

“Are you sure you’re understanding me?”

“Yes, Dan,” I said. “It’s a privilege for me to hear these things.”

“It is not a privilege,” he said. “It is a responsibility. You are the one I have chosen to help me speak. You are the one who must help me pass these things along.

“Now I will continue.”

He steepled his gnarled fingers in front of his face.

“Now the trail begins to get difficult. It gets difficult because there are things that are difficult for me to say and things that will be difficult for you to hear.”

He touched his fingers to his lips, as if seeking to consecrate his words.

“When your people first came here, we reached out our hands to each other. We showed you our ways, and you showed us yours. We taught you about the animals and the plants and the medicines. We showed you how to live on this land — how to make clothing and grow crops and build houses for the weather. You thanked us and showed us all the amazing things that you had created, like guns for hunting and glasses that could make far things look close, and special medicines that could cure sicknesses our medicines could not.

“Those were good times. They were not always easy times, but our hands were extended to each other in the hope of friendship. We were living together inside the Creator’s promise.

“But then something changed. Your hunger for our land became greater than your hunger for our friendship. What had been a sharing became a struggle for a way of life.

“We did not want such a struggle. We have always believed that the Creator’s knowledge is too great to fit inside one people. We believe he gave different knowledge to different people, just like he gave different knowledge to different plants and different animals. We believe it is our task is to be open to the Creator’s knowledge and to honor it wherever it is found.

“From the first, we saw that your people had a special kind of knowledge. It was knowledge that was difficult for us to understand, but we had to respect it, because it was your gift from the Creator. It was the knowledge of the restless spirit.

“You were always seeking. You did not want to stay still — in your lives or in your minds. You were always trying to change things, to make them better, to make them different. It was like the world that the Creator had made was not good enough for you. You wanted to know what was inside of stones and what was beyond the stars. You took everything apart then tried to put it back together. You never rested.

“This seemed to us like an unhappy way to live. We believed that what the Creator had given us was enough and that the place he had put us was where we belonged. We wanted to learn the Creator’s original teachings in the land that he had given us. We were an honoring people, a guardian people, not an exploring and discovering people. For us the world was a mystery to be honored, not a puzzle to be solved.

“But we saw that you had accomplished great things in your way, and we respected that. We thought that we could share our knowledge with you, and that you would listen to us and learn from us, like we were learning from you. But that was not your way. You believed that the Creator had put all his knowledge in a Black Book and it was your task to bring that Black Book to other people and make everyone live in the way that you lived.

“As you became more and more powerful, you tried to force this way of life on our people. You tried to destroy our languages. You took our children. You would not let us practice our beliefs or live in the way we had been taught by our ancestors. You tried to silence the voices of those who had lived here long before you and replace them with the sound of your language and your own way of life.

“This was a mistake. Our Indian people have been here for ten

thousand seasons. We have a deep knowledge. We have been born on this land; our bodies have returned to this land. We have an understanding that comes only from deep listening and long patience. You needed to hear what we had to say, but your ears were closed and your hearts were hard.

“Now the earth is passing through a difficult season. A strong wind is shaking all the trees. Everyone is wondering what will happen. But our people are not worried. The tree of our life is strong; the roots of our knowledge go far into this earth.

“Your people’s roots do not run so deep. You grew fast and tall on this land, faster and taller than we had thought possible. But your roots have just started to become one with this soil. These winds could harm you. They could damage your little children. That is why I am talking to you. Perhaps now you will listen to us. Perhaps now you will open your hearts to what we have to share.”

His hands were shaking. I had never seen him so desperate to communicate.

He took another sip of water. “I need you to understand these things, Nerburn,” he said again. “I need you to pass them on.”

“I’ll try, Dan,” I said.

He slammed the glass back on the table.

“No,” he said. “No. You will not try. You will do it. You will do it for me, and you will do it for Yellow Bird. I am telling you this. You think I let you close to my life so you could choose what you want?”

“I’m sorry, Dan. I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“I don’t care how you meant it. I only care that you do what you are called on to do. It is like I said — not all gifts are easy gifts. This gift I give you is not an easy gift. People will challenge you. White people will say that you lie. Indian people will say that you try to steal our words and put them in your own mouth.

“Grover says I should not have talked to you. He says you’re weak. He says you fear anger. He thinks I chose poorly.

“I don’t believe that. I think you are strong. I think you have the strength of a camp chief, not the strength of a war chief. You are not a leader, but you make sure that no one is left behind. We Indian people are the ones who have been left behind. That is why I talk to you. Because you will not let the little children be left behind.”

I was taken aback by his vehemence. But I was honored by his willingness to stand by me.

“I won’t let you down, Dan,” I said. “I won’t let Yellow Bird down. I won’t let any of you down.”

He poked my arm with his crooked finger. “You just worry about the children downstream,” he said.

He pointed at the tape recorder. “Now, check those white man’s ears. Make sure they’re still awake.”

I held up the recorder so he could hear the whirring of the wheels. “They’re still awake,” I said.

“Good. Now let us go a little farther on this trail.

“The greatest weakness of your people is that you do not know how to listen. You have closed your ears to other voices. Not just the voices of other people, but the voices of all creation. This is wrong. The Creator has placed knowledge in all things. Just because we humans have been given the gift of being able to stand outside ourselves does not mean that our knowledge is superior. We are not at the center of creation, we are just a part of creation.

“We Indians understand this. We know that the Creator placed special knowledge in everything. *Tatanka* has a special knowledge. *Wanbli* has a special knowledge. The plants, they each have special knowledge. Even little *shunka* here, he has special knowledge.”

He rubbed Charles Bronson under the neck. The little dog shifted in Dan’s lap and stared up at Dan with something close to love.