

Chapter I

Tanarou awoke to the smell of smoke. He sat upright from his pallet, drawing the skin around his shoulders as he looked about him to locate its source. The morning sunlight filtered through the riotously-colored leaves of autumn, casting a pattern of ever-changing shadow across the floor of the forest around his sleeping place.

Nearby, he saw his companion Ginawo stirring in his sleep, but he knew that the younger man would be slower to wake than he was, with his senses fully sharpened by the experience of combat. Standing, Tanarou moved silently into the woods toward the source of the acrid scent, seeking its cause.

As he crested a rise tangled with low-hanging cedars he spotted the small campfire, and heard the guttural speech of three men who lounged about it. Freezing, he studied them. They did not wear the blood-colored jackets that marked warriors of the “British” tribe distinctly from those of the “Colonial” tribe.

Their clothing was worn and dirty by Tanarou’s standards, made of the material that looked like skins, but was composed of many individual strands, in a variety of shades, ranging from the pale brown of dried grass to the black of a doe’s eye.

Their words were in English, though Tanarou’s grasp of that language was not firm enough for him to make out more than a handful of words. He did hear

the word “Indian” from one, who wore a rough jacket of poorly-cured deerskin and a hat bearing a bright blue ribbon Tanarou knew somehow signified his rank.

One of the deerskin man’s companions responded with a long comment, from which Tanarou could only recognize the words “scalp” and “Mohawk,” which Tanarou knew was the word that these pale men used for some of his brothers.

The topic of their conversation was deeply interesting to him, so he knew that Ginawo’s hare ears should be the ones to listen in on it. His companion’s youth might be a hindrance in early-morning alertness, but like young men of all times and places, Ginawo had embraced and absorbed the novelty of the ever-increasing presence and contact with these new men with greater enthusiasm than the men of Tanarou’s generation had.

As a result, Ginawo understood much of the English that most of these men spoke amongst themselves, as well as some of the French that others spoke. To Tanarou, none of these tongues had the fluid beauty of the words taught to his own people in the days before the stories were told, the true words of the People.

Regardless of the aesthetic merits of the language these interlopers used, Tanarou needed to understand better what they spoke about, so he slipped back over the ridge, relaxing as he was safe from the view of the men lazing about the smoky fire that had betrayed their presence to all creatures for a great many strides downwind.

Returning to where Ginawo still slumbered, he bent beside the younger man, grunting softly in his ear, “Wake, you who would mimic the wintering bear. It is

not yet time for your long sleep, and there is work I need of you.”

Ginawo opened one eye and looked at Tanarou, saying in a whisper that matched Tanarou’s low volume, “You are not the straight-limbed maiden I hoped to find stepping out of my night thoughts. What is it that you need of me, respected elder?” His tone as he said these last words failed to reflect the honor due to Tanarou, and earned him a quiet, but not too hard, cuff on the ear.

“There is a group of the pale men whose fire should have awakened you long before I returned, and I need you to tell me what they are saying to one another and all who would care to listen.”

Ginawo opened his other eye and sniffed the air, nodding to Tanarou. “You are right, as usual, revered elder. I have erred in not awakening sooner.” Rising to his feet, the younger man stood slightly taller than Tanarou, a fact that the old warrior resented but refused to acknowledge that he resented. Narrowing his eyes and pointing with his chin, Ginawo continued, “They lie in that direction?”

Tanarou nodded in reply and led the way. Neither man made any sound as they stepped through the confusion of tangled fallen branches and the carpet of fresh leaves that laid on the forest floor. Both wore the skins of the bear in whose brotherhood they were joined, scraped clean and made supple by the long, patient application of the thick, pungent grease of the same animals.

Warm and flexible, the more important feature of these clothes at the moment was that they enabled the men to blend in invisibly with the forest around them. Neither had a firearm, and they knew that in

a conflict with the pale men, they would be overcome in a moment—so they kept themselves invisible to the blind eyes of the interlopers, and inaudible to their deaf ears.

