes.

Half-walking, half-swimming now through chest-high water, they halted in the center of the riverbed, let it gently but persistently lap against them, as the boy prayed aloud.

"Living water, reflection of—and reflected by—that River in the heavens, teach us to move in your fashion, with patience and purpose, cleaving to the paths worn smooth, until we find the ocean's depths, or spring once more from our birthing cistern beneath the mountains."

Cradling him as though he were a newborn, Chipmunk dosed Talks With Wind four and seven times beneath the murky surface. Then, clawing at sand and silt, they ascended to dry in the direct rays of their lodge's clearing.

“Now,” Talks With Wind instructed shakily as he knelt to reenter the lodge and rewrap the bearskin about himself, “make me a tea.”

Stealing under its maudlin shrubbery, Chipmunk gingerly scraped bark from the white willow, ancient’s aspirin, taking and stowing each fourth and seventh chip while letting the others fall. It whispered to him like an instructive grandmother as he whittled—rustled and fussed in the breeze. She bore the auspicious mark of having once been struck by lightning. These cutlets settled atop a medicine bag lately loaded with hot-pink raspberries—delicious, anti-inflammatory—and sedative mullein shoots—young, pale-green, not yet brilliant yellow. He knew of a wild cherry nearby whose pulp would divulge a few final splinters just for flavor, while, back at the sweating lodge, his mentor had already prepared and bottled the delicate antiseptic oils of garlic and thyme. It was a tincture for any and all maladies, since they knew not which one in particular to treat.

Reentering the clearing, Chipmunk froze, tomahawk in hand, mesmerized by the sight of newcomers neither fully human nor beast arrayed about the lodge. Feathered as ravens, hunched like hags, they hopped and stepped timidly about the perimeter, dipping their noses down as though they were beaks threatening to peck. In broken, bestial dialect, they began to caw and cackle over all the hearts they had already eaten to prolong the beatings of their own. Talks With Wind listened to them wearily from within, smelled their fetid stench, swayed gently from where he sat, preparing.

“*Ha!*” he suddenly screamed, motioning at Chipmunk’s planted stakes with his ancient rattlewand. These ritualistic arrows blurred into the midst of the Raven Mockers’ unholy flock, spurring them into the wind as a flurry of black feathers and grey ash.

The boy raced to his master’s side and embraced him. “How, Uncle?” he sobbed into Talks With Wind’s chest. “How can they fly when the Red Woman shines?”

“Something has happened,” Talks With Wind explained as he held him close. “Something terrible, near the rising sun. You must tell no one of what you have seen.”

Chapter Two: Council Fire

"...there must be in their social bond something singularly captivating and far superior to anything to be boasted of among us; for thousands of Europeans are Indians, and we have no examples of even one of those aborigines having from choice become Europeans! There must be something more congenial to our native dispositions than the fictitious society in which we live..."

-Crevecoeur, "Letter XII: Distresses of a Frontier Man," *Letters from an American Farmer* 214

"Recite to me the past of our People," Talks With Wind instructed softly as they hobbled towards home, glancing at his apprentice's pallor. He still clutched his rattle-wand warily.

Chipmunk wiped cold sweat from his brow, fidgeted with his tomahawk. "The Immortals placed our People upon a land towards the rising sun, Uncle. The old men say one of those first men had a beloved dog who took to howling at the river whenever he laid eyes upon it. One day the man had had enough and scolded the dog, after which it began to speak. It said, 'Soon the Immortals will send a deluge upon this place, so that everyone will drown. But if you throw me into the river and immediately begin building a raft, you and your family will be saved.' The man did just as the dog had said, so that he and his family floated atop the rains until they could see the bones of the dead and hear their spirits dancing. Thereafter some of that man's children wandered North-East, and followed a bridge made of ice to this Turtle Island. They lived among the Great Lakes for a time, until a war broke out between those of them who were giants, and those that were not. The giants were exiled south to the cave-county, which they took from the moon-eyed men, and inhabit still. That is all."

"Why were only some of them giants, and not all?"

"I don't know, Uncle."

Talks With Wind hummed. "The stories do not explain it; thus we can only conjecture. Perhaps the blood of the Immortals was interspersed among us."

Chipmunk considered this. "It is strange that no giants remain."

“It would seem their lineage is persecuted wherever it goes.”

The pair paused, ears perking.

“Here I am,” the hunter announced politely before rounding a nearby tree, kneeling to shed the weighty carcass of a doe from about his shoulders.

“So you are,” Talks With Wind greeted, motioning apologetically to his incumbered state. “What news in the last seven moons, nephew?”

Starved Fox shrugged, scratching nonchalantly at the leg which was his namesake—half of a foot, vertically, the other half having been claimed by a wayward tomahawk. “The White Chief fusses over his daughter as her divined moon grows near. He complains of your absence and badgers the other doctors unceasingly.”

The medicine men nodded, nonplussed at the news of their needy benefactor.

“It would please me, nephew, if you would precede and announce us, for I would hold a council as soon as we arrive.”

Starved Fox nodded, taking back up his burden.

Talks With Wind eyed his apprentice. “A fine hunter such as Starved Fox always remembers his apologetic prayers—but what would he need to do, should he ever forget them upon killing such a beast?”

“By night, he should build a fire behind him,” Chipmunk answered, “to hinder Little Deer from following the blood trail.”

Talks With Wind nodded. “Lest Little Deer strike him with rheumatism, yes.”

“Even a hunter need know a little medicine, nephew,” Starved Fox commented, winking at Chipmunk as he turned.

The boy grinned.

Dark earthen fields wreathed their village. These were still sparsely populated by stooped or kneeling feminine forms even as dusk breached its pink-purple nimbus overhead. They harvested the intertwined Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—after the fashion of the primordial matron Corn. Wherever Corn's blood was shed her stalks may sprout, and no man over these may tread. Their lengthy heads of hair dangled down almost to the dust, and occasionally they would wipe the sweat from their brows with the skirts which concealed the thigh unto the knee.

The modest mud-clay-walled and thatch-roofed houses of these feminine farmers encircled a central dance-ground and the imposing council house beyond it. Therein the smoke and light of a great, constant fire lapped at the dark. Men were still trickling into this ancient structure from their domestic doorways as Talks With Wind and Chipmunk reached the communal path. Starved Fox had rightly appraised their pace.

A grandmother gasped from within one such house at the sight of Talks With Wind's sallowness as he passed, murmuring a blessing after his slight shadow. She could still see him as he was many moons ago—a sleek form of burnished bronze spinning wildly before sheaves of green corn, a newly bestowed eagle feather blurring amidst his locks.

The dull exchanging of pleasantries lulled and faded as the medicine men passed the doorposts. Knees and elbows angled and shrank to clear their path. The eldest men, already propped comfortably upon bearskins, motioned towards the finest one as yet unoccupied. Seeing Talks With Wind to this seat, Chipmunk withdrew into the anonymity of a dim corner. As if on que, all eyes within the audience diverted from the venerable medicine man to the ground just before him—for to be stared at is distracting, and to stare detracts from listening.

Peering over the audience appraisingly, the old man smiled and motioned for a child of no more than three winters who was straining against his caretaker's arms. Freed, the child immediately tottered over and made himself at home by splaying out upon Talks With Wind's lap with a giggle. Rubbing the

small, shaven head fondly, the medicine man cleared his voice and began to speak in a low, methodical tone. Unable to annunciate as mightily as he once had, the audience leaned towards him, as though his form exerted some magnetic force.

“Uncles, nephews—seven moons I have sweated now, but remain unwell. My head throbs as though it has been struck, and there is fleeting pain like lightning in my gums. Recently, when my student asked me to clarify a matter in one of the old tales, I was unable to recall it until another doctor reminded me. This is not merely the slow decline of old age. I will not see the next Green Corn.”

The audience grumbled softly to themselves, deeply troubled.

“But there is a far more important matter at hand. While I slept, another of our doctors came to me from afar, like the rabbit. He was one not yet born.”

More grumbling now, bordering upon rudeness.

“Consider the echo in a mountain range,” Talks With Wind illustrated patiently. “One man calls to another in the distance, and the other does not hear his voice until he has already finished speaking.”

Several wizened hunters nodded their heads.

“Well, then. If the cycling of the moons were a mountain, he called down to me from a peak, and I answered him from a base.” Talks With Wind breathed deeply, hearing his argument had registered by the agreeable humming of “*hwo*” reverberating in the air.

“Unobstructed by the climb we have yet to make, his view is more expansive. From that summit he has seen many strange things and found them worthy to share. He wished to tell us that a man has died across the Eastern sea—a man alike to that Wild Child of Corn and Hunter, who rose up from the river, having made a body for himself from shed blood, and was capable of all medicine and mischief. Just as that one broke into his father’s cave and upset the jars, out of which poured calamity, so this Wild Child’s death has loosed something deadlier still. Hereafter the pale peoples of the world will be driven towards the setting sun, even unto our Island, by the consequence of his murder, until—

concerning the cardinal points—there will be no true division. Then man will live as the animals have always feared—one house atop another, without room even to sow seed. There will even come a time when men forget how to hunt, and women how to raise their own young. Their pitiable children will roam untaught, unbidden, like wild dogs...”

The old man’s voice trailed off, clearly shaken. When it returned, it was barely a whisper.

“Those of our People whom are not killed shall become even as they.”

Eyes widened and nostrils flared in indignation. A young doctor near the forefront shifted a foot impudently, as though he had no choice but to intervene.

From his corner, Chipmunk whispered under his breath, “Spread my spirit about” four time in quick succession.

Talks With Wind held up a hand placatively. “Do you think this trial is the first? There were others which we remember. We remember that time long ago when spirits swarmed the air unceasingly, speaking of wars and rumors of wars. Such a time it was that the Immortals feared no People would be left, and so issued an offer unto those ancient houses that they might be removed to safety. Thereafter the People fasted for seven moons and made not a sound, until from the mountains there came a roaring of thunder and trembling of earth, and a great hand scooped them up and deposited them upon Lone Peak, wherein none ever mourn nor die. This place may still be seen, near Cheowa’s head.”

The pious young doctor settled himself, and, sensing a pause, added, “Another town near Hiwassee was taken similarly. The Immortals placed them under Shooting Creek, and still they will sometimes tug at a fisherman’s net to remind him that they are well.”

Talks With Wind pursed his lips appreciatively.

“Then you would have us withdraw as well?” an audience member questioned.

“Who can say whether the Immortals will issue such an invitation again? That the unborn doctor need tell of these things suggests they will not. No; he proposed an altogether different solution, though it too derives from our old tales. When I was a boy it was told to me that once a Shawano doctor named Groundhog’s Mother was captured by us, but spared if only he would dedicate himself to the pursuit of that wonder-worker which grants whatever medicine is asked of it.”

The peers of Talks With Wind shifted uncomfortably, unsure that such a thing was fit for young, impressionable ears.

“They said also that he went looking for it in the Smokies, especially its deepest pools and highest passes. Then he thought to find it beyond the Gap of Forked Antler, perhaps at the enchanted lake there which teems with giant reptiles. Finally, he came upon it at Gahuti Mountain.”

“What was it, Uncle?” one of the boys interjected.

Talks With Wind tickled the toddler’s ribs and, lifting him gingerly from his lap, perched him upon a wrinkled knee. “It was the great horned serpent called Keeneyed, nephew,” he answered into the darkness. “And what would Groundhog’s Mother want with such a beast?”

The boy shrugged uncertainly.

Talks With Wind grinned. “He was after the flaming crystal set into its forehead like a scale, which is called Translucent. It is this which the unborn doctor would have us seek.”

One of the elders cleared his throat politely. “But none now know of Translucent’s location, Uncle. Groundhog’s Mother kept it jealousy, for it was a hard-won prize. He pampered it often with the blood it thirsts for, lest it become as fire and consume its neglectful caretaker. Surely it rests with him in some long-lost grave.”

Talks With Wind nodded his head in deferment. “None of the People, even in the unborn doctor’s age, have successfully sought out Groundhog’s Mother’s grave. Nonetheless, it is the only medicine capable of saving both Peoples.”

