



Weird Western Quarterly #9
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Published: 2008

Categorie(s): Fiction, Fan Fiction, Westerns

Tag(s): western comics DC2 windrunner

Weird Western Quarterly
Issue #9: "Inherit the Wind, Part 2 - Revelations"
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1838:

He didn't know where to begin. So much had happened to him since he'd left home... how in the world could he sum it all up on a few paltry sheets of paper? He started to lay down a few words, hesitated, laid down a few more, then crumpled the sheet up in frustration and threw it as far as he could. *I can't do this*, Chris Maxwell thought. *I know I should, but dammit, I can't even figure out what to call them!*

He got up and stretched his legs — he'd been sitting cross-legged in front of Hawk's tipi for almost an hour, forcing himself to try and start a letter to his grandparents back in Manchester. Obviously, it wasn't going to happen, at least not today. Chris knew he should at least let them know he was alive, but beyond that... what? What did he have to say to them? He wasn't as angry with them as he'd been all those months ago, when he'd stumbled across the truth, but there was still a discomfort there, this feeling that Elias would never be happy with him unless he toed the line and played the good son. Chris shook his head, thinking, *But I'm not his son, I never was. It was all just part of this big damn lie, and I don't know if I can forgive him for that.*

Then there was the matter of trying to explain Echo Valley. He'd been living there for over four months now, and Chris still couldn't find the words to describe it properly — "A virtual Eden", his father had called it when he wrote to his mother long ago, but even that seemed an understatement some days. Though Chris had first come to the valley in the midst of winter, the place had a lushness to it even then, a pulse of life that went beyond the people living there and seemed to be present in the very soil. Hawk said it was because of the magic his ancestors placed

over it, but Chris still refused to believe in that nonsense. He did his best to be tolerant of the notion, however: he was a guest here, after all, and wasn't about to ridicule these people for their beliefs.

There were a few odd things about this place that he couldn't reasonably explain away, though, like what they called "the blessings of the valley". When Chris was well enough, Hawk and Small Eagle showed him around the area, which included taking him past the supposed "border" where the magic stopped — when they told Chris to turn around, Echo Valley was gone, and he saw only the jagged, foreboding rocks that he'd seen when he first arrived with Big Pierre. He immediately dismissed it as some trick of the eye... but when he went to say so to Hawk and Small Eagle, he saw that they were gone as well. He spent the next couple of hours wandering about the mountainside, completely unable to find his way back to the valley, then the two men suddenly showed up once more and led Chris back, easy as you please. The next day, the whole tribe gathered to witness the ceremony that would allow Chris to "see" the valley just as well as them. Again, Chris tolerated their beliefs, letting their shaman Wise Owl paint designs on his face and chant over him as he knelt on the ground, but when it was over and they took him to the same spot as before, Chris really *did* see the valley now, clear as day. He tried to chalk it up as some form of hypnosis, but that didn't explain why he couldn't see Echo Valley in the first place. "Because you weren't supposed to," was all Hawk would say whenever Chris pressed him about it. "You were a stranger, and a white man at that, so... " Hawk would then smile and shrug, as if that said it all.

Chris had come to expect those sort of conversations with Hawk: while the man was intelligent and rather well-read for someone raised in the wilderness (as was his brother), he had a casual attitude when it came to certain facts. Whenever Chris disagreed with something Hawk had said, the older man would hear him out, nod, and simply say, "Different minds, different thoughts." No argument, no forcing Chris to see things from his point of view, just a nod and acceptance that the young man had an opinion that differed from his own. It was a drastic change from the atmosphere Chris had grown up in, and it took some time to adjust. The two of them never stopped talking, though, often going for long walks through the valley as they did so. Hawk would usually slip in a lesson of some sort on those walks as well, showing Chris how to read a trail or the proper way to set a snare — again, it was all done in that

casual way Hawk had, not forcing the lesson, just letting it happen as the opportunity to teach arose. And he'd taught Chris a lot as a result; while he wasn't sure if he could handle being completely alone out in the wild yet, he certainly had more experience now than when he'd first stumbled into Howling Forks.

The sound of laughter nearby broke Chris out of his ruminations. Small Eagle's children were running about the outside of their family's tipi, which was set up not far from Hawk's, giggling and shrieking as Small Eagle's eldest boy chased his little sister around with a fat bullfrog in his hands, doing his level best to drop it down the back of her deerskin dress. Around the fourth or fifth lap, Small Eagle himself came out of the tipi to see what all the commotion was about. Upon witnessing the deadly peril his little girl was in, he scooped her up in his arms and held her as high as he could, smiling up at her. The girl smiled down, spreading her arms as if to fly away and laughing. As Chris watched, he recalled his grandfather playing with him like that when he was about their age... then he pushed the memory away as that taint of the lie crept over it. Nothing about his life looked the same anymore because of that, not even pleasant memories.

Small Eagle caught sight of the young man standing there watching them and called out, "Is something wrong there, Chris?"

"No, just thinking." Then to further obscure the trail, he asked, "Has anybody seen Hawk yet?"

"Not that I've heard. Don't worry, this is perfectly normal behavior for him."

"If you say so." Three days before, Hawk had told Chris that he was going off to have a think by himself for a while. Chris figured that the man would be back in a few hours, and when Hawk didn't show, Small Eagle and his family had to talk Chris out of searching for him. "How do you know he didn't get hurt or something?" he asked Small Eagle now as the man played with his children.

"I just know, that's all," he replied. "Same as I know when the rains are coming, or if a hunt will go well. It's just... there." He tapped a finger against his temple. "It's never steered me wrong before."

Chris tried not to scoff. He'd heard about Small Eagle's supposed clairvoyance before, and he didn't believe in it any more now than he had four months ago. Both of the brothers claimed that their grandfather, Grey Elk, had a touch of it as well, and had predicted many things, including the arrival of their father in Echo Valley, which was a fairly odd tale in itself. But just like their claims about the valley being magic, Chris didn't put any stock in them — try as he might, he couldn't reconcile all these superstitious notions with nearly two decades of rational, civilized living. "If he's not back by tomorrow, will you humor me and go looking for him?" the young man asked.

"Sure thing... but it won't come to that," Small Eagle answered as he placed his daughter on his shoulders. "In the meantime, try to finish that letter, okay?"

"How did you know I... " he started to say, then glanced back towards Hawk's tipi — the paper and jar of ink were still sitting in plain view. Nothing magic there, just common sense. "Sure, I'll try."

Small Eagle gave him a nod, then took his little boy by the hand and started to walk towards the lake, leaving Chris alone once more. The young man resumed his place in front of the tipi, picked up a fresh sheet of paper, and stared at it for nearly a half-hour before giving the task up for good that day.

Hawk finally showed up again that night. Chris had been sound asleep inside the tipi when the man came in and shook him awake — once he'd achieved a state of semi-consciousness, Chris sat up and glared at him, saying,

"Where have you been? I was beginning to think you were dead!"

"Far from it," Hawk replied. "I just needed some time to think 'bout a few things, and I find it easier to do such when I'm by myself." He settled back on his haunches and regarded Chris. "Spent a lot of time thinking about you, actually."

"I'm flattered, but please don't run off like that again, okay?"

The older man nodded, but it seemed an absent-minded gesture, then he said, "I'm thinking it's about time I head out on the trail again. Not a little jaunt like I just did, mind you, I mean a long haul. Visit some of the other tribes out there, make sure the whites nearby are behaving properly." He grinned. "You've gotta keep an eye on them white folks. They'll think that they own the world if'n you don't remind 'em every once in a while that there's other people out there."

"When do you think you'll be back?"

"Don't know. Usually, I spend 'bout four months or so traveling, then come on back for a spell. Depends on how long the mood to wander strikes me. One time, I stayed gone for close to two years... met a lot of nice folk in that time."

Chris yawned and started to stretch back out again. "Well, I hope you don't stay away for *that* long. I'm having a hard enough time trying to figure out what to do with myself around here."

"Actually, I was figuring on you heading out with me, maybe try your hand at trapping or some such, something that'll help you support yourself if'n you're gonna stay out here in the wilderness."

That woke him up the rest of the way. "You really think I'm ready for that?"

"You're at least ready to give it a shot. You've still got a little more to learn, but I can only teach you so far... sooner or later, you've gotta start doing, son."

The man did have a point: what good would all these lessons from Hawk do him if he never put them to use? It seemed fitting, Chris supposed, that he at least try and take up the sort of tasks that his father had performed during his time out west. "Was my father any good at it? Trapping and tracking and all that?"

"He wasn't bad. If'n he hadn't died, I reckon he would've gotten a lot

better." Hawk patted him on the shoulder and said, "You think on it for a day or two... and don't feel that you *have* to do it just 'cause your father did. Everybody's got to be their own man." He moved over to the other side of the tipi and stretched out on the bed of hides laying there, not even bothering to take off his mud-caked boots.

Chris stretched back out himself, tucking his hands behind his head and staring up at the smoke-hole in the top of the tipi — he could see a few stars sparkling in the small patch of sky beyond. Despite all the months he'd spent away from home, despite all the conversations with Hawk, he was still undecided about what to do with his life. Should he be a man of the wilderness, living by his wits and what the land provided, or should he return to the civilized life that he'd known for so long, if for no other reason than it was what he was accustomed to?

By noontime the next day, Chris had decided to hit the trail with Hawk... and judging by the simple nod the man gave when he told him, Chris got the impression that Hawk knew what the answer would be before Chris himself did.

They departed a week later, amid well-wishes from nearly everyone in the tribe, some going so far as to bestow upon Chris a few gifts, simple things that might come in handy out in the wilderness. Even Small Eagle's wife, Laughing River, gave him something to help him remember his time in the valley: an image of a bird intricately carved from a small, polished black stone with a rawhide thong attached. "It is a thunderbird," she explained as she looped it around Chris's neck, "a rare and sacred animal. It acts as a messenger for the Great Spirit, and to be in its favor can bring one good luck." He smiled and thanked her, finding himself genuinely touched — though he didn't share their beliefs, he did admire the skill it took to make such a charm.

Only one member of the tribe seemed indifferent to them leaving: Wise Owl, who stood silently by with a stony look on his face as they mounted up. Chris remarked on this as they made their way on the winding path up the side of Table Mountain, and Hawk merely shrugged and said, "Uncle Wise Owl's always been like that, always serious about

everything. Mom used to say that he was no fun to grow up with.”

“I’ll bet he wasn’t.” To be honest, Chris was glad to get away from Wise Owl for a while. Something about the shaman had unnerved him since the first time he’d met the man, and Chris always felt uncomfortable whenever he was around. Perhaps it was his imagination, but during his entire time in the valley, he had the nagging sensation that the man was constantly watching him, as if Wise Owl was truly living up to his moniker and Chris was nothing more than a field mouse.