Stopping as the smell of the campfire nearly brought a sneeze to his nose, Tanarou motioned for Ginawo to follow slowly now as they came within hearing of the Colonial men's speech. The two stopped behind the boles of great maples, each large enough that even if the other men had thought to look in their direction, there would be nothing that they could spot, even if they could truly see.

From this vantage, they listened, Tanarou only picking up an odd word now and again, and Ginawo carefully marking everything he could say. The younger man's special gift was in being able to repeat stories he heard, whether they were the stories of the Elders, spoken in the speech of the People, or the words of such as these three men, with their broken-sounding languages. He would later be able to recite what he heard, and then tell Tanarou—or others—everything that he understood of it.

Tanarou could hear laughter and a lot of what sounded like relatively light-hearted banter, though it was difficult to discern exactly what the mood of the speech he heard was, so different was it to his ear. The few words he could make out sounded warlike, in contradiction to the tone, and he looked forward to Ginawo's report of the details.

As they sat listening, they could hear the men stand and begin to clean up their encampment, to the extent that they could be bothered. The hiss of water poured over the campfire, accompanied by a pale drift of dying-ember smoke and the warm smell of steam,

told Tanarou that it was time for he and his companion to return to the place where they had spent the night themselves, so that they could discuss what Ginawo had heard.

Motioning silently to Ginawo, Tanarou rose to a crouch and made his way down the slope and back toward their camp. After a moment, Ginawo rose to follow him, and Tanarou heard the crack of a branch snapping beneath the younger man's moccasined foot, as he incautiously stepped away from his tree.

Ginawo and Tanarou both froze, and the talk from the men on the other side fell silent, as all five men fought panic and fear of what would happen next. Tanarou could hear the Colonials trying to be quiet as they ranged out from their campsite in search of the source of the sound that they'd heard. He discerned that they were heading in the wrong direction, though, and he motioned to Ginawo to follow him in the opposite direction.

He did not express recriminations to the younger man for his carelessness—there would be time enough for that later—but in his heart, Tanarou raged at Ginawo's oafishness. Clever he might be, but if he got himself or both men killed, all his recitations and translations would be of less use than antlers to a wolf.

Now, at least, however, Ginawo was being fully mindful of his footfalls, and Tanarou himself had to glance back from time to time to assure himself that the younger man followed him yet. The Colonials had started shouting to each other as they fruitlessly scouted over the hillside, and he could make out enough to recognize that they were convincing themselves that it had been something other than a human footstep that they had heard.

Tanarou led Ginawo further away from their encounter with the pale men, speeding up as the need for utter silence fell away with distance. Finally, he signaled a halt, and waited for Ginawo to join him for a conference.

As Ginawo approached, he lowered his shoulders and presented Tanarou his ear for the painful cuff he had earned, and accepted it without flinching or crying out. "I was careless and foolish, honored elder, and I am deeply grateful that my error did not cost us more dearly."

"Well you should be filled with sorrow, Ginawo, who stumbles through the woods like a currant-drunk turkey. If those pale men had not been as stupid as newly-born squirrels, we would be their captives or worse now."

"I know this, respected elder, and I only hope that the knowledge I have carried away from our meeting with them will be worth the danger I then brought to us."

"What have you learned, drunken turkey?"

Ginawo favored the older man with a crooked smile. "If you will refrain from sharing that name with the others ever, I will gladly tell you what the Colonial warriors were speaking of."

Tanarou feigned giving the matter some serious consideration, and then nodded solemnly. "I will not tell Jiwaneh that you have more in common with an autumn turkey than with a great warrior, if you will now share with me what those men spoke of."

Ginawo flushed at the mention of his favorite girl's name, but he took a deep breath and nodded before he began to speak.

"They are a scouting party, and a much larger force follows them two days back."

“What is their purpose in coming to this place?”

