

BILLY BUCKHORN

and the Rise of the Night Seers



GARY ROBINSON

THE THUNDER CHILD PROPHECY BOOK 2

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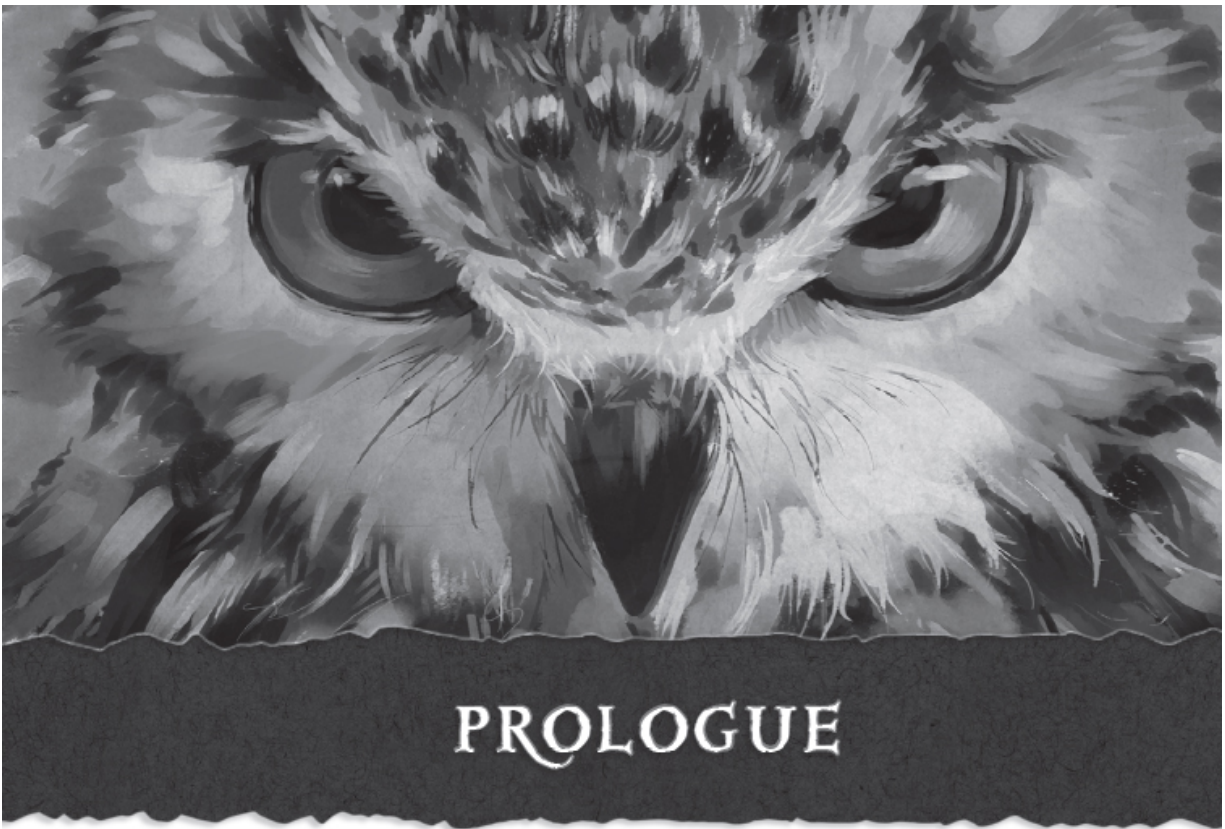
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sixteen-year-old Bryan Johnson was convinced that nothing interesting would take place on this family winter vacation to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. *What makes it so great?* he thought. *Absolutely nothing, as far as I can see.*

The weather seemed worse than usual, even for this time of year. A relentless wind howled through the trees, sounding every bit like a pack of hungry wolves. Occasionally, an odd, mechanical-sounding squawk rang out, echoing across the mountains. It all made the teen's skin crawl.

The Johnson family had been making this annual "pilgrimage to nature," as Bryan's parents called it, since before he was born. Mr. Johnson had researched the family's genealogy and discovered they had a Cherokee ancestor mixed in among the mostly German Americans in the family tree. He was proud of that little fact.

The Smokemont Campground, near the Oconaluftee River, was a favorite destination spot for countless numbers of families from Tennessee and the Carolinas during the winter school break. It was located less than ten miles north of the Eastern Cherokee reservation in North Carolina. That was one reason Bryan's parents liked coming to these campgrounds.

