

Fire-Head.

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1.



At the very beginning of the world, the sun shone all the time and there was never any darkness. Yussen, the Creator, kept Night prisoner in a sack which he gave Badger to safeguard.

My head is booming to the beat of a drum, forcing me to awaken. The blood-rhythm driving thoughts upward. I smell sand and blood. My breathing is deafening me. The Ga'anⁱ drums are beating through my head. I must be lying amongst the drummers. If only the song would finish I could go back to sleep. But I cannot sleep with the Mountain Spirits coming. I try to move my head, the drums boom deeper and the tiered headdresses of the dancers seem to swirl before my eyes. I feel sick and then the roiling of my stomach pulls me into the real world. I come fully awake but hold myself still and stifle the groan of pain that tries to escape. I do not at first know where I am, I try to think of my name; it seems to take a long time to come to me. 'My name is Ko-bitset – Fire-head. *Idéndshíí* - I am of 'The People' and at thirteen years I have failed in my first 'raid' beyond the mountain. As these thoughts fight to the surface, the drum beats recede, and I remember the trouble that is around me. I hold still, keeping my breath as even as I can. I do not want to alert 'them' to the fact I am alive and awake, they might finish the brutal job that they started.

The drums in my head beat quieter but other pains spring into place, my left arm is trapped, twisted beneath my body and aches as though broken; *Idéndshíí*. Some pride comes back to fight the desire for mam's comfort. I repeat to myself the chant, my spell against pain: 'I remember the time I fell in the cholla cactus; that was painful. The time I slipped and hit my knee, that hurt! And when we fought the bees for their honey... When this hurt is past, I will remember it's passing, with pride'.

I could feel the slight warmth of a fire on my back so figured I was turned from the fire and could open my eyes. It was a struggle as they seemed gummed shut but eventually I could see dancing firelight reflected on a straggly mesquite bush.

The remnants of the dance drums faded and I heard the low mutterings of the *pindah-lickoyee*, I could smell food cooking and despite all orders to my belly it rumbled like distant thunder. I kept still, hoping to learn what I could.

"I say we scalp that'un like we did them others." He sounded mean.

A gruffer voice spoke, "Ya must be colour blind, ya can't get nothin fer hair that ain't black as sin."

A third, cold voice cut through the grumblings of the other two. "We gonna have to git supplies or we don't make Sonora, we don't make Sonora we don't git no bounty on the scalps we got. If'n we trail over to the Gila river we'll likely find

greasers willing to buy or swap supplies for a slave.” They didn’t argue with that hard voice.

What had happened to my companions, had they been killed by these White-Eyes? I tried to roll over quietly but couldn’t help a gasp of pain as my left arm dragged. My eyes blurred the shapes of the three men who were picking strips of bacon from a skillet over the fire, I sensed that they were now watching me. I blinked my sight clear. A tall, thin man with yellowish skin and a drooping rattail of a moustache spat into the fire then bit off a new chaw from a wad and wiped his greasy fingers on his dirt-encrusted trousers. He had a Hawken rifle like Uncle Dleesh did, it was held ready under his right arm. As his spit fizzed he spoke, in that thin, sharp, mean drawl; “Reckon Tooley there messed him up a bit much; not ginna make much of a slave outa that. Might be easiest to jest shoot it!” He spat in the fire.

Tooley, the bearded scruffy man across the fire glared back and scratched in his dirty beard; “It might be a younker but if I hadn’t messed it, it’d have surely done me harm, wuss than a cougar in a sack!”

The third man could’ve been clean shaven a couple of days ago and his now dusty broadcloth suit didn’t have the shine of ingrained dirt the others had. Cold almost colourless eyes studied his companions. Then he turned and surveyed me like I was a deer haunch. I glared back at him. I looked pretty stringy, but with us Apaches that was deceptive. My buckskin shirt was well-used and looked like the cut-down from elder-brother that it was; my calf-length moccasins were decorated with red beads. My sinewy legs were exposed by my breechclout which looped through a crude leather belt. My skin, though tanned by the sun, was lighter than most Indians and my red-gold shock of hair, held back by a headband matted with dried blood, showed what I was; a half-breed. Those milk-water eyes fixed me with an implacable hatred; he laughed meanly. “You *sabe* eh, you speak anglo eh, kid? Yer Ma got raped by them varmints I guess, an’ now yer jest another little savage wi’ no name.”

With anger and pride I did my best to straighten myself though my left arm was still almost useless. “Mam married my Da proper!” They looked surprised by my words. “Da leads my clan. When they find you, you’re a gonna be without a name!”

He spat at my feet, “We’ll be well gone”, he sneered cruelly, “Ain’t none of your playmates gonna be giving the alarum.”

That hurt and I hung my head as I thought of my friends Ighal, Delzine and Gozhoo. Then I made an effort to pull myself together.

Tooley seemed to surprise himself when he spoke; “We ain’t carrying your kin scalps boy, we shot ’em but we didn’t find the bodies.”

“What ya tellin’ him that fer, ya goin’ soft!”

“Shut ya trap Vander. Jest ‘cause the younker got some grit you figure to grind it.”

“Tooley, you did the damage, you patch him up.” The third man’s look did not encourage further argument.

Tooley caught his glance but quickly looked away. “Ya, okay Ice, but if’n he starts anything I’m goin’ to finish it quick.”