After a stop in Howling Forks for more supplies, the duo headed southeast, traveling at a leisurely pace across the open landscape. There were very few people living that far out in the wilderness, but Hawk seemed to know just where all those pockets of humanity dwelled. As they moved from one place to the next, spending time with a small tribe of Indians that was still trying to live as their ancestors did or looking in on some adventurous white family that had settled far from the usual trails, Chris began to see a different side of Hawk: the man acted as a sort of diplomat for these people, bridging the gap between the white world and the red, making sure that they coexisted as peacefully as possible. Now he understood why the name of Tom Hawkins was so well-known, despite how isolated the man’s own people were.

In between those goodwill visits, Hawk would put Chris through the paces of true wilderness living. The young man would have to provide both food and shelter for the two of them without one shred of help, and there were nights when they’d end up eating nothing but dry jerky because Chris had missed a shot or failed to set up a trap proper. As always, Hawk never lectured, and he would only offer advice when Chris asked for it. “Even if you fail, you’re still learning,” Hawk pointed out one night as Chris cooked a rabbit over their campfire. “Trust me, you’re doing pretty good for a greenhorn.”

“If you say so.” He turned the stick the rabbit was skewered on over the fire — it was a skinny little thing, barely enough for the two of them. “I suppose if I was doing really horrible, you would’ve stepped in by now.”

“I don’t know, I kind of like this arrangement: you doing all the work and me reaping all the benefits... small as they may be.” Hawk gestured

to the rabbit with a smile, then said, "But I reckon the big issue here is what *you* think of all this. We've only been out on the trail for a couple of months... would you be able to handle doing this all the time? Possibly on your own?"

"Maybe... but I think we should wait until I've bagged a decent meal before you turn me loose."

Not long after, they stopped to visit with a tribe of Blackfoot that lived not far from Fort Collins. While the government had displaced many tribes as the United States expanded westward, this particular band had managed to strike up a deal with the commander of the nearby fort, and had so far been left in peace. Unfortunately, things were becoming rather tense as of late, due to more whites settling in the area. Rumors were spreading that the soldiers could show up any day and round up the whole tribe, forcing them to march off to some distant location that held no appeal for the whites yet.

When the two of them showed up in camp, the tribe's chief immediately approached Hawk and asked for his help in the matter. "Jesus, I knew this would happen eventually," he muttered after he was told about the situation, then he turned to Chris. "This is probably gonna take a while to sort out, son. You just keep yourself outta trouble 'til I'm done, okay?" Before Chris could even answer, Hawk started to walk off towards a large tipi along with the chief and a few other Blackfoot.

Chris looked at the other Indians standing nearby. Many had the same expression that he'd seen when they'd stopped to visit with other tribes along the trail: that look of instant distrust, simply because he was white. He couldn't recall anyone in Echo Valley ever giving him that look, but then again, they hadn't experienced the hardships that the rest of their people had. Chris smiled and did his best to look friendly, but it didn't appear to sway them. *Just don't do anything to upset them and you'll be fine*, he thought. *They know you came with Hawk, and they respect him... hopefully, that'll be enough.*

As he waited for Hawk to finish his business, Chris wandered about the camp. He couldn't figure out why, but something about the place seemed familiar. It resembled many of the other Indian encampments they'd visited over the past few months, so he attributed the feeling of

deja vu to that... until he caught sight of a lone tipi on the east side of the camp with a simple zigzagging line, like a child's rendering of a lightning bolt turned sideways, painted in red on the stitched hide. Suddenly, the feeling of familiarity turned into a cold lump of fear in his gut. "This is impossible," he said under his breath as he approached the tipi, his hand reaching out to touch the design — everything about it was identical to the one he'd seen in his dream many months ago, he was sure of it. "But that *was* a dream, that's all it was. This can't be the same... " He shook his head, as if trying to wake up. "It's just a weird coincidence, that's all. This is probably some very common Indian symbol that you caught sight of somewhere else and your brain later jumbled into your dream *and it doesn't mean a damn thing!*"

Chris heard a chuckle behind him, and he let out a yelp. He turned around to see a very old Indian standing there, clad only in deerskin breeches, his long, snowy-white hair blowing in the breeze. He regarded Chris for a moment, then looked at the design on the tipi, which Chris still had a hand laid upon. "Oh... sorry, I'm sorry," Chris stammered, and pulled his hand away. "I was just... I'm not sure what I was doing, I... "

The Indian gently took hold of the young man's hand, then placed it back on the design, his own winkled tan hand laying on top of Chris's smooth pale one. An eerie silence passed, then the Indian said in a wavering voice, "*Ahwehota.*"

"I'm sorry, I don't speak your language," Chris said. "I know a few words, but... "

"They spoke to you," the old man said in English, the words coming out slowly. "They wore your father's face... so you would listen." He reached up with his other hand and touched the thunderbird charm hanging around Chris's neck. "When they first spoke to me, they took this form... but I have seen many others since then."

"What are you talking about? Who's 'they'?"

The Indian gestured around them, saying, "The spirits... of wind, of lightning, of thunder. They led you from your home so you could receive the gift... like I did."

"I don't believe in spirits," Chris told him flatly as he pulled his hand away. "Nobody led me anywhere, I came out west of my own volition."

The Indian smiled. "If this is so, then tell me... what set fire to your barn?"

"How did... what... *who told you about that?*" Chris glared at the old man. "Did Hawk tell you? Is he playing some stupid joke on me?"

"I did not speak with the Son of Tomahawk... but I know who you are, Christopher Maxwell. I know you think that you have no past, no future... because of one lie. I also know the spirits sent you a vision. A great evil is coming, and only you can stop it."

"I just told you: I don't believe in spirits. And I don't believe in visions either." The fear Chris had been feeling had been replaced by annoyance — while there were still some bizarre coincidences going on here, he certainly wasn't about to chalk them up to some mythological nonsense. He turned on his heel and began to walk away, but before he got more than five steps, the old man was blocking his path. Chris stopped short, thinking, *How'd he get in front of me so fast?* Then he said aloud, "Look, I don't know who you are, or who put you up to this, but it's not funny, so leave me alone!" He went to step around, and once again, his path was blocked — how such a withered-looking old man could move so quickly was beyond him. With a grunt, Chris started to reach out so he could push the man to the side, only to find himself grasping empty air as the Indian literally vanished before his eyes — there was a moment where he thought he could see right through the old man, then there was nothing to see through at all. The young man yelped like he'd done earlier, pulling his hand back and cradling it to his chest as if he'd been bit. "What was that?" he gasped. "*What* in God's name was *that?*"

Once more, there was a chuckle behind him. Chris looked and saw that the Indian was standing beside the tipi just as he'd been before. "The spirits told me you would be stubborn," he said with a smile. "When you are ready to believe, I will be here."

Still cradling his hand, Chris responded in the only fashion he could think of at that moment: he ran like Hell in the opposite direction.

By the time Chris got back to the chief's tipi, Hawk was just emerging with the others. They still appeared to be discussing things in the Blackfoot's native tongue, but when Hawk caught sight of Chris and the disturbed look on the young man's face, he came right over and asked what was the matter. "Nothing," Chris replied as he stole a glance over his shoulder. "Any chance we can get out of here now?"

"In a minute." Hawk turned back to the chief and spoke a few words, to which the chief appeared to reply in the affirmative. With a respectful nod, Hawk left the man and began to walk towards where they'd left their mounts, saying to Chris, "I was hoping to share in their hospitality for a few nights, but going by the stuff Chief Two Horses told me, I think I'd better get over to Fort Collins before things get any worse."

Fort Collins was nearly a good eight hours' ride from the encampment, and though they hadn't reached it by the time the sun set, Hawk decided that they'd be better off waiting until dawn to finish the journey, just in case some sentry with an itchy trigger finger got the wrong idea about two figures approaching in the dark. After a small meal, the two of them stretched out on their bedrolls on opposite sides of the campfire, and Hawk busied himself with rolling them some cigarettes from his poke. As he worked, Chris asked him, "Why did you tell that old Indian all that stuff about me?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Back in the Blackfoot camp, this Indian came up and started talking all sorts of crazy things. He knew my name, he knew about me leaving home, and when I pressed him about it, he said the spirits told him all this stuff."

"What did he look like?"

"Old, very old. His hair was all white, and his face... he looked *really* old."

"Was he fast?"

"He was *scary*, that's what he was. At one point he just... I swear, he vanished right in front of me."

Hawk smiled and nodded, saying, "*Ahwehota*."

Chris's eyes widened. "He said the same thing to me. What does it mean?"

"That's his name. It's Blackfoot for 'He who runs beyond the wind'." He handed Chris one of the cigarettes he'd made, then lit his own with a twig he'd plucked from the edge of the fire. "He took the name a long time ago, after he gained his powers and was made the tribe's shaman. He's slowed down quite a bit these days, but from what I've been told, he really lived up to it when he was a much younger man. I've heard stories about him outracing tornadoes, or moving so fast that the ground caught fire."

"Uh-huh." The young man's voice had taken on the doubting tone that it always did whenever Hawk talked like that. "So now you're gonna claim that the spirits really did tell him all that stuff about me, and you never said a word?"

"When would I have had the time to tell him *anything*? You saw me go into the tipi with Two Horses and the others right after we got into camp. Honestly, I'm surprised Ahwehota's still alive... like you said, he's *really* old."

Chris lit his cigarette and took a drag. "Okay, you've got a point... but I wonder who *did* tell him about me."

"You said it yourself: the spirits told him."

"Oh, come off it, Hawk!"

The man raised his eyebrows at Chris's outburst, but went on anyways. "Ahwehota's been able to commune with the spirits since he was a little boy, or at least that's what he says. Reckon that's the reason why they granted him his powers in the first place." Hawk smoked a little more,

then said, "Question is, why are the spirits yapping in his ear about *you*?"

"It was all nonsense," Chris muttered. "Nonsense and coincidence."

"What was? C'mon, humor me, son. What did Ahwehota say?"

The young man sighed in defeat. "He kept telling me that I'd had a vision."

"Well, did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Have a vision. 'Cause if'n you did, I'd love to hear it. Ain't met many white folks that've had visions before."

"It wasn't a vision, it was just..." Chris sighed again. "After my fight with Big Pierre, I had a dream about my father. I chased after him, but I couldn't catch up, and then I... I found this Indian tribe that'd been slaughtered, and some soldiers, and there was this..." A hand unconsciously went to his throat, then he said, "It was just a dream, that's all. Dreams don't mean anything."