Sounding much like a travel brochure, Bryan's father often said he loved the park's breathtaking mountain scenery, panoramic views, rushing mountain streams, and old hardwood forests that stretched to the horizon. Coincidentally, Bryan did indeed trace those exact words back to the park's printed guide.

Bryan's ten-year-old brother, Jessie, apparently still found the annual trip exciting and interesting, and he was having a great time. But the boy had a tendency to spend many of his waking hours entranced in some make-believe fantasy involving magic and warlocks or dungeons and dragons.

That was why it was no real big surprise to Bryan when Jessie came running into the campsite early that New Year's Eve morning, screaming at the top of his lungs, "A giant bird just kidnapped Corky!"

The young boy was near tears and panicked out of his mind at the loss of the family pet. "Good acting," Bryan said with a laugh. "That was an Oscar-worthy performance!"

The boys' parents emerged from their tent.

"I'm not acting!" Jessie responded angrily. "I saw it happen with my own eyes!" He buried his face in his mother's embrace and began sobbing.

"What kind of bird is big enough and strong enough to pick up a thirty-pound cocker spaniel?" Mr. Johnson asked as he scanned the sky.

"I don't know what kind of bird it was," Jessie replied, still sobbing. "But his feathers looked like they were made of metal, and his claws were big enough to pick up a cow."

"You mean you guys are buying this story?" Bryan asked in disbelief. "He's obviously in the middle of one of his fantasies, or he lost Corky somewhere along the trail and had to make up a story so he wouldn't get blamed."

Jessie let go of his mother and ran toward his older brother.

“I’m not making it up!” the boy said as he took a swing at Bryan. “You don’t know what I saw!”

Their father, who’d been scanning the woods around them, stepped in between the boys and took hold of Jessie. Squatting down, he turned the boy so they were face-to-face.

“What do you say we get on over to the ranger station?” he said. “We need to report this incident to the park authorities immediately and then do a thorough search for Corky along the trail. Maybe the bird dropped him somewhere.”

“Good idea,” Mrs. Johnson said. “Bryan can stay here and watch the camp.” She eyed her eldest son sternly.

Jessie stopped crying and nodded his approval of the plan.

So, the three Johnsons marched the two hundred yards to the Smokemont Ranger Station, which had just opened for the day. Fifty-year-old Joseph Saunooke, a Cherokee ranger who’d worked for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park the last ten years, had just finished raising the American flag on the pole next to the station when the Johnsons approached.

The Cherokee man gave them a warm welcome, noticing that the boy was quite distressed. Once they were inside Saunooke’s office, Mr. Johnson tried as best he could to describe what Jessie had reported to him without sounding *too* out there. It was a balancing act for sure.

“Jessie, describe the bird in as much detail as you can,” Ranger Saunooke said in a sympathetic tone.

“It was bigger than any bird I’ve ever seen!” the boy said excitedly. “Its feathers were about the same color as a penny. I could tell it was hungry because his head was moving back and forth, you know, like he was looking for something on the ground to eat.”

“What else?” the ranger asked.

“Corky started barking his head off and jerked the leash out of my hands.” The boy began to tear up again. “That’s when the thing saw him. Corky ran toward the bird, barking at it up in the sky. I heard a clanking noise coming from the wings as it began to swoop down toward my dog.”

After a pause, the boy wiped his eyes, then turned serious.

“The giant claws opened up, and Corky yelped as they closed around him.” Jessie took a deep breath and finished his story. “It flew off upriver with a loud squawking sound. I could see Corky’s leash dangling from the claw. I watched the bird turn toward some cliffs, and it looked like there was a cave near the top. The thing took Corky inside the cave, and that was the last I saw of them.”

Exhausted from recounting the event, the boy blew out a big gush of air and slumped back in his chair.

Hugging his son and winking at the ranger, Mr. Johnson said, “Quite a tale, isn’t it? Who’s ever heard of a giant bird with metallic wings?”

Joseph Saunooke, for one, had heard of such a bird all his life—the Tlanuwa, his people called it—but he wasn’t about to admit it to this family of Anglo tourists.

“I’ll file a report about the missing dog and the bird sighting today” was all he said. “Why don’t you folks go on back to your campsite, and I’ll organize a little search party for your dog. Hopefully, we’ll find him hiding out somewhere near the trail.”

Satisfied with that response, the Johnsons headed back to their campsite.