“Both?” the young doctor questioned.

“The People born, and the People unborn,” Talks With Wind elaborated. “For if I find it, as the unborn doctor believes I can, then another may use it to defend this Turtle Island from those who would invade it—be it to send Translucent as fire against them, or render our shores invisible to them, or teach us new medicines so that we will be prepared for their arrival.”

“Who may use it, if not you?” someone in the back inquired.

Talks With Wind shrugged. “He did not say. Perhaps Lightning himself will descend to wield it for us.”

Setting his little ward upright before him, Talks With Wind placed a chin upon his shoulder so only he could hear. “Tell me—what do the Little People gossip of lately, nephew?”

The child grinned reticently, then pointed towards Chipmunk’s corner.

As the meeting disbanded, Talks With Wind beckoned over a harried figure, the white feather of peace dangling predominantly from his brow.

“Starved Fox tells me you have terrorized the other doctors in my absence, White Chief,” the old man noted wryly.

White Chief grimaced in faux-offense as he entered the firelight. “None is your equal in the medicine, Uncle. I believe I would already have a grandson, had you been here to oversee my eldest daughter’s first pregnancy.”

“Perhaps,” Talks With Wind pondered. “I was attending unto the collection of Creek scalps at the time. Nephew,” he signaled to Chipmunk from over his shoulder, “you recall my improved tincture for the third trimester?”

Chipmunk grunted an affirmation.

“Fetch the entirety of its ingredients from my late wife’s house, and meet us at the house of White Chief’s wife.”

The boy turned on his heel and hastened to the task, weaving in and out of the still-dispersing crowd.

“Come, nephew,” Talks With Wind suggested to the chief, accepting an arm as aid, “I will describe the preparation of this brew to your eldest daughter’s attendant.”

“May you not stay until she suckles? I would pay handsomely—two, three bearskins.”

Talks With Wind grimaced as he rose, slightly embarrassed by this bribery. “All omens indicate this child will succeed in entering the world. Whether it remains a world worth entering is my concern, now.”

The chief rubbed his chest nervously as they walked. “You have spoken of strange medicine this night. Where will you seek the Translucent?”

“South-east, about the Wall of Stone.”

The chief hissed a little louder than he had intended. “Few return from that place.”

Talks With Wind leaned heavily against the doorframe of the chief’s abode, appraising the young woman who lay just within with a belly fully swollen.

The chief brushed past to fling aspersions at the haggard young doctor snoring there in a darkened corner. “Sluggard! The backs of your eyelids must teach many medicines!”

“Indeed they can,” Talks With Wind quipped, beckoning the startled practitioner over to himself and away from the incensed chief. Taking him gently by the shoulders, Talks With Wind stood him up straight and hummed encouragingly.

“It is permissible to sleep when one’s patient sleeps, nephew. Fretting is no medicine.”

The chief scowled to himself, kicked at a bloodied rag upon the floor.

Talks With Wind knelt down to examine this curiously. "Is this hers?" he asked the doctor, gesturing to the prostrate patient.

"No; her younger sister's," the doctor clarified. "It is her moon."

Talks With Wind nodded, took the clean tip of the cloth gingerly, and tucked it within the folds of his robes. "Listen, nephew," the old man continued as he rose. "I must away for many moons, perhaps never to return. Permit me to teach you one last lesson, though you are already well-advanced in the medicine."

"Thank you, Uncle," the young doctor answered shyly.

"Chipmunk brings the ingredients of which I now speak. First apply a wash of bee balm to any irritated areas. Then administer a tea of the following: birch and burdock to purify the blood; the fruit of the pimento tree to regulate bleeding; snakeroot to prevent dehydration. A modicum of burseed cannot hurt, and should any sign of aversion towards the child develop after delivery, continue and increase dosage of the latter."

"And what of aloe, Uncle?"

"Though some doctors would use aloe whenever, I have found it inconducive to pregnancy. Consider instead the crushed leaves of the ash for purification, then the inner bark of the black alder to prevent hemorrhage."

Turning, Talks With Wind ushered Chipmunk in as he approached the door, arms laden with carefully packaged ingredients in a wrap of buckskin.

"Thank you," the young doctor repeated as he accepted the bundle reverently.

Seeing the sleeping patient begin to stir, Talks With Wind clapped the doctor upon a shoulder encouragingly. "To water with each new moon," he reminded. Then, with a respectful glance at the White Chief—whose expression now vacillated from myopic concerns to ones far more general—the master and apprentice took their leave.

“Do we depart at once, Uncle?” Chipmunk asked bravely, attempting to stifle a yawn.

“No, nephew,” Talks With Wind smiled. “You have been vigilant these past seven days. A young man needs much sleep, and even more food. We will remake tobacco in the morning and then depart.”

Relaxing his posture in relief, Chipmunk waved at Little Heron in the distance—a peer with whom he used to play ball. Little Heron returned this acknowledgement enthusiastically, as did the precocious younger sister trailing behind him.

Chipmunk’s hand waivered for a moment and a slight flush entered his cheeks.

Talks With Wind watched this knowingly.

Stooping to brush aside the animal-skin curtain from its entrance, the medicine men clamored into Talks With Wind’s humble home.

“Ah!” the old man appraised, taking up the leg of cooked venison—still warm—from where it lay awaiting them. “Starved Fox is most considerate.”

Pushing this momentarily aside, the medicine men placed their tomahawks reverently upon the makeshift table which consisted of a small tree stump. Divesting themselves also of the medicine bags upon their waists, the leather loops of these they tied habitually about the axe hilts so that if one object were sought after in the dark, the other would automatically be found.

Running a hand across this surface’s coarse grain, for a brief moment the unmistakable scent of his late wife registered in Talks With Wind’s memory. He glanced superstitiously towards the depression in the earth where they had lain together before settling down upon his widower’s bedding at the opposite end of the room.

The young apprentice stretched his spry muscles and glanced eagerly at the steaming cut of meat. “Go ahead,” Talks With Wind bid him. “My appetite has yet to return.”

Watching the boy scarf down his meal eagerly, the old man debated whether to load himself a pipe and eventually decided against it. Instead he opted to remove his moccasins and lay out fully,

noticing how blurry his perception of the familiar ceiling had lately become. Placing his arms behind his head, he closed his eyes and twitched his lips in a little mischievous smile.

“Little Heron had grown large.”

“Mhm,” Chipmunk acknowledged.

“His sister has developed quite nicely as well.”

Noting a momentary lapse in mastication, Talks With Wind continued, “But there are girls of even greater beauty in your Grandfather’s clan.”

Chipmunk finished swallowing. “I know, Uncle.”

The old man cracked an eyelid at his apprentice and deigned some small approximation of a wink before rolling over to seek out the finery of his bearskin sheets.

Finding it difficult to sleep atop his panther skin bedding—what with that creature’s strength coursing through him—the boy mutely recited the dream-divining prayer until his eyelids definitively closed.

“I heed your will and you love me for it, oh Ancient One. All I have is yours. You watch over me at night and nourish my soul so that nothing wicked may alight upon me. Help me dream rightly, so that when I wake I will act accordingly. I will skirt sleep’s waters like the Water Strider. I am Chipmunk; I am yours.”

It seemed to the boy that he now lay alone in a field of rampant weeds. They stretched unto the inky black edges where the sky-vault plunges downwards. Swelling and cavorting by a mysterious breeze, they whispered to him variously.

“We aid Man whenever he calls upon us in his need.”

“I do not know your purpose,” Chipmunk admitted mournfully, first to one, then another, then them all.

“Our spirits will tell you,” they reassured.

Chapter Three: Clothed in Stone

"If slavery is in itself a sinful thing, then the Bible is a sinful book."

-R.L. Dabney, *Life and Campaigns of General T.J. (Stonewall) Jackson*, 168-169

Refastening his medicine bag and tomahawk about his waist, Chipmunk knelt before the tree-stump table—still bleary-eyed—to set his elbows atop the remnants of the devoured venison yet scattered upon it. The light of dawn illuminated his knees by creeping along the ground from beyond the curtain.

Across the table, Talks With Wind shook the rattle-wand before his apprentice's face menacingly as the boy took up the diminutive parcel which had been placed before him and commenced undoing its knot of twine. Shaking out the contents into an open palm, Chipmunk observed the fresh redbird heart gravely, still slick with blood. Bringing it to his mouth, he bit it as though it were an apple, juices dribbling down his chin. As he chewed, he meditated upon this imitative species and prayed that it would grant him the same aptitude for keen and abiding remembrance.

Stilling the rattle, Talks With Wind nodded, pleased that Chipmunk had taken this medicine without blanching. "When you return here," the old man summarized, "you will know all that I know."

Donning raccoon-skin caps, bearskin cloaks, and buckskin breaches, they veered southeast from the village, tracing familiar contours of wood and field. Fleet-footed across the autumn silt of cotton shrub, pine needle, and orange-red clay, their bows, quivers, and waterskins slapped against them gently, beating out a dull rhythm upon their flesh.

Journeying just deep enough into the woods that the sounds of the village were utterly absent, they repeated a few suspicious doublings-back to make sure they had not been followed before making a beeline for their first destination. It was a semicircular outcropping of stones they had placed amidst a dense thicket of pines. All saplings and bramble had been cleared by Chipmunk's axe from about the

periphery, so that a near-constant stream of sunlight filtered down from overhead to shine upon the precious harvest in its center. Therein a single full-grown specimen of tobacco lay, grown in isolation so that the eyes of the profane might not diminish its virgin power. The ashes of lightning-struck wood dusted its roots, and auspicious thunder had been heard overhead on the day its seed was planted.

“Has it moved?” Talks With Wind questioned.

“It has,” Chipmunk confirmed, indicating the stone upon which he had left a mound of its crushed leaves to dry as compared to the stone upon which they now rested.

“The Little People have remade it, then,” the old man remarked with satisfaction, scooping up the puissant heap in his palms. Kneading this habitually with the four fingers of his right hand counterclockwise, Talks With Wind indicated for Chipmunk to provide the finishing touch. The boy produced a sack dusted with ground cedar seeds from his medicine bag and held it open so that Talks With Wind might empty the crushed leaves within it. Shutting the bag and shaking it thoroughly, Chipmunk reopened it and watched as his master selected four small pinches therefrom. Wetting these momentarily within his cheek, Talks With Wind rolled his tongue and spat the moist ball into the bowl of his pipe. Cupping his hands over the bowl, the boy sparked his flint above it until a small curdle of smoke arose. Drawing upon it quickly, Talks With Wind exhaled a heady tendril, first downwards upon his own body, then upon the face and chest of his apprentice.

“Now no witch may surprise us,” Talks With Wind assured, “and weapons will fly at us crooked.” Continuing to puff upon the pipe even as it dwindled, the medicine men glanced once more behind themselves before departing from their precious crop.

When the sun was directly overhead they halted to harvest and chew handfuls of sunflower seeds, considered the sight of several buzzards arguing over some tattered remains. “They fuss over their prey as doctors over patients,” Talks With Wind quipped before spitting a phlegm of powdered shell. “Remind me, nephew, how their story goes?”

“Uncle,” Chipmunk recited as they resumed their pace, “it is said that the buzzard is truly a doctor among animals, for it attends unto the dead without ever growing sick itself. If there is an outbreak of pox, it is permissible to slay one so that we might eat a sliver of its flesh and gain this resilience. We may also place its black feathers over our doorway, to forbid the witch that sent the pox. Even their quills make for good tubes by which a doctor may blow fine medicines into a pierce-wound.”

“Yes,” Talks With Wind affirmed, “but why is he bald?”

“Once he had a fine topknot and a full-feathered head, so that he put on airs and would eat no carrion. This insulted the other birds, who made due with whatever, so they asked Buffalo to take his scalp. With the source of his pride removed, he will now eat nothing but carrion, while the other birds prefer living prey. That is all.”