“They did not speak of this, but they did say that they would be looking for settlements of the People to report back to their chief.”

Tanarou’s brow furrowed deeply at this news. “They cannot be looking for us in order to make gifts to us,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

Since the British and the Colonials had begun warring several summers before, Tanarou and many of the other elders of both tribe and clan had been torn as to what the role of the People ought to be in this new struggle.

First to speak at the conclave where they gathered to talk the question over had been Hotoke, who reported, “We have already heard that our clan-brothers in the other tribes of the Haudenosaunee have been participating in attacks on the Colonials, and have destroyed several of their villages and taken trophies of their victories.”

He gestured to the east and continued, “I have spoken with Oskanondonha, who would have us fight alongside the Colonials and in opposition to our own clan-brothers. Already he has set brother against brother, tribe against tribe. This is no way for the People to treat one another.”

The elder Nakawe had been unequivocal. “We should learn which side in this war can most benefit the People. We have always been able to enjoy the ruin of these pale men when they contest with one another.”

He gestured about the lodge at the gathered elders, urging their agreement with his hands and nods of his head. “Perhaps this time, they will even grow so small from grinding upon each other like rocks in a stream that we can pluck them out and toss them back

into the ocean.”

Many had murmured their agreement, but old Nitchawake had stood, commanding silence with his presence. Slowly, the discussions around the lodge had slid to a halt until all in the circle looked at him and waited for his comments.

“Many wars have I seen, between brothers in the People, between the People and these men, and amongst these men themselves. I have seen peoples ground down as you say. Our tribe is one such, and we now live on this land because my father and his brothers made the same mistake you are making.”

He surveyed the room, opening his arms to encompass the world outside of the lodge. As did all in the circle, Tanarou attended him closely, and not only because of his age. His skin and hair were tinted darkly with the costly root of their former homeland, giving him a dark visage that all present instinctively associated with strength and experience.

“My father fought in the war for the warm skies, and he was among the dead there. My mother told me many times of the welcoming home of the People by our brothers in the Haudenosaunee Confederation.”

His arms dropped as he settled into his tale. “We were forced out of lands warmer and more genial than this place, where we had been masters of our own fate. The other tribes of the Confederation make the People feel welcome here, but in games at the clan gatherings as I grew up, I sometimes heard my brothers and myself taunted for our need to carry more fur in winter, and for the ways of our mothers.”

He shook his head. “My aunts and uncles did not come here because they wished to speak with others whose tongues were familiar to them. They came here

because an entire generation of warriors was laid low in battle with these pale men, the same men whom you so lightly assume can be depended upon to grind themselves away in dissipation against their own brothers.”

Sitting, he concluded, “It may be that we will need to choose a tribe of the pale men to call our brothers in war as they fight each other. But we must do so like the hare, who runs swiftly because knows that he is easy to catch, and not like the porcupine, who tastes just as good, but stands to fight because he believes himself to be invincible.”

A long silence followed Nitchiwake’s speech, and in the quiet, the even older Karowenna spoke up from her place of honor on a mat at the end of the circle furthest from the entrance to the lodge. “Nitchiwake is right—but we are neither hare nor porcupine. We are not helpless, nor are we foolish.”

Her eyes narrowed in the deep and complex folds of her face, and she continued, “We are like the fox, wise enough to see trouble when it is coming, and swift enough to flee, should it prove to be more than our teeth can hold.”

She paused for a long moment, so long that Tanarou even thought that she might have fallen asleep. He nearly started when she said, suddenly, “Neither side of this war has treated us fairly. Both the blood-jackets and the farm-builders will take what they need, without regard for the People. Indeed, they do not see us as people at all, but rather merely as a hindrance to their own plans.”

She, too, shook her head in frustration. “None of them can be trusted to keep their word; none can be left unwatched with something that is ours that they might want. We should take no side today, but rather regard

all of them as enemies not yet at war with us.”