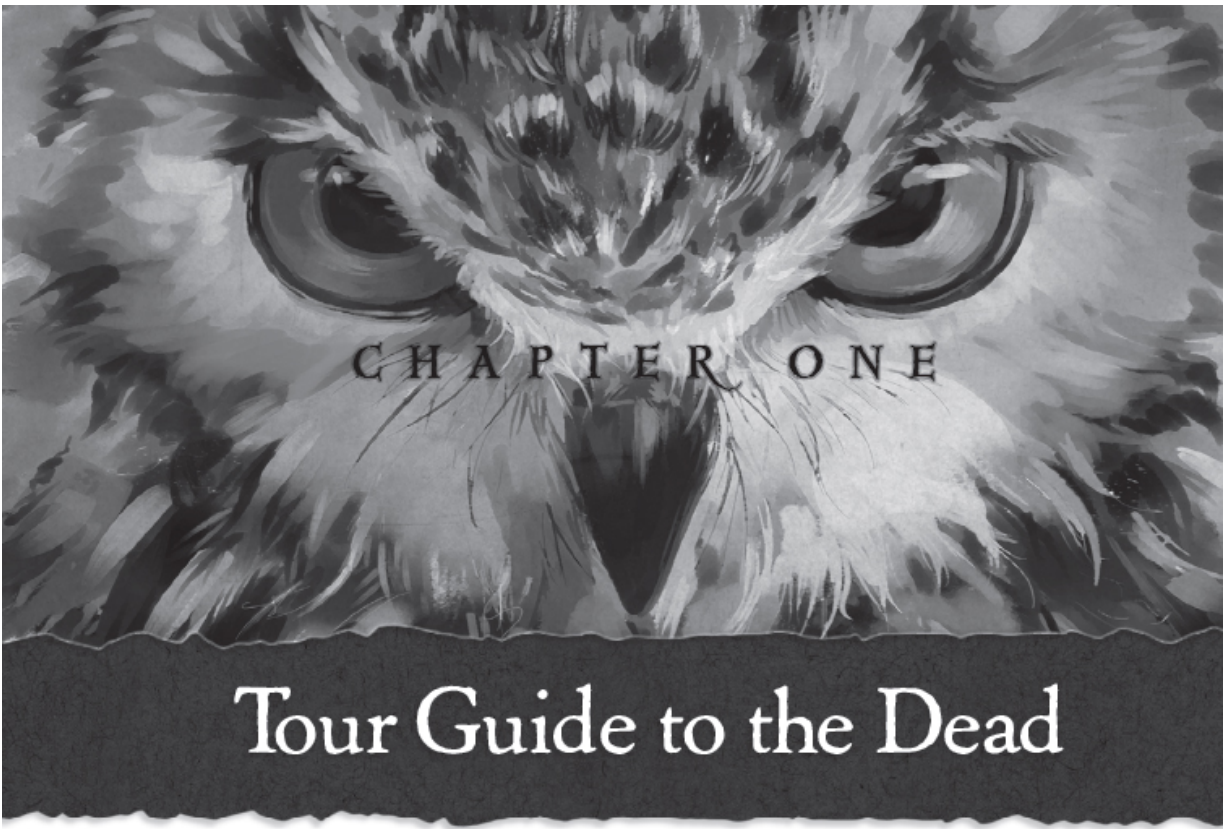
After they were gone, Joseph immediately placed a phone call to his aging uncle Bucky Wachacha. The Cherokee elder and medicine man had spent a lifetime gathering the legends, songs, and cultural practices of their people. He said he was a member of some intertribal group of medicine people from different parts of the country.

Recently the old man had been carrying on about some ancient prophecy that was about to be fulfilled. The prophecy foretold of a time when the old stories would prove to be true, a time when the legends would come to life.

No one had reported seeing a Tlanuwa in two hundred years, at least. The copper-feathered creatures were known to fly up and down the Oconaluftee and Little Tennessee Rivers, grabbing goats, dogs, and even small children and taking them back to their nests inside caves located high

up on cliffsides along the waterways. They'd terrorized the Eastern Cherokee for centuries.

Was today the day the prophecy came true? Joseph hoped to find out.



Since the gathering of the Intertribal Medicine Council— also known as the ITMC—on the first day of autumn last September, reports of possible “Chosen One” candidates had come to Cecil Lookout from Native American communities via phone, letter, email, text, and tweet.