“Jest put this ‘tween yer ears; we got fifty odd scalps. Down Sonora they’ll give us a hundert dollars each...” Vander muttered under his breath “Fer braves scalps.” That earned him a hot glance. “Hell, even them's that are kids are worth twenty-five! Howsoever ya add it up we get a lot o’ bounty when we hand them sacks over to the Mex authoritiesⁱⁱ. To do that we need to re-supply. This kid is the easiest ways we’s can git that!” He turned on me abruptly where I stood slightly swaying but proud, “What’s yer name boy?”

“Ko'-bitset.”

“Cold biscuit? That’s not much of a name, what’s it mean?”

I drew myself up trying to copy the way my Da looked when he addressed the tribe; “Fire-head.”

“Waal that suits more I guess. We’ll just call ya 'Jack' I reckon. Now yer hear me good Jack! Yer *sabe* we need yer to git supplies fer Mexico, yer behave and we’ll sell yer ta some good Mex’s and yer’ll do all right.” His voice hardened like quenched steel. “Yer try an’ git away, or fight us an’ I guarantee ya’ll need every ounce of ‘Pache blood ya got to bleed afore I’m done wi’ ya! *Comprende?*” Despite myself I nodded. “Tooley, see to him.” Ice turned away and moved out from the fire into the outer dark.

Later after Tooley’s rough ministrations I was given some dry bread and a cup of water, I finished it right quick but then Tooleoy tied my hands in front of me and my ankles together. I struggled to roll myself in the horse blanket they threw me. My thoughts twisted and turned like a rattler in deep sand. I should slip my bindings and disappear like a true member of the ‘Nde’ – The People, the Apache! But my body ached and stung all over, my head still swam from time to time and moving lights behind my eyes seemed to compete with the bright stars overhead. I tried to wriggle a dip in the sand for my hip. I couldn’t hear Ice, out in the dark; that was warning enough, like an owl he was unseen and soundless in the night. A shiver thrust itself down my spine. Everyone knows owls are likely as not the spirits of the dead. Were the spirits of my companions even now winging across the stars? As if to answer me a Great Horned Owl called “Hoo – hooo”, across the mesquite and saguaro. Burying my head in the blanket I wished that I was back in my own rancheria on the White Mountain. Mam softly singing the songs of a far away land called Cymru.

*"Yn y mor y byddo'r mynydd,
Sydd yn cuddio bro Meirionydd;
Ni chawn unwaith olwg arni,
Cyn i'm calon dirion dorri."ⁱⁱⁱ*

2.



One day, while Badger was travelling through the land, Coyote, saw him carrying the large sack in which Night was kept.

The trial had started when Hoo-may gathered six of us young boys together. “I set you boys a task deserving of the *Nde*’; you must travel as a war-band must travel. You must not be seen. You will go to the salt-wall and return with a bag of salt each.”

A stocky, powerfully built man with a barrel-like chest, he was famed in our clan for his stamina. It was said he could run down any horse in two days. He stepped away from us and watched as we gathered together to talk over the test. The youngest of us was Tsikali, short even for ten years, he leaned back at the hips, his head held slightly to one side as he listened. Like the rest of us he wore a breechclout of white cotton, looped through a tied leather belt and calf length moccasins with turned up toes and though his hair was hardly long enough to warrant it, a cloth headband. Lika was the eldest at nearly fifteen; in contrast to Tsikali he had a broad face and a button nose; his dark tanned arms, already well thickened with muscle, were folded across his chest. “I shall lead,” he declared to the group, though his eyes were on me, the next eldest. I was taller than him which he didn’t like. I was about to challenge him when a better idea came to me; I turned to the other boys; “Ha-ah, Lika will take care of us.”

Hoo-may smiled inwardly; perhaps the fire in Ko’s head was coming under control. He had wrong-footed Lika, who now suddenly realised that he would have to do more than walk ahead of the others.

“Enjuh! Good.” Agreed, Delzine, who was playing with small sticks that he passed from hand to hand. The two brothers, Ighal and Gozhoo nodded. “It will be a grand adventure,” Said the ever-cheerful Gozhoo. “A grand adventure,” echoed Ighal.

Tsikali looked up at Lika; “What do we take with us, ‘Leader’?” Lika had to think quickly and was flustered by the quiet attention of the others. “We must take our bows, and, and...” He turned to me; “Ko’ will be ‘Second’. He will tell you what else to bring. I shall talk to Hoo-may and find out more of what trail we should take.” With this command to me, he left us and went over to the old warrior.

I looked into the eyes of the four younger boys for a long moment, suddenly realising that I was caught by the same trap I had sprung on Lika. Now I had to come up with answers. I glanced at each of them and took a deep breath. “Each of us must carry all that we need, and...” I caught each with my glance. “It will be your responsibility!” I thought quickly. “Your bow and quiver, blanket-roll, best knife, a fire drill, and whatever food you can carry wrapped in your blanket roll.”

“Ha’ah”; they agreed in unison and spread out to ask their mothers for food and a blanket each.

I hurried to Mam's wickiup. She must have known what was coming, for she already had a blanket spread on the ground, accumulating the things I would need to take with me. Mam was of average height, dressed as most Apache women in a loose cotton skirt and shirt blouse, her skirt the purple of smoketree flowers. Her blouse, the colour of bluebonnets in the early morning, was belted at her narrow waist by a leather strap, from which hung her skinning knife in a beaded scabbard. Her feet were bare and her red-gold hair was dusted with grey. As I approached she straightened and pushed the hair from her face. She smiled; "I have a few dried chokecherry cakes for you to take, some yucca and some antelope jerky."

"We shall live off the land, Mam." I replied somewhat scornfully.

"It would be as well to take a little food in case you don't have time to hunt, my son." Eyeing the sweet berry cakes that I liked so much, I thought better of travelling without food. "Is there a small water skin I can carry, and one for the salt?"