Hawk didn't respond. He finished up his cigarette and threw the butt into the fire, then stretched out on his bedroll. After a minute, he said, "I really wish you wouldn't dismiss such things out-of-hand, Chris. It was fine before, but now... now it's dangerous."

There was a disappointed tone in the man's voice, one which Chris had never heard Hawk take before, and it bothered him — he felt like all the respect that he'd earned from the man had just been chucked out the window. "I'm sorry, Hawk, but... I just don't see things the way you do." The older man said nothing, and Chris soon laid down himself, watching the fire between them slowly die down as he drifted off to sleep.

It was still early when the two of them reached Fort Collins, and after a brief talk with the man at the gates, they were admitted. Though it was mainly a military installation, it also acted as a way station for any civilians headed west, and there were many a trapper or hunter mingling with the soldiers on the grounds. Not long after they dismounted, Chris spotted a familiar face, and called out, "Hey, MacHenry! Over here!"

"Maxwell? Is that really you?" The trapper approached them, looking Chris up and down in amazement. "Damnation, son, I thought you was dead!" He clapped the young man on the back so hard he almost knocked him over. "Big Pierre up an' disappeared 'round the same time you did... y'all know anything 'bout that?"

Chris looked over at Hawk, who tactfully replied, "There was a bit of an incident." He then offered his hand and a warm smile. "I'm Tom Hawkins, by the way."

"Ah, the infamous Tom Hawkins, at last." MacHenry gave him a good firm handshake, saying, "I've heard the name many a time, but this is the first time I've ever seen you in the flesh. To be honest, when Maxwell turned up lookin' for you, I figured it to be a lost cause, but it looks like I was wrong." He turned back to Chris. "You ever find out 'bout that other fella? Cramer or whatever?"

"Crandall... Jim Crandall," Chris answered quietly. "Yeah, I found out."

"Good, that's real good. Doin' pretty good myself. Finally decided to take a tracker's job for the Army... ain't so bad, havin' steady work." MacHenry grinned at the both of them and hitched thumb towards another section of the fort. "Listen, why don't y'all follow me over to the barracks? I'm sure one of the guys has a bottle of whiskey stashed in his gear somewheres."

"Maybe later," Hawk said. "Right now, I've got to speak with the commander... but I'm sure Chris would love to join you in a belt."

"Hawk, you know I don't..." But it was too late: MacHenry had tossed an arm around Chris's shoulders and was steering him towards the barracks. The young man looked back to see Hawk flagging down a nearby

soldier, and Chris had the sneaking suspicion that he'd been ditched on purpose.

There were already a good many men gathered in the barracks, some passing around the aforementioned whiskey, others playing cards for what little pay they got as trackers and scouts for the Army. When MacHenry told them that Chris was a friend of Tom Hawkins, they welcomed him into their fold like he was a seasoned frontiersman, never mind that a year ago he didn't know the first thing about surviving in the wilderness. As he got comfortable around them (and he'd put away a couple of shots... just to be polite, of course), he began to relate what few experiences he'd had so far under Hawk's tutelage, which started the other men telling their own stories, many of them rather boastful. All in all, they were good men, and Chris rather enjoyed their company — it was a nice change from all the months spent with only Hawk to talk to.

It was getting on near midday when Hawk showed up in the barracks to collect Chris, and by then, the young man was beginning to feel a little tipsy from all the "polite" drinks he'd taken — he swayed slightly when he got off the bunk he'd been sitting on. "Son, I do believe you're sloshed," Hawk said.

"I'm fine, really. I just... I can walk it off." He took a few steps, then walked right into another bunk and almost fell over. Some of the scouts watching let out a guffaw.

"Reckon you'll be safer if'n you do your walking outside." Hawk took hold of Chris's arm and carefully steered him out of the barracks. "You're not gonna sick up on me, are you?"

"No, no... maybe." He leaned against the side of the building, his eyes closed. "Ugh... didn't realize how much I'd put away 'til I got up."

"Well, at least tell me you had fun."

"Yeah, it was pretty fun. They seemed impressed that I was traveling with you... felt like I was riding on your coattails a bit, though." He straightened up as best he could and asked, "How'd it go with the C.O.? Everything get smoothed over?"

"Mostly, but it still doesn't look good." Hawk leaned against the building himself. "The white settlers coming in are complaining to the Army that the Blackfoot are hunting on their land and taking their livestock, but the whites don't seem to understand that they went and set up housekeeping right in the middle of the Blackfoot's territory. I got the commander to agree to talk with any more settlers heading into the area about just where the borders are, and to warn them of the consequences if they don't listen, but the ones that're already here are staying put, and the Blackfoot are just gonna have to work around them. It ain't the best solution, but the only other choice is relocation... of the Blackfoot, mind you, not the settlers." He sighed and said, "Same old, same old: treaties ain't worth the paper they're written on, and the Army would rather give the Indians the shaft than stick by their word."

"I'm sorry," Chris said, and he meant it. While he certainly wasn't responsible for the predicament, he couldn't in good conscience agree with the double-standard the government maintained with the natives. "So, what do we do now? Head back to the Blackfoot camp and deliver the news?"

"As unpleasant a job as it is... yeah. At least they might take it a little better coming outta my mouth than some hick soldier's."

"I suppose you're right. Let me say goodbye to MacHenry, and we'll... "

"You don't need to say goodbye," Hawk told him. "You're staying here."

Chris looked at him, surprised. "What for? Are you afraid of how they might take the news or something?"

"Nope... I'm cutting you loose." The young man's jaw dropped as Hawk said, "You're a real smart kid, Chris, and you've took to the lessons I've taught you well enough, but I reckon there's some things that I just can't teach you, no matter how hard I try." He looked off across the grounds of the fort. "I hate to admit it, but you ain't never gonna be able to fit into my world proper, so I think it's best that we part ways. I already talked with Colonel Haggard 'bout you staying on here, and he seemed agreeable to it, once I vouched for you. Reckon maybe you can team up with MacHenry."

“Does this have to do with what we were talking about last night? Because if it does, then this isn’t fair!” He jabbed a finger at the older man, saying, “You never had a problem with me disagreeing with you before. ‘Different minds, different thoughts’, that’s what you always said. Now because I don’t believe in what some older-than-dirt Indian said, you want to get rid of me?”

“I’m not getting rid of you, I’m bringing you back to where you belong.” Hawk leveled his gaze at him. “Now don’t go blaming yourself over this — if’n every white man could learn to think like a red man, we wouldn’t have half the problems we do — I just figure that it’s better for you stay with your own people than for me to keep dragging you into situations that you obviously ain’t comfortable in.”

“I was fine with it, I just... dammit.” The young man punched his fist on his thigh in frustration, then said, “Don’t do this to me, Hawk, please. I won’t know what to do with myself if you leave me here like this.”

“Don’t fret ‘bout it, son. Like I said, you’re a real smart kid, and I’m sure you’ll make your way in the world just fine without me.” He put his hands on Chris’s shoulders. “You do me a favor, though: keep an eye on things out here for me. If’n the situation between the Blackfoot and the Army starts to get outta hand, drop a line to Howling Forks for me, okay? Reckon I’ll be heading back that way in a couple months.”

“Sure.” He tried to put up a brave front, but in reality, he already felt lost.

“Trust me, son, this is for the best. You just remember everything I taught you, and you’ll do fine.” He smirked and tapped a finger on Chris’s thunderbird charm. “And if’n you ever get yourself into trouble, don’t be afraid to ask for a little help.”

Chris nodded and put a hand over the charm, and kept it there as he watched the older man walk towards the stables to retrieve his horse. When he realized he was still holding onto it, however, he let his hand drop, shaking his head at his own foolishness.

MacHenry and the others seemed glad to find out that Chris was sticking around Fort Collins, and made room for him in the barracks. They also made quite a few jokes about how they were planning on breaking him in, but the young man's mind was too focused on other matters to be worried about that. Even as he prepared for bed that night, he kept wondering how he'd manage without Hawk watching out for him. But soon sleep overtook his weary mind, bringing dreams that were unpleasantly familiar.

He saw the three dead soldiers again, still suspended from poles and their bodies horribly desecrated, with the ruins of the Indian encampment stretched out behind them. Unlike the first time he saw it, however, he recognized it for sure as the Blackfoot's camp... plus he was fully aware that he was indeed dreaming. *But if that's the case*, he thought as he walked past the corpses strewn about, *how come I can't seem to wake up?* Then Chris spotted the tipi with the zigzagging pattern painted upon it, just as he'd seen it before with both his waking and dreaming eyes. Only this time, he also saw Ahwehota sprawled on the ground before it, and the owl that had attacked Chris in his other dream was sitting atop Ahwehota's chest, picking at the man's bloody scalp with its beak.

The young man froze, then started to back up slowly, but it was too late: the owl let out a terrible screech and took to the air, coming straight at him with its talons extended. Desperate to get away, Chris tried to move faster, but only succeeded in tripping himself up and falling to the ground. He could see the owl descending, flecks of blood on its claws, and before he realized what he was doing, Chris clutched at the thunderbird charm around his neck and held it before him. To his amazement, a shaft of light suddenly shot out of the charm and struck the owl — the animal screamed in pain as its feathers burned away, revealing a very human form. Chris could only lay there, jaw agape, as he looked upon Wise Owl's face twisting in anger, the charm's pure white light illuminating his features in perfect detail. "You really think that can stop me?" Wise Owl spat at him. "You have no power... no faith!" He rushed at Chris, fingernails growing into claws once more as he reached for the young man's throat and...

The sound of a gunshot woke Chris out of his dream. He sat up on his

bunk, staring into the darkness in confusion as he heard more gunshots, followed by the peal of a brass bell. Many of the other scouts had already jumped out of bed and were leaving the barracks. "What... what's going on?" Chris said to one of them as he raced by.

"Dunno, but that was the alarm bell," the man replied. "We might be under attack." He continued towards the door as Chris got up himself and searched for his boots in the dark, then gave up and ran outside barefoot.

Chaos reigned as most of the men rushed to the main gate, while others headed for the armory. The gunshots were sporadic now, but they appeared to be coming from inside the fort. Though he was unarmed, Chris decided to follow the sound of the shots, figuring that, at the very least, he would find the cause of the commotion. As he rounded a building, another man ran headlong into him, knocking both of them to the ground. "Hey, watch where you're..." Chris started to say, then stopped cold as he got a good look at the man. He was clad in skintight gold-and-blue clothing, with a blue star emblazoned over his chest, and an oblong yellow lens fitted over his eyes, which were staring at Chris with a rather dazed expression.