Sounding the dusky border of their tribe, the medicine men made a rudimentary camp, eyes roving for the footprints of men that were not their own. Finding none, Talks With Wind bedded beneath a willow tree while Chipmunk dug a berm to conceal the light of their modest fire. “Uncle,” the boy asked as he placed the finishing touches, “why search for the crystal at the Wall of Stone, rather than Gahuti where it was first found?”

“That place remains unremarkable since Groundhog Mother’s time,” Talks With Wind indicated with his chin. “The wives of hunters do not boast that their husband has stalked there, nor do the Little People goad one to go. Rest assured, nephew—wherever Translucent is, there will strange medicines also flourish. As some slabs of metal tug at one another like an invisible hand, so the crystal entices medicine to itself. And while our People rarely have need to venture this far south, many rumors derive from about that lonesome Wall.”

“They say it is guarded,” Chipmunk recalled nervously as he blew a flint’s spark to life, “by those who are clothed in stone.”

Talks With Wind hummed, hand drifting subconsciously to the hem of his cloak. "They are strange folk, with even stranger fears," the old man pondered aloud. "Our kind may well be as terrible to them as they are to us."

"You have seen them before?"

The old man shook his head in the negative. "Only the corpse of one, years ago in Creek country. It appeared as boulders cleft together in the shape of a great man. I spared the life of a young warrior towards the end of our campaign, that he would tell me the tale of those remains. He maintained that a woman had scared it to death, after it slew her husband in mad desperation to escape her."

Chipmunk pondered this. "Sometimes the girls scare me too," he admitted innocently.

Talks With Wind peered over at his ward, then threw back his venerable head and laughed, barely managing to muffle his mouth with a forearm.

Chipmunk pouted before conceding a grin.

They woke in the grey of early morning to a strange sound from the thicket just before them.

Chipmunk quickly dosed their flickering coals, felt the steam upon his face. Talks With Wind noted the eerie absence of birdcall nor the startled snuffling of the four-legged. They peered intently into the dense tree line, bows across laps, until the moon had dipped out of sight. A faint mist wove through the tree trunks and swirled about the fallen leaves and not even a squirrel stirred in the branches and hollows all about.

Rising, both medicine men stood breathing deeply through their noses, sampling the air. It was thick with a soupy humidity—too much musk and rot for so dry a place, especially upon a cloudless morn. They exchanged glances before raising their nocked bows and advancing into the brush.

Their steps came slower, grew softer, as the overgrowth gradually dimmed their guiding light. Occasionally, each would silently signal to the other concerning the disturbing lack of rabbit trails, or

motion upwards at long-abandoned, dilapidated nests, until the fog grew so dense that even these signs were obscured.

They flattened down beneath a natural trellis of foliage upon cresting a hill and finding that the creek bed beneath them was utterly dry, yet brimming inexplicably with rolling plumes of foul mist. Consulting in whispers barely more than movements of the lips, they eventually set down their bows to stand and sing in practiced tandem.

“Listen! You charge forth like one in rut, and I am most afraid of you. Why? You are merely tracking down a mate. Her footprints may be found, *there!*” They motioned the mist upwards and away from themselves. “Thank me, for I have shown you the way. Set your course above the treetops, towards the mountain peaks, and find her easily. Let your path be where the waving branches meet!”

Both blew in the direction towards which they wished the mist to go, and watched as it obediently slithered away.

Immediately they perceived the tracks all about them. They were man-shaped but not man-sized. Their great muddy indentations suggested that whatever had left them was of unfathomable weight.

Now they heard again, and raised their bows in the direction of, some alien rasping just beyond the creek’s terminus. It was like a tree splintering at the touch of lightning, or bone cracking at the point of an axe. They crept inch by inch towards the clearing from whence it came.

It knelt there—gargantuan, arrayed in tattered moss—amongst a blighted quarry. Heaving great shoulders of limestone and strewing tears of shale, a hand of onyx shielded its granite face whilst the other crooked about breasts of mica. Twisting slowly, it glowered up at the medicine men with an iris of rose quartz slatted between lids of fool’s gold.

“Filthy apes!” it thundered, chokingly, from the debris. “Blood-spillers! Branch-breakers!” It recovered its eye in disgust. “What good has ever come from thee?”

Talks With Wind lowered his bow, Chipmunk following suit. "Why do you hate us so?"

"I will show thee fear," it vowed, scooping up and extending a handful of pebbles and sand.

"Dust thou art, and to dust thou wilt return." Letting the refuse drain through its fingertips, the earthen being clenched a mighty fist and shook the nearby trees with a downwards blow. "Ten thousand winters I have lived, and am counted young. Yet now even our Mother, rumored immortal, has not ten thousand more. Her veins shall be opened; her organs shall be harvested; her teats shall run dry. Then will her corpse float in the oily black of heaven. Like Corn, she has birthed her own murderer."

Chipmunk gasped as he caught sight of what the figure was cradling. It was a miniature of itself, divested of moss and silted in ashy white.

"What is this place?" Talks With Wind questioned softly.

"A grave within a grave," the giant answered defeatedly, splaying out its sickly child in plain view. Then, taking up a nearby boulder, it held it over and dropped it upon the child's head, stilling it instantly.

Talks With Wind took ahold of his cloak hem as the inconsolable giant turned towards him and began to rise, scampering up the steep incline a fistful of red clay at a time.

"You may loathe men, but what of women?" the medicine man asked as he flipped back his cloak, revealing there the woven kerchief of dried blood earlier collected.

The giant shrieked so loudly that Talks With Wind was bowled backwards. It clutched at its eyes as those minerals liquified, exposing behind cavernous sockets a brain of solid, now molten silver which poured inordinately out of its eyes and nose and mouth. It let loose and rolled back with a horrid thud, coming to rest with its murdered offspring for a pillow.

Chipmunk helped his master up and away from the quarry. As they hastened southeast, unable or unwilling to speak of what had just been witnessed, sunlight and birdsong began to filter back into the surrounding wood.

It was dark when they arrived. The stone mountain blotted out their horizon with its granite dome looming sternly monolithic over a grove of ancient pines. The old, fading foot and knee prints of other giants dappled the ground before it, as though it had been an altar where they supplicated themselves.

“Look,” Talks With Wind motioned upwards. “See how the moonlight plays upon the wall?”

Chipmunk stared intently where his master pointed, felt the hair upon the nape of his neck bristle even amidst the heat, as the massive figures of three pale men riding upon the backs of even paler beasts began to materialize there. The riders to the fore seemed preoccupied, and paid them no mind. Only the rider to the rear seemed aware of their presence. Locking eyes with the Cherokees, this rider swept the strange fabric hat from atop his head and clasped it to his breast in a universal gesture of cordial deferment. His stony gaze was simultaneously fearsome and melancholic; behind an ample beard the lips were clasped and jaw wound tight like one whose custom it is to always demand more from himself than others.

“I am Talks With Wind, whose mother is a star,” the medicine man began tentatively.

The giant nodded. “And I am Wall of Stone, whose father was Jonathan.”

The medicine men exchanged brief looks of incredulity. “Our People have a saying,” Talks With Wind explained. “Who your mother is, is certain; who your father is, is just a rumor.”

The giant deigned the slightest of smiles. “My father’s stock made war upon your ilk while settling this ‘Island.’ But for a summer, after our parents had both succumbed to sickness, my elder brother and I lived as you do now—sleeping under stars, and chopping wood for the fuel-fires of great boats in order to eat. I do believe we might have dwelt in that fashion thereon, had the ague not found us.”

Talks With Wind blinked, somewhat uncomprehendingly. “How came your father’s stock to our Island?”

Wall of Stone smirked, but not at the Cherokee. “We were commanded so, by a god named Mammon.” He indicated a southwesterly direction. “Beyond that swathe is a great gulf, and beyond that gulf is a land of persons even wilder than yourselves. They take not just the scalps but the still-beating hearts of their enemies. One of their mountains proved irresistible to us—*Potosi; Cerro Rico*—a store of moon’s metal beyond measure. More coveted than even land and livestock, it divulged and divulged until its glimmerings were no longer a wonder to our people, but a standard. It incentivized us to travel further, explore deeper, until the entire Earth was united in this bargaining and trade. It made of this world a place where men would rather stalk metals than meats. By it was born such things as piracy, colony, luxury—words incomprehensible to your time, but foundational to mine.”

Chipmunk shivered at his master’s flank.

“And what of our people?” Talks With Wind asked. “What becomes of us?”

“Yours are taken at first by our sicknesses and swords, for we coveted a certain fiber which grows in your fields. It provided us with...” Wall of Stone trailed off momentarily in embarrassment, “...most comfortable clothing. But eventually, your fragments were uprooted entirely, and cast westward beyond our immediate interests.”

“Is there no struggle of which we are a part? No great combat preceding this defeat?”

“Your people put up a fight, but not as you might expect. Overwhelmed by our numbers, you eventually aligned yourselves with one band of pale peoples against another.” Wall of Stone sighed. “The band I speak of was my own—an army of confederates against a union of invaders.”

Talks With Wind stroked his chin uncertainly. “Your people war among themselves?”

Wall of Stone laughed bitterly, so that it reverberated among the trees. “We killed our brothers in the hundreds of thousands—figures beyond you. Wounds were dealt that shall never heal, not until the end of the world.”

The giant glanced at the other members of his company and seemed glad that they could not hear him.

“We were disparate states, united by an agreement of mutual defense. In this agreement it was given that all things not apportioned therein to the communal chiefs were solely for each state to decide. I was a warrior at the behest of these states. I fought one of their wars across the aforementioned gulf, and upon returning was entrusted to teach my trade to our youths, as you now do for yours,” here he motioned to Chipmunk. “I did so to the best of my ability, albeit reluctantly, for I came to doubt warfare as the proper path to distinction.”

Talks With Wind hummed to himself deep within his throat.

“I preferred to till my fields, and teach my neighbors the Good News—my medicine,” the rider explained. “When it became clear that there were those who intended to violate our compact and thus dissolve it, I sang most fervently that the disaster would not come to pass. Even at the final hour, my wife and I retired to our chambers and spent it in attempting to work the preventative medicine. Then, I marched my wards and myself to our deaths.”

Talks With Wind and Chipmunk considered this gravely, eyes fixed politely to the ground.

“Thus your people’s blood was comingled with ours, for a time,” the rider continued. “Repetitiously abused by those united states, and having grown rather fond of our southernly life, you allied yourselves with my confederation to rebuff the invaders. Eager to preserve whatever vestiges of your autonomy remained, and incensed at the thought that the northern quagmire called Washington might demand the only pittance left, you signed your lives away to a lesser chief of mine named Pike, until necessity again made you kneel.”

“Washington,” Talks With Wind mulled. “This is the place that decides our fate?”

Wall of Stone nodded. “It is northeast, almost unto the sea. After perhaps 20 moons, one reaches a great river. Betwixt where that river forks and grows thin, there lies a fetid swamp. From thence all havoc in my time derived.”

Chipmunk’s eyes widened at the sight as his master unbound a precious eagle feather from about a lock of hair. Extending it upwards, Talks With Wind explained, “We give a feather to those who have taken life, or lost it, on behalf of the people.”

A single, stony tear ran down the rider’s cheek as a light breeze took the feather from the old man’s hand and carried to the mountaintop. By the time it had disappeared from view, so too had the riders and their mounts, leaving the face of the mountain in utter dark.

Circa 1820 AD

“Remember, Ayoka,” the silversmith whispered into her ear, cupping her jaw in his palms, “you have drunk the dew from a scarlet pitcher plant.”

She nodded, brushed her cheek against his, and looked up boldly.

Naught but a few fearless old men accompanied them about the council fire, for it remained to be seen whether these newcomers came bearing a magic auspicious or abhorrent.

Rising, the father placed a hand proudly upon her shoulder. “Uncles, you are neither the first nor the last to doubt my new medicine. Already the pursuit of it has cost me a wife and a cabin—burnt to the ground by those who destroy whatever they do not comprehend. My ‘talking leaves’ also were destroyed, but I have remade them from memory to present them to you today.”