However, the eighty-year-old head of the council didn’t do emails, texts, or tweets. His teenage grandson Cody, who lived with him, handled those reports. Every one of them had to be investigated and followed up on. Finding and preparing this future spirit warrior for their upcoming role was vital, not only for the sake of the Native American population but for all the people of Turtle Island.

One of those calling in to report to Cecil was his granddaughter Lisa, who told him of a Cherokee teenager, the grandson of a medicine man, she’d been reading about in newspapers from the area where she lived. The boy, Billy Buckhorn, had been struck by lightning, had miraculously saved

a busload of kids from certain death, and had died himself and come back from the dead with enhanced abilities.

Last fall Lisa told her grandfather, “I plan on tracking him down so I can talk with him. Maybe you and Dad can come to Tahlequah to meet with him sometime soon.”

“It sounds like this boy might be a real contender, if the news reports are accurate,” Cecil replied. “And if the boy isn’t pulling off some kind of hoax just to get attention.”

On the most recent winter solstice, the members of the Medicine Council had gathered again to review and evaluate the most likely candidates. Three people, all from recognized families of Native healers, had been put on the short list.

The winter solstice, falling on December 21, was the seasonal turning point and beginning of the new year for traditional Native peoples. It was coincidentally also Lisa Lookout’s birthday.

During the afternoon, while the ITMC was holding its sacred winter solstice proceedings, all those in attendance felt it—the unmistakable signal that a profoundly significant supernatural event was taking place. The signal rippled through the group as the most psychically sensitive perceived it first, and then others gradually recognized it.

The point of origin of the subtle signal seemed to be southwest of their location, but only one person, Cecil, was able to narrow that information down to a specific region—somewhere in eastern Oklahoma. He could also sense that the event, whatever it was, involved the first activation of the Fire Crystal since its disappearance almost a thousand years ago. That was a significant development for sure.

From Lisa’s reports, Cecil and his son Ethan knew that eastern Oklahoma was home turf for Billy Buckhorn. Was the supernatural signal related to the boy, or was it merely a coincidence? This would have to be investigated sooner rather than later.

Cecil, Ethan, and Lisa didn’t know that at that precise moment, the Paranormal Patrol had successfully recaptured the Horned Serpent in a cave near the Oklahoma-Arkansas border.

The facetiously named Paranormal Patrol had been made up of Billy; his best friend, Chigger; Billy's father, James; and university archaeologist Augustus Stevens. The group's sole task had been to recapture the Horned Serpent, which had been thought of, until recently, as mere Cherokee mythology.

Now, ten days after that solstice, just after dawn on New Year's Eve, an early morning freezing fog was interfering with Billy Buckhorn's ability to focus. Fog and frost were both common for Oklahoma winters, but not usually at the same time.

Through years of experience in woods and wilderness, along with his grandfather's traditional Native teachings, the Cherokee teen had become finely attuned to his natural surroundings. At the moment, he was trying to follow a set of fresh, barely visible deer tracks through dry underbrush in the woods just north of the Brushy Mountains in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

Bowhunting for deer was Billy's favorite winter sport, following an ancient tradition of his Cherokee people. In fact, the sixteen-year-old's well-preserved recurve bow had been handed down from his aptly nicknamed great-grandfather Bullseye Buckhorn.

Hunting deer with a bow and quiver of arrows was far more challenging than hunting with a rifle. That was why Billy liked it. And because the young man could easily imagine himself a hundred or two hundred years ago doing the same thing.

These days, a sixteen-year-old Cherokee was qualified to receive a bowhunting license good for hunting on several different tracts of land within the Cherokee Nation boundaries. And this time of year, the end of December, was among the final days of deer hunting season for archers.

Like Cherokee hunters of old, Billy had purified himself in a small temporary sweat lodge before undertaking this hunt. That ritual not only allowed for the opportunity to pray for success but also cleansed him of his human scent so as not to alert the prey to his presence.

The sudden crack of a breaking twig a hundred feet ahead caused Billy to stop dead in his tracks. The gentle rustling of leaves in a soft, cold breeze

was all he heard for the next few seconds. Then he heard a second twig break in the distance. Ah, his prey was closer than ever now.

With one eye on the deer's tracks and the other on the path ahead, Billy moved silently forward. Careful not to step on any twigs himself, the young hunter skillfully crept along. A few minutes later he saw that the deer's trail rounded a large boulder. Using the rock for cover, Billy peered through the trees until he spotted the animal. The young buck had stopped to take a sip of water from a nearby stream.