"Booster!" somebody yelled, and the two of them looked to see another odd fellow approaching. Like the first man, he was wearing impossibly-tight clothes (his, however, were blue all over), and a pair of yellow lenses that made him appear bug-eyed. "It isn't bad enough that you sent us to the wrong timeframe," the blue man grumbled as he helped the gold man to his feet, "but you had to drop us in the middle of the flipping Alamo, to boot!"

The gold man rubbed his sore head. "I didn't drop us in the Alamo... at least, I don't *think* I did." He looked down at Chris and asked, "Hey, kid, is this the Alamo?"

Chris didn't answer, he just continued to stare at the two of them, and the blue man said, "Forget him, we've gotta get out of here!" He grabbed the gold man by the wrist, which had a small box strapped to it. "And this time, try to tell the difference between an eight and a nine!"

"Grife, one little slip-up..." The gold man fiddled with the box for a moment, then the two of them began to fade before Chris's eyes. Just before

they disappeared, the gold man slipped him a wink and said, "Say hello to Davy Crockett for me."

A few minutes later, MacHenry came around the side of the building to find Chris still sitting there, staring at nothing. "Hey, Maxwell, you okay?" The young man nodded, and MacHenry said, "Well, get on your feet, then. We've gotta find those two jaspers that broke into the fort."

"Too late, they're gone."

MacHenry cocked an eyebrow. "You sure 'bout that?"

Chris got up, eyes still fixed on the spot where the two strange men had been standing. "Yeah, I'm relatively sure."

Time passed, and Chris settled into the routine duties of an Army scout, which consisted mainly of riding along with the soldiers when they did patrol or went out hunting. It was steady work, as MacHenry put it, but tedious as well, and Chris found himself second-guessing his decision to stay in the West. There was no newfound desire to return home, however, just doubt that this was the life he was meant for. He tried to ignore the feeling, attributing it to being separated from Hawk so abruptly, but it still dug at him late at night as he lay awake in his bunk.

A few months after coming to Fort Collins, Chris visited the Blackfoot camp once more. It wasn't by choice — he'd been avoiding any assignment that might bring him into contact with that strange old Indian again — but while riding along with a scouting party one afternoon, the lieutenant in charge suddenly decided to pay the tribe a "goodwill visit" since they happened to be in the area. Chris couldn't very well refuse to go, so he sucked it up and followed along, opting to stay with their mounts along with another scout as the lieutenant and some of the other soldiers lorded the authority of the United States Army over Chief Two Horses and his people.

As they waited, Chris's fellow scout seemed less interested in watching horses than in leering at the female Blackfoot that passed nearby. "Damnation, would you take a gander at that 'un there." He slapped

Chris on the back until the young man picked up his head. "She's plump in all the right places, I'd say. Be quite a sight outta that buckskin, don'tcha think?"

"Quit it, Wilkes," Chris said. "It's not right to stare like that."

"Ain't no harm in it. They's just a bunch of animals anyhow... ain't got no proper Christian notions in their heads. Hell, I hear-tell their men kin take a half-dozen wives if they want, no sin in it at all. Folks that'd do that cain't be too concerned with other folks lookin' on... I'll bet they enjoy it."

"Well I don't, so quit."

Wilkes made a rude noise. "What do you know 'bout it, anyhow? Boy like you's probably never even dipped his wick afore... an' your hand don't count none."

Chris felt his face grow hot as he tried to think of a good comeback, then he saw something out of the corner of his eye that took his mind off of it. "What's he doing here?" the young man muttered under his breath, and started to walk away from the horses. Wilkes said something, but Chris ignored him and kept on going, his eyes locked on the man making his way through the camp.

As he got closer, Chris confirmed that it was indeed Wise Owl he was seeing, but what the shaman was doing here amongst the Blackfoot was a mystery — from what Chris knew, Hawk was one of the few people that ever left Echo Valley on a regular basis, not to mention that the valley itself was about a week's ride from there. He thought about calling out to the man, but that old nervous feeling he always got in Wise Owl's presence had come over him, so instead he followed silently at a discreet distance. The man's destination soon became evident: the tipi with the zigzagging red stripe on the side, which apparently belonged to Ahwehota.

The old Indian sat cross-legged in front of the tipi with a piece of buckskin laid out before him, various stones, feathers, and other small objects arranged upon it. He greeted Wise Owl in his native tongue and gestured for his fellow shaman to sit beside him, but Wise Owl did not,

choosing instead to continue standing with his arms crossed. Though Chris couldn't make head nor tail of their conversation, their body language was easy enough to read throughout: Wise Owl appeared to be angry about something, and was leveling most of that anger at Ahwehota. The Blackfoot seemed to take it in stride, however, keeping his voice calm and remaining passive while Wise Owl gestured about them with increasing mania. Then his anger reached a fever pitch, and he kicked his foot at the objects Ahwehota had continued to contemplate throughout their conversation, knocking them into disarray. The older shaman focused directly on him after that, but it apparently wasn't enough for Wise Owl, who pulled something out of a pouch hanging from his belt and moved towards Ahwehota in a violent manner.

Though Chris still didn't know what to make of Ahwehota, he certainly couldn't stand by and let the old man get hurt, either. He'd been peering at them from behind a nearby tipi, and had started to step out into the open when he witnessed something inexplicable: Ahwehota disappeared, and a whirlwind took his place, buffeting Wise Owl to and fro until the man fell to the ground, the object he'd pulled from his pouch flying from his hand — to Chris, it appeared to be a small cat's skull, painted with strange designs. When the wind died down, Chris saw Ahwehota standing over Wise Owl with a steely look in his eyes, and all the feathers and stones and such that had been scattered moments before were now neatly arranged on the buckskin once again. The older shaman spoke sharply, pointing back the way Wise Owl had come, and the man slowly got to his feet and began to leave, but not before scooping up the skull he'd dropped and giving Ahwehota a withering look. Chris quickly ducked back behind the other tipi before he could be seen, clutching at the thunderbird charm around his neck just as he'd done in his dream — he didn't know why, but he felt much safer doing so.

Once Wise Owl had passed out of sight, Chris came out of hiding again and looked towards Ahwehota's tipi, only to see the old Indian hunched over, hands on his knees and breathing hard. Just as before, concern overcame any wariness Chris had of the man, and he went to Ahwehota's side, saying, "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"I used to be... so much faster," he replied, wheezing. "But now... it wears on me. If I were a younger man, Wise Owl would not dare threaten me so."

“But why’d he threaten you? What the heck is he doing out here?”

Ahwehota straightened up and regarded Chris. “Are you ready to believe now?”

“Don’t start that stuff again. I’m just trying to figure out why Wise Owl would travel all this way to bully an old man.”

With a sigh, Ahwehota gestured towards the buckskin and its contents laying on the ground, saying, “I have read the signs for many months now. They speak of great evil coming... the death of many innocents. I ask the spirits to show me this evil, so I may stop it. They tell me it comes in the guise of a friend. Then they tell me... of my own death. I do not fear dying, for I have lived for so long... but before I die, they tell me I must pass on my gift.” He smiled and pointed a bony finger at Chris. “The spirits chose you, Christopher Maxwell, to become the Windrunner. They see your heart... and judge it as good. They say that you will carry the gift further than I can dream... to a time beyond the old magic, to a place that has not been born yet. But before I can give it to you, you must believe... for if you do not, then the gift will die within you.”

“I can believe in facts, but not in this.” Chris himself gestured towards the buckskin, but in a dismissive way. “I’ll admit, I’ve seen a lot of strange things in the past few months, but there’s no trick you can pull that’ll make me believe in magic and spirits and what-have-you. Where I come from, those sort of things are for children and half-wits, not for educated men.” He started to turn away, saying, “You’ll just have to find somebody else to sell your snake-oil to.”

Quietly, Ahwehota said, “In your dreams, do you see Wise Owl’s face?”

Chris stopped and looked back at the old man, but said nothing.

“I would not have suspected him... until today,” Ahwehota continued. “There is terrible anger in him... at the whites, and those who tolerate them. He speaks of destroying them... no matter the cost. That is why he came here today. He wanted me to give him my gift... to add it to the magic he has been collecting, but I told him it is promised to another... one who believes in justice for all peoples, not only his own.”

“So you’re saying that Wise Owl is this ‘great evil’? That doesn’t make sense. I mean, the man saved my life in Echo Valley... if he hates whites so much, why do that?”

“Perhaps to cast off suspicion,” the old man replied. “I do not think that the Sons of Tomahawk... would approve of what he is planning.” He shook his head, his white hair stirring gently with the breeze. “They are very dark plans... full of blood, from both your people and mine. I think he would rather destroy the world... than let the whites have it.”

Chris stood in silence for a moment, then said, “I’ll let Hawk know about Wise Owl... that he threatened you, that is, not about the rest of this stuff. You and your spirits are on your own in that respect.”

“Do as you will, Christopher Maxwell... and pray that you do not regret your decisions later.”

The young man gave Ahwehota a nod, then walked back to where he’d left Wilkes with the horses. In the back of his mind, he mulled over what the old Indian had said, stripping away the mumbo-jumbo and leaving only the rational evidence. While he couldn’t put much stock in Ahwehota’s story regarding Wise Owl hating whites to the point of wanting to kill them, that didn’t change that fact that Wise Owl did attack the old man with no apparent provocation. *That’s enough to warrant a letter to Hawk*, Chris thought. *Not exactly the sort of trouble he wanted me to keep an eye out for, but still...*

He started working on the letter as soon as he and the others returned to Fort Collins, describing the incident in detail but omitting the supernatural portion of the old man’s ramblings. The only part that Chris got stuck over was the odd whirlwind that had sprung up in the middle of it all — he eventually chalked it up as a dust devil, a phenomenon he’d heard of but never witnessed. Once he had the whole thing set down proper, he posted the letter care of Howling Forks and didn’t give the matter a second thought.

The next day, Chris was on work detail in the stables, making sure the horses were fed and well cared for — a nice change from his usual scouting duties. He helped prepare mounts that morning for Wilkes and three

soldiers, who were going out on a routine scouting patrol near the Blackfoot camp. When they weren't back by noontime, he didn't think much of it, but as the sun got lower in the west, a murmur of concern started to go up around the fort. Colonel Haggard was talking about making up a search party when one of the sentries spotted a lone rider coming their way. Some men ran out to meet him, and when one of them yelled for someone to fetch the doctor, a few more men rushed out, Chris included. None of them were prepared for what was out there.