Squeezing her shoulder before releasing her, the silversmith motioned to the priest of the elders. “Shooting Bear has agreed to assist us in our demonstration. The experiment is simple. Ayoka will be taken to the far end of your fine village. You shall then approach me, one by one, and whisper

into my ear some word or phrase that a child could never guess. I shall then paint your words upon this buckskin, as the white men do, but the symbols I place there will be not theirs, but our own.”

A very tentative “*hwo*” emerged gutturally from the audience.

“If the child, upon seeing the buckskin laid out in the light of the fire, can read aloud your secret words without any assistance from myself, then you will know that our entire Nation may be made literate, and preserved not just in memory, but upon whatever surfaces we see fit. If not, then we will depart and trouble you no more.”

The silversmith motioned to Shooting Bear. The elder looked very kindly upon Ayoka and beckoned to her, though he smoked his pipe most vigorously and fidgeted with his turban.

The daughter left her father’s side with reticence, though her posture was very proud. The silversmith and the other elders watched them depart, and only the roaring of the fire was heard until they had been long out of earshot.

Taking up his brush and uncorking the ink bottle, the father announced, “Uncles, I am ready.”

Chapter Four: Sons of Thunder

“Then his father gave him a war club and said, ‘Now you must play a ball game with your two elder brothers. They live beyond here in the Darkening land, and I have sent for them.’ He said a ball game, but he meant that the boy must fight for his life. The young men came, and they were both older and stronger than the boy, but he was not afraid and fought against them. The thunder rolled and the lightning flashed at every stroke, for they were the young Thunders, and the boy himself was Lightning.”

-James Mooney, “Untsaiyi The Gambler,” *Myths of the Cherokee*

Circa 30 AD

The leaves were bright as blood as they marched northward, the cries of the hermit thrush sounding their approach. Distant bluffs broke like stormy waves upon their horizon as they cut through escarpments of wind hewn limestone. The splattered droplets of cascading falls slickened their faces in the shade of damp grottos, only to dry again as they crested gnarled outcroppings to course correct atop lonesome heath balds.

The tracks of elk, black bear, and red fox stamped down hillside explosions of mountain laurel before meandering back into the anonymous oblivion of virgin hollows which only the noonday sun disturbs. There tunnels of rhododendron and blooms of galax and sprigs of bluebell rotted beneath the shadow of balding firs, and salamanders scuttled past the stems of amanita mushrooms sprouting before the cool breath of gaping subterranean portals. The white and lime-green of luna moths heralded each dusk, and flying squirrels often awoke them by nocturnal crashings amidst the branches.

“This becomes increasingly unfamiliar,” the old man eventually admitted. “Let us determine the most auspicious course,” he advised, feeling in his medicine bag.

Chipmunk dropped to his knees at the edge of a convex buzzard bath and filled his cupped hands with rain water. Kneeling next to him, the old man produced a slim silver coin with a hole punched through it so as to run the length of a string. Wrapping the string about his fingers, Talks With

Wind dangled it downwards most delicately until the smooth disc of metal floated horizontally atop the surface of the water within the boy's palms. As he did he sang a bittersweet song in the minor key, like all of their songs.

"Provider, you reign on high. By your hand our lives are measured, as is everything upon the earth. We beseech your presence, and that we may have ears to hear what you say. We inquire that which your mind knows that ours does not. My name is Talks With Wind. Ancient White One, I harken to your truth."

As he sang, the coin drifted further northward, then slightly to the west. They repeated the experiment three more times and found it consistent, except for a slight warble of uncertainty each time the westward direction was broached. On the fourth repetition the coin began to sink, and the old man yanked upwards upon the string to prevent the coin from grazing the boy's hand.

That night Talks With Wind awoke with a start and found the boy asleep safely beside him. Rising bleary-eyed and staggering to the edge of the chasm to relieve himself, as his stream of urine faltered, the clouds shifted slightly overhead, casting moonlight upon what was now an utterly alien landscape.

"Provider," the old man breathed as he looked up, every hair on his body standing on end.

It was a wreck of refuse as far as the eye could see—broken, rotting, oozing, molding *shapes*. Their garish, discordant colorations and materials scalded his eyes, while the haphazard fashion in which they were strewn, layer upon indistinguishable layer, put him in mind of a charnel pit where the broken bodies of slain foes were piled to be burned. The buzzing of flies amongst this ruin was thunderous, and proliferating maggots made the fresh animal carcasses atop it seem to flinch and retch.

Still frozen at the precipice, he watched as a dog frolicked after a butterfly amidst the horror, ribs jutting from its taut hide. Though trembling, he found he could not contain a slight smile, for the creature's oblivious tail wagged on in spite of the insanity.

“Uncle?” Chipmunk asked, stirring.

Talks With Wind blinked and found that only a vast gorge of greenstone lay before him.

“I am well,” he answered, peering suspiciously once more into the dark before returning to bed.

Dogwood and loblolly pine gave way to maple and black gum as they followed its voice to the bank of the great river. Bullfrogs and kingfishers alighted as they neared, while the stately heron merely stilled and eyed them piercingly. Raccoon tracks dappled the mud over which they walked.

“We need meat,” Talks With Wind concluded as he paused to massage the tremors running through his hands.

The boy nodded and began to divest himself of all his gear except his bow and quiver.

The old man curled up in the hollow of a nearby linden trunk, pulling his cloak tighter about his shoulders. Squinting, he gently brushed away an argiope spider from his face and set it safely upon a nearby root. “Return to me before dark—even if empty-handed. Else I will worry.”

“Yes, Uncle.” Nocking an arrow to his bowstring, Chipmunk traipsed towards a honey-suckle-hemmed meadow. As he went, he occasionally paused to snap supple branches which pointed back in the direction from which he had come.

His pace slowed as he drew near to a break in the brush, until finally he hunched over and began to crawl towards a low berm which provided a wide vantage of the field. The sheaves of coral honeysuckle flagged to-and-fro amidst the breeze all about him, eventually cooling his sweat-drenched face as he lay there.

For a long time he heard nothing but the crashing of rambunctious squirrels in the trees behind him and noted the teensy tracks of field mice dappling the soil, trickling into and disappearing within the high grass. As his lids grew heavy, he began to lightly hum a favored hunting song to steel himself against the monotony.

“Give unto me the winds and the breezes. Great Hunter, I am come to where you repose. Your stomach is as hungered as mine; let us not be sated until we feast.”

As he paused, a lone doe crested the far thicket in his peripheral vision. Resisting the urge to look at her directly, he lowered his head and continued—even quieter, now—to hum.

“Eldest Red, guard my heart when I sleep. Sprout good dreams within me, and let my waking instruct me. May their little trails terminate with me; let me lay their blood cleanly atop the leaves. You are hungered; so am I. Help me feed us both.”

Prancing coquettishly towards the center of the field, the doe lowered her head to an enticing clot of greenery. Seeing her still to chew, the boy infinitesimally shifted the bow upwards, staked the tip of its lowest limb within the soil. He drew back the string as slowly as ice thaws and awaited the fickle breeze. Feeling it withdraw as though the Earth were inhaling, he loosed when the last blade of grass between him and her had ceased its rippling.

She moved not at all at first, so that the boy despaired of missing her entirely. Then, tossing her head weirdly to the side as though shewing a fly, he glimpsed the arrow-feathers wave to him from deep within her side as the breeze recommenced its blowing. She went to a knee before toppling over mightily.

Closing the gap, another arrow at the ready, he found only tranquil, blank eyes and dark saucers of blood pooling beneath her neck and chest and even out her mouth. Tugging forth the shaft with difficulty from just behind her foreleg, Chipmunk whispered something repetitiously to her awaiting ear before dipping down his neck to set her atop his shoulders like a yoke.

As the boy withdrew fully-laden from the field, something in a far bush stirred and came flitting towards the site of the kill. It was a little snow-white fawn, uncanny in coloring and daintier even than a newborn. It bent its nose to the crimson pool still welling there atop the soil, and asked something softly

in Cherokee, perking an ear to await a reply. A faint answer wafted upwards from the bloodstain, and upon hearing it the little fawn pawed its hoof affirmatively before darting away.

Finding Talks With Wind fast asleep, Chipmunk set down the doe reverently before him, straightening her limbs and neck to make for a finer presentation. Dual reverberations of thunder sounded behind, and as the boy turned towards them he beheld a great rainbow looming above the river.

“Uncle!” Chipmunk exclaimed, tugging at Talks With Wind’s robe.

The old man caught the boy’s hand as it reached out at the majestic sight.

“Do not point at a rainbow,” Talks With Wind reminded firmly.

Chipmunk dropped his arm obediently back to his side as they admired the sign. Its prismatic array hung before them like a spilt cornucopia. The blues of the North ranged from the darkness of burning sage to the pale greys of a dove’s wing. The reds of the East seethed from the autumnal yellow-greens of jade to the iridescent pinks of quartz and the burgundy of wine. The whites of the South lay latent throughout, dappling the whole with tones of saffron and bronze-gold. The funereal palette of the West was hardly visible at all—a hazy black corroding the edges.

“Tell me about the rabbit,” Talks With Wind instructed as he rose from the trunk with a groan.

Chipmunk grinned. “The Great White Rabbit is foremost in mischief, Uncle. Though weak, he is clever, and though fearful, he appears unexpectedly.”

Motioning for Chipmunk to rest, Talks With Wind knelt before the doe to examine it, kneading the musculature and coat for irregularities.

Sitting down heavily, the boy continued, “He streaks across the earth like lightning to illuminate the situation. It was he who stole the coat of the otter and the fur from the possum’s tail. He also betrayed the turkeys to the wildcat, and blunted the deer’s teeth, and tricked the wolves with a likeness

of tar. Yet, for all that, he failed to outrace the patient turtle due to his pride, and was eventually banished from the four-footed tribe when deer conjured a great river between him and them.”

Producing his knife and a coil of twine, Talks With Wind bound the doe’s back ankles one to the other before tossing the rest of the length over the lowest branch of the linden. Tugging from the opposite side, he hoisted the kill until the tip of her nose floated above the ground, then secured a second knot about the trunk of a dead sapling. Returning to her, he lifted the white of her tail to fix the point of his blade in the groove of the anus, then gradually pulled downwards, disemboweling as he went, until the pelt fluttered fully open like an untied robe. Tugging it backwards from about the collarbone, he fanned out the damp prize to dry upon the moss of a fallen tree trunk before superstitiously slicing at and discarding her inauspicious hamstrings.

Chipmunk stirred from his nap and began to stoke up a hearty fire as Talks With Wind carved several choice hunks from about her ribs and hindquarters. Setting these morsels upon a loose slab of slate, the old man set it within the heat but not the flame to glaze.

They were several smoky, delicious mouthfuls into this feast before the old man perked his ear and reached silently for his bow.

Chipmunk set down the cut he had just taken up to follow suit, sliding an arrow gingerly out of its nearby quiver.

Fire roaring too mightily to dose without spewing steam and smoke, they left it to peer each about the opposite side of their linden. The venison grease on their fingers and lips blotted out all other scents upon the air.

“Listen youngsters—get gone at once,” Talks With Wind murmured under his breath. “An old hag is hunting you. Quick, now! Go home and let us get away!”

“Who are they?” Chipmunk mouthed, wide-eyed.

“Roaming hillfolk,” the old man whispered back, squinting.

They approached with the setting sun at their backs. "Cavemen scalps!" the newcomers tittered one to another as they weaved in and out of the trees. Amidst these maneuvers they snuffled and snorted boldly, bobbed their masked heads wildly, dancing the sacred Buffalo steps. Each wore a prized snake rattle about their necks, and their torsos were jagged with scarlet bloodroot paint.

"I am Bang, and he is Boom!" a boyish voice announced from behind cover. "And we are the sons of Thunder!" the other unseen youth replied.

The Cherokees wordlessly anchored their knuckles against either side of their tree trunk, drawing bowstrings taut until they grazed the tips of their noses. Peripheral vision began to constrict as heartrate increased from a march to a stampede.

"I have come to trod on your soul, wolf," Chipmunk mutely mouthed, face going white. "I wrap you in black cloth, cover you in black soil. The only path left you leads to the grave. The color of your soul is dyed this day from red to blue. In that dark you will dwindle and disturb us no more. Listen!"