Now's my chance, Billy thought.

Nocking an arrow, he pulled the bowstring taut. Then, taking aim at a spot just behind the creature's front shoulder, Billy whispered a prayer asking for the animal's forgiveness.

At that exact moment, the deer turned his head and looked straight at Billy. The animal's eyes locked on to the hunter's.

"Shoot if you must," the boy heard in his mind. "I do forgive you."

Shocked by what he'd heard, the archer froze. Had the animal just spoken to him?

The bowstring remained taut. The arrow remained nocked. Billy's eyes remained locked on the deer's eyes, while the deer's gaze remained firmly fixed on Billy.

"What'll it be, young medicine man?"

Billy aimed the arrow up and away from the deer. Upon its release, the projectile flew harmlessly into the forest's upper canopy. The animal motioned his approval with a nod of his head, then turned and calmly ambled away.

"What just happened?" Billy asked out loud.

He'd become more or less accustomed to strange things happening in his life, beginning with the lightning strike on Labor Day and continuing with his near-death experience over the Thanksgiving holiday. Each incident had been followed by strange phenomena, like his ability to read people's minds, sleep on books to learn their content, predict the future, and talk to the spirits of the dead.

And thanks to the thousand-year-old spirit of the Sun Priest, Billy could now see energy fields around people and understand the Cherokee language.

Billy was also experiencing painful physical growth spurts. Not the normal bits of growth a typical teenage boy might experience. More like abnormal growth that the gigantism disorder might bring on. At first Billy thought his imagination was just running wild, but the periodic bouts of pain were undeniable. And when his mother complained about having to let the seams out of all his clothes, he knew it must be real.

And now this—he'd actually heard the thoughts of a wild animal. Sure, Cherokee legends were filled with tales of animals and people talking to one another, but those were symbolic, fanciful myths, weren't they? Of course, he had repeatedly told Chigger that all Native legends had a core of truth based on some reality from the ancient past. Billy realized that concept had been proven with the appearance of the Raven Stalker and the discovery of the Horned Serpent, which had slithered out of the crystal cave back in November.

What was it the spirit of Billy's grandmother had told his grandfather during the Labor Day stomp dance? Oh yeah. "Strange changes are afoot."

All this swirled through his mind as he headed back to his campsite. Chigger had declined his invitation to join him on this hunt, saying mysteriously that he would be hunting something larger and more significant. Billy hadn't pushed it, sensing that his friend was becoming more and more interested in pursuing his own path. That was okay. In fact, it was best for both of them. It was high time the faithful sidekick moved out from under Billy's shadow.

Back at the campsite, Billy stowed his bow and arrows behind the seat in his pickup, started a small blaze in the firepit, and put a pot of coffee on to boil. He was in no hurry; he had all day to pack up and drive to Live Oak ceremonial grounds in time for the winter spruce dance that would begin after dark.

Several hours later, the teen continued to review the recent past as he drove toward the stomp dance grounds. The dance was once held yearly on

the night of winter solstice, but ceremonial leaders had shifted the time to New Year's Eve because more people had time off work for the holiday.

He'd had plenty of choices for where to spend New Year's Eve. He could have opted to spend a quiet night at home in Park Hill with his father, who would be in his upstairs study while his mother made some extra money working the night shift at the Tahlequah Indian hospital. Or he could have hung out with Chigger at his family's mobile home. They'd probably watch the ball drop in New York City on TV. He could have even gone to a party some of his school friends were having at a classmate's house while his parents were away. That party would involve guzzling as many kinds of booze as they could scrounge up.

But Billy had chosen to continue the tradition he'd begun with Grandpa Wesley three years earlier: participating in the stomp dances at Live Oak. There was nowhere else the teen would rather be than sitting beside his medicine man grandfather in his Red Paint Clan's arbor on New Year's Eve. Or dancing around the sacred fire to the cadence of the call-and-response songs and the *shh-shh-shh* percussion of the turtle shell leg rattles worn by the women.

No billboard or neon sign advertised this remote eastern Oklahoma event. No radio DJ or television news announcer broadcast the time or whereabouts of this private ritual. It was only for those who belonged there. And Billy knew he belonged there.

There had been times recently when he'd questioned his involvement in what his grandfather called the "medicine path." But he'd resolved the doubts that had dogged him and vowed to remain on the path.