The rider was Wilkes... or what was left of him. His face was nothing more than bloody strips of flesh, and his left eye had been torn out. Blood had soaked through most of his clothing, and the stink of it made Chris retch, but he found he wasn't the only one turning green over it. Despite it all, one of the men kept it together well enough to pull Wilkes off the horse and lay him out on the ground. "What happened?" the man asked him. "Who did this? Where's the others?"

"I-I-In... j-j-juh... Injuh..." Wilkes choked out, his remaining eye rolling madly.

"Christ, his guts are gone," another man said. "There ain't nothin' but a hole..."

"*Shut up,*" the first man hissed, then looked back at Wilkes. "You're gonna be alright, the doc's on his way. Now, who did this? Was it Injuns? Is that what you said?"

"Guh... groun'... oudda... heeeeeee..." Wilkes's body convulsed, his hands digging at the earth beneath him, then he became still. The men assembled also fell quiet, not so much out of respect but out of total shock. The doctor arrived moments later, with Colonel Haggard right behind, though the presence of neither man made any difference.

The colonel's eyes lingered over what remained of Wilkes, then he pointed to the assorted soldiers and scouts around him, Chris included. "I want all you men at the gate in fifteen minutes, saddled up and loaded for bear. A man bleeding this bad had to leave some sort of back trail, and you're gonna ride until you find out where in the Hell it leads." They all snapped to attention at that, and fifteen minutes later, over two dozen men were ready to ride out onto the darkening plain. Chris felt

like he was going to vomit again, but he held himself together as best he could as he and the others started out.

They rode on through the night, doing their best to follow the trail by moonlight, but by daybreak, they hadn't found a trace of the others. When the trail went surprisingly cold, they decided to split up the men — Chris was put into a group heading westward, in the general direction of the Blackfoot camp, along with MacHenry and two soldiers. By then, a lot of talk was circulating about who the guilty party was, and many seemed to agree that Wilkes named his killers with his dying breath. "You know damn well and good it was them Indians," one of the soldiers in Chris's group kept saying as they rode. "Only savages could do something like that to a man. They ain't got no conscience."

Then at midday, the four of them caught sight of what appeared to be three men standing atop a hill. They turned their mounts towards it and rode fast, calling out but receiving no reply. When they got closer, the reason was evident: what looked from a distance like three standing men were actually three men hanging upside-down from poles, long dead and baking in the sun. Each had been stripped to the waist, their bellies flayed open and their internal organs neatly arranged at the base of the poles.

Chris nearly fainted off his horse. "This can't be happening," he whispered, staring at the bodies. "It's not real. It was just a dream, *it's not real...*"

The others ignored him and dismounted. One of the soldiers knelt down to examine the faces of the dead men, saying, "Perkins, O'Donnell, Miller... this is them, alright. The sons of bitches gutted 'em like animals."

"I told ya it was Indians!" the other soldier said. "Lookit what they did! Sick savages, that's what they all are!" He pointed to the west. "Their damn camp's only maybe five miles away... they's tryin' to make fools of us!"

"I can't believe they'd do this," MacHenry muttered. "Them Blackfoot seemed peaceable enough, for the most part."

"That's what they *want* you to think, right before they slit your damn throat!"

Chris somehow managed to find the strength to approach the bodies. He could see the markings carved into their flesh, just as he'd seen in his dreams. "This can't be happening," he whispered again, but his denial couldn't make it disappear. He *had* to deny it, though: if he admitted that the gory image he kept seeing in his dreams was real, then *what else* might become real as well? Behind him, he could hear the one soldier condemning the Blackfoot, talking about how he was going to gut every one of them for what they'd done to his friends, and a numbing realization swept over the young man. "Oh dear God, no... no, you can't do it!" Chris went over to the soldier and took hold of his shoulders, yelling, "You can't kill them all! It's not right!"

"The Hell's the matter with you, boy?" the soldier said, and gave him a shove. "You want to let a bunch of savages get away with slaughtering your fellow white man? Best to wipe them all out than to give 'em the chance to do it again."

"That's not justice, it's murder... and I won't let you get away with it!" Chris began to punch the man in the chest, as if he could hammer the point home with his fists.

"Maxwell, get a hold of yourself!" MacHenry said, but Chris wasn't listening, all his attention was focused on the soldier before him, on making him listen no matter what, even if he had to beat him up to do it. Unfortunately, he was seriously outclassed, and the soldier gave him a good swift backhand across the face. The young man went flying, sprawling out near the dead bodies, who stared at him with lifeless eyes as the soldier bent down and knocked him out cold with one punch.

When Chris regained consciousness, he found himself laying on his bunk back in the fort, the early-morning sun coming through the windows. His head was throbbing, and he let out a groan as he tried to sit up. Then he heard a voice say, "'Bout damn time. I figured you was gonna be out for a whole 'nother day."

He looked over to the next bunk to see MacHenry sitting there watching him. "What... what happened?" Chris asked. "How'd I get here?"

"How do ya think? Slung over a horse." MacHenry glared at him. "I dunno what your problem is, but you're lucky they didn't toss you in the stockade. I managed to convince them that y'all just went a little screwy 'cause of the blood, so you'd best keep that in mind when they get back."

"Get back? What are you... " The young man paled, then he jumped off the bunk and began to head for the door out of the barracks, but MacHenry held him back. "Let me go, damn you! I've got to stop them!"

"You're too late, they left hours ago. The colonel's leadin' most of the regiment out to the Blackfoot camp — they're gonna bring every last one of 'em into custody."

"No, they're not. They're gonna kill them... they're gonna slaughter them all!"

"What makes you so damn sure 'bout that, Maxwell?"

"Because... because I know, that's all." He couldn't bring himself to say the real reason — he barely believed it himself, so how could he convince MacHenry? "You've gotta let me go, Mac. I can save them, I... I'm *supposed* to save them."

"An' I'm supposed to make sure you stay put, so take a seat an' quit talkin' crazy." He tried to force Chris back down on the bunk, but the young man slammed a fist into his gut, then his jaw. MacHenry staggered back, and Chris bolted.

A few soldiers had remained behind to protect the fort, but none of them noticed Chris as he made his way to the front gates. A man on horseback was coming in from an outside patrol, and as soon as he dismounted, Chris rushed forward and knocked him over, then swung up into the saddle himself. The soldiers manning the gates tried to shut them before Chris could get away, but they were too slow, and the young man rode out of the fort amid shouts of alarm. It would take about eight hours to reach the Blackfoot camp, which he might be able to cut down to seven if

he drove the horse hard enough... but he had no idea how much of a lead the regiment had on him. *Don't think about it*, he told himself as the horse galloped across the plain, *just ride. Ride and pray.*

The trip seemed to take forever. The sun climbed in the sky as he rode westward, eyes fixed on the horizon in the hope that he'd spot the regiment, but he was alone. Around the fifth hour, his horse began to foam at the muzzle from exhaustion, but he didn't care, he just dug in his spurs and pushed the animal further. Then an hour later, he saw the smoke. It was just a thin tendril against the wide blue sky, but Chris knew that, if he could see it this far away, it must be a rather large blaze. *Too late*, he thought, the words drumming in his brain in rhythm with the horse's hooves as he rode on, unwilling to stop. *Too late too late you killed them all too late...*

When the encampment finally came within view, he stopped upon a rise of land and stared with wide eyes as the tension that had been building between the two races for months finally found horrific release. People were screaming in both Blackfoot and English as fires ate their way through the camp. Bodies were scattered about the ground, some of them trampled by horses as the soldiers rode roughshod through the area, firing at anything that moved. A few soldiers had dismounted and were fighting hand-to-hand with the tribe's warriors, who wanted nothing more than to protect their home from this invading force. The smell of blood and black powder was sickeningly pervasive, just as it had been in his dreams... and he knew how this would all end if he didn't do something.

"Stop this!" he cried, and drove his already-exhausted mount into the thick of it. A rifle hung in a scabbard attached to the saddle, and he drew it out as he rode, firing over the soldiers' heads to get their attention. Unfortunately, some of them thought his intentions were much more lethal, and opened fire upon him in return. Chris's horse reared up as the bullets whizzed by, and the poor animal caught a few in its hide. Chris tumbled out of the saddle, a bullet sinking into him as well — lucky for him, it wasn't fatal, but considering all the blood now pumping out of the wound in his thigh, it soon would be. He hit the ground and lay there stunned as his dying horse added its screams to the others filling the air. *Gotta get up... gotta move*, he thought, and started crawling on his hands and knees towards a nearby tipi, hoping he didn't get trampled

before he reached cover. He was almost there when he saw another man sprawled out in the tipi's shadow, his long, snowy-white hair coated with blood. "Ahwehota!" Chris called out, but the old Indian didn't stir. Gritting his teeth, the young man climbed to his feet and hobbled over to him. As he got closer, he could see that the man's skull had been cracked open like an eggshell — whether from a bullet or a horse's hoof, it was impossible to tell — and there were multiple bullet wounds peppering his bare chest. Chris ripped off his shirt, then fell to his knees beside the man, trying to use the garment to stop the gouts of blood pouring out of the head wound. "Don't die, please," he sobbed. "Oh dear Jesus, don't let him die... "

The old man's lips moved slightly, and he managed to choke out, "Not... fast enough. Used to be... much faster... younger... " His deep brown eyes, now flecked with red, focused on Chris. "You will be faster."

"Don't talk. You're gonna be okay." His shirt was a mess already, but the blood continued to flow. "I'm gonna get you out of here, I promise. I'm gonna save you."

"I am already gone," Ahwehota said. "My ancestors... they call to me. But they must wait... until I give my gift to you."

"Don't start that again. You know I don't believe... "

"*Yes, you do.*" The man spoke with a force in his voice that belied his condition. "You have seen your vision... become reality. You knew after you saw the white soldiers... that death would come here next. Your mind refuses to acknowledge... what your heart knows is true... *but it must.* Just as you accepted the truth... of your mother and father... you must now accept this truth... make it a part of you."

He shook his head in denial, but even as he did so, his mind went back to that old childhood memory again: hanging above the Warrior River, trying to decide whether or not he should jump. Despite all the madness around him, despite the dying man laying in his arms, that image refused to go away. This time, however, the jump before him was much larger, more treacherous, even more so than the one he'd made when he found out about his birth parents. Truly, this was a leap of faith: to accept the impossible as probable, to acknowledge that there were forces in

the universe that existed outside the confines of what he knew to be the rational world, and to embrace the fact that those forces had led him here, to this place, to this moment, for reasons he may never fully understand... but that didn't matter, so long as he believed in them.