Hearing an errant twig's snap, Chipmunk spun and loosed as Boom charged. With a mad scream, the attacker took the arrow between his ribs and exchanged it with a tomahawk hurled expertly at the back of Talks With Wind's head. Chipmunk dove and struck it off course with the limb of his bow, shattering it ruinously. Bang's throwing knife hissed past where the boy had been crouched but a moment before.

Talks With Wind shot where Bang's projectile had originated, heard it bury harmlessly in a berm. He nocked another and deftly circled the tree in anticipation of his foe's flanking maneuver. Diving prone, Chipmunk crawled to where Boom lay clutching at the sunken reed shaft jutting from his torso. Glancing up at Chipmunk dazedly, the young Seneca began a hideously belabored war cry which was promptly silenced by the flat of the Cherokee's axe head.

"Boom?" Bang called uncertainly.

Talks With Wind let loose at the voice, missed again.

"Boom?" he called once more, closer now.

"Here!" Chipmunk screamed, holding Boom's still-dripping scalp aloft.

Bang leapt atop Chipmunk from the undergrowth, sending both crashing down the hillside. His buffalo mask lay forsaken atop the hill.

Talks With Wind scampered up and aimed his arrow but held, unsure where to place it amidst the intertwined, nearly identical combatants. One of them was hitting the other's head with a rock repeatedly, painting the leaves with gouts of blood.

"Chipmunk?" Talks With Wind asked vaguely, preparing to release his string.

The victor turned to answer to his name, slowly loosening his sprained and dislocated fingers from about the murderous rock until it tumbled from his grasp. Sitting back upon his ankles, Chipmunk motioned to the faceless Bang listlessly. *"Will you take his scalp for me, Uncle? I am too tired."*

Talks With Wind lowered his bow, nodded grimly. He kicked aside the scattered remains of Chipmunk's bow and descended.

Kneeling next to the corpse, the medicine man first sliced free the precious rattlesnake ornament from about Bang's neck, holding it up to the dim light ponderously. *"Thunder's necklace,"* he murmured to himself. *"It is just what you adorn yourselves with..."* This he pocketed. Then, tracing the curvature of the skull with the tip of his blade, he pried the scalp upwards about the edges to gain purchase before tugging it free. Tucking this grisly prize into the depths of Chipmunk's medicine bag, the old man motioned for the boy to extend his hand. Grabbing up a gob of fallen leaves with his good fist, the boy stuffed them into his mouth so that he would not bite his tongue as his knuckles were snapped straight or yanked back into socket one by one.

"Did you take the other rattle?" Talks With Wind questioned.

"Yes," Chipmunk breathed, reaching for it.

The old man stayed his hand. "That one is yours." Sighing, the medicine man rose and offered an arm to his apprentice. "Come. We will finish the meal that they interrupted."

Chapter Five: Hickory & Marsh

"If I had known that Jackson would drive us from our homes, I would have killed him that day at the Horseshoe."

-legendarily attributed to Junaluska, who saved Andrew Jackson's life at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend

"I do not care for this place, Uncle," Chipmunk wavered, reaching for the snake rattle about his neck self-consciously.

The swampland stretched expansively before them betwixt the forking river. A family of muskrat screeched indignantly at the Cherokees' scent and scuttled out of sight into the marsh grass.

"Why is that, nephew?" the medicine man inquired.

"It puts me in mind of that swamp Wild Child entered after his father Hunter told him to keep away from it."

"And why did he tell him this?"

"Because a panther slept therein that could not be killed by any normal means."

"There," Talks with Wind eventually indicated, signaling a dry path snaking betwixt the stagnant, algae-infested pools. Clamoring down, they followed it warily until they reached an impasse—a sandbar amidst a veritable lake of fetid water. Sickly trees clamored upwards for sunlight out of its unsounded depths.

Gleaning his master's intention, the boy began clearing their firepit with his axe head, occasionally glancing up as though debating whether to speak.

"What troubles you?"

"Well, Uncle..." Chipmunk started quietly, setting aside his tomahawk. "...I've been wondering...if you know who my father is?"

The old man sat down tiredly. "What have you heard of him?"

Chipmunk shrugged. "Little—and nothing good."

Talks With Wind began arranging the contents of his medicine bag upon the ground before him. "I had only just returned from my last Creek war when your mother called for my assistance. She told me that he was a wandering doctor from some western village, one very tall and fine in appearance, with many an eagle-feather adorning him. He excelled in all things except that which he loved most—to gamble. Eventually he grew so in debt to our villagers that he even wagered his own life. Shortly thereafter, he disappeared."

Talks With Wind considered his next statement slowly.

"Some of our men boasted that they had slain this gambler, as was their right by blood law. But they could produce no evidence of their kill when I inquired after it. Many moons later, I heard tale of such-a-one again, from a trapper who had established a trade route with the plainsmen."

"So he may live still," Chipmunk whispered. Then he turned and recommenced digging.

The next time Talks With Wind thought to look at him, Chipmunk was crouched unwaveringly at the water's brink, mesmerized by a particularly stooped and warped hickory just a stone's throw away. The white fungus of root rot sashayed its base like a noxious lily pad atop the water.

Ceasing to stir the meagre soup of cattail cores and arrowhead tubers he was preparing, Talks With Wind asked what the boy was doing to no response. Setting aside his makeshift ladle, the old man slid towards his apprentice, at first debated touching him, but opted instead to sit beside him and follow his gaze.

He could hear it now, too.

"Avert your gaze from my waters, you old Hickory!" slurped a voice of mud and moisture.

"Dry up, you murky Marsh!" came the wooden reply. "Jefferson had already thought it in 1803! What do you think all that Napoleonic territory was for? It was to be a plot equal to that which was ceded! The Arkansas River was hospitable to their kind. Many of them went on afore by choice, even their precious Sequoyah!"

“And so you grinned at them in that Chickasaw council house, promised good faith and well-defined boundaries, all the while writing home to your friends in this God-forsaken swamp with boasts of malicious intent. Then you had the audacity to lead into battle those very souls whom you intended to betray. Go on, hardwood. Tell ‘em. Tell ‘em how you praised their cavalry in one breath while calling them savages with the next!”

“I did not see *you* there at the Horseshoe Bend, sir! Did your stomach blanch at the sight of one savage scalping another, or did you merely read about it in the paper over your morning coffee?”

“I read that there was scalping and looting aplenty, by red and white alike, which you as commanding officer did little to stop. I read also of your disgraceful conduct involving that incident with Houston and Crockett!”

“Oh, hellfire!” the tree crackled. “What’s a few hogs for one’s fellow soldiers? And Houston one of them by adoption. *Why* those bastards had to raise such a fuss...”

“Well, upon that we’re of one accord—hogs are naught compared to what you stole from ‘em. Yet Major Ridge loved you just the same. And I quote—‘My heart is glad when I look upon you. Our heads have become white...’”

Hickory moaned, shook its branches as though shooing away a bird.

“All the while, you urged Georgia, dare I quote again—‘Build a fire under them. When it gets hot enough, they’ll move.’”

“Don’t you play holier-than-thou with me, Marsh! You had your chance to save them. When it came right down to it, the flimsy semantics of what constitutes a ‘foreign’ versus a ‘dependent’ nation were enough to wash your hands of the matter.”

Marsh gurgled in irritation. “Perhaps I was a Pilate at first, right up until you let the missionaries among them be clapped in irons and set to hard labor! Then did my court pronounce, verbatim, ‘The Cherokee Nation...is a distinct community, occupying its own territory, with boundaries accurately

described, in which the laws of Georgia can have no force...' Thereafter, you were heard to say that Marsh has made his decision, so let him enforce it if he can. And as a final insult heaped upon grievous injury, you dared openly address your 'friends' to the effect that their dire situation was due to their own lack of virtue in both education and temperance."

"Excuse me," Talks With Wind interrupted.

Marsh stilled and flowed closer to the medicine man's feet attentively.

"Many a slanderous thing has been said of us just now, but I would know exactly how this old Hickory betrayed our people?"

The Marsh sighed breezily. "He is the one, sir, whom caused your people to be rounded up and marched westward, so that the looting and subdivision of your ancestral lands might commence all the more rapidly. He dispatched for this 'painful duty' the great war chief Scott, whom would have done better to slay him in a duel when he had the chance."

Talks With Wind ducked as a blazing arrow sailed overhead and into the midst of Hickory's bone-dry boughs. The medicine man turned incredulously. Chipmunk knelt by their campfire, still aiming the bow, trembling with rage.

The tree began to scream and curse and heave from side to side as the flames spread and engulfed it entirely. "Red savages! Damn you! Damn you all!"

Through gritted teeth, Chipmunk managed to say, "Let us see if you can pull up *your* roots."

Amidst the crackling of the flames, Talks With Wind could faintly hear the harsh laughter of the Marsh as it lapped back and forth, extinguishing wayward sparks in its inky ripples.

"There is no power here, medicine man," the Marsh judged. "Only specters who crave it. Seek instead the peaceful People of the Falls. Ask them of a haunted rock overlooking their coast. That is where this all truly began—begins."

As dusk fell the temperature plunged, and their little fire guttered uncertainly betwixt the cypress-studded hillside and the winds whipping about its flank. Raising an eyebrow uncertainly, Chipmunk shook Talks With Wind's dosing shoulder and indicated an ear. Both listened carefully for the sound to come again beneath the rustling of the leaves.

"Night is coming," a female voice called down to them softly for a fourth and final time. "The Dark Moon has come to glow inside your soul."

A wolf's haunting howl echoed down their hillside. Chipmunk briefly spied her upon the ridge, wreathed by a jaundiced moon, before she slunk out of sight.

"I know that voice," Talks With Wind pondered, feeling about in his medicine bag. He produced a small pouch tied tightly with twine.

"Who is she?" Chipmunk whispered, raising his tomahawk.

"She was a doctor-in-training once, until her teacher found she preferred putting in evil to drawing it out."

"A witch among our people?" Chipmunk hissed. "Who found her out?"

"He is with you now," Talks With Wind stated before raising a finger to his lips.

The acrid smell of charred tobacco, ill-consecrated for malevolent intent, offended their nostrils.

"Wizards, I am as much a wizard as you!" she howled, closer now, but echoing from either side. "Your body is a blighted tree, and the dung of the dog is your raiment. You are old and lonesome and thine viscera is rent from thee. Your mind is a hollow of poisonous mushrooms, sprouting idiocy. How will you sing once I tear out your throat?"

Their fire went out like a snuffed candle, and immediately pitch-black shadows began to hem the edge of their campsite like sprouting polyps. In their frenzied clamor these began to swell and constrict inwards, their shapes stretching desperately to seize hold of awaiting flesh.

Taking Chipmunk about the shoulders, Talks With Wind flicked at the shadows with his wand, rearranging them into new configurations, as he whispered a separate incantation.

“Listen! The wind embraces us like a lover, and none will know that we were here. We will be swaying like the trees, weightless like their leaves. See me yet step over unheedingly; you do not recognize my body. I am a great Wizard; my singing surpasses thee.”

The she wolf’s eyes glowered to radiant slits as she beheld what appeared to be the forms of her prey paralyzed against the hillside within the shadowy bramble. Approaching Talks With Wind’s frozen face, she smirked unmistakably before lowering her fangs to Chipmunk’s exposed throat. But before her jaws could shut, her ears flattened backwards at a slight creaking from a tree branch just behind and above her. Turning, her eyes stung as powdered ash was blown into her face by her teacher’s breath.

“Ancient White One, in nothing do you fail,” Talks With Wind pronounced, hanging upside down by the knees. “Ancient White One, cut their throat from singing.”

Arterial blood splattered the campsite, and the yellow light of the cresting moon quickly dissipated the unnatural shadows. The she wolf lay still upon the stones, as dead as they.

Curling upright upon his branch, Talks With Wind tossed the remainder of the precious powder sack to Chipmunk upon an opposing limb. “Seven needles of lightning-struck wood, burnt to cinders and remade,” he explained. “My antidote for witchcraft.”