"Of course. Now run and get your bow and quiver; you have your knife? I'll roll the blanket when I have put in a little leather patching and needle and thread, you never know..."

"When I might need it," I muttered as I ran to get my bow.

An hour later we were again gathered around Hoo-may and ready to go. Each had our blanket roll slung at our back and carried either a bow and arrow or a war club to our size. Hoo-may had a stern look on his face; "This is a big test for all of you. You must work together, you must all agree to whatever action you take. You should be back here in four days at the most."

"Ha-ah, hosteen," we replied together and turned and trotted off after Lika.

Hoo-may turned as Ko's father came up. "They are away."

"I hope there are no *pindah* around. I think I shall watch from a distance till night-fall."

"I think the *pindah* stick to the Gila," he said, as they had a last view of the boys walking steadily down the trail in single file.

We were following a slim Indian trail barely more than a large moccasin wide, a true trail of 'the people', I thought to myself. Perhaps on this trip I could track a *pindah*; they walked with feet to either side, not in a single line, so I had been told. I was sure there would be other exciting things to find and see. At the thought I sharpened my hearing and raked my eyes constantly across the sandy trail and all around looking for tracks and signs of animals, two or four legged. There was the wiggling track of a gila monster's heavy dragging body, and there an jack-rabbit had dived into the cholla. I must practice again the jack-rabbit trick which I had perfected when I was smaller and wanted to get away from the bigger boys. I had found that if I could really think myself into the jack-rabbit mind then I could make my body follow the path its body had taken through all but the thickest clump of cactus. I had begun very slowly and carefully but now could slip through the grasping needles and spines at a speed that no other could follow without coming out like a porcupine. Trouble was that as I grew taller it was getting harder and harder. It would be best now, I reluctantly thought, to try it on the track of a coyote or other larger animal.

A large cottonwood hung over the little stream that ran down the canyon toward the White River; a mourning dove *coo-cooed* dolefully.

The trail wandered, skirting the edge of the canyon wall, rounding boulders bigger than a horse and saguaros pointing to the clear blue sky. I walked steadily, following Lika who paced ahead; Tsikali and then the others were similarly strung out behind me. We passed under the brief shade and heavy scent of an acacia. The ground had a slight dusting from the pale yellow flowers. 'Enjuh', a good sign for our journey; although it wasn't ritual pollen, it still had some of the *ha-dintin*^{iv} power. Lika stopped suddenly. I tried to see why, then heard the rattle, and moments later an enormous hawk wasp, its wings a brilliant orange blur, flew slowly towards us. Lika wanted to duck but held himself still. The wasp changed course at the last moment and went round him. He turned to watch as it sailed up into the acacia. He grinned at me in relief and set off again.

As we crossed an open space, the white sand reflected an intense light through which sulphur-yellow and marine-blue butterflies flitted from silvery-grey to delicate pink flowers. Each soft moccasin-clad footfall raised a puff of dust that smelt of burnt flint and heat-stiffened leather.

We crossed a small wash where storm water had hurried from a crack in the canyon wall. I spotted some lovely smoothed and rounded pebbles about the size of a dove's egg and stopped to pick them up; they were hot in my hand as I stowed them in a fold of my blanket roll. Tsikali, Ighal, Delzine and Gozhoo caught up with me. Seeing what I was doing they also hunted around for good throwing-stones. Annoyed at our stopping, Lika returned; "If you stop or see something you should call me!"

"Look what great throwing-stones Ko' found," said Ighal, to stop him from getting bossy. Lika stooped to pick up an almost perfectly round one he had just seen.

"We could yip like a coyote if we need to tell the others something."

"Good idea, Delzine", Gozhoo said. "If it is something dangerous and we should look out, then do it once only. Yip twice to call us all together."

"It would be nice to find some quail for supper," said Ighal, who was always thinking of his stomach.

"Let's get on", said Lika.

Like loose beads on a string we set off again. We came out into the main valley; the saguaro gave way to mesquite tangles which then opened out again where each creosote bush defended its patch. Here and there the busy hum of insects and the quick fluttering of colourful butterflies surrounded the glorious gold mass of palo verde trees.

I yipped twice like a coyote. The others gathered round and we all squatted in the shade of a cottonwood. "I think we should practice travelling separately to a rendezvous, as if we had been surprised by enemies."

"I was just thinking that we could do that, but I couldn't think of a good place to meet one which we all know," said Lika.

"How about at the mouth of Turkey Creek?"

"Enjuh! A bright spark from our firehead." Delzine chortled at his own joke. We all gave him a look and shook our heads sadly.

"If I spot one of you I will give the quail call."

"And us you," we replied to Lika.

"Ha-ah." Delzine, Gozhoo and Ighal headed toward the river. They would cross over when they found a good place and then space themselves widely across the valley floor.

Tsikali stood. "I shall find a way farther from the river on this side".

Lika stretched. "I will go along the flats here".

I nodded. "I shall follow the banks of the river, keep a sharp eye out for *pindah* tracks, hey."

"Ha-ah!" We all agreed.

We moved off and left the shrub to a disturbed cactus wren, pursued for a while by his rattling cry.

A couple of hours later Lika was squatting by the water's edge gutting a wood rat when Ighal and Gozhoo appeared. Ighal was pleased. "Enjuh! I saw a rabbit but it got away."

"Let's hope the others had better luck or we shall have to start on our rations tonight!" Lika answered moodily as he finished the gutting and skinning and rinsed off the little body. The next to arrive was Delzine and he had two quail. He greeted them and then squatted to start plucking one bird, the other he threw to Ighal to start on. "I think Ko' or Tsikali will have more. I got one with a stone and the rest flew off, but a little further on they flew back down in front of me. I think they were frightened back into flight."