"Yes," Chris said after an eternity. "Yes, I know... I believe... "

"Then you are ready." Ahwehota closed his eyes and raised a bloody hand toward Chris's bare chest, a mournful sound coming from somewhere deep within the man. With his gore-stained finger, the old Indian began to draw a simple zigzagging line across the young man's skin, and the sound Ahwehota made became louder, drilling into Chris's skull until that was all he could hear. Beneath the design, he could feel his heart begin to beat faster, so much faster than it ever had before in his life, the blood in his body screaming through his veins as it tried to keep up with the changes being wrought upon it. Sparks of electricity began to spread across his skin like wildfire, dancing over his teeth and tongue as he cried out in pain, and still his heart beat faster, only now it had become like the whir of a hummingbird's wings, just a constant thrum of motion in his chest, and Chris thought, *When will it stop Jesus make this stop this'll kill me if it goes on much longer my heart's going to explode just stop it stop it stop it stop it LET ME GO!*

He broke free somehow, stumbling to his feet and looking down at himself in shock. Electricity was still arcing off of his skin, but it didn't hurt so much now, and he realized that the wound in his thigh had completely healed. He also realized that his hands were shaking so badly that he could see right through them — he tried to make them stop, but the best he could do was slow them down so that they were more visible. "What did you do to me?" he asked Ahwehota, but as he gazed down on the old man, he realized it was a pointless question: Ahwehota was dead, his body shriveled and ancient-looking, like a desert mummy. Whatever power he'd given Chris must have been the only thing keeping him alive. *But what sort of power is this?* he thought. *What do I do with it?*

Then he noticed how quiet everything around him had become. He looked up to see that the entire world had come to a standstill: people were frozen in mid-stride, the hooves of galloping horses were suspended inches above the ground, bullets hung in the air like ironclad bumblebees... no, wait, there *was* movement. It was agonizingly,

impossibly slow, but things were in motion. The bullets, to be sure, were the fastest, advancing a half-inch every few seconds, and Chris thought, *I could just pluck them out of the air with my bare hands if I wanted.* No sooner had the notion entered his mind than he found himself racing forward, his eyes focused on a single lead ball lazily spinning towards a wailing child. He wrapped his hand around it with ease, then turned around and whipped the bullet back at the soldier who'd fired it, watching as it splintered the soldier's rifle, then clipped the man in the head, all of it happening at an eerily slow pace. *Well, that's one,* he thought. *Now for the rest.*

Chris began to run, leaving lightning in his wake as he zipped across every inch of the encampment in seconds. Bullets were either thrown back or swatted into the ground. Rifles were snatched from the hands of unsuspecting soldiers and broken in two. An overzealous corporal in the midst of slitting a Blackfoot warrior's throat suddenly found his jaw shattered. And then, just as fast as it had started, it was over: Colonel Haggard, confused but terrified, called for his men to retreat, and they all began to turn tail and run. Chris continued to take a few swipes at the soldiers until he was sure that they wouldn't double back, then he finally allowed himself to slow down... but he quickly realized that he couldn't come to a complete stop. Electricity kept crackling across his skin as every cell in his body vibrated, and his heart was still hammering away in his chest at an impossibly-fast rate. *You've got to calm down,* he told himself. *If you calm down maybe you can stop but I can't calm down I can't stop God this is starting to hurt again God please how do you stop this?*

In the midst of his distress, a murmur began to rise around him, and he saw many of the surviving Blackfoot approaching. Though Chris still didn't understand their native tongue, one word they spoke stood out clear as a bell: *"Ahwehota... Ahwehota..."*

"I'm sorry, but I'm not... he's gone, he's dead." But either they didn't understand him or they didn't care, for they continued to say the name, a few going so far as to lay their hands on his bare shoulders or falling to their knees before him. Some of the people he saw were injured, some were weeping, and all of them had the same silent plea in their eyes: *Help us. You have the power. Help us.* But Chris didn't know how to do such — Ahwehota had given him speed, but nothing more that he could tell. Perhaps he could use this power to heal them, just as the wound in his leg

had healed up, but without knowing exactly how to do so, he was just as likely to kill them, and there had been far too much death today. *I have to do something, though, he thought, but what? What more can I do?* Then he recalled what Ahwehota said about Wise Owl, and what Chris himself had seen in his dreams... and he knew that the fight wasn't over just yet.

As difficult as it was, he turned away from the Indians and began to run once more, this time heading in the direction of Echo Valley. Under normal circumstances, it would take a week of hard riding to reach the valley from the Blackfoot camp... but Chris knew he was anything but normal now. He pushed himself as hard and as fast as he could, his legs becoming a blur as he flew across the plains, miles falling behind him in the blink of an eye. Barely a minute after Chris left the Blackfoot camp, he passed by the outskirts of Howling Forks, the windows in Kubert's trading post exploding inward from the force of the thunderous boom the young man's passing generated. Despite that, he never slowed down, flying up the path winding along Table Mountain and down the other side until he reached the heart of Echo Valley, his bootheels digging long furrows into the ground as he skidded to a stop in the middle of the Indian camp. A few of the residents cried out at his sudden appearance, unsure if this new arrival was friend or foe. From the direction of his family's tipi, Small Eagle came running, staring in disbelief at the young man and saying, "Chris? Is that you? What in God's name is going on?"

"No time... the Blackfoot... something terrible happened." Chris found it even harder now to slow down to a normal speed, much less talk in a way that his words didn't become a blur of sound. "Hawk... gotta find him... talk to him... he might know..."

Small Eagle looked towards his tipi and yelled his brother's name, then turned back to Chris, saying, "He just got back home yesterday. He mentioned about Two Horses' tribe having some difficulty with the Army, but this..." He gestured at the young man, whose entire body was crackling with energy. "What in blazes happened to you?"

"That is a very good question," Chris heard someone say, and from out of the corner of his eye, he saw Wise Owl approach, a stony expression

on his face like always.

The man's presence took Chris by surprise. "How did you get back here so fast?"

"Get back from where?" Small Eagle asked. "Uncle Wise Owl's been here ever since you went off with Hawk."

"No... no, that's not true." The young man pointed at the shaman, saying, "I saw you in the Blackfoot camp just a few days ago. You told Ahwehota about how you wanted... to kill all the whites, but he wouldn't go along with it... so you set up his whole damn tribe." He paused as his fury built up inside of him, making him lose his grip and speed up again — he reined it back as best he could, gritting his teeth at the pain it caused. "Y-you wanted to... to kill them all... simply because one man... didn't agree with you."

Many of the other Indians had begun to gather around them, all curious about what was going on. Hawk was soon amongst them, his eyes widening when he got a glimpse of Chris. "Holy shit," was all he could manage to say.

"I don't know if'n what you're saying is true," Small Eagle told Chris, "but you'd better have some sort of proof if'n you're gonna go accusing Wise Owl of murder."

"You want proof? How about this?" Chris held up his hands, dark red smears coating his palms, not to mention his bare chest. "This is Ahwehota's blood! I held the man in my arms as he died! He gave me this power with his last damn breath!"

"He *gave* it to *you*?" Wise Owl said incredulously. "He made a mistake, obviously. It's far too much for you to handle — look at how you're trembling in pain." He approached Chris, a hand dipping towards the pouch hanging from his belt and pulling out a small cat's skull, the same one he'd produced before attacking Ahwehota. "Come, son of Jim Crandall, let me take this pain from you."

"Keep that thing away from me!" He slapped it out of Wise Owl's hand, and he could swear that he felt the tiny skull sink its teeth into his hand

for a moment. When he pulled his hand back, he realized that it felt slow and clumsy... in other words, it felt normal again. "That's what you wanted to do to Ahwehota that day," he said. "If he wouldn't give you his power willingly, you were going to suck it out of him."

Small Eagle had caught the skull and was turning it over in his hands, examining the designs painted on it. "Parasitic magic," he muttered. "Feeds off of life forces, twists the natural order out of shape... this isn't what our shamans use. It's anathema." He dropped the skull on the ground and crushed it under his heel. "What the Hell have you been messing with, Uncle?"

Wise Owl looked from Small Eagle to Hawk, then a wicked smile spread over his face. "Let me show you," he said, and suddenly, the ground began to rip open under their feet, gnarled roots springing up and wrapping around the brothers. The people gathered around started screaming and ran, afraid that they might be next. The only one unfazed by it all was Chris, who leapt forward in a flash, tearing Hawk and Small Eagle free before the roots could get a solid grip, then carried them far away from the threat. Once they were clear, Chris ran flat-out at Wise Owl, only to realize too late how foolish that was as the shaman raised a hand, making a thick mass of thorny vines erupt out of the ground right in front of him. Chris dug his heels in to slow down, but the vines quickly enveloped him up to his chest, pinning his arms to his sides. "Did you think I only knew one little trick?" Wise Owl said, stalking up to Chris as the vines constricted, squeezing the breath out of him and the thorns drawing blood. "I've been collecting so many different types of magic over the past year. One of them lets me cross great distances as easily as walking through a doorway... it has become a very useful tool for me."

"I'll bet," Chris choked out. "You could be gone and back... before anybody knew it. Helps keep your plans... under wraps... until you're ready."

"Indeed. I wasn't going to make my move just yet, but you've forced me to act sooner." Wise Owl reached up and grabbed Chris by the back of the head, glaring directly into his eyes and saying, "The sacrifice I'd made served a dual purpose: it not only stirred up the white soldiers, it was also meant to collect up Ahwehota's power once he died, along with the souls of all the others slain. In a way, the slaughter was really

Ahwehota's fault. I tried to make him see that the whites would never be happy until they'd taken everything from us, so what did he do? He gave his power to an ignorant white child, just to spite me!" The vines constricted even tighter in response to the shaman's anger. "It's not bad enough that your people are destroying our lands and killing us like vermin, now you're taking our magic as well... but not for long." Another animal skull — a bird's skull, judging by the shape — suddenly appeared in Wise Owl's other hand, and he started to bring it up towards Chris's face. "I will have the power of the Windrunner, one way or another."

Before he could do anything, however, a gunshot rang out, and the bird skull exploded, taking part of Wise Owl's hand with it. The shaman howled in pain, then turned to see the Sons of Tomahawk standing nearby with rifles. "That was a warning shot, Uncle," Small Eagle said, keeping his Plains rifle leveled at the shaman as Hawk reloaded their father's old flintlock. "You do so much as twitch funny, and I'll put one in you damn head."