So he calmed his busy mind and focused on the night ahead. It seemed as though his pickup knew the way to the ceremonial site so well it could steer itself there. Like it somehow had its own sense memory, through the feel of tires on familiar ground, the recognized pattern of left and right turns of the steering wheel, or the accelerations and decelerations of the old Chevy engine.

As the trip progressed and the road transitioned from a paved two-lane highway to a one-lane dirt affair, it symbolized the mental journey Billy

was taking away from his modern, everyday life to a more remote state of mind.

Making the final turn, the forest-green Silverado moved down a gravel-covered back road that wound its way through the dark, silent woods. Ahead of the teen lay a return to a distant yet vibrant past.

Grandpa Wesley had recounted the history of these dances many times over the years. Cherokees had brought all their ceremonies and traditions with them on their forced migration from Georgia and North Carolina to Oklahoma Territory. The journey, taken in the 1830s, was known as the Trail Where They Cried, or simply the Trail of Tears, because of the pain, suffering, and death experienced by the Cherokee people. One-quarter of the Principal People died on the march, supervised by armed United States soldiers.

Meant for believers and practitioners of the old Indian religion, these stomp dance rituals had descended from tribal ancestors who lived hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago. So far, Wesley had only hinted at the deeper mysteries behind those stories, songs, and dances of old.

Deeper understandings were yet to come.

As Billy steered the truck off the dirt road, its headlights swung in an arc, illuminating flashes of chrome mixed with dust and mud on two dozen cars and trucks crammed into a dirt parking lot at the edge of a clearing.

A light turnout, Billy thought as he pulled up and parked next to his grandfather's red-and-white Ford pickup. The low chatter of Cherokees reached his ears as he climbed out of the cab of his own truck. Orange-yellow light from the ceremonial fire danced in the teen's eyes as he made his way toward the circle of arbors that surrounded the central square.

A remembered moment flashed in Billy's mind. It was from the last dance he'd attended, during Labor Day weekend. While in a trance in the middle of the night, he saw a ladder with thirteen rungs. In the vision, he was standing on the third rung, ready to take the next step upward. But as he attempted it, he slipped and fell. That fall woke him from the vision, the meaning of which his grandfather said would eventually be revealed. And it was.

Other monumental moments from that fateful weekend flooded into his mind uninvited, including the lightning strike that coursed through his body, creating the spiderweb pattern of burns permanently scarring the side of his neck and the back of his hand. Touching the neck scar, he told himself it would be time to update his personal medicine journal after tonight's ceremony.

The ceremonial leader's first call to the dancers brought Billy back to the here and now. The man's voice resounded through the clearing, and the teen quickly headed for the Red Paint Clan arbor, where his grandfather would be waiting.

Seven brush arbors encircled the dance grounds that, in turn, encircled the sacred fire. The fire that burned within the sacred square was said to symbolize the center of the universe. Four logs set the perimeter of the fire, each aimed at one of the four cardinal directions. Thanks to Wesley's teachings, Billy knew the fire also symbolized the spirit within each person who would take part in the ceremony, as well as the fire of creation that brought the world into being.

"On Indian time, as usual," Wesley said with a smile as his grandson took a seat on the bench next to him.

"Not a minute too soon, not a minute too late," Billy replied, returning the smile. "You taught me well."

The second call went out to the dancers seated in the seven arbors. Native adults and children began moving toward the center, falling in single file behind the leader, alternating male and female in the line. The head man began his slow counterclockwise rotation around the fire. The turtle shell rattles worn by the women on their lower legs began their familiar rhythmic impersonation of falling rain.

"Maybe we'll both get a visit or a message from your grandma tonight," Wesley said as he rose from his seat to join the dance.

Stomp dances at Live Oak were known for providing spirit connections to departed loved ones. Wesley looked forward to his visits with the spirit of his deceased wife, Billy's grandmother Awinita, that often occurred during the night-long ceremonies. Wesley considered himself lucky and blessed if

she appeared to him even momentarily at some point during the all-night affair.

Billy was silent as he followed his elder toward the fire. The teen fell in behind a woman as the line of dancers spiraled around the blaze. In the past it had taken him at least an hour to reach the state of mind dancers strove for, that twilight condition somewhere between waking and sleeping that allowed for subconscious communication or trance visions.

This time it was only a matter of minutes before the familiar humming vibration came over him. His whole body quivered as a translucent scene presented itself, superimposed over the physical setting. Concentrating as best he could, Billy attempted to continue following the woman in front of him.

