



Words were her first remembrance. Words singing her to sleep. Words guttural and harsh. Lyrical as the air she breathed or the waters lapping at her toes. Nepi. Eau. Water. River. In every tongue it breathed the song of life, of death. A cricket chirp. A song of hovering wings. Every creature has its own tongue to speak, to soothe, to rage, to laugh, and to sing the song of life.

The wings held her, gave her breath and song and words. She heard them all in her cradle, in her mother's arms, trembling and weak. In the arms of a stranger, torn from her home, from the safety of her warm, tiny cradle. The warrior, fierce and proud in forests primeval where fear lurks but also is banished upon a word. Wendigo. Demon. Pailissa, Hileni, Homme. Man. Son of Man. Spiritus. Cautantowwit. Great Spirit. Father.

A warrior's daughter. A child of light living in the darkness.

Rage and then fear. What was there to fear? Here in the woods, among the trees where the Life Rivers flow. The words pour from her childish lips. All is calm. All is banished upon a word. Perfect love casts out fear, for the one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Do you see? He comes! He comes to save! To protect! Do not fear! Do you understand?

But they did not understand. Feathers folding around her, comforting her. Warm. Embracing, yet menacing, to those who do not understand, to those who do not love. Tears and feathers. Light and dark. Death had come, but so had life. And then the Time was ended and the child returned to grow. And the words she once knew, the world she once knew, would be forever changed but not quite forgotten.

◆◆◆ CHAPTER 1 ◆◆◆

Benjamin Stephenson searched the shadowy woodlands at the edge of the Ohio River waiting for Swearingen's woman to arrive. The note was the only reason he'd be enduring an idle winter's eve when there was plenty work to be done at the trading post. The scrap of paper crinkled in his hand, a worrisome matter that prickled with all the possibilities for her summoning him here. He pondered again the note's cryptic intent.

*Met me Zane Ridz
efför darzwerk dun
Fee*

Phoebe Swearingen. "Fee" to everyone who knew her well, including her devoted husband, but Ben preferred the elegance and formality of her Greek name, though Fee may have suited her better. The woman was never one for book learning, but that didn't seem to matter to Zechariah Swearingen who fell under her charms readily enough. Ben shook his head and chuckled into the winter stillness, broken only by the wind's whistle through barren trees and the pulsing hoot of a horned owl mournfully seeking his mate. Truth be told, there wasn't much time or need for reading or writing, beyond keeping accounts at the shop and assisting the paymaster for the militia. Few among these hills were able to match Ben's thirst for books or Swearingen's engaging wit. If only he had thought to bring one of his books to keep him from thinking of all the work he had yet to do.

A ledger awaited his accounting, among numerous other tasks at the trading post. Shipments should arrive any day now, as mid-winter's thaw foretold an early spring—although the weather was a capricious mistress. Supplies were low, with some weeks of winter remaining before Farming Man's Spring, come March, ushered in the planting time. Until then, folks would be in want of staples to extend their larders until kitchen gardens yielded summer's bounty. It was his task to supply the essentials that made survival possible and the luxuries that made life livable, ultimately at a profit to the store and to him as well.

With the coming of spring, there'd be more settlers heading across the Alleghenies and down the Ohio looking to make a new start in the valley. Most would likely be pushing onward into the virgin forests and fertile bottomlands where the great rivers met and promised rich rewards for those with the mettle to hew trees into farmland and settlements. It meant a fine crop of customers would inevitably pass through to trade goods, hopefully exchanging a few silver and gold coins he could add to his meager savings hidden in a sack beneath the floorboards of his storeroom quarters.

Ben folded the note, contemplating all possible meanings once more before tucking it into his coat pocket. Swearingen must be ailing again, or he'd have sent word himself, if there were further developments in the matter at hand. He tried to brush a twinge of guilt aside; perhaps he should have sought out his friend in recent weeks. But, Phoebe could have come by the store. Perhaps Zechariah was still stewing over their last quarrel, and she wanted to save her husband's pride or avoid wagging tongues. It wasn't like him to be so pigheaded and contrary. No, that was not like him at all. Clearly, the note was not the man's hand or even his dictation... unless...

He should have called on the stubborn fool long before now, before it was too late. Another shiver of regret came and then coursed away like the river beneath the crest of the ridge. The meandering Ohio kept its steady path regardless of what befell it. The river, ever constant, ever moving, offered the kind of inward sustenance no preacher's sermon or pious hymn singing could provide. There was no use borrowing trouble. Sufficient unto the day, is the evil thereof. Those

were the words he chose to live by, never looking back to misspent youth or past errors, and never counting chickens too far into the future. He preferred going forward, like the steady flowing river. Perhaps he should have swallowed his own pride and gone to see Zack, but there had been other matters to settle, promises to keep, always another promise to honor and a favor to return. He didn't mind, though. It was all good business.