Circa 1845 AD

Pausing to adjust the ribbon of his silver medallion self-consciously, Sequoyah commenced rewrapping the weather-worn turban about his venerable head.

“What say you, Chusaleta?” he asked abruptly, glancing at the full-grown son riding across from him on mule-back. “How did it go?”

“They said you are the greatest medicine man,” the son boasted.

Sequoyah considered this expressionlessly before taking back up the long-stemmed pipe he had balanced precariously upon his saddle-horn. After a few puffs, he replied, "I am glad they like my syllabary." Then, casting his gaze past the wild cactus patch which flanked them endlessly and up at the clouds glowing with dusk, he murmured, "It will storm."

It wasn't long until two peals of thunder confirmed this assessment. As heavy droplets of rain began to beat down upon the little party, they spurred their mules off path and tied them to the trunks of several close-knit trees. Huddling within this grove, his son and their compatriots began shaping the campfire.

Unnerved by inactivity, the old man took up a machete and offered to go find water. The son's face dimpled in a small, loving smile as he watched the turbaned head withdraw out of sight, little puffs of smoke trailing after it in the brush.

He reversed the course of a low-flying bird to find that which had made it heavy, eventually spying the edge of a hemmed-in pool. As he hacked a path to it, a flash of lightning streaked overhead, illuminating the pool entire. What the old man saw at the far bank caused him to drop his blade and lose his footing. Stumbling through branch and bramble, he landed heavily at the water's edge.

Eventually craning his neck upwards and blinking, he found he could behold the vision still. The figure of an enormous brown bear stood there panting mightily, and upon him there sat the dark form of a man cradling some alien fire to his breast. Mesmerized by the bear's familiarly expressive eyes, the old man crawled a little closer.

"Uncle?" he whispered.

The bear whined approvingly.

The entirety of his body trembled as Sequoyah rose and waded across the pool. A turtle's shell disappeared before him into the murky depths. Reaching the other side, the old man dropped to his knees and buried his face within the majestic coat, weeping.

From atop his mount, the Firekeeper extended the flaming object to him, saying, "The last placenta has been buried upon the last mountaintop. We have walked a trail that none need ever walk again."

Chapter Six: The Underground

“When he reached the settlement he found a party just starting out to search for him. They asked him where he had been so long, and he told them the story, and then he found that he had been in the panther townhouse several days instead of only a very short time, as he had thought.”

-James Mooney, “The Underground Panthers,” *Myths of the Cherokee*

Circa 30 AD

Chipmunk watched the wooly worm as it crawled across his foot, tickled by its hairs and noting the slightness of its brown band as compared to its black. He let the little mouthful of protein pass, dreading its consistency, snacking instead upon an acidic fistful of cranberries harvested from sporadic peat bogs as they marched. Occasionally he had to pick out the rotting body of a bog copper butterfly which had failed to migrate, feel it turn to dust in his fingertips.

Often the distant gobbles of wild turkey tempted him off course into moccasin-shredding shale barrens, but the old man heeded their calls unphased and pressed on without falter. Even the small, blurred bodies of the black-brown-white cliff swallows appetized the boy as they shot overhead in endless southernly procession, leaving their singular mud nests unattended upon innumerable boughs and cliff faces.

In the mornings he wondered at the perennial shoots of foul-smelling skunk cabbage which liquified the frost in their vicinity, transmuting a deadly foe into nourishing fluid. “The plants are both medicine and medicine worker,” he entertained meditatively, until the sight of an oak debarked by starving squirrels distracted and unnerved him.

Finally they woke to a dying fire amidst a world of swirling white, branches overhead laid bare and nothing visible beyond a stone’s throw. “Frostbite,” Talks With Wind appraised after removing his

moccasins to find a black welt roving upwards from the webbing of his toes. "It must already be the month of the Big Moon."

Stepping into the still-warm ashes of their campfire, the medicine men began to dance and sing. First they craned their heads backwards like howling wolves and cried "I am the wolf." Then they raised their hands like antlers and bellowed "I am the deer." Then they barked and bared their teeth while proclaiming "I am the fox." Finally, they laid down in the ashes miming death while whispering "I am the possum."

Warded by the sympathetic medicine of these creatures impervious to frost, they stood side-by-side within the ashes, overlapping bearskins wrapped about them. They kept their eyes firmly fixed upon the nearby creek bed so-as to spot any wayward animal or even a slight dying-down of the blizzard's rage.

Just as the boy's chin touched his collarbone in numb lethargy, sounds of movement jolted him awake. Finding their bow was still mercifully within his grasp, he loosed his share of the bearskins and began with minute movements to aim at the buck whose antlered head was stooped to lap at the creek ice.

A blur of black motion obstructed Chipmunk's target before he could pull upon the string, and the boy's eyes widened in horror as he discerned the newcomer's large feline form. The panther stood over its freshly felled prey, yellow eyes watching the medicine men unblinkingly. Then, with an eerily human posture, the cat stooped, teathed the nape of the buck's neck, and slung the carcass over its shoulders with a nonchalant toss of the head.

"You are hungered; I will give you meat," it purred in fluent Cherokee. "You thirst; I will give you drink." Chipmunk kept stock-still, mouth agape. "You are strangers; I will take you in."

"You..." Talks With Wind managed as he lowered the boy's hold on the bow, "...are of the Underground?"

The panther nodded regally, then, as though to demonstrate, strode lithely atop the snow to a small hill just over the springhead. Pawing at the hillside, it cleared the obstructing frost to reveal a handsome little door. Undoing the door's lock with the insertion and twist of a single claw, the slinking form left the door welcomingly ajar as it and its burden disappeared within.

Chipmunk made to follow.

"Wait," Talks With Wind warned, gesturing timidly from where he now sat in the ashes. "There is something you must know."

"Aren't you coming?" Chipmunk cried as he knelt next to him.

"The path is too narrow for one as old as me. Now listen—those who go Under may never again dwell amongst the villages of men, nor speak of what they heard there under penalty of death."

"Even to you? Why?"

The old man's face contorted in distress. "To be a man, one must live among men. To be a beast, one must live among beasts. These are something *in between*."

Chipmunk nodded gravely as he rose, commenced shedding his weapons and even his moccasins to his teacher's care.

"Nephew," the old man called again as Chipmunk knelt to grasp the doorframe, "do not tarry long, lest you forget me entirely."

Chipmunk nodded obediently before slipping into the dark headfirst.

Candlelight flickered against the walls of the cavern. Creatures of all manner, some which Chipmunk recognized and others which he did not, lounged there about a great dining table, uncorking wineskins with paws and claws, wielding silver utensils with tails and tongues, and heaping upon wooden plates monstrous portions of grains, nuts, fruits, greens, and savory, lightly-cooked meats.

For a backdrop there roared a mighty hearth over which a hairy, diminutive, yet rotund chef labored, exercising opposable thumbs masterfully as he frantically stirred ladles, sampled saucepans,

and threw pinches of garlic or thyme into bubbling pots. Fat droplets of sweat poured from his brow, further salting the dishes.

Depositing his deer carcass for this eccentric chef's inspection, the panther rounded the table and beckoned for Chipmunk to take an appropriate seat at his right paw.

"Who is he?" Chipmunk inquired as he took his place, glancing towards the humanoid gourmand.

"He is a monkey, nephew—they make his kind towards the rising sun."

"Will he not join us?" the boy asked as he took up a massive ham hock and commenced savaging it with his teeth.

"No," the panther explained, "He feeds others, but never himself."

"Can he talk like you?" Chipmunk asked with a full mouth.

"Oh yes," the panther cringed at the boy's horrendous table manners, "but he has taken a vow of silence until he goes Above. There he will prepare an even greater feast than this."

Chipmunk felt something furry and warm stir between his feet. Glancing down, he spied a mangy, emaciated dog lounging beneath the table. It yawned most cynically and let its pink speckled tongue loll out one side of its mouth.

The boy giggled and asked, "Are you hungry?", casting about the table for some morsel to give it.

"Would that I could be freed of all hungers," the canine opined as it rolled over onto its back, spread-eagle. "However, you may rub my belly if you wish."

Chipmunk obliged, and the dog showed its fangs in a contented grin.

"What are your names?" the boy asked the table, for none had volunteered theirs amidst the jovial gorging.

“We have no need of names here, one being but a slight variation upon the other,” the panther explained before quaffing a mighty draught.

“Nonsense!” came a tiny, squeaking reply from across the table. At first Chipmunk could not make out this speaker until he leaned forward and squinted, at which point he discerned an indignant gadfly haranguing the panther from atop a piece of half-eaten bread. “And they say *I* corrupted the youth with strange ideas?! Why, all I ever did was ask questions, and here you are making all kinds of unfalsifiable claims...”

A featherless chicken—alive and well upon a seat, not atop the table—clucked its sycophantic concurrence with the fly.

The dog beneath the table briefly growled at the sound of the chicken’s babble.

Chipmunk scarfed down another plate teeming with corn and okra.

“Sameness implies equality,” roared a wild-eyed lion with an even wilder mustache and mane, looking up from some introverted stupor. “Say, nephew,” he asked suddenly, taking notice of Chipmunk, “how would you respond if some spirit were to steal after you into your loneliest lonesomeness and say—”

“Be still,” rebuked the little lamb which sat meekly upon the lion’s lap.

Chipmunk blinked dreamily, rapt by this lamb’s tender mien.

“I tell you the truth—the Ancient White One is love,” it proposed to him rather simply.

“And love is submission,” a desert cobra rejoined with a hiss and a flick of its tongue from across the table.

Chipmunk upset his cup. “Uncle!” he cried in anguish, leaping to his feet. “How long have I been in here you with, instead of out there with him?”

The dog whined and rose with urgency.

“More light, you knaves!” instructed the panther, clapping its paws together, “and turn these tables up! Quench that fire, the room is grown too hot!”

Snatching a whole turkey from its gleaming platter, Chipmunk hastened towards the exit as a path for him was promptly cleared, the dog following loyally at his heels.

“We are past our dancing days,” the panther bid the boy bittersweetly as he withdrew. “How long is it now, since I was in a mask?” he asked rhetorically.

Chipmunk and the dog found Talks With Wind curled against a tree on the opposite side of the weakening winds.

“Take,” Chipmunk apologized, tearing off a steaming turkey leg and extending it, “eat.”

“I will lick his wounds,” proposed the dog, slobbering over the old man’s face and limbs where the frostbite was worst.

Talks With Wind chewed urgently, batting his eyelashes to shake the frost. He nodded wordless thanks to both of his caretakers.

“Say, dog!” Chipmunk started, thinking to ask for directions, but when he turned to him the creature was gone. The boy looked towards the hill, but found that the little door—if ever it had been there—was already lost beneath freshly fallen snow.

Soon the color had returned to Talks With Wind’s cheeks providentially, and he insisted upon walking without assistance. The junior medicine man punned to the senior that the healing properties of dog saliva had hitherto been much underestimated.

The medicine men crested a hill and found themselves overlooking the edge of a vast wood which plunged downwards into an expansive wintery bay. Sand and frost intermingled bizarrely at this stark demarcation. Fragments of bone and shell picked clean by absent birds strew the shore like an

exploded grave. The corrosive undertone of salt radiated from jagged wave breaks, assailing their already raw and stinging nostrils.

Talks With Wind looked up at the hammering of a woodpecker overhead, and commented with more than a hint of nostalgia, "This creature passes down its home generationally, too."

Chipmunk motioned Talks With Wind's wandering attention to a thin wisp of campfire smoke at the northwestern inlet of the bay. Grimacing at one another, each eventually shrugged and began the descent. Making little attempt to conceal their approach, the medicine men soon found themselves faced by a small audience sat cozily about a fire upon a fallen log. It was a little Falls-people family arrayed before their dome-shaped wigwam, prying stubborn clams from their shells and dropping them with a *plop* into a steaming pot boil. The males had hatchets and bows at their feet, but none reached for them. The Cherokee knelt on their haunches at the edge of the campsite as Talks With Wind commenced a game of charades assisted by a very broken Northern dialect.