The vibrational energy intensified and increased in speed until a circle of invisible sparks shot out from him in all directions. Losing consciousness, the boy collapsed on the ground, and nearby dancers moved out of line to pick him up. Four men carried him to the Red Paint Clan arbor and laid him out on a bench. It was a common experience during the ceremonies.

Within Billy's own reality, however, something quite different was happening. His nonphysical energy body rose above the fire, the dancers, and the brush arbors. The boy had left his body before, usually with the assistance of helpers of the Sun Priest—except for that one time he died on the hospital operating table.

Maybe my body is dying again, Billy thought to himself. *Maybe I'm actually going to cross over this time.*

"Stop being so dramatic," a voice inside his head said. "You're not dying. You're just going nonphysical again."

There was something familiar about the voice, but Billy couldn't place it. "Who said that?" Billy responded, looking around his immediate nonphysical environment. The only thing he could pick up was a small bright spot of light that flitted back and forth just above him. The being seemed like an insect or a hummingbird that couldn't sit still. Then, gradually, the bright spot dimmed until it became a recognizable figure.

“Little Wolf, I should’ve known.”

“Surprise, surprise!” the diminutive Cherokee said.

As one of the legendary Yunwi Tsunsdi, or Little People, he stood about two feet tall. He had first appeared in physical form when Billy was a boy, then again in the hospital during his recovery from the lightning strike. Long before those instances, however, the little man had served as a medicine helper to Grandpa Wesley.

“How am I seeing you now in nonphysical form?” Billy asked. “I thought you were a physical being.”

“Ah, you think you know so much, and yet you know so little,” Little Wolf said with a deep sigh. “We Yunwi Tsunsdi are multidimensional. How else do you think I could appear and disappear in your hospital room?”

“Okay, got it. But what are you doing here now, and where’s Grandma Awinita?”

“Your grandmother is busy with a visitation to your grandpa tonight. But she left me specific instructions on what to do as your tour guide.”

“Tour guide? Why do I need a tour guide?”

“The nonphysical dimension is a vast, multilayered thing. If you’re going to be connecting the living with the dead, you have to know where to find the dead, right?”

“I guess so. I thought they’d just come to me.”

“Sometimes they will, but it’s not that simple. We’d better get a move on while your body is safely resting under the arbor.”

Little Wolf pointed with his lips toward the Red Paint Clan’s arbor. Billy looked that way and saw himself resting on the bench.

“Two places at the same time once again,” he said to himself.

“You’ll get used to it,” Little Wolf replied. The small man made a circling motion with both hands, which created an energy bubble that enclosed the two of them. “First stop on the tour— the cemetery.”

The pair zipped away in their energy bubble. At first Billy experienced a blurring effect as his physical surroundings whizzed by. But very quickly they arrived at a spot high above a military graveyard that held row upon row of neatly aligned white gravestones.

“Why come here?” Billy asked.

“To show you where you rarely find the spirits of the dead,” Little Wolf replied. “Most people think graveyards are filled with ghosts, but that’s not necessarily true. Ghosts are self-imprisoned spirits who can’t let go of some part of their physical lives, so they’re usually hanging around other places.”

Little Wolf guided Billy down closer to the ground, stopping in front of one particular grave. The words engraved on the headstone said *Franklin Buckhorn, US Army*. Billy knew this was an uncle on his father’s side of the family.

“You unexpectedly met your mother’s deceased brother, Luther, last year because he had some unfinished business to tend to with your uncle John, the preacher,” Little Wolf said.

“Yeah, Grandma Awinita brought him to see me.”

“But you don’t see your father’s brother Franklin hanging around the cemetery here, do you?”

Billy looked around and didn’t see any spirits lurking about.

“That’s because most people killed in the midst of battle get stuck somewhere near where they were killed, like on the battlefield,” Little Wolf continued.

“I see what you’re getting at.”

“And there are plenty of people who don’t even really realize they’ve died, because they’re so focused on still trying to fight the battle they were in the middle of fighting when they died.”

Billy remained silent a moment as that idea penetrated his mind. “Is that where my uncle Frank is?” he asked.

“Bingo!” the spirit replied.

Billy and the diminutive Indian immediately zipped across some indescribable space and came to a stop just above a desert valley dotted with short bushy trees and large boulders. A battle raged between two opposing forces: a row of camouflage-uniformed soldiers in the middle of a dry riverbed who faced lines of Middle Eastern men with beards who attacked from both sides.