"Enjuh! Where shall we eat and camp?" Ighal asked Lika.

"We shall go up the creek a bit to make a fire pit. You," he said to Delzine, "could go and start it if you like. Then when it grows darker we should spread out in the brush a bit, and away from the water because..."

"I know," said Ighal, "so that we don't keep any animals from drinking."

"It is also safer; if a bear or an enemy comes to drink we will see them first."

"There are none near here, are there?" Ighal looked over his shoulder.

"There are many enemies everywhere; it is always best to see them first. I shall go after Delzine. Bring the others when they arrive." Lika headed off up the creek following Delzine's tracks.

Later as the last shreds of meat were nibbled from quail bones and the fire was dull embers, Gozhoo told a Coyote story.

One day Coyote was travelling along. He met Frog. Coyote said to Frog, "Come on, let's race together and see who is the faster."

"You must be making fun of me to talk like that." Replied Frog.

"No, come on, let's race together!"

"All right, but first I want to go some place for a minute."

Coyote said he would wait. Frog went off to where the other frogs were. "I'm going to race Coyote and I want you to place yourselves all along where the race is to be, jump as Coyote comes up and then the next frog will take over."

"Coyote will be the loser, the frog who has the place at the finish will say to Coyote, 'My aunt, you are no runner at all; you are no man, only a boy!' Make fun of him."

When Frog came back the race began. Frog took one jump. At each bound Coyote took he saw Frog leap ahead of him. This way Coyote lost the race. Frog said to him, "My aunt, you are no man, only a boy! I beat you racing. You are no runner."

Coyote answered, "My aunt, you are a good runner and you beat me. I have raced with lots of Apaches and other people, but you are the first ever to beat me." That's the way Coyote lost the race... I'm talking about fruit," he finished the story that way so that he would throw any listening spirits off the track; make them think they had not been talked about.

Lika wanted to tell a story about Big Owl, but we thought that was a bad idea as it might bring an owl around and we didn't want to get owl sickness. Lika kicked dirt over the fire and told each of us which bush to sleep under, choosing a soft sandy patch for himself. We grumbled a bit but were all tired enough to wrap ourselves in our blankets and go to sleep.



At first light we chewed some dried strips of deer meat, drank in turn and set out.

It was past midday and the heat beat back from rounded boulders and gravel as I made my way to the river's edge for a drink. Here a sandy beach made an easy place to lie and suck up deliciously cool water. I was about to leave when I saw the shallow depressions in the sand a few feet out from the beach, though already filling with silt, there was no mistaking horse-tracks. I stood, and leaning back my head, yipped like a coyote. As I swiftly set off on the trail of the horses, I heard the first reply.

A mile or so downriver Tooley was following Ice's wide back as his black horse threaded its way through clumps of fiery-flowered ocotillo. Though Ice seemed to slip past without noticing them, the ocotillo always seemed to be reaching out spindly arms for Tooley. He wondered if they would be real wide-awake by the time Vander, leading the pack horse came past. He chuckled to himself at the thought of those long arms grabbing Vander by his scrawny neck.

"Yah got a joke? I could do with one," growled Vander from close behind him.

"Well, see, these ocotillo seem to be waking up, and..." He realised that Vander wouldn't see the funny side. "Ah, nothing."

"Will you coyotes quit ya yappin'. I've got a feelin' that we ain't alone!" That worried Tooley and Vander.

"Ya mean 'Paches?"

"Waal, Vander. I don' reckon as how they'll likely be Sioux!"

"Mebbe it's just the ghosts following their hair," Tooley said.

"Shut ya trap!" They both bit back.

They looked around uneasily. To their left the river flowed between low-cut banks, the flats they rode over were lightly clothed with brittlebush and the low grey-gold stonecrop. Further from the banks the mesquite and occasional palo verde trees gave a fair amount of cover for imagined Apache hordes.

"What we goin' to do, Ice?"

"Wolfskill,^v he gave me the lowdown on this trail. Seem to remember he 'lowed there was a place not long after we meet with the White River that ought to answer. A loop of the river with a narrow neck, so's it's easy to keep a watch fer trouble comin'. We'll stop awhile, have us some coffee and grub. If they's peaceful they'll come in and ask for food..."

"And if they's not?" asked Tooley.

"Then they'll likely scout us a bit. I'll spread my roll and then slip over the bank and come wide round. You two make ya'selves at home."

"But we'll be right out in the open..."

"Sure. You's the bait," Ice said meanly.

"Why don't I go out on scout and you stand up here like a... "

"Ya wouldn't last long out there, apart from smellin' ya half a mile off, ya make more noise than javelina in wallow! Ya want an injun haircut, go right ahead!"

That ended the discussion. Ice kicked his horse on and the others followed, not without constant glances over their shoulders. Both seemed now to feel beady black eyes boring into the backs of their necks.

The river had doubled back on itself leaving a narrow neck of land not more than fifty paces wide. There was little cover; storm-waters had swept away all but the most well-rooted mesquite. On the river side of one these they set about digging a small fire pit and setting up for the night.