Occasionally the grandfather of the family would hum encouragement, particularly at the sign and slang for "haunted rock." The littlest girl giggled when Talks With Wind held up a palmful of snow to illustrate albino skin. Drawing to a close, Talks With Wind hummed uncertainly to himself and awaited a reply.

The grandfather scratched his leathery chin and stared into the bubbling pot for a while. Then, reaching some decision, he rose and indicated his eldest daughter. She undid the front knot of her shawl to reveal an overly burdened belly.

"Late," she approximated.

Talks With Wind smiled and uttered an affirmation, instructing his apprentice to search the grove of dogwoods they had just passed for either a blackgum tree or black haw shrub and return with a generous scrape of its bark. Approaching and kneeling beside her, the medicine man produced his rattle-wand and commenced an accompanying chant.

“Little boy,” he addressed the womb in Cherokee, “hasten to me. Little boy, hurry, I’ve brought you a bow. Someone else might get it first!”

The family observed this operation intently.

“Little girl,” he renewed, “hasten to me. Little girl, hurry, I’ve brought you a sifter. Someone else might get it first!”

Cupping a palmful of powdery snow, Talks With Wind leaned forward and gently blew it from his hand upon the bare belly.

The mother shivered and laughed, placing a hand there. “Kicking,” she mimed.

Talks With Wind nodded and held out a hand for Chipmunk to deposit the cuts of bark as he reentered the campsite. Glancing over at the boiling pot, he crushed these fine in his fist and sprinkled them into the boiling water.

“Drink, after,” he instructed her, passing his rattle-wand over the reluctant entrant.

Satisfied with this thorough treatment, the grandfather signaled for the medicine men to accompany him. Tracing the shoreline, they meandered further northward at a geriatric pace, eventually reaching a bluff laid bare before the stormy sea. The old man declined to set foot upon those sands, instead opting to take up a wayward branch of driftwood and indicate the peculiar stone in question.

The sight of it was rather anticlimactic. There were other, larger stones nearby, but nonetheless it was self-evident to the medicine men that this was in fact the one the Marsh had indicated. It radiated a mournful import, sat waiting there like the cornerstone of a great house as-yet unframed.

Talks With Wind issued a broken “thanks” to the old Fallsman as he took his leave, hastening away with significantly more urgency than he had arrived.

“Don’t shoot at this one,” Talks With Wind requested, tongue-in-cheek, as he exchanged glances with his ward.

Chipmunk smirked slightly at the rebuke and began to gather the implements for a fire. The sun was setting as he set the last dry twig in place.

Talks With Wind crouched by its fledgling flames and cast several pinches of tobacco upon the coals. The plumes inexorably drifted towards the lonesome rock and settled there, at first merely as an amorphous cloud, then gradually as the shape of a man. It seemed to sit upon the rock broodingly, chin resting atop fist.

Talks With Wind cleared his throat.

The figure turned from its seaward vigil and addressed them. "Forgive me, nephews; I was lost in thought."

"May we know what you were thinking?" Talks With Wind inquired.

"Of the lands toward the rising sun; its various peoples, and their strange ways..."

"How do you know of them?"

"I have seen—will see—them. In time, I will be taken by one of their Hunters after the Smith departs, ultimately to be bought, instructed, and freed by their medicine men. Many moons later, I will make my way back here—back home—only to find that I am the last of my tribe."

"A strange fate," Talks With Wind conceded.

The seated form hummed in agreement. "It grows stranger still. For soon, what do I see crest my horizon but more ships of pale peoples? But these ones wish, not to take me from my village, but to dwell there themselves. It being unoccupied, and I being lonely, it seemed only right that I teach them our ways, as they had once taught me theirs. I saw them through these deep winters and dangerous shoals until fever finally claimed me."

Chipmunk sighed.

"Do not mourn me, boy," the figure kindly advised. "Little has changed but my perspective."

“Of all the spirits I have evoked, yours seems the most far-reaching. Tell me,” asked Talks With Wind, “can you guess at where the pale ones will consolidate their power upon our Island?”

The figure shifted to peer back into the waters meditatively. Eventually, it said, “That place is upon your journey home. If you keep to this shoreline, you will eventually sight the sound of a long island. When you reach its conjunction with the mainland, you will have arrived. Shortly after my death, that place catches the pale peoples’ eye. They ‘purchase’ it—agree that only they shall dwell there thenceforth—in exchange for sixty units of measure. It will become their greatest port—their greatest city—in all the world. A stone giant shall rise from its waters, proclaiming it as the gateway to prosperity.”

Talks With Wind grasped Chipmunk’s shoulder excitedly.

“Beware,” the figure warned as it began to fade, “lest you too fall prey to its illusions. If Groundhog’s Mother asks, you may tell him that Squanto sent you.”

As the medicine men passed through the dunes of the beach beneath the Fallsman family’s overarching hill, they paused to listen to the faint sound of a newborn’s cry somewhere above.

Chapter Seven: Groundhog's Mother

"The [Keeneyed serpent] represents to the Cherokees something more than an inimical aspect of nature...it symbolizes satanic deceit, confusion, and negation."

-Jack F. Kilpatrick & Anna G. Kilpatrick, "Uk'ten' Stories," *Friends of Thunder: Folktales of the Oklahoma Cherokees*, 43

"The 5 to 6-knot currents of Hell Gate on the East River should be taken into consideration."

-"New York, NY," *Reed's Nautical Almanac: North American East Coast 1999*

The moraine was backlit by bolts of oceanic lightning. They turned inland to look where the estuary cut down the basin like a cracked jar, testament to primordial upheavals which had cut the grooves in this turtle's shell. Talks With Wind gestured to where each body of water—harbor, estuary, strait and bay—seemed to intercept one another and converge.

As they drew near, each flash of lightning briefly illuminated a dilapidated yet otherwise nondescript burial mound, and just before it there sat some wretched gravetender arrayed in rotting rags who stoked a flameless campfire of ashen coals.

"Come, nephews," the bent and haggard form beckoned, stirring at their footsteps. "I will teach you new songs, and new dances."

"Who are you?" Talks With Wind asked, an alien note of fear sounding in his throat as he and Chipmunk halted within a stone's throw of the camp.

"I am he who plucked the crystal from the serpent's forehead," the wizened Shawano boasted matter-of-factly.

"That one is long dead, and you are no spirit!" Talks With Wind rebuked.

Ignoring this, Groundhog's Mother continued. "Upon the face of Gahuti I came across a hunter being strangled by the serpent. He cried out for aid, assuring me it was my enemy as well as his. But this

I already knew. With all his strength holding it still, I dealt a fatal arrow between its scales and the crystal. Thereafter he introduced himself as none other than Thunder Himself. He allowed me the crystal as a reward, saying it would serve me so long as I kept it well-fed with blood.”

“How came you here?”

“The beast was named Keeneyed,” the ancient reminisced nostalgically, pulling a wayward maggot from his face, “for the crystal acts as a third eye which peers past all obstructions, be it the breadth of mountains or the cycling of moons. Upon attaining that sight, I hastened here, to the place of greatest import upon our Turtle Island. You stand upon hallowed ground, doctors, for this is where I shall deliver the serpent’s sight to the serpent’s blood.”

“I do not understand,” Talks With Wind uttered hoarsely.

“There can be no contention with the coming albinos,” Groundhog’s Mother sneered. “We red men think merely to live in harmony with the world the Provider has formed. But the white men seek to usurp He Who Dwells Above and shape a new world entire.” The ancient rose to his knees in a kneeling position and uplifted that which he had been clutching to his bony breast. Between the cracks of his frail fingers the precious trinket shone like white lightning.

Eyes widening, Talks With Wind raised his bow towards the supplicant and sunk an arrow cleanly through the ancient’s heart.

Groundhog’s Mother hardly paid the jutting appendage any mind as he stared drunkenly into the light. “Did not unborn Sequoyah prophesy that only the Gambler’s son may vanquish me?”

Chipmunk looked up at Talks With Wind in horror as the ancient began to violently retch. At first it only seemed that he would vomit, but as his jaw unhinged and lips stretched to the point of tearing upwards along the cheekbones to the ears, it became apparent that he was divulging something else entirely. Chipmunk leaned against Talks With Wind faintly as the birthing serpent slowly twitched and

opened its slit eyes in their direction. It was missing a scale in the center of its forehead, and branched horns slickened to the sides of its head gradually unfurled like a butterfly leaving its cocoon.

“Is that...?” Chipmunk swooned. Talks With Wind shoved the boy backwards.

Vision swimming, Chipmunk shook himself and looked up to see the Keeneyed serpent locked in mortal combat with a mighty brown bear. The latter’s fearsome bellowing shook the surrounding trees as it slashed and tore at its foe’s wildly contorting coils.

Groundhog’s Mother laughed insanely as he looked on.

Chipmunk’s vision cleared as he recognized the rattle necklace stretched taut about the bear’s neck. He rose on wobbling knees and fetched up his tomahawk. Then, stumbling over to Groundhog’s Mother, he unceremoniously hacked off the outstretched hand which held the crystal.

The ancient stared at it lying there in the dust as though it were some other’s. Then, flicking the tomahawk out of the boy’s grasp with a paltry gesture as though he wielded an invisible wand, he eagerly reached out to regain the crystal with his remaining hand. Chipmunk dove so that his fingertips and the fingertips of the ancient touched it simultaneously.

The boy blinked. He had no frame of reference either in memory or dream to quantify the alien landscape that surrounded them now. A sputtering yellow contraption screamed and swerved to avoid the Shawano and Cherokee where they lay. The surface was like spilt tar, but perfectly flat, with streaks of white paint uniformly demarking its bounds. On either side of this trail there loomed great houses, not of wood but painted rock. There were people in these houses, just behind the bizarre sheen of translucent windowsills—male and female of every race. Chipmunk craned his neck upwards, at what he took at first to be twin mountains. But no, they were houses as well—disproportionate, dizzying, maddening houses which loomed and lingered impossibly somewhere between earth and sky.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Groundhog’s Mother gaped gleefully.

An explosive reverberation suddenly emanated down from one of the mountain-houses, flattening lesser structures, buckling the tar-trail, overturning idling contraptions, blotting out the sun with dust and screams. The crystal gleamed amidst their overlapping hands as one of the mountain-houses began to tilt downwards towards them like a vanquished warrior.

“Provider!” Chipmunk screamed, desperately prying the crystal out of the ancient’s grasp. It flashed.

The Keeneyed had taken the bear’s back and was slowly constricting about its throat, horns trembling with bloodlust. The boy knelt to take up Talks With Wind’s rattle wand where it lay and, standing upright, pointed at the serpent with both of his wonderworking instruments.

The ancient looked up from his prostration in ecstasy. “Yes, nephew!” he encouraged. “Become thou the Keeneyed!”

The bear’s eyes widened with a fear unrelated to its own mortality.

“What do you mean, uncle?” Chipmunk asked Groundhog’s Mother, shoulders heaving to restrain himself.

“You loathe my serpent but love its scale. I tell you the truth—they are one and the same.”

Chipmunk looked at the crystal with dread.

“Use it for good; use it for evil,” the ancient continued, “it cares not, so long as it is used.”

The boy’s grip upon the crystal tightened, and as he met the mournful gaze of the bear he blinked back hot tears.

“The Provider’s way are not our ways, nephew. His thoughts are not our thoughts. The Immortals would not cater to your master’s beck and call, so he thought to make one of his own!” The ancient laughed so violently that black blood speckled the ground about him. “Your hypocrisy, medicine man,” Groundhog’s Mother addressed the bear, “is matched only by your ambition.”

Gritting his teeth, Chipmunk turned the wand upon the crystal, glancing once more at the bear and perceiving a solemn understanding in its eyes.

The ancient raised an eyebrow uncomprehendingly.

“I am at peace!” the boy chanted. “I return this evil!”

A flick of the wand sent the crystal speeding skywards, directly into a lightning bolt’s all-consuming path.