Billy recognized one of the uniformed soldiers as his father's brother Franklin, known to those closest to him as Frank. He was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with one of the bearded men. The only problem was that neither man was making any progress in harming the other because their blows failed to strike any solid flesh. Both were merely energy forms—spirits—with no physical body to hit.

"What, they're dead and don't know it?" Billy blurted out.

"Bingo again."

"How long have they been like this?"

"How long ago did you get the news that your uncle was killed in action?"

"I'm not sure—ten years, maybe." The reality of the situation dawned on Billy. "They've been stuck here doing this for ten years?"

"Some spirits keep it up for centuries. Think of haunted castles and such. Time's not really a hard-and-fast factor over here, so you don't sense how much time has passed."

"Can we help get him unstuck?" Billy asked.

"That's what we're here for. Others have tried. Now it's your turn."

Billy floated closer to the action. "Uncle! Uncle!" he shouted. "It's me, Billy, your nephew!"

Frank didn't seem to notice, so the teen moved in closer and took up a position within his uncle's line of sight.

"Franklin Redpaint Buckhorn, look at me!" he shouted more loudly and forcefully. He waved his arms while whistling and yelling until his uncle finally noticed him.

"Get back!" Frank responded. "They'll kill you!"

The man continued his fruitless combat maneuvers.

"He can't kill me," Billy said. "He can't kill you either, because you're already dead. In fact, you can stop fighting because he's dead too."

That got Frank's attention. He stopped struggling and stood still.

The Middle Eastern man continued his efforts to strike his opponent, to no avail. His blows passed right through Frank's translucent form. Finally,

the bearded fighter stopped trying to damage his enemy. Looking around, he blinked a couple of times, saw Billy, and exclaimed, "Allah be praised!"

The man fell to his knees before the teen and bowed his head to the ground in worship. He began a fervent prayer chant.

"He thinks you're a god or something," Frank said. "Are you?"

"No, I'm your nephew, Billy Buckhorn."

Billy realized that the last time his uncle had seen him, he was a young boy of about five or six years old.

"But how are you here?" Frank asked. "And where is here?"

Just then some sort of opening appeared above them, and a bright light spilled on them. Who appeared in that doorway but Billy's great-grandfather, Bullseye Buckhorn. He called to his grandson Franklin, who looked in his direction.

"Grandfather, is that you?" Frank asked as Bullseye floated toward him.

Bullseye sort of winked at Billy as he escorted his grandson through the opening and disappeared.

The Middle Eastern man witnessed the same sequence of events Billy had seen and stood up with a puzzled look on his translucent face.

"I am also dead?" he said.

Billy merely nodded.

"What am I to do now?" the man asked.

A thought appeared in Billy's mind. "I'm not sure, but I think you're supposed to just wait here, and someone you know will come and find you."

The man blinked as he digested the idea. "*Inshallah!*" the man exclaimed. "If God wills it."

Momentarily, an opening appeared nearby like before, and a man wearing flowing tan robes stepped through it. The Middle Eastern man seemed to recognize the visitor and followed him back through the opening, smiling at Billy before disappearing.

After that the scene fell silent. The teen looked around but couldn't detect Little Wolf's presence, and so he just floated, realizing that his tour, or whatever the heck it was, must be over.

As he closed the eyes of his energy body, he thought of the Red Paint Clan arbor at the stomp grounds. He pictured the stomp dance grounds clearly, seeing the circle of dancers, hearing the call-and-response of the songs, even smelling the smoke from the central sacred fire.

In a matter of a few seconds, he felt the familiar stretching sensation, and in the blink of an eye, he detected the denseness of his own physical body around him. He opened his physical eyes and blinked a couple of times. There was no sign of Little Wolf, Bullseye, or his uncle Frank. He spent a few moments absorbing what he'd just experienced, but once again his mind filled with questions—questions he doubted could be answered by his grandfather or anyone still in the flesh.

Traditional Cherokees believed a person's soul hung around for four days after death and then traveled westward to the land of the dead, Billy remembered. And according to Uncle John, churchgoers believed the souls of the dead slept—that is, rested in peace—until Jesus returned to take them to heaven one day, but only the true believers.

The experiences he'd just had didn't line up with either of those beliefs. He'd have to talk to *someone* about it all very soon.

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