"You waddies heard this one?" Tooley said; "Two men looking ta cross a twenty foot river. One said to the other, 'You wanna bet I cain't throw you cross thet river?' 'Yeah', said the other; 'I bet you \$50, you caint'. 'Bet you \$50 I can, said the first man. 'So come along here and do it!' The first guy seized the man and threw him; o'course he fell into the middle of the water. Out he came a-drippin' an' claimin' his \$50. 'Oh no, not so fast,' said the first man. 'I niver said how many times I would have to *try* throwin' ya. But I will succeed! Afore I'm done, I will succeed! So come along agin.' T'other man was a mite glad to lose his \$50, and escape the danger of repeated drownin'." Tooley laughed without much humour; "See Ice, I can see we're set up, an' I'll take it this time. But if ya don't pull this off, don' think I'll be backin' ya next time!"

"Man's the only animal that can be skinned more'n once," Ice shot back. "I'll take a paseo; any sneakin' injuns'll find themselves on the wrong end of some hot lead!"

Meanwhile I was very carefully working my way through the low brush. I moved with each breath of warm breeze. Making sure there was no rhythm to my movements. If a shadow fell, I let it fall on one side to break my outline, and for long minutes I would stay motionless, barely breathing. I let myself slip back to the games of my childhood; the games of 'wait' and 'ambush'. How to 'be' a rock, or a grain of sand amongst many. It is not easy to let go of yourself, to lose those fixed, hard thoughts of action, to put aside time and future; just 'be'. Be a part of the sand and rock and scrub. But at this we Apache are master. The *pindah* seldom realise this extra magic, the magic that enables the Apache to be unseen in open view. I was a lizard of small thoughts in hot sand.

Ice undid his blanket roll and threw it on the ground not far from the water's edge. He lay down and shortly he rolled to the low bank and dropped over.

I could not quite hear what the low voices of the men around the firepit were saying, and though I could see two of them, I wasn't sure that the other was still lying on his blankets. I moved another foot forward behind a piece of driftwood. I raised my head; there were only two men. Too late I smelt a strange smell...

Ice was just about to shoot the crawling Indian in the back when he realised that, oddly, he didn't have black hair and that he was pretty small.

A powerful hand grabbed my hair at the same time as a large knife was at my throat. I went rigid. "Git up, real careful, till I decide if yous a dead injun or not!" Ice hauled me to my feet and dragged me over to Tooley and Vander who both had guns out.

"What the hell kind of scalp-lifter ya got there?" growled Tooley.

"Waal, it ain't full growd, it's dressed 'Pache but it ain't pure with hair like this."

"There more of you varmints around?" Vander demanded.

I ignored him though gradually slumping; when the knife edged away from my throat I lunged forward, ignoring the pain as a chunk of hair was ripped from my scalp.

"Ádaa gondzåå!" I yelled out a warning. An arrow buried itself in Vander's saddle and then, still yelling, I was desperately fighting with Tooley who seemed to be trying to wrench my arm from its socket. I didn't see the gun barrel that Ice swung hard against my head, but as I slipped into unconsciousness I seemed to hear the crack of Vander's rifle.

3.



Coyote, was always thinking about food, so he thought Badger was carrying something really good to eat. He started walking along with Badger.

A hard boot on my arm woke me. A faint greyness to the east suggested the dawn to come.

"Go git some firewood, boy," growled Ice.

I struggled to my feet and held out my tied hands; "Quicker you cut my hands free".

"Oh no, you can manage jest fine. We only need a hatful of a fire to make coffee, then we'll be on our way pronto."

By the time I struggled back with an armful of sticks, Vander and Tooley were up. Tooley was blowing life into the few embers left from the night before. Vander had filled the battered coffee pot from the river.

Daylight was swiftly washing the canyon with a pale yellow light and a jay, annoyed at our presence, swore like a rock scratching across slate. A warbler's – "*wichity-wichity*" – song fell into the murmuring of the river, then a quail called and for a moment I thought it was a rescuer. Ice's sharp eyes had seen my shoulders slumped as no hint of echo followed. "Not one of ya compadres eh?"

"What's that?" Tooley straightened from the fire.

"Jack here thought for a minute that quail was 'Pache but there was no echo, would've been if it were injun-made."

"Ya reckon we lost 'em these two nights?" Tooley asked.

"They don't like movin' or fightin' at night much, so Wolfskill said. Som'at to do with owls, I think. That right boy?"

"Everybody knows that the spirits of the dead live in owls," I said defiantly.

The rising sun struck the canyon wall with hard light; "There's where they live". I pointed to the canyon wall where under an overhanging cliff, about half way up, black holes like empty eye sockets stared down at us.

"Huh, cave dwellin's. They say the 'Pache killed off the injuns what lived there." Vander sneered; "Jest like the White-men are going to wipe out the 'Pache!"

"The Anasazi - The Old Ones, were long gone when we came."

"Ya don't know that, toad?"

I ignored the insult. "That is how the old men tell it round the fire. They do not speak falsely like the white man," I said proudly. "All our words are like the lines on the cliff there; never changed by any man as they are passed down."

"Niver mind waggin' ya chin. We clear of the varmints or ain't we?" Tooley demanded of Ice.

"I doubt it. But I saw no sign of hosses, so we should have a lead, long as we doesn't hang around rollin' the guff too long. Why don't ya git the hosses sacked out and we'll get some miles 'tween us and any followers!"

Tooley, Vander and Ice didn't take long to slurp their coffee, chew on some jerky and get the horses saddled and loaded. Nobody offered me anything to eat or drink. Soon we were trailing down the Salt River canyon. Ice led, Tooley followed trailing the packhorse with me uncomfortably astride the packs. Vander with constant glances down the back trail was last.

By the time the sun had heated the air enough for the bees to get busy we were miles down canyon. The trail was like a broken thread; obvious and packed at times, then making hard work of getting through a thicket of cactus or scrub. Wandering from the river banks to the canyon side and then back; it seemed without reason. But Ice held a sharp pace. He knew, as I knew, there was only one real trail, one way to go.