There had been much more conversation in the lodge, lasting late into the night, but ultimately, the elders as a group had come to the same conclusion, and so things stood as Tanarou considered what to make of the information that Ginawo had reported to him.

Tanarou asked the younger man, “Did they say specifically that they were looking for the People, or for some of our brother tribes? I heard them speak of the Mohawk before I came and disturbed your sleep.”

“I did not hear them speak of any tribe. They only said that they needed to look for all of the villages in the area.”

The younger man scowled and added, “I did not like the way that they laughed when they said that they hoped to find our villages without alerting us. Should we summon the warriors?”

Tanarou frowned. “To what end?”

“We can stop the scouts from finding our homes!”

“Did they say how large the force is that is following them? I have little doubt that if we stopped them, they would send out more scouts, and in larger numbers.” The older man shook his head. “No, we must simply warn the People and hope that they can escape whatever mischief these pale men have in their minds for us. The fox does not attack the wolf, Ginawo, but instead stays out of his way when he comes to visit.”

Ginawo scowled even more deeply, but kept his thoughts to himself.

Tanarou rose and listened carefully for a moment, then said, “Come, let us return to where we slept, so that we can conceal our presence there, should they happen to stumble across it.”

Chapter 2

Sergeant John Howe wearily joined his men as they finished cleaning up the last traces of the night's encampment. William and Joseph, his two privates, exchanged amused glances as they packed up their kit and tossed leaves and fallen branches over the site of their fire to conceal the fact that they'd been there.

As he worked, William asked conversationally, "Do you figure that it were an animal, then, Sergeant?"

Howe sighed wearily. "I don't know, William. It sounded like a branch breaking under the weight of a man, but we never did see any hint of anyone in the woods." He scowled up at the ridgeline where he'd thought he'd heard the tell-tale sign that they were not alone in the forest.

"Of course, with those devils, who could even tell? I've heard stories that they scarcely even touch the ground as they go, so it's no wonder that they leave no tracks that a normal man could follow. I can track most any creature on four legs or two, but they seem able to leave no mark, even when they've left no doubt that they've been there."

Joseph looked up, a sad, distant look in his eye. "They left nothing but ashes at my neighbor's place in Pennsylvania. Naught even fit to bury left of them."

He looked sharply at Howe. "Nor any tracks any of us could see, either. They are devils, when they set their minds to it." After pondering for a few moments,

he added, "Some of them can be downright helpful, but these Mohawks and Iroquois are just set on murder and destruction, it seems. Is it true that we're going to give them back some of their own?"

Howe shook his head and pursed his lips. "Nay, I cannot say what is on the general's mind exactly. He has his orders from General Washington himself, though, and authorization right from the Congress, so whatever they've told him to do, it's all the way from the top."

William interjected, "Well, whatever it is, I hope we can get on with it soon. Weather's not getting any warmer, and them dandies in Congress can't seem to get us any warm clothes to wear out here."

"Nice morning today, though, particularly since we're warmed up from beating through the woods," Howe rejoined, and all three men laughed. Slinging their sacks onto their shoulders, the two privates looked expectantly to Howe, who glanced at the sun rising through the leaves over his right shoulder and started his little squad marching northward.

As they picked their way through the undergrowth, Joseph started in again on a constant complaint. "Sergeant, will we be getting some more supplies in a few days, when we report in? My belly still feels empty, even though I know that we just ate."

Howe shook his head, frustrated. "Joseph, you'd still be peckish even after you finished off an entire steer. I think that your legs must be hollow, because there's no other reason that you don't outweigh any three other men in the squad, the way you eat."

"Aw, come on, sergeant! I don't eat any more than is my share."

"...plus whatever the rest of us leave on our plates," intoned William quietly.

Joseph answered plaintively, “Well, would you have me just let it go to waste?”

The two privates bickered on, mostly in good spirits, as the little group continued to make its way through the forest until it was full well time to do something about Joseph’s growling belly. Howe said, “Stop here, men, and let’s have a small, quick fire for some tea and hardtack, all right?”

