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Opening extract from

Apache

Written by

Tanya Landman

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He was in his fourth summer when the Mexicans rode against us.

Tazhi, my brother: the child who delighted the hearts of all who looked upon him. The wind flowed in his veins, and the sun itself seemed to shine through his eyes when he smiled.

Only Tazhi stood and faced them.

And for that, he was cut down. In a flash of reddening steel, Tazhi was sent to the afterlife, condemned to walk for ever headless, and alone.

We were orphans of the Black Mountain Apache, Tazhi and I. Our mother had been slain by Mexican soldiers when Tazhi was a babe of ten moons old. Our father had gone from us two winters before that. He had ridden with warriors on a raid into

Mexico; there they had been ambushed. Our father was one of many who did not return.

So Tazhi and I belonged to no one, and thus we belonged to everyone – or Tazhi did.

When he was small, he had no mother to embrace him, so all the women of the tribe cuddled him, squeezing his plump limbs and tickling him until his laughs rang through the camp. As he grew bigger, he had no father to grapple and fight, so all the warriors wrestled him, delighting in his growing strength and fearless bravado. Golahka, that powerful young warrior, would play with Tazhi, although he had three children of his own. And slender Tehineh, Golahka's tender-hearted wife, would smile and look on quietly as she knelt beside the fire.

But it was I Tazhi turned to at night; I who held him through the long, black time when the coyote cried and the owl called. Tazhi would shut his eyes only when his head rested on my shoulder, and I would curl around his sleeping body to protect him from the unseen terrors of the dark.

We were at peace that summer, and happy to be so. The Mexican, it seemed, had tired of his endless war against my people, and instead had invited us to trade. Thus the whole tribe left the settlement of tepees in our Black Mountain home and for many

days travelled south across the flat plains, deep into Mexican territory. Tazhi and I moved lightly, our hearts untroubled, our spirits soaring with delight to be roaming free across the land created by Ussen, the Life Giver, for the Apache.

Each night of our long journey we made camp, sleeping wrapped in blankets beneath the stars. By firelight, the old men of the tribe told tales, and Tazhi and I listened with eyes wide as they recounted how – many lifetimes ago – strangers who spoke the Spanish tongue had come from the south, butchering every tribe they met and putting whole settlements to the flame. Those they did not murder, they enslaved.

The Apache had held their freedom by moving high into the mountains where the strangers dared not venture. They kept themselves apart, and safe. But, in time, these Spanish men mingled their blood with those few of other tribes who survived their slaughter. Thus a new race was born: the Mexican, who now squatted greedily on Ussen's land and called it his own.

Conflict between the Apache and this murderous race was woven through our history like a red thread through a blanket. But now the blanket was folded and put away; there was to be no more warfare or bloodshed.

* * *

At last we stopped outside the Mexican town we call Koskineh. There Tazhi and I sniffed the air; the faint scent of cooking spices drifting from the dwellings thrilled us with its strangeness.

In the dip of a broad, open valley, where the river ran cool and clear, our tribe bent saplings and cut brushwood to fashion into wickiup shelters. We gathered wood and built fires, setting pots of meat bubbling in the flames.

For some days all was calm. In the mornings, the warriors went to trade in the town, leaving behind a small guard for the protection of the women and children.

I was then in my fourteenth summer, and was counted a woman. In the absence of my own mother, Nahasgah – mother of Golahka – had been trying to teach me the skills of womanhood that I should have mastered many, many moons ago. I had no aptitude for the tasks she set me. My fingers were clumsy when they attempted to coil baskets, and stupidly awkward when they tried to tan a deerskin. I could not scrape free the hair without nicking the outer surface, and thus each hide I worked became worthless.

To make weapons was a different thing. As soon as Tazhi could walk, I had fashioned him a small bow

and a quiver full of arrows. Other boys played with sharpened sticks, but for Tazhi I made arrowheads of stone, the flint shaping easily beneath my fingers.

On our third day outside Koskineh I made Tazhi a spear.

It was not the full length of a grown warrior's lance, and yet it was no plaything. The weapon stood taller than Tazhi, but was well weighted so he could thrust it with ease. The head was long and slender, crafted from a dark flint, as sharp as the blade of the knife that all Apache carry. The shaft I had decorated with an eagle's feathers; I had found them on our journey, lying on the ground before me, as though a gift from the bird above.

When the warriors returned from trading that night, Tazhi, armed with his new weapon, barred their way. He singled out Golahka, shaking his spear threateningly, vowing to slay the warrior if he took another step.