Leaning his long gun against a nearby oak and setting the unlit lantern on a dead log, he impatiently scanned the silent trees towering over him. He should check on a few traps in the waning daylight, put idleness to constructive purpose in case she didn't show. *She better come soon*, he grumbled inwardly as he retrieved the long gun, left the lantern for later, and made a quick turn through the dense trees and snow-frosted creek bed where he'd placed a few beaver traps.

In the dusk, settling across the woods, the air misted and clung to barren branches and lurked at the creek disappearing into the horizon beyond the endless river flowing west. Shadows drifted through the thicket and across the ravine in a muted play of light, conjuring images of nocturnal creatures and apparitions in the distant, whispering pines. A trick of the eye. *Childish delusions*, he thought, as he tended another game-less trap. But only a fool was not on guard in the woods, or so his militia scout training had taught him, if not his youth living in the outlying woods of Western Pennsylvania during the last war. Peace treaties had settled conflicts of late, be it with natives or redcoats, still his skin prickled warily and his fingers twitched to aim his gun. Another moment scanning the hazy woods, ears pricked for the slightest snap of a twig. *A mere illusion*, he thought. Couldn't be what—or even who—he saw reflected in the icy ripples of the creek and then wafting silently into the shadows between trees. A slice of blue against gray-white wilderness. Ol' Blue was thought to be long dead by now, or at least faded into obscurity somewhere beyond the English Lakes, after Fallen Timbers settled the score. Ben was too pragmatic to believe in ghosts. Yet deep in his bones he sensed the old scores were not yet settled. His hand eased the flintlock at the ready. He could shoot the tail feather off a sparrow at a worthy distance, but this was no sparrow, nor could it be

Swearingen's woman lurking silently among the dimming woods. A glimpse of feathered flight, the soft fall of snow from a branch, and his firearm was cocked and aimed into the misty chill. The shadow moved between trees and then was no more. An owl hovered and circled from his perch, dusting snow on the trap at Ben's feet. One last hoot and flutter of hovering wing and all was still, but the hairs standing on his neck told him he was not quite alone.

"Ben." The small voice, barely a whisper at his back, wafted through the cold, winter air in the wake of the owl's departure. He turned to see her standing a few feet away, a slave girl followed a few paces behind with downcast eyes, just enough to suggest submission, though the stubborn jut of her chin spoke otherwise. Ben wondered if indeed her eyes would echo the chin if revealed in full view and how her mistress would address this silent protest? Both women staved off winter's chill swathed in woolen shawls and hooded cloaks, the squire's lady and her handmaid. Phoebe's eyes sparkled against rosy cheeks.

"I thank'ee for comin' out here like this." She bit her lip and took a step forward. "I didna keep ya waitin' long I hope?"

"No, not long." Ben measured a patient breath, stepped over a dead log, and offered a gentleman's hand to steady her footing on the uneven terrain. "What's this all about?" His voice sounded far more pleasant than he felt, though curiosity grew like a weed in his bosom.

Her gloved fingers gripped his hand, firm and true, as one narrow boot landed over a tangle of frosted roots. She looked back to the slave gazing warily around the thicket. Ben wondered if the girl had seen what he had, but then dismissed the thought when she returned her sullen look toward the toes of her boots at her mistress's command.

"Achsa, you best go on now and see if any o' them sugar maples is getting ready for tappin'."

"But Mizz Phoebe, it be too cold still, and—"

"Just do as I say, girl. Y'hear?" She turned blinking eyes at Ben. "Mr. Stephenson and I have some matters to...discuss."

"Yas'm." The girl raised a sidelong glance before trudging off, one heavy foot at a time through the snow-covered trees.

Before addressing Ben, Phoebe turned to her slave one last time. "And don't be poking back 'round here until I come fetch you. Y'hear?"

"Yas'm."

Ben kept his eyes peeled between the two women, waiting for Achsa to disappear into the packed trees and wishing somehow he could follow her rather than face whatever was behind Phoebe's eager gaze. The girl was right, too soon for maple sap to flow. She'd be back right quick enough. His attempt to speak was met with Phoebe's lifted finger and a sign to be still until they were assured of privacy.