Joseph was very efficient about getting the fire going, busily gathering dry kindling from the undergrowth, and within a few minutes, a fire crackled within the circle of rocks he had assembled in the small clearing Howe had selected for their resting point.

William was just as fast to set up the pot over the fire and scraped tea into the pot from the block he produced out of his sack. Shortly, all three were slurping the last drops of tea from around the dregs in their battered tin cups and gnawing at their hardtack.

They stomped out the embers and covered them with dirt before re-arraying the natural detritus of the woods about the spot. Once Howe declared himself satisfied that their presence would not be betrayed by any remnants of their fire, they again shouldered their packs and continued into the forest.

The sunlight of the morning had given way to sullen grey clouds by the time they stopped for lunch, and not long after they began marching northward again, the first drops of cold rain were spattering through the orange and yellow leaves of the autumn trees. The three men raised their collars, and the tricorne design of their hats kept the worst of the drips from the branches overhead off of their necks.

“How long do you reckon before this turns to snow?” Joseph’s tone was just short of a whine, and

William grinned at Howe's growl in response.

"Now that we've filled your belly, must we listen to your complaints about the Congress' management of the weather for the next ten miles?"

Joseph replied, aggrieved, "I wasn't complaining, only but wondering. After all, I expect that it starts snowing sooner here in New York than it does in Pennsylvania."

"You've naught to worry about, Joseph," Howe replied. "I misdoubt that even Congress will expect us to fight once the snows in these parts get going."

William spoke up now, interjecting, "I've heard tell that the snow here can get to be deep enough that a man could pick apples without a ladder, if he could but stay upright in the stuff." After a moment's thought, he added, "Or if there were any apples yet to pick by the time the snow became that deep."

"Indeed, William, when last I traveled here, I heard much the same, but if we find ourselves still in these reaches of the country by that time, we'll likely all get the chance to learn how to use snow-shoes. Our opponents here are known to be expert users of these things, and it will not avail us at all to say that we cannot meet them in battle because there is snow on the ground."

Joseph replied, animatedly, "I have heard of these things, that they permit a man to walk on snow just as if he were floating over the top!"

"'Tis not so easy as that, Joseph," Howe said. "I have spoken with men who have used them, and they say that it is hard work—not so hard as walking in snow without them, but still, a fit man can only go perhaps half so far in a day with them than he could on dry ground, and he will rest well that night."

"Speaking of rest...", Joseph began, hopefully,

but Howe silenced him with a glare.

“The village we’re to scout out is twenty miles ahead yet, and then we return to the main force to share what intelligence we have gathered. We’ll not succeed in this if we don’t keep up a decent pace.”

“Yes, sir,” said Joseph, his shoulders slumping. However, his pace never slackened, and the group made good time through the now-sodden woods.

With the heavy clouds overhead still providing a steady rain, it grew too dark for safe travel much earlier than it had the previous evening, and Howe soon enough ordered the men to stop and set up camp for the night.

No one in the group was an experienced woodsman—William had been a blacksmith’s apprentice prior to his enlistment in the militia, Joseph a farmer, and Howe had been a brewer.

However, they had learned quickly enough how to fashion the canvas they carried into a rude shelter, and with a few saplings and some hempen twine, they soon had a serviceable lean-to tent that they could sleep under.

As he laid the fire, Joseph swore under his breath. “This kindling is so wet, it’s going to take a long blow indeed to make a decent fire with it.”

When his companions failed to express their sympathy, busy with their own tasks around the campsite, he shook his head and went back to setting the thinnest cedar branches he’d collected into a careful pile over the bark and somewhat dry leaves he’d already formed into a loose circle in the fire pit.

Sighing again, he pulled a cord of jute twine from his tinder box and carefully unraveled it into a loose, dry form, which he then set into the center of the fire pit. Crumpling up charcloth around that, he then pulled

out the flint and his knife, and began scraping sparks into the jute.