Where did your prey need to go? Where was water? Where could a horse travel? What Ice didn't realise was the one big question; how far could an apache travel on foot in a day? The answer was up to 50 miles; but he probably wouldn't have wanted to know that.

At noon Ice reined up on a gravel bank where a little wash came into the river. "We'll give the horses a blow, an' have a chaw of jerky."

Tooley and Vander were pretty quick to drop from their mounts, glad to stretch legs. Tooley went to un-cinch his horse. "I'd not bother, jest in case we have to light out of here sudden," Ice growled. "Jest water 'em."

Hands tied to the pack saddle, I sat perched on the packs. If they all dismounted would I have a chance to take off on the horse? Only if its lead rope was untied from Vander's horse, and even then there was not really any cover near enough to be out of sight before they'd cut down on me. Tooley untied my hands. "Water 'im." he grunted.

I was glad to get down from the uncomfortable pack saddle and lead the horse to the river's edge. I threw myself down beside the horse, upriver and slaked my thirst with the cold clear water. Beside me the horse sucked noisily from the surface.

When I brought the horse back to the others Tooley handed me a piece of jerky; "Chaw on that, Jack." He looked me over with an appraising eye. "How's the arm coming? Better be fit in a couple of days when we git to the Mex settlements."

"If ya done chawin the fat, Tooley, then mebbe we can rattle our hocks afore any of thet boy's kin ketches up with us." Ice waited for Tooley to lead out and Vander follow before warily bringing up the rear.

We plodded on through long hours with the odd brief stop for water.

It was late afternoon. Dust and pollen motes drifted in the air, lit by the low slanting rays of the sun. Deep shadows were caught by the canyon walls and ahead we could hear the chattering roar of rapids; but here it was quiet enough to hear the

click of hoof on stone, creak of saddle leather, then a canyon wren's sudden descending trill seeming alarmingly loud.

Tooley had his hat pulled low against the probing sun, squinting to see the trail, followed by Vander who trailed the packhorse. They had not re-tied my hands and so I had been able to make myself more comfortable. As I dozed I turned over my situation. 'What could I do to escape? Had the others really got away and how long would it take them to get help? Were my father and clan already following? Perhaps already preparing an ambush to rescue me?' My heart lifted at the thought. 'If only...'

We reached the river bend where the water fought its way over a series of rock ledges. No longer was there any birdsong. Pushed by the river's course we were headed into shadow so dark that Tooley leading could hardly make out the trail ahead. He kicked his horse to a trot, eager for relief from the glare. As I was jerked by Vander into following suit I heard Tooley cough and then he hunched forward over his saddle. I saw it before Vander did and threw myself off the horse; the head of an arrow had appeared in a spreading bloodstain on Tooley's back. Vander pulled up, opening his mouth to shout. Nothing came out for the half-heard crack of a rifle had spun a lump of lead the size of an acorn into his chest. Tooley and Vander hit the dirt together. Ice hadn't heard the bow-twang but sensing something wrong was already pulling up as the shot sounded. It was enough for the two arrows headed his way to miss. He lit out hotfoot back up the trail, weaving the horse as he went.

Behind a boulder I was tucked out of the firing line and safe from the rearing horse. My heart leapt. 'Father was here'; I was rescued! I heard two riders take off after Ice.

The horse quietened and a pair of brown, moccasined legs appeared under its belly. It was with a sinking feeling that I realised there was no beadwork on the rolled down moccasins and the toe turn-up was not like mine. As I stared in consternation a gruff voice spoke with a strange accent from behind me. "Get up *ishkiin*."^{vi}

Slowly I rose and turned. I saw staring at me a strange Indian, his long fingers casually holding an old Springfield rifle across his chest. "*Duc-do-e*?"^{vii} he demanded. I took in his short-sleeved buckskin and war cap with silver concho and black bearskin. Standing proud I replied with disdain "*Ndi-nde-zn*!"^{viii}

Three more men approached. One held a lance, another a straight hardwood bow with a black-shafted arrow on the string. I knew them for Tonto Apaches, a war band from the tangled valleys and high forests of the Mogollon Rim. Not enemies, but not exactly friends either.

"What are you doing with these *pindah*?" The leader of the war band demanded.

"They captured me; they said they would sell me to the Mexicans for a slave. I am glad you have killed them, for on that horse are many scalps of the *Nde*. They said they could sell them in Mexico!"

At that moment Vander coughed bloodily. We all turned. The rattail moustache was flecked with a pink froth. He was trying desperately to pull his body away. The Tontos drew knives. "Enjuh, this one can pay!" Vander stared with horrified eyes as they advanced, struggled again mightily, coughed a huge stream of blood into the sand, and died.

The Tontos, disappointed, turned back to me. I held myself as tall and as proud as I could. How would they treat me?

The leader of the war band appraised me for long moments. Finally he spoke; "You are not full-blood Nde, but your heart is strong. You shall be of our clan now. We are travelling fast to meet with others and raid the Mexicans for cloth and powder. You will be in charge of the horses. It is my word!" He turned away and spoke to the other warriors. "Work quickly, build a scaffold and a hot fire so we can send their hair to our brethren in the 'homes for the dead'. Strip the *pindah* and then make sure they will not be whole to trouble any one of us in the time beyond. We wait only to learn of the last one's death, and then we must ride like the hot wind to be on time for the meet in the Sierra Madre."

As the others went about his orders he turned to me; "It is best you become one of us now."