It was very quiet now. Some kindly hand covered the boy’s eyes, blotting out all else.

“You are the Gambler’s son, who slew the sons of Thunder?” a man’s voice asked him gently.

Chipmunk nodded, resisting the urge to try and open his eyes.

“You think no thoughts of resentment towards our world?”

The boy shook his head in the negative.

“You may look now.”

Chipmunk breathed deeply, shudderingly, and opened his eyes.

They stood atop the billion-year-old peak of Grandfather Mountain, overlooking the rolling Blue Ridge from dizzying vantage, with wintering orchards of piedmont barely visible beyond the snarled forestry some sheer 4,000 feet below.

Groundhog’s Mother lay half-buried within the scant soil of their hillside, though his chest still rose and fell with shallow breath, and occasionally his glassy eyes blinked. A beautiful female farmer was knelt next to him, dropping fresh kernels of corn upon his chest. A handsome hunter attended her, occasionally stooping to pour clear water from a jar upon these. To Chipmunk’s astonishment, this corn immediately took root and began to rise into fully-laden sheaves. The young doctor who had covered Chipmunk’s eyes—considerably wilder in appearance than his parents—approached Groundhog’s

Mother with a ready scythe and cut these cleanly to the ground. The Shawano's chest stilled, and the hunter closed the lids of his dimmed eyes with an open palm.

The family of three looked up at Chipmunk and smiled.

The prostrate bear stirred and raised a single blood-crusted lid to gaze upon the boy. The withered remains of the serpent lay scattered nearby.

"Oh, Uncle!" Chipmunk sobbed, dropping his bow to embrace the matted fur.

Striding grimly to where it lay, the wild young doctor took up this bow and cast it off the peak, placing a mysterious glowing object there in its stead. Accepting the replacement, Chipmunk gingerly cracked open the curiosity's boards and began thumbing through its pages. Eventually, tears streaming from his cheeks, the boy shut the book and looked up at the family in awe. "The last placenta," he repeated. "The last mountaintop."

The boy rode upon the bear's back with the nape of its neck for a bridle as it scaled down the cliff face and meandered trails hemmed in by slabs of ancient clay. After much meditative snuffling and pawing of the ground, they crested a hill which overlooked a great natural reservoir that shown purple in dawn's rays. Hundreds of ducks and pigeons frolicked upon its surface, leaving countless fish undisturbed beneath. Another bear or two swam among them in perfect pacifism. Clear springs poured into it unceasingly from the cliffs above.

The bear whined curiously, looking across its shoulder at the boy.

"Yes—I can see it too," Chipmunk answered.

The other animals seemed to part a respectful path for the bear as the boy slipped down from his shoulders and sat waiting upon the shore. It dipped a paw in coquettishly before deigning to submerge, sinking momentarily like a rock to the very bottom of the lake. Chipmunk hadn't time to worry, for the bear immediately vaulted upwards, flipping and pirouetting beneath the surface like a

spry cub. When it breached, its coat was radiant, all injuries healed. As it rejoined the boy it began to sing.

It sang first of the primordial bears, who had thought to wage war upon man, but finding themselves clumsy with weapons of war, had resigned themselves to being fine sport and rare food for the only predator more dangerous than they. It sang also of those men who, in a time of utter famine, had willingly transformed themselves into bears to feed their tribe. Last of all it sang of a certain chipmunk who had transmuted its streak of fear into a bolt of lightning.

When they breached the thick forests about the mountainous outskirts, the land seemed familiar to them. At dusk the bear came to a halt and sat staring, not towards home, but westward towards the setting sun.

“Do we go unto these hills?” Lightning asked curiously.

The bear shook its head, then raised a singular paw to its own chest.

Tears fell from the man’s eyes as he stroked the bear’s velvet ears.

The bear groaned and licked a great pink tongue across Lightning’s cheek.

They sat considering one another for a while, then Lightning knelt in the grass and watched him go until the four-legged form disappeared behind a dip in the westward trail. Taking his master’s rattle wand from his belt, he gripped it firmly as he rose to continue on alone.

Starved Fox intercepted him upon the village’s border.

“You are changed, nephew,” the hunter noted, glancing at the uncouth hair sprouting from the man’s chest and jaw. “I thought at first that you were the Firecarrier when I sighted you.”

“Perhaps I am,” the man explained. Then, stooping down to demonstrate, he began to write with the base of the rattle wand upon the dust of the ground.

“I will call a council,” Starved Fox replied softly, placing a hand upon the writer’s shoulder.

Circa 1789 AD

The table was a ruin of uncovered plates and emptied wine glasses. Silverware glimmered here and there against the tablecloth as in a prospector's dream. He still sat with elbows resting devil-may-care against the edges, his violin and its bow lately placed precariously at a cleared corner. Several open books also lay within arm's reach, facedown upon a vacant chair like birds dropped dead midflight. His cheeks and lips were still slightly flushed from the wine, but his eyes appraised her quite clearly by the candlelight.

She smiled and glanced up at a slight creaking overhead—the wayward step of some nightgowned eavesdropper, no doubt. And who could blame such anxious propriety? For the guests were gone and the music had ceased.

What a dinner it had been, or so she gleaned! She shared many a thing with him, but never his meals. Not unless it was in the capacity of daughter's maid, which was rather seldom since their return from France. Parisian Polly had monopolized her; Albemarle county's Polly could fend for herself. She wanted for nothing, nonetheless—nothing except assurance that her dotting father was also a chaste one. Another reversal of roles; Polly had hardly batted a prim eyelash whenever the widower called upon the married madam Cosway. But Cosway's paler complexion—and the fact that she was not a potential half-aunt—might suggest another *matière à inquiétude*.

Momentarily sobered by a similar series of deductions, he leaned back, applied a napkin to his perspiring brow, and suddenly rose, snatching up the candlestick.

“Come, Sally,” he instructed. “I could do with some night air.”

Lighting the lamp and snuffing the candle, they pushed wide the glass doors of his study to access a contained Venetian porch, the green slats of its tightly shut blinds concealing the comings-and-goings from its adjoining greenhouse piazza. Shouldering past that darkened bower with its myriad

specimens, they exited into the moonlight and tarried beneath the boughs of a singular oak tree just feet from the foundation. Illumining its roots, he told her that dear Dabney was buried there.

“Who was he?”

“My boyhood friend.”

Continuing the shining arc, he lovingly roved light back over the gloomy yet magisterial porticle.

“It *is* good to be back,” he murmured, half to himself. “I hope never to lay eyes upon another politician.”

For but a moment while saying this, he seemed old to her. Then the clockwork mind recalibrated, and with it the leonine visage. “I would like to show you a curiosity—something the others wouldn’t have,” he declared, lowering the lamp. “The young ones may not even know of it, and the old are too superstitious.”

“It sounds as though our home is haunted.”

“In a fashion. To the stables! There is a corner of Prospero’s island you’ve yet to see.”

“Does that make Polly Miranda?” she giggled rhetorically in teenaged fashion as they tried the steep path to descend from the mountaintop.

A mare whinnied nervously as the stable door’s latch undid at this witching hour, but calmed as the scent of the Master passed. The would-be-riders stood amidst the hay for a time, fingering first at one stallion’s snout, then another. Finally, they settled upon the white.

“And the name it said on him was Death,” one of them murmured as the bridle jangled.

Teething at his bit, the pale horse tossed his head and surveyed the wintering fields of corn and tobacco. “We will need to diversify into wheat soon,” Thomas noted with a slight hint of displeasure.

“Such a young nation cannot depend on usurers for its bread.”

Passing shanties, some still awake with the roaring of hearth fires and sawing of fiddles within, they crossed the scant demarcations of the grounds and followed the slight lapping of water to the southern bank of the Rivanna's southern branch.

"Are we heading to Charlottesville?" the girl asked as Thomas spurred their steed on.

"Only its general direction. Tonight we will not concern ourselves with the architectures of white men."

"Whose, then? Something my kin built?"

Thomas laughed. "Nor black men, either. Some theorize that these lands were once occupied by a red race, more primitive even than your own. However, no evidence is left of their existence—or so they say. I found one of their barrows here when I was eight years old, little more than a hollow mound of earth and stone. It was spheroidal, perhaps forty feet in diameter, and twelve feet in altitude. The plunge of my spade met a mass of bones..."

As his voice trailed off, so did their mount. He raised the lamp higher and said, "It ought to be just here."

They sat before a semicircular grove within earshot of the river where no grass grew and no leaves nor acorns lay. Even to her it seemed that something once there had been utterly taken away. As they leaned their heads over the spot to examine it, an eerie chill batted the trees all about and set the horse to whinnying. As Thomas turned his attention back to the bridle, Sally's eyes squinted into the darkness and a glint reflected in her irises.

"Well," the master laughed as he regained control, wrapping the leather tight about his fist, "it is well that I left *that* out of my *Notes*. It would seem the recollection of an eight-year-old boy is not admissible!"

Sally nodded mutely.

“Perhaps it was a dream. I have often pondered how it would have been, had any of those natives greeted our arrival. They would have butchered us all, I expect.”

“Or we them,” she replied.

Author's Afterword

Though Sequoyah did much to preserve his people's culture, Cherokee source material remains at best fragmentary. Its majority derives from white missionaries—especially James Mooney—from whom the finer points of Cherokee spiritual traditions may have been kept. Thus, depicting Cherokee medicine men, especially those predating Columbus and De Soto, can only ever be an educated guess. That being said, there are several concepts herein that are far more fanciful than scholarly on my part.

It is unlikely that the Cherokees were already residing in present-day Georgia during the first century AD, nor do we know when their sporadic warring with the Creeks became in vogue.

The wording of prayers herein is almost always inspired by actual Cherokee prayers, but are almost never verbatim. According to the authority of Jack and Anna Kilpatrick, Cherokee-to-English translation utterly fails to capture the poetic nature of the originals; thus I chose to preserve the poetry at the cost of literalness.

There is no evidence that ancient Cherokees believed they had originated on the other side of the world and immigrated via the Bering Strait. This was probably first foisted upon them by spurious scholars such as Professor Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, who were motivated not by migratory knowledge but by wishful thinking concerning the Biblical lost tribes of Israel. Cherokee historian Emmet Starr comments on early colonized Cherokees' agreeableness to and even perpetuation of such theories, "...it is palpable that [the Cherokees] had been told [Abrahamic] stories by [the missionary] Priber during his short stay among them and that they had forgotten their origin within seventy years and attributed it to legends that had descended from...their primal religion" (*History of the Cherokee Indians and Their Legends and Folk Lore*, 24).

Suffice it to say that this is but one of numerous convolutions between original Cherokee myth and the myth of their colonizers, to the extent that it is not always possible to discern where one ends and the other begins. Thus I have occasionally "leaned into" these convolutions, intending not-so-much

to perpetuate them as to “bend them” for the purpose of incorporating Cherokee culture into the worldwide mythos that has often excluded it. Readers will have to judge for themselves whether that intent was successful.

The decision to maintain the presence of Sally Hemings at Monticello was a difficult but intentional one; I concluded that it would be flippant to use Lightning’s triumph as a *deus ex machina* for all the historical ills of the United States. As for her and Thomas’s imaginary late-night romp, Hyland’s *In Defense of Thomas Jefferson: The Sally Hemings Sex Scandal* may lead one to conclude that Thomas’s brother Randolph is a likelier candidate for this sort of rendezvous.

Finally, I would like to preemptively address any concerns of “cultural appropriation,” given that I am so pale I would likely disappear in a blizzard. The Cherokee have traditionally accepted myriad ethnicities into their fold, including but not limited to the likes of Sam Houston and Chief John Ross. Thus, should any such concerns be raised, they will most likely originate from those bored, trite, and effete whites whose pastime it is to be outraged on minorities’ behalves. I feel no obligation nor desire to appease these neo-Inquisitors. However, should anyone of Cherokee lineage wish to contact me with concerns, I pledge to read it and reply if it seems that a reply is desired.

All readers may write me through christopherleewinn.com, which I will read and reply to as is feasible.

-Christopher Winn