"And now it begins, just as I always knew it would: the Half-Breeds rise up and betray their red brothers... in favor of their white ones." Wise Owl stepped away from Chris and looked about at the rest of the tribe, many of whom had taken cover but still lingered close enough to see and hear. "You all know the prophecies of Strong Bow! You know he warned us of the coming of the white tribe! But even he could not see how their coming would destroy us from within!" He leveled his gaze at the brothers, saying, "First it was Tomahawk, whom my father dared to call Strong Bow reborn. He bedded my sister and tainted our line with his mongrel sons. Then he brought Jim Crandall into our midst, and forced me to bless him with the sight which no white man was meant to possess, polluting our valley even more. And because of Crandall's presence, it later drew *him* here." With his good hand, he pointed back at Chris, who was still struggling to free himself from Wise Owl's magic. "The white tribe was never meant to set foot in Echo Valley, yet we keep letting them in, one by one, until one day they will outnumber us in our own home." He turned to the others once more and said, "We cannot stand by anymore and let this happen! We must purge the white blood from our valley! And then we must purge it from the rest of the land, until it all belongs to our people once more!"

“Echo Valley wasn’t founded just to keep out the whites,” Hawk said evenly. “It was founded to be a place of peace, a place where those who were sick of bloodshed and blind hatred could escape that nonsense and live in harmony... but you seem to have forgotten that part. Matter of fact, you seem to be reveling in the idea of killing people just to prove that you’re right. If anybody’s polluting the valley, Wise Owl, it’s you.”

“How dare you,” the shaman gasped, then raised his hands, blood dripping off his wounded hand and down his arm. “*How... dare... you!*” He whipped his hands to the sides, and a wall of flame began to tear across the ground at the brothers, who quickly retreated as Wise Owl screamed at them in ancient tongues, cursing their existence.

Through it all, Chris could do nothing but watch, the vines still holding him fast. He felt helpless, despite the power that now resided within him — he could feel it struggling for release from his body, just as he struggled with the vines. *Maybe that’s the solution*, he thought. *I keep trying to hold it back, to slow down, when maybe I should just let it free.* He closed his eyes and focused all his attention on himself, feeling his strange new powers coursing through his body, concentrating on bending all that power towards a single purpose. Soon, his outline began to blur as his whole body vibrated, and the plant fibers started to smoke from the friction he generated. *Go faster faster just a little faster*, he told himself, and let the power rip through him at such a velocity that he seemed to glow from within. *Keep going keep going it’s starting to break don’t give up don’t stop don’t stop...*

Then the vines suddenly exploded outward, and Chris launched himself at Wise Owl, striking him from behind. Though the shaman went down, he certainly wasn’t out, and now concentrated his attack on Chris alone, bathing the young man in eldritch flame. Chris didn’t let it deter him in the least, moving so fast that the fire couldn’t burn him, until he reached Wise Owl once more. A blind rage had overtaken his mind, and he grabbed hold of the man’s hands with such force that he snapped every bone in them. The flames dissipated, but Chris continued to assault Wise Owl, pummeling him with his fists at super-speed, barely noting how much damage he was doing.

The two brothers ran up to him, Hawk yelling, “Chris, for God’s sake, stop already!” But Chris couldn’t stop, it was as if some switch had been

thrown inside him and broken. Seeing no other choice, Hawk struck Chris in the chest with the butt of his flintlock, knocking him away from Wise Owl. Pointing at their uncle, he said to Small Eagle, "Keep an eye on him," then went over to Chris, who was kneeling on the ground, an intense white light enveloping his body. "Can you hear me, Chris? Are you alright?"

"*Can't... stop...*" Just getting out those two words was a struggle — he felt like he was bursting apart at the seams. Lightning seemed to pour out of his eyes as he looked up at Hawk. "*Help... help me...*" He reached out towards the man, but before he could make contact, Chris lost his grip on himself, and he felt the power within him suddenly burst forth in all directions, taking him with it. His mind and body had become pure energy, and he raced across the world, weaving and overlapping with himself a thousand times a second as he saw and heard everything all at once. He saw the sands in the African desert and the highest point in the Himalayas. He saw the bustling streets of downtown Boston and a tiny fishing village in rural Japan. He saw a couple making love on a boat in the Indian Ocean and a man in Texas beating his wife while his newborn son wailed. All this and more was laid bare before him, the images blurring together as his mind tried to take it all in. Then Chris saw a woman standing in the middle of a room crying while a man tried to comfort her... and after a moment, Chris realized he was looking at his grandparents, and they were standing in his bedroom back in Manchester. He wanted to stop right there, he wanted to tell them he was alive and that he missed them, that he didn't care about the lies anymore, he wasn't angry at them anymore. But try as he might, he couldn't stop, he just kept going faster, and, the images became more disjointed, to the point where Chris wasn't sure if they were real or hallucination. He saw battles rolling over the nation, whole states fighting against one another, the land chewed up and soaked with blood. He saw great moving machines piloted by men, first on the ground, then in the sky... then he saw men in the sky *without* machines, their clothes bright like those of the two strange men he'd briefly seen in the fort months ago. He saw more wars, each one worse than the last, and bigger, more terrible machines to aid in those wars. He saw things that he didn't even have words for, things that he wasn't sure the human eye was meant to see, and still he went faster, until the images disappeared and all he saw was light, beautiful, multicolored light, and it was singing to him, it was calling to him, pulling him into its embrace, and he welcomed it.

Chris... come back, Chris...

There was a voice in his head. He thought it was coming from the light at first, then he realized that it was coming from that other world, that old world, where people lied and bled and died, and he didn't want any part of that anymore.

You've got to pull yourself together, Chris... slow down...

Slow down? He couldn't do that, he'd tried, and it hurt. No more of that.

You have to try... I can lead you back, but you have to make the first move...

He looked at the light surrounding him, listened to the wondrous sounds emanating from it. Why would he want to leave such a beautiful, peaceful place?

Because if you stay here, you'll never be able to go home again... you'll never see your family or friends again... please, Chris, come back to us...

The image of his grandparents came into his mind, and the emotions he'd felt upon seeing them began to well up once more, along with loving memories of them that he'd tried to deny while he'd been angry with them... and he knew that, if he gave himself up to this place, all of that would be washed away, good and bad. He wouldn't be Chris Maxwell anymore, he wouldn't even be human, he'd just be a tiny part of a vast force flowing through the universe. Despite the siren song it made, giving up his humanity to hear it forever was too high a price.

At the edge of his vision, he could see a wisp of gossamer, and he knew instinctively what it was. He reached for it, let it take hold as it pulled him away from this place, back through time and space and all the myriad dimensions he'd passed through in the blink of an eye until he could feel the weight of his own body and the blood pumping through his veins and the breath in his lungs and he suddenly fell forward, a whole person once more, into Hawk's arms. He felt like a newborn babe, gasping and blinking as he tried to readjust to having substance again. He could still feel the power inside him, but it was no longer overwhelming. In fact, it reminded him of the first dream he'd had in Echo Valley, with

the wind blowing through him, causing his body to tingle — in the back of his mind, he knew that he could call forth that power just as easily as one flexes a muscle, but for now, it was relaxed and at rest. He sat up and looked at Hawk, saying, “Thank you... I don’t know how you did it, but thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Hawk replied, and nodded towards his younger brother, who was kneeling right beside the two of them. “He did all the work.”

Chris turned to Small Eagle, puzzled, and the man simply smiled and tapped a finger against his temple, saying, “It’s never steered me wrong before.”

A quick, barking laugh burst out of Chris at that, and he embraced Small Eagle. Hawk threw an arm around Chris as well, and the three men stayed like that for a few moments, each one grateful to have made it through the whole ordeal in one piece.

From the broad plateau atop Table Mountain, the whole of Echo Valley could be seen. The trees below wore their autumn colors, and children laughed as they ran through the carpets of leaves that had already fallen from them. Women prepared for the coming winter by making blankets or mending the hide-covered tipis, while the men went off hunting to make sure the camp was well-stocked with provisions. It was a peaceful scene, but Chris’s eye kept lingering on two particular spots in the valley: the patch of charred and upturned earth where he and Wise Owl had fought a week ago, and the grayish-white scar on the land that marked where the shaman’s tipi had stood before Hawk, Small Eagle, and Chris set it aflame and sowed the area with salt, just to be sure that the deadly magic Wise Owl had brought to the valley wouldn’t taint their lives in the future. “I could have prevented all this,” he muttered. “If I’d listened better to Ahwehota, and to my dreams...”

“You did listen,” Hawk replied, standing beside him. “You just didn’t speak the language yet. Reckon you’re getting a pretty good handle on it now, though.”

"I suppose I am, but if I'd been a little more open-minded to the whole idea of magic in the first place, instead of thinking it was nothing but superstition..."

"You can't keep beating yourself up over this, Chris. If'n anybody's guilty of anything, it's me: I lived around the man my whole life, and I had no clue what lay in his heart. Even Small Eagle didn't know, and he's got the touch — reckon Wise Owl figured out a way to mask his thoughts just in case." Hawk sighed and ran a hand through the blond streak in his hair. "Nothing like finding out you've got a crazy uncle, eh?"

"Maybe not so crazy. I hate to say it, but he did have one point: if things keep going the way they are, the whites will wipe out the Indians in the next few decades."

"Not completely. Things will change for us, of course, and we'll have to leave some of the old ways behind, but that's natural. You white folks are changing too, you know: just as we're adapting to white ways, some of your folks are taking a shine to ours. And of course, there's you." He smiled. "If'n the spirits trust you enough to give you such a power, I'd call that a sign of good faith between your people and mine."

Chris looked down at his hands, thinking of the power that lay within him now. "I just hope I can live up to it. I'm still trying to understand what I can do with this, and to be perfectly honest, it scares me a little sometimes. Ever since I got lost in... in whatever that place was, I keep thinking I'm going to slip again and get trapped there."

"Maybe the spirits took you there on purpose, as a warning of what might happen if you let your powers control you instead of the other way around." He put an arm around Chris's shoulders, saying, "Try as we might, we can't always fathom the ways of the spirits. Hell, even I question them sometimes. After I left you at Fort Collins, I sat down with Ahwehota and had a good long talk with him about your vision. I told him that you were a very smart young man, but too white to grasp what you were seeing, and that he'd best not involve you in whatever awful thing was coming down the road, 'cause you wouldn't be able to handle it. And you know what he said? He said that just 'cause you weren't the

obvious choice didn't mean you weren't the *right* choice."

Chris thought about this for a moment, then said, "So you really *did* dump me at Fort Collins because I didn't believe in what Ahwehota was telling me."