He turned away and left me with desperate thoughts. "This was better than Mexican slavery, but what had happened to my friends? I just want to go home."

A pyre for the scalps was quickly built and lit. By which time the two Tontos who went after Ice had returned and ridden up to their leader. "He has gone quick, but is already disguising his trail. It could take a day at least to catch him. Shall we do it?"

"We must not miss the rendezvous. His time will come. That dun, give it to our new recruit, the *ishkiin* here. Let's ride. We stop only at nightfall!"

It was not long before we rode out in a long line. It could almost have been accidental that I was in the middle of the band.



As dark shadows gathered around the pyre and its greasy smoke signal climbed out of the canyon the Tonto band followed. Cutting left and right they zigzagged upward chasing the retreating line of golden sunlight.

It was a cold hard night for me. A dry camp on the edge of a sandy wash where night caught us with only a sip of water. This really was becoming a bit too much adventure!

The next day started early with a demand to help give the horses a few mouthfuls of water squeezed from a cloth. When that was done I was allowed to drink and given some pemmican to chew as we mounted and rode out. Their leader seemed to know the trail well and within the hour we came to Shute Springs and were able to water the horses and ourselves properly, though we didn't rest, but pushed on

for the Pinal Mountains. That night we camped amongst the piñon pines close to a small chuckling stream. The Tontos were friendly and insistent that I was to become one of them. The leader said that if I performed well on the raid then someone would be sure to adopt me into their family. I was given a rather smelly, but at least warm, blanket to sleep in. Rolled up at the edge of the firelight I listened as they talked of the trail ahead. They would skirt the Dripping Spring Mountains and cross the Gila river into the Tortilla range. The Santa Catalina and Rincon Mountains would lead them down to the border and into the Sierra Madre. Every day would take me further from my own family and clan. I went to sleep determined to look for any chance to get away.

Again we started at first light and pushed hard, watering at the crossing of the Gila in the early afternoon. Out of the Gila valley we came into an arid, cactus-ridden land of rocks and dry washes. Here and there giant saguaros stood sentinel to the long years of their growing. The air was thick with heat and time. Weary though I was, I kept a careful eye out for any chance of escape.

It was not much of one when I saw it. A short distance ahead, the trail was forced around a huge boulder, then there was a short stretch of pea-gravel from some hidden wash, followed by what seemed to be an extensive field of cholla. What caught my eye was the thin thread of a game trail crossing the gravel and going into the cacti. A slim chance but I might not get a better. I would take it. As my horse rounded the huge boulder I was momentarily out of sight of the Indian behind me. Slipping from the horse I ran the slim trail that headed for a small gap in the cholla. Five paces and a shout, followed by an arrow that nearly tripped me as I dived into the gap. I was almost out of sight when what felt like a stone from a sling hit my leg. As hooves kicked up dust behind me I saw a small deer track heading deeper into the thicket. Plunging onward I felt a new stab of pain from my leg. Hidden for a moment deep in the cholla I stopped, lungs gasping for air. I didn't want to look at my leg, but I hissed through my teeth when I saw the arrow stuck into the back of my thigh, a ribbon of blood running down the shaft and dripping to ball in the sand. 'The pain will get worse; I must snap the shaft off now whilst shock is still holding back the hurting,' I thought. Taking a deep breath I twisted round to grasp the shaft and snapped it off a hand's breadth from my thigh. I couldn't help a gasp. A call came from behind me. I turned and moved as swiftly as possible, gritting my teeth against the growing pain and striving to imagine myself a deer escaping the grasping cactus spines. Suddenly I came upon a clearing. I knew I must cross quickly before they surrounded the cholla clump. Three running leaps and I was across and able to crawl through a narrow gap into another denser thicket. From the clearing behind me I heard thudding hooves that pulled up. The Tonto shouted to the others; "He is hit." He moved the horse closer to the thicket trying to see in; I cowered. "Come out little fool. We can treat your wound, won't hold it against you." I had a good idea that the treatment would likely be permanent. They would not nurse me, or slow themselves up for a boy barely adopted. As the Tonto moved a bit further off I pushed myself on

into a rock-choked arroyo. If they really wanted me they would have to crawl in here on hands and knees. Horses sounded from somewhere above me, and then voices:

"Pah, he's not worth the time or trouble; he's losing blood and will only hold us back. Let's ride."

"Ha-ah", came grunted agreement from the rest of the band and they moved off.

As silence descended so did my spirits. It was a bad wound. I ripped a strip from my breech clout and bound it round the arrow stump and the bleeding did at least slow. But it was going to have to come out and I knew it would have to be pushed through. I could not manage that. Like my desperate thoughts, a darkness seemed to be gathering at the edges of my vision. I thought of my father and as I slipped into unconsciousness, prayed to Yussen that he would come soon.

I woke shivering and dreadfully thirsty as the first light skimmed my rocky hideaway. I must find some help for my wound and some water; the closest for either would be the Gila. Luckily I still had my knife. With it I was able to trim a mesquite branch for a crude crutch. It was hard to do, I had to stop and rest frequently. It was well light before I was ready to try to walk.

Through that long day I struggled slowly down the trail. At times I felt like everything was so clear and bright that the distant vermilion mountains were within touching distance. At others it seemed night was hard upon me, or I would wake finding myself slumped on the ground, my leg on fire. Around noon time I came upon a barrel cactus that furnished me with the dank pulp from its heart. It was not much but the few drops of moisture seemed wonderful as I squeezed them onto the dry stick of a tongue I had in my mouth. For a while I felt better and made progress before shadows again seemed to gather around the edges of my sight. I was trying to use the throbbing of my thigh as one might a Ga'an drum to drive myself onward, ten throbs to a halting limping pace. At least I was moving forward, toward something. Whether a fevered death amongst the rocks and ants, or some relief to my raging thirst if I could reach the waters of the Gila. So on I pushed concentrating on each step. Each one showing another few feet of dusty ground. My wandering mind tracking the marks of ant or deer as if it could follow their journey to home and safety.

