

Chapter 3

Tomawka's Dream

The young man sat cross-legged and raised his arms toward the sliver of moon still visible behind the maples, oaks, and ash that grew to his west. Raising his face toward the heavens, he sang thanks for his delivery through the night, and then rose to his feet, turned to the east, and began his chant to the new day. Tall and thin, sinew and bone, his muscles were long. There was no other in the valley of his people that was taller than he, and he was widely known for his athletic skills. He loved this place and took every opportunity to visit the lake. It was holy. The unmistakable odors of lake and forest blended into a sweet perfume that filled his senses with absolute perfection. On gentle mornings like this, it whispered to the goodness of the earth and embraced all travelers within its warm cloak.

However, he had seen it angry. A time when the wind blew so ferociously that trees fell and the lake's surface was whipped into frenzy; the water, black as night, with waves so big they washed over the peninsula on which he now camped. It blew so hard that froth was driven from the white-capped waves and filled the air like fog on a warm spring morning. As much as he feared those times, he loved the peaceful feeling during mornings such as this.

His name was Tomawka and he was sent by his leader to scout the area for sign of Chippewa war parties, and to locate stands of wild rice and berries. The Chippewa were responsible for driving his people from their ancestral home to the north; they were his sworn enemy. Battles were not uncommon in this most special of places. An abundance of ancient burial mounds bore evidence to that fact. His village looked forward to trading and socializing with the other Dakota bands that gathered along the shores and islands of the lake each year, and a tribal war would not be welcome.

Tomawka traveled the shoreline around the entire one hundred plus miles of lakeshore and found no trace of the hated Chippewa. Today he would travel the final miles that would bring him to a place called Spirit Knob. Tomorrow he would return to the camp of his people.

He traveled light, his only possessions a knife that was given to him by the great leader Shakopee in recognition of his bravery in battle, and a flint that was securely held inside a leather pouch at his waist. His upper body was naked. He wore leather leggings and moccasins common to his people. A single eagle feather tied into his long black hair was a sign of his bravery. He had no fire to extinguish so there was very little to be done to erase his presence from the small point of land. Tonight he would build a fire and cook fresh fish. It would be his first warm meal since leaving his village fifteen days earlier.

He left the peninsula, following the water's edge where it washed against a steep incline. As he walked, the terrain on his left slowly descended to water level and he found himself on a narrow strip of dry ground running through a marsh. On both sides, the reeds opened to deep water. Behind him was the peninsula where he greeted the new day.

The large bay on his right would guide him to this evening's cooking fire. The journey, if undertaken directly, could be completed in less than half a day, but Tomawka knew he would be lucky to arrive at the place called Spirit Knob before sundown.

The Chippewa warrior watched as the tall man approached the marsh. The Dakotas knew this Chippewa as Catka, a reference to his left-handedness. In truth, Catka was the fiercest of the Chippewa in his village and many Dakota scalps hung on his lodge pole. He disdained spears and arrows, preferring the war club in combat. He liked the feel of breaking bones and shattered skulls at the head of his club. Catka fought for the love of battle and he was well known and feared by the Dakotas. He had, deep within, a perverted love of killing. He now planned the death of the Dakota approaching through the marsh.

Catka was raised like all the Chippewa children, but by the time he was seven, he began to stand out from the others. He caught frogs, impaled them with a sharp stick, and roasted them over the fire while still alive. He was known to climb high into the trees and take baby birds from their nests, rip the heads from the bodies and throw them to the ground. While other children hunted for meat, Catka hunted for the killing, often mutilating animals beyond recognition. When he came of age to fight the enemy, he proved to be a natural combatant and gained instant recognition for his fearless embrace of battlefield chaos.

Seeing the tall Dakota warrior approaching, he knew his reputation would soon be bolstered.

As the Dakota knew Catka, the Chippewa knew Tomawka—what a gift he had been given! It was good he did not have his war club for it would have been difficult to leave the Dakota's face intact. He would not settle for the scalp, rather the entire head of this Dakota warrior would hang outside his lodge. All who walked near would whisper of his might. His enemies would fear speaking his name aloud. He would be as a God to his people. He would defeat the great Tomawka on the shores of this lake. His name would be sung by generations not yet born.

Tomawka moved steadily along the sandy high ground within the marsh. His head turned slightly from side to side, allowing his eyes to scan what lay ahead. Trained in the pursuit of wild game, he focused on nothing yet saw everything, allowing his peripheral vision to detect the flick of an ear or movement of a leg invisible to the focused eye.

Ahead, on the far side of the marsh where the ground rose around the open bay, seven wood ducks erupted and climbed, circling out over the water.

"Strange," thought Tomawka. "All rose from the surface as one. Something disturbed them, something they are not used to."

He continued walking without breaking pace and his head continued its movement from side to side. Then he saw something even more disturbing. On the high ground and very near where he knew the trail passed, he detected a fleeting glimpse of color, unnatural for its surroundings. Then it was gone. Tomawka continued as though he saw nothing.

Catka knew where he would engage the Dakota. He reasoned the unsuspecting Tomawka would take the main trail unless alerted by sign of another person, or a branching trail that required inspection. There was no such trail between the two, and Catka had left no sign. The perfect place for engagement was where the trail crossed a gully created a decade earlier when a huge cottonwood was uprooted during a storm. In the following hours, the rain fell so heavily that it filled the root cavity and eventually washed over the side to flow toward the lake, taking surface soil with it. Subsequent rains continued to wash the ground away until the gully reached a depth of nine feet. The sides were steep, and roots from standing trees hung from the sides of the washed-out earth, the trees themselves threatening to crash into the open gully when sufficient ground washed from beneath them.