"Well, if you want to get technical... yeah, I did." The two of them laughed good and hard over that, then Hawk said, "But it did turn out to be the right choice, now didn't it? You were there to receive the gift, and you used it to save the lives of all those Blackfoot... and that is a fact that you seem to keep forgetting." He pointed down at the valley, towards a cluster of tipis that belonged to the newest residents of Echo Valley: nearly forty Blackfoot men, women, and children who had survived the Army's assault on their camp. "Those folks are alive because of you, and they accepted our invitation to settle here in the valley because they believe in you. They know that whomever carries the power of the Windrunner must be worthy of it, even if he is just a skinny little white boy. So you keep that in mind the next time you think you failed these people."

"I'll do my best." He turned away from the valley and looked to the east, towards the vast world beyond Table Mountain. "I should get going, before I lose my nerve."

"How long do you think it'll take you to get back to Manchester?"

"Don't know. I'm trying not to push myself too hard, plus there's the Mississippi to cross... maybe ten minutes?"

"That long? Hell, I think you can do better than that." Hawk clapped the young man on the back. "You say hello to your grandparents for me, okay?"

"That I will. Maybe next time, I'll even bring you along," he replied, smiling. "I think it'd be best if it was just me and them for this first visit, though. We've got a lot of things to catch up on." Chris took a few steps away from Hawk, then paused. "But I might leave out the Windrunner stuff for right now. You know how white folks are."

"All too well. Godspeed, Chris." Hawk raised his hand to wave farewell,

but the young man was already in motion, becoming a bright streak of lightning across the plateau. A few seconds later, a clap of thunder rang out over the mountainside, though the sky was clear. "Your son's gonna make you proud, Jim," Hawk said under his breath as he made his way back down to the valley. "It took him a while, but he's finally figured out what to do with himself: he's gonna travel the world, learning as he goes and using his gift to help people of all races, wherever they need him... and if the spirits blessed him the same as they blessed Ahwehota, I know that Chris Maxwell will be helping people for many generations to come."

A warm breeze blew across Hawk's face, and he smiled and nodded in return.

EPILOGUE

I have to get a damn transfer, Private Humbert thought as he tossed another shovel-load of dirt out of the hole. I sure as Hell didn't join the Army to dig graves.

It wasn't just the grave-digging that had gotten the private thinking about a transfer: the past week had been filled with one crazy thing after another, and he'd had it. First there'd been those men that got mutilated, then there was that... well, he didn't know *what* it was that'd ripped through the Blackfoot camp when he and the rest of the regiment had gone to round them up, but he'd damn-near soiled himself when it shattered the rifle in his hands. And to top it all off, that Maxwell fella disappeared for a day, then came back with some Indian tossed over his shoulder, all bound and gagged and beat to holy Hell. Before Maxwell disappeared again, he told Colonel Haggard that the sorry dirt-worshipper was the one responsible for killing those men, not the Blackfoot. How he was so sure of that fact, Humbert didn't know, but one thing was certain: that damn Indian was crazier than a shithouse rat. The whole time they had him locked up in the stockade, the fella kept on chanting something in Injun-talk and carving lines in his skin with his fingernails... which was no mean feat, considering both his hands were mangled up something awful. Even as they dragged him up the gallows to be hanged, that damn Indian just wouldn't shut up, not until the rope went taut and snapped his neck but good. And now Humbert was stuck

digging a grave for the sorry sonovabitch. He personally thought they should've just dumped the body out where they take the manure every day, but the colonel said that even a murdering heathen deserved a decent Christian burial. Of course, the colonel wasn't the one who had to *dig* the damn grave, now was he?

He pulled himself out of the hole and walked over to the wagon. The corpse was laid out in the back, wrapped in canvas and cinched tight with a rope — the burial may have been Christian, but the Army apparently considered the coffin optional. "Okay, fella, time to move into your new home," he said as he pulled the bundle off the wagon, then started dragging it across the ground. Nearly halfway to the grave, the rope worked its way loose, and an arm flopped out. "Aw, Jesus," Humbert groaned, "now I'll actually have to *touch* the damn thing." He knelt down and gingerly took hold of the arm, bracing himself for the cold, clammy feel of dead flesh. To his surprise, though, it didn't feel that way at all. In fact, the skin felt strangely warm.

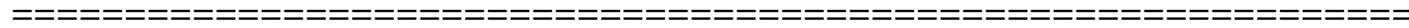
Then the arm suddenly jerked out of his delicate grip and shot towards his throat, the mutilated fingers digging into Humbert's windpipe. He struggled to break free, but it was already too late: his face began to wither and turn gray, and soon his entire body fell to dust beside the bundle. Not long after, the rest of the former corpse emerged from the bundle, albeit with difficulty: the hands were still in horrid shape, with two of the fingers on the right hand completely gone, and the head lolled uncontrollably to the side due to the hangman's break, not to mention the numerous other cuts and contusions that would take months to heal at this rate... but Wise Owl was still alive. He'd had to make unholy bargains with some of the lowest entities that lurk in the dark realms, but in the end, they'd granted him what he desired, and saved his soul from oblivion. There was much he'd have to give them in return, but once his debt was paid, Wise Owl would be free to exact his revenge upon those who'd made him debase himself so.

He crawled slowly across the ground, gnarled hands grasping for purchase as he dragged his broken body towards the wagon. The horse whinnied as he neared, sensing his new, unnatural state and wanting to get away, but Wise Owl whispered a spell that forced it to stay put until he had a chance to pull the life-force from it, like he'd done with the soldier. It was one of the few spells he had left in his possession, thanks to

the bastard Sons of Tomahawk and the thieving white child, but in time, he would have more, and when he had enough, their blood would run through Echo Valley in rivers.

But first, I must tend to myself, Wise Owl thought, and grabbed hold of the screaming horse's hind leg.

THE END



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Weird Western Quarterly #3 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 3 (of 4): Life During Wartime.

The origin of Jonah Hex continues! He's finally got the life he wants, but will Jonah be able to keep it when war breaks out between North and South? Sides are taken, choices are made, and Hex dons a familiar-looking uniform for the first time!

Weird Western Quarterly #4 (2006)

Jonah Hex: Death & Gunsmoke, Part 4 (of 4): When Jonah Comes Marching Home.

The final chapter in the origin of Jonah Hex! As the Civil War ends, Hex's new life begins, but first he faces an old enemy for the last time. It's the moment you've all been waiting for, and it ain't pretty! Don't say we didn't warn you!

Weird Western Quarterly #5 (2007)

Nighthawk: 'Til Things Are Brighter.

The soul of the Egyptian prince known as Khufu has passed through many lives, and, in each one, he's been a force for good...

or has he? For the first time anywhere, it's the untold origin of Nighthawk!

Weird Western Quarterly #6 (2007)

The Vigilante: A Lonely Soldier Away From Home

Weird Western Quarterly #7 (2007)

Bat Lash: In for a Penny, In for a Pounding

Weird Western Quarterly #8 (2007)

Windrunner: Inherit the Wind, Part 1 (of 2) - Secrets.

Before Barry Allen, before Jay Garrick, another man had been granted the power of the Speed Force. But who he was before he'd obtained those powers has always been a mystery...until now. A young man's quest for answers becomes entangled in magic and riddles in the first half of this 2-part tale!

Weird Western Quarterly #12 (2008)

It's the first annual Christmas issue of Weird Western Quarterly featuring a holiday tale with the Old West speedster, Windrunner as well as a Jonah Hex vignette, "Prelude to a Reckoning."

Justice League #15 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 1 (of 3).

What starts as a typical day for a group of Leaguers turns deadly as they are attacked by an unknown enemy. Who is the Lord of Time, and what diabolical scheme does he have that threatens both the past and the present with destruction? You won't want to miss what happens at the end of this issue!

Weird Western Quarterly #10 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 2 (of 3).

It's 1878: Do you know where your heroes are? Lost in time, their memories gone, four members of the Justice League have been marked for death by the Lord of Time. And if they want to make it out of this one alive, they're gonna have to rely on the kindness of strangers...namely Jonah Hex, Scalphunter, Bat Lash, and making her DC2 debut, Cinnamon!

Justice League #16 (2008)

Lead Us Not Into Desecration, Part 3 (of 3).

It's past and present versus the future as the Justice League teams up with some of the greatest heroes of the Old West to take down the Lord of Time! Can they stop his scheme before it's too late, or will Arizona be blown right off the map?

Weird Western Quarterly #13 (2009)

Jonah Hex: Children of Heaven

When Jonah Hex gets caught up in a fight between Chinese railroad workers and their white bosses, he thinks it's a pretty straightforward affair. But after meeting a young Chinese woman named Mei Ling, his life gets more complicated than he likes.

Weird Western Quarterly #16 (2009)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Better Part of Valor.

Rogues Gallery #17 (2009)

Rogues Gallery: El Diablo.

Legends of the Old West still resonate even today. One of the most persistent legends is of El Diablo and Lazarus Lane.

Journey with us back in time to the yesteryear of the Old West... as Rogues Gallery continues to put its spotlight on our guest writers...

This time by the acclaimed Susan Hillwig.

Weird Western Quarterly #20 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: The Reckoning.

Driven to the brink by the events of the previous issue, Jonah Hex goes on the warpath...but at what cost?

Weird Western Quarterly #19 (2010)

Weird Western Quarterly: Domestic Disturbance.

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #1 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: The First Day of the Rest of Your Life.

The Blackest Night is over, and the Brightest Day has begun for twelve newly-resurrected people...but unbeknownst to all, there's a thirteenth person that got brought back as well. A hero to some, a villain to others, Jonah Hex once again walks amongst the living, and Death itself is a closer companion than ever!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #2 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray: Back In Black.

Wait a minute, how in blazes can we have a second issue if Hex was killed in the first? Well, y'see, that's the funny thing...

What, you think we're gonna spoil the surprise here? Go read the issue and find out for yourself!

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray #3 (2010)

Jonah Hex: Shades of Gray.

What started out as a quiet visit to Paradise Corners has turned into a big mess, and now Jonah has to decide between running for his life or making up for past mistakes.

Weird Western Quarterly #21 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: Brothers in Arms.

In the midst of the Civil War, Scalphunter and Matt Savage try to help a mysterious black woman ferrying slaves out of the South, while circumstances beyond their control threaten to drive the brothers apart.

Weird Western Quarterly #22 (2011)

Weird Western Quarterly: How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away?

Bat Lash once again crosses paths with Penny "Dreadful" Drea-ney. Has the gambler learned his lesson from their last encounter? Yeah, I don't think so either.

Weird Western Quarterly #23 (2012)

Weird Western Quarterly: At War With the Devil, Part One.

As the North and the South begin to clash, Windrunner finds himself on the front lines of a different, more personal war. When the smoke clears at the end of this issue, you'll know this is only the beginning of a battle that's been a long time coming.



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