I don't know how many steps I made but it seemed that night was closing about me, though was it truth, or my last waning sight, I knew not. I just made another step. I tried to lick my lips but the stick in my mouth...



I felt cold and the darkness seemed a freezing blanket wrapped around me. A stone eating its slow way into my knee awoke pains that had been assuaged by my passing out. Now I felt the night close around me. I rolled over so that the cold light of the stars could give me focus. After a while I stopped shivering and found a

feeling of peace filling me from the slow warmth of the sand underneath. I decided that it was not so bad to go to uncle Cho'-Atze this way. As I composed myself to go, red sparks flared in the corner of my eye. Slowly I turned my head and saw firelight reflected of a rock face. In my mind uncle told me it was my father come to rescue me. With an effort I rolled over and somehow pushed myself to my feet, stumbling I made for the flickering light that had been lit by my father... I staggered to my feet with the aid of my crude crutch and dragging my fiery leg headed for the fire. It seemed to keep on moving away as I struggled to reach it, and the shadows in my mind seemed to creep closer again. As they closed in I staggered into the fire light. And as I fell I heard as if from the bottom of a deep canyon, the words of the *pindah*. I knew it was not my father.

"My goodness, what on this Good Earth is that?"

I was brought round by water being carefully poured between my dry lips. I struggled to sit up. Another strange one voice was speaking quietly, if with some difficulty, in accented Apache. "Lie still, *ishkiini*. You will not be harmed." A cold wet cloth was placed on my forehead, and as I drifted in and out of consciousness I listened to the words around me.

The soft voiced man was replying to a question I had missed. "He's Apache, Ma-am, White Mountain I'd say from his moccasins. Come a ways with that arrow in his leg, the fever is in him now..."

A voice that made me think of my mother replied; "Can you not cut it out, Mister Rountree?"

"Waal... It'd have to be hammered through I'm thinkin'. In too deep fer cuttin'."

"We should take what measures we can to save the youngster's life. It is our Christian duty."

A man answered; "It would be as well to do it quickly, would it not Mister Rountree, before any infection gets a seat?"

"Indeed, ya Reverence. Do ya have any whiskey, to dull the pain and clean the wound?"

"I am afraid not. What you call 'whisky' in America would hardly be used to doctor sheep at home. I decline to carry any."

"Waal, I'll admit it's rough medicine, but there's times it's a sight better than chawin' hide. I'll jest go ask Flynn, there's a fair chance he'll have some stashed somewhere in his possibles."

I was aware of the man leaving and realised that the woman had knelt at my side and turned the cloth cooling my face. Half thinking it was my mother I tried to speak; "D... Diolch^{ix}."

Clara Snell turned to her husband, the Reverend Frederick Snell. "Fred, what did he say? It was not English nor like Mister Rountree's words, but sounded somehow familiar."

"How extraordinary, my dear. I think that was Welsh. Do you not remember the maid we had? And observe his red hair. He seems at least part Celt. Perhaps it

was more truth than fancy, the old stories of the earliest settlers of the New World finding Gaelic speakers."

As I passed again into the fever Clara leaned over me with another wetted cloth. "As thy day, so shall thy strength be," she murmured...



I woke spluttering as hot and vile fire burned in my throat. "Steady, *ishkiini*," the buckskin-clad Cap Rountree said. "Ya need this, whilst I git thet arrow out."

I spat out the vile liquid and shook my head. Cap looked into my eyes for a long moment. "Doo dat'ée da^x." He put a piece of leather between my teeth. "It's easier on your chawin' gear than grindin'! Ya understand I've got to drive thet arrow right through?" I nodded. "Bite hard and turn over a mite so's I can get to it."

He swiftly peeled away the blood-clotted cloth from the arrow shaft and doused the red, inflamed skin with whiskey that burned. He reached for a chunk of fire wood.

Clara intoned; "Bless the Lord Oh My Soul - and forget not all His benefits."

Cap smote the end of the shaft.

I was glad of the hard leather that gave as my teeth bit deep into it. A white-hot shaft of pain drove through my thigh and the beat of the hammer blow became the beat of my own heart...

Glossary.

K'a-o-nih - Flying Arrow

Tsikali – Woodpecker

Lika – He who claps

Ko'-bitset - Fire-head.

Ighal – Small bell

Delzine – Black Ant

Gozhoo – Happy one

Cholla - cactus with hooked spines, pronounced choya'.

Endnotes:

Chapter 1:

ⁱ Ga-an dancers represent important spirits in Apache religion.

ⁱⁱ The Sonoran authorities put a bounty on Apache scalps in the 1830's, other areas did also. One of the many sources of hatred between Mexican and Apache.

ⁱⁱⁱ Traditional Welsh song - Longing for Meirionydd

'By the sea there is a mountain,

Which hides the vale of Merionydd,
I will never glimpse it again.
Before my gentle heart breaks.’

Chapter 2:

^{iv} Ritual pollen collected from cattails, giving a power of peace and favour.

^v William Wolfskill was an early trader who trailed from Santa Fe to California.

Chapter 3.

^{vi} Boy.

^{vii} 'Flies in Their Soup People' of the Cibicue Apaches

^{ix} Thank you in Welsh.

^x Okay.