“Ha!” He gave a quiet exclamation of victory as the jute caught light, and bent hurriedly to give it breath and encourage it into a full fire. Soon enough, the charcloth had lit up the leaves and bark, and the first from the kindling-wood starting to burn let him sit back on his heels as he carefully laid larger sticks and wood across the small fire and built it into a warm, cheerful presence in the center of the campsite.

“Fire’s ready,” he called to William, who had already unpacked his cooking kit, and was pouring the water Howe had fetched back from the nearby stream into his cook pot.

“Thanks, Joseph. See? It wasn’t so hard as you thought it’d be.”

Joseph grunted noncommittally, and Howe smiled from inside the lean-to, where he was unfolding the waxcloth upon which they would sleep—hopefully, dry.

William fed some dried beef into the pot that he’d set over the fire, and then stirred in what spices he had. “Not much of a dinner, boys, but it will have to do. Unless one of us can spot something tastier as we go, it’s going to be hardtack and dried stew all the way there and back.”

“We cannot spare the powder, nor dare we advertise our presence so boldly,” Howe replied. “What we have fetched along will just have to serve to satisfy Joseph’s stomach.”

Joseph, to his credit, did not groan, and set down the wood he’d gathered beside the campfire, then crouched to warm his hands.

“Do you reckon, then, that the Mohawk are nearby, sergeant?”

“I should hope not, but if they were, we would know naught of it until they wished to announce their presence.”

“Are they so difficult to spot in these woods?”

“They are like smoke, Joseph, and they have lived in these woods for many hundreds of years, at the least, so they have learned all the ways of keeping out of sight and covering their tracks. Those who dismiss them as primitive men or mere savages do so at their peril. The Indians I have known are as clever as you or William.”

“That’s not saying much, in Joseph’s case,” William said, with a guffaw. Joseph favored him with a sour look, and then turned back to Howe.

“I’ve heard that the Congress sought to make a pact with these Mohawk fellows, before the British convinced them to take up their side in the war. Is there any chance of turning them over to our side?”

“Well, Joseph, it’s far more complicated than all that. Strictly speaking, the Mohawks are just one tribe of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Federation. They are probably the most warlike against our cause, but the rest save the Oneida have been doing the will of their British allies, spreading death and destruction across this part of the frontier for several years.”

“Sounds like whatever the General’s got planned for them, they have coming to them.”

“I believe that the Congress is acting in the hope that this action is sufficient to bring the Iroquois back to neutrality in this struggle, or to at least splinter the Iroquois further. The Onondaga and the Tuscarora tribes may be amenable to alliance, if we can but convince them that to oppose us means their certain destruction.”

William looked up from where he stirred their

meager stew. “What is your experience of these tribes, sergeant?”

“I have but little direct experience of them, William. The Oneida, of course, you’ve seen at the garrison, and the Mohawk are their kin, but have their own distinct ways, naturally.”

Howe finished with the waxcloth, pinning down the ends with rocks he’d found in a nearby moraine. Standing, he continued, “You’ll see your fill of their ways tomorrow, if we can pick up our pace just a bit.”

He peered up through the multicolored canopy of dripping leaves and added, “Of course, that would be considerably easier if this rain would cease.”

Joseph grunted in agreement, as he sat on a large log he had dragged into the clearing for all three men to sit on before the fire pit. “So long as it doesn’t turn to snow before we’ve gone from this place for home, I’ll be well-enough satisfied. Is that stew ready, William?”

William shook his head and rolled his eyes as he lifted the pot off the fire with a stout branch. “Can always trust you to be thinking with your stomach, can’t we? Where’s your plate?”

Darkness settled deeply over the woods as the three chewed the stringy stew, each lost in their own thoughts. The only sound came from the spatter of the rain dripping upon all as the smoke from the dying campfire rose straight upward in the still night air.