There was a natural slope leading to the gully from both sides, but once at the bottom the traveler must walk several yards within the washout to reach the exit slope on the far side. This was where Catka would become a legend. He planned his attack for the place that the Dakota would be most vulnerable. He decided to spring his trap as his enemy began his ascent from the depths of the gully.

Like Igmu Taka, the lion, he would pounce and slash the ankle tendons leaving his foe helpless. He would bring death as slowly and painfully as

possible. He had time. There was no hurry. If Tomawka was exceptionally strong and resisted death, he may strip the flesh from his arms and hear his screams.

They would sing of Catka the warrior.

They would sing of Catka the legend.

They would fear Catka the God.

He barely heard the red squirrel begin scolding him from above.

Tomawka left the marsh and gained the slope to higher ground. His senses were attuned to everything around him. There was something unsettling about the flight of ducks. Even more unsettling was the glimpse of something through the dense leaves on the shore he now approached. Then he heard the squirrel, its agitated chatter was commonplace in the forest, but when coupled with the other warnings he knew danger was ahead.

But where? He needed time to think, to prepare, to plan his response to the new threat. For the first time since he left the peninsula, he slowed his stride. To an onlooker it was innocent, stopping to gather berries at the edge of the trail. To Tomawka it was time to prepare for battle.

He entered the bushes to conceal his movements. He nonchalantly repositioned his knife so it could be withdrawn from its sheath in the natural motion of raising his arm from his side. His mind raced. He had walked this trail before. What lay ahead? Where was danger the greatest? If what waited was a Chippewa war party they would already be upon him, which meant it was either a wild animal or a single human that prepared the ambush. Where would he position himself to improve his chances of taking a whitetail deer that walked this trail?

Then he knew. The ravine, of course.

That is where he must be most alert. That is where the ambush would take place, and that is where his instincts and reactions would be tested. To fail was to die. Tomawka had no intention of dying on this day.

Catka waited impatiently for the Dakota warrior to approach the gully. He had picked his position well. He was concealed by brush heavy enough to hide his movement, but offering a natural opening through which he could launch his body noiselessly to drop upon the unsuspecting victim.

Tomawka approached the ravine as though he suspected nothing. As he walked the slope to the bottom, he shortened his steps and slowed his pace. With his weight riding on the balls of his feet, he was prepared for instant movement in any direction.

Catka watched the tall warrior descend into the gully.

Tomawka walked directly toward the concealed Chippewa. He approached the thick bushes to his right, and as he turned to exit the ravine bottom, he sensed movement behind him.

Catka launched himself feet first to deliver a blow to the middle of the back, intended to break the spine. As his enemy lay helpless, he would slash the ankle tendons and quickly follow with a cut across the belly. In moments, this Dakota would be holding his own intestines in his hands.

Tomawka, with the sensation of movement, crouched and spun his body, right arm sliding upward, hand closing on the handle of the knife given to him by Shakopee, his leader. He dove to his left, twisting his body, and as his left shoulder hit the ground, his right arm swung in an arc. He felt the blade make

contact as he rolled, struggling to maintain control. He spun to his feet, knife extended, ready to parry the expected thrust by his unseen opponent.

Catka was unable to stop his flight as he saw Tomawka spin away. He extended his left leg to place his heel into the kidney area and render his foe helpless long enough for him to recover and slash the injured body. As he saw the Dakota hit the ground, he felt a searing sensation inside his left thigh. He hit the ground hard and spun to face his enemy.

Tomawka's right arm was covered with blood as he faced the Chippewa. It dripped from his elbow, and he feared a deep wound, although he felt no pain.

Catka looked at the bloody arm and smiled, showing gleaming white teeth behind thin lips that refused to rise at the corners. As he stepped forward, his foot slipped from under him and he went down hard. Strangely, the Dakota just stood there looking. What was wrong? Why was he not attacking? Then Catka noticed what kept Tomawka rooted in place. He, Catka, was lying in a pool of blood. He raised his left leg and blood pumped forth with every beat of his heart. His eyes moved from his leg to his enemy's face, and he realized it was his blood on the warrior's arm. Catka's expression was flat, showing neither hate nor surprise. He was dying. He knew he was dying, and that knowledge was his last. As he lost consciousness his lifeblood continued to spill on the ground in the ravine, and Tomawka looked on, feeling sorry that the death had not been nobler.

Every warrior wanted to die in battle, but none wanted to die from a single knife stroke.

Plucking the knife from the dead Chippewa's hand, Tomawka untied the rawhide strap affixed to the sheath, stood, and without looking back moved onward to Spirit Knob.

Tomawka watched, trancelike, unable to take his eyes off the scene unfolding below him. He was deep into the big woods, trees so thick that sunlight could not penetrate their branches, and he was a vapor, floating above, without voice.

Below him, the naked Indian dodged the fusillade of crows, black and ferocious, and so great in number they couldn't be counted. They streaked through the branches and dove upon his naked body, hammering with beaks that dripped blood, stripping his flesh and penetrating to the bone. Singing the song of death, he raced to the precipice and launched his body to the rocks below.

It was then that Tomawka saw him transform into a grasshopper, and with great leaps, traverse the swollen stream on boulders, each popping to the surface as he was about to alight in the water to be carried away by the raging current. With each leap, the stream widened and the shore that he sought moved farther into the distance. On the fourth leap, the grasshopper became the whitened bones of a skull, eyeless sockets staring skyward as it drifted through the air.

Tomawka awoke with a start, heart pounding as he sprang to his feet, knife in hand, ready to confront that which he did not know, only to face the silence of the night. Interminable moments passed before he realized it was a dream. Unnerved, he stalked the perimeter of his campsite before returning to his small fire, constructed with certainty that there was no danger in the darkness surrounding him. Why now, was he moved by the Great Spirit to see this vision, and what was the meaning?