Once the slave was no more than footprints in snow, he said, "Now, what's all this about, Phoebe? How's Zack been these days?" He affected a disinterested, light chuckle and then clamped his jaw tight at her stone-sharpened mask.

"I didna know any other way to speak to you without..." Phoebe tugged on the fringe of her shawl, scanning the glen as if for some sign of danger lurking behind every darkening tree. "Things, they ain't been good. Figured you oughta know, is all." She folded her arms, pulling woolens tight. "He's talking crazy these days. I thought you'd be comin' 'round again. I know you had words that last time, but it weren't his fault...what he said."

"Phoebe, I bear no malice toward him."

"What you mean by that?" She wrinkled a puzzled nose. "Bear him...no..."

"Malice. Ur...hard feelings...ill will." Ben tapped a finger on the gun barrel, standing upright by his feet. He hadn't come out here to teach a vocabulary lesson. "We just had a...difference of opinion. I've the shop to keep and little time of late to pay a call." The lie was plausible—perhaps not even so much a lie as a weak excuse.

She flashed a look of watery fire at him. "Oh and don't let me keep you for certain, from your 'portant dealings. Never mind about your friends and all." She was not above crying to get her way, but this seemed more than mere feminine wiles, or Zack's provocation.

"What is it, Phoebe?" He brushed snow off the log, offering a place to sit, which she at first refused.

"No one's been by, which is fine on account o' Zack...he don't want no one to know...not the way he's been. Especially not his kinfolk, not

that they take much mind to stop by. . .haven't since we wed, least not since Christmas anyways. And that's just when the worsening come."

Ben studied the trees, taller now as he sat on the cold log, diminished near the forest floor. The setting sun fingered its soft rays through the haze, shielding his view of the river beyond the crest. "Then it's begun again? The fevers? Mayhap it be another bout that'll run its course. It's no different than last time."

"It be different. Worsen now than the last bout at harvest time." Her voice broke the stillness like the crack of an ice-laden branch. "I been hopin' he'll get better. But hopin' ain't change nothin' and prayin' only seems to make it all worse."

"Bilious fever," Ben muttered. "It comes and goes. Most everyone's had the ague at one time or other."

She shook her head, her lower lip trembled and then steeled into a firm line. "This ain't no regular ague. I seen it afore when it get this bad. Once. I oughta knowed. I did know. . .and still I took to marry him, 'cause I thought there'd be time. It'd all work out right."

"Time," Ben whispered the word reflectively more to himself than to her. He suspected what she meant. Hadn't Zack argued about just this notion? The lawsuit. The land claim. Inheritance rights and a man's mortality. Perhaps in his friend's illness he'd lay it all to rest, put matters in order, and resolve the past once and for all. It was one small tract of land among the hundreds the Swearingens owned.

"Shepherd's back in these parts, Ben. It's up to us now to make it right. You understand? I'm all they've got and now. . . I can't do this all alone. Not now anyway. . ."

He recalled his friend's pensive agitation that day in early December, when there had been a brief respite between snowfalls. They had returned early from hunting, Zack growing uncharacteristically tired, his condition clearly deteriorated since summer, but somehow Ben refused to see it then. Perhaps he had noted it but assured himself a long winter's rest and a decoction of yellow bark he had sent for in a recent shipment from New Orleans would restore him to full health.

"Yellow bark?" Zack had said, a hint of sweat on his brow and a tremor in the hand circling his drinking mug as if his life depended on it. "A good bleeding might be all I need, Ben."

"It's said to cure fevers." He laid the bundle on the table and sat down opposite his friend. "The doctor down in Wheeling sent this receipt on how to brew it up proper. The Spanish priests have been using it for a couple centuries now, ever since the conquistadors discovered it from the Incas."

Zack lowered his head with a miserable laugh. "You are ever the one for useless information, Stephenson. Who the hell cares out here where some ancient mystics got their potions? Likely be witchcraft. Naw, might be my humors just need fixin'." He drained his mug, tea laced with whiskey, and called for Phoebe to fill it again. "Well, I got a bit of information for you too, and I need you to mind what I say."

"There's no use fretting over it now." Phoebe sat close enough on the narrow log for him to feel her thigh against his through the layers of woolens. He shouldn't be alone with her here on Zane's Ridge. With the setting sun came a deepening chill, his thoughts wandering between the past and the present and where in all this he might find his way through. He should get them both to shelter soon, somewhere away from here, out of the cold or, better yet, back to her ailing husband.

"If there's no use fretting, then why'd you call me out here like this? Now, of all days?" He hadn't meant it to sound quite so harsh.

She flinched and shuddered slightly. "You're his friend. I'd hoped you'd be mine as well. We've all had our good times together. Hain't we?"

Ben softened at the smallness of her voice and the pleading of her pretty face. "Aye, that we have. You won't be going though this all alone, Fee, no matter what comes. Neither you nor Zack, regardless of what's been said or done."

"I'd hoped you'd say as much." She sat a bit straighter with eyes shining in an air of readiness.

Softly, carefully, he spoke, their clouded words spread into the chilliness filtering into the trees, absorbing shared secrets along with those of ancient times. "I should've come by long afore this and made everything right."

"Aye, ya shouldn'a done a lot o' things different." Eyes colder than the ice creek pierced at his soul. "We all shouldn'a. But no use frettin' over milk what's been spilt on the barn floor."

"I'll take you home now. Fetch your slave girl and we'll get you both out of this cold."

He stood with hand extended to lift her up.

"No, not till I say my piece." She rose slipping free of his aid and placed a hand on a nearby sycamore, picking at the bark. "He'll be dead afore long. Likely afore winter's end." The corner of her mouth snaked into a wan smile. "There. I said it. Hain't wanted to think on it, but it's said and done. Not even married one full year and already be a widow woman." She snorted, worrying a lower lip tight against her teeth. "Best get used to wearin' bombazine."

Ben drew toward her, stunned as if she'd slapped him. "There now, Phoebe, let's not talk like this." He lifted a comforting hand toward the back of her hood, letting it drop to his side when she abruptly turned.

"I got to know what will happen to his land, his property. Will it all be mine?" She ran strips of shorn bark between nervous fingers, letting them rain onto the frozen ground. The newly bared patch on the tree lay naked and raw.

"Lass, you can't think on that now." Acid burned his stomach, painin' him more than the slap of his words earlier, yet they bore the truth of it all. His argument with Zack weeks ago ate at his conscience. Land rights. Family disputes. Prior claims. None of it was his worry and yet...

Would his friend have put his wife up to this? Sent her to do his bidding in his deluded state? Was he becoming as conniving as his other kin? It wasn't like the man he knew, though mercenary greed was the more palatable option than fever, leading him to hide behind his woman's skirts leaving her to act alone in the woods on a winter's eve on his behalf.

"I got to know," she nattered on, curling her hand into a fist and pounding the tree. "They won't take it back, not all of it. His family...and now that Newhouse...takin' up with another what's come to make his claim all over again? Now that Zack's..." Her voice reduced to trembling despair. "What's left for me now?"

"No one's going to take anything away, if it's your home and things you're fretting on about. You're entitled to what's your husband's

property under the law. Who's tellin' you this?" A cold wind blew down from the north, and the smoldering light tamped down beyond the distant hills. He knew what she feared, though he still found the notion as delirious as a fevered man's ravings. "Did Zack send you out here? Come now, we'll fetch you and your girl back to the house and settle this together over a cup of warm coffee and some of your fine biscuits. Night's coming on and as you say, it's high time I pay a call and eat my share of crow."

She shook her head, brooding into the distance, ignoring his urging to leave. Her pale lashes lay in a soft curve against the line of her gently rounded cheek. "He don't know I'm here. This is the best way, talk it out tween us, plain and simple and no one knowin'."

"If you want my help, such as I'm able, we'd be best hashing it out with Zechariah present." He drew back, ready to gather his gun and lantern before darkness completely overtook them.

"I mean to say... It's just that... No one can know just yet." Despair tempered her tone. "Please, hear me out. He don't know much of anything lately, where I go or even who I am most days. Just keeps sayin' he's got to set all to right. Keeps reliving things what should be dead and gone. Fights Injuns in his sleep. And he...he..." She lowered her hood, causing Ben's next breath to seize at the base of his throat. His hands clenched reflexively, fighting a desire to reach for her, comfort her, embrace her. And to strike his absent friend hard and true, everything fought in a clash of wills at the sight before him—a bruise, the mark of a man's palm colored her neck. Even in this waning light, he knew that's what it must be.

"Did...did Zechariah...Zack...? No," Ben whispered, incredulously, thinking of his fevered friend's hand against this delicate throat. "No, it can't be."

"He didn't mean to. It's the way o' the fever when it gets real bad. I knowed that. 'Twas the other night. Him fightin' Injuns again like in the last war. He didn't mean none of it agin me." She removed a glove and tenderly traced the bruise.

"We'll keep him tied down. It's the only way. A dose of laudanum will..."

She breathed a weak smile. "You doctorin' now as well as lawyerin' "