Golahka's dark eyes glinted with seeming terror as he held his hands up placatingly. Tazhi drove him back, ordering, "Away, miserable coyote! Away from my women! Away from my children! Away, away!" And Golahka fled from the camp, screaming like a maiden.

There was much laughter amongst the women and warriors, and Tehineh smiled. Tazhi did not.

In his fourth summer, he stood proud as a mighty warrior, believing in his victory.

Chodini, chief of the Black Mountain Apache, turned to my brother and said, "We shall ride together, you and I. The earth will turn red with the blood of our enemies."

He looked at the weapon, feeling the sharpness of the flint, and gave me the briefest of nods. I flushed with pride.

But then Tehineh whispered to me, "Tazhi is indeed brave, but someone must also teach him cunning. Courage alone will not make him a warrior."

I did not think her words would come to haunt me so soon.

At sunrise the next morning, the warriors set forth once more to trade with the Mexicans, carrying with them many hides and moccasins, and beaded pouches that had been stitched during the months of winter. They also carried baskets, for the craft of the Apache women is skilled and greatly valued.

Tazhi took his spear and busied himself amongst the wickiups, learning his weapon's weight and judging how to thrust it accurately at a target. More than one dog that day learnt to run quickly when Tazhi approached.

Nahasgah called me to her, and once more began the unending task of teaching me to be a woman.

The day before, she had shown me how to coil a jug and rub the surface with red ochre to make the vessel pleasing to the eye. The whole I had then swabbed with melted piñon rosin until it was water-tight. Now the rosin had cooled and hardened, but my wretched attempt was a poor, lopsided thing.

I handed the jug to Nahasgah for her inspection. Silently she stared at it, turning my lumpen creation over in her gnarled, age-worn hands, fighting a smile that had begun to crease the corners of her mouth. After some time she said, "Take it to the river and fill it. The water you bring back will be your day's supply."

I knew I would go thirsty that day. As I walked through the grass, sunlight glinted through the gaps in my useless vessel. It would barely hold a mouthful of water – and that, only if I was lucky.

When I reached the river that skirted our camp, I dipped my jug, and sure enough the water spilt through a thousand holes. I stood it on a stone and knelt, cupping my hands in the water and lowering my face to them. I thought to have a long, cooling drink before I returned. But the sun was so warm, the day so beautiful, that I did not go back to Nahasgah at once. Instead I postponed the inevitable

scolding. Trees grew either side of the river, and I had a sudden urge to climb. I craved a moment's freedom – a moment's solitude.

I swung into the branches of a pine tree – it seemed to lower itself to greet me – and climbed, the tree's spirit singing beneath my moccasined feet as they pressed against the rough bark. At last I sat high amongst the sharply scented, needle-thin leaves. A breeze rocked me in the clear air. Ussen had gifted me with the eyesight of a hawk; and in truth, sitting there, I felt as free as the eagle who soars above the plains.

Far below me, the whole camp stretched away across the broad valley. Tehineh had settled her baby upon a Mexican blanket of red and black for which Golahka had traded a basket the day before. She was quietly engaged in the many different tasks that demanded her attention: tending her fire, stirring a cooking pot, seeming at the same time to stitch a waist pouch without ever taking her eyes from her baby, or the small daughter who played at her feet. Around her, women chattered and scolded and shouted as they prepared food, stitched hides and beaded the knee-high moccasins of the Apache. Nahasgah sat twining a basket, her black eyes darting restlessly about as she watched children running between the wickiups in a frantic game of chase.

And where was Tazhi?

There!

Hunting Golahka's eldest boy, creeping towards him unseen, his spear held ready to thrust.

And then in the distance I saw a cloud of dust – the kind thrown up by the hooves of many horses. I did not call out. The warriors guarding our camp stood to see who approached, but I was not alarmed: we had been invited to this place. We were at peace. I thought they stood from curiosity, nothing more.

Some way from the camp, the leading rider raised his hand, and all came to a halt behind him. The men were dressed in the same dark clothing. Mexican troops. Still I did not sense danger.

But then – across that great distance – I heard the soft slide of metal against metal. The leader's hand had gone to the hilt of his sword. Chill horror swept through me. With a cry of sudden fear, I looked at our guards. There were but two warriors left to defend the tribe: Naneneh and Kaise, both so swift they could let fly seven arrows before the first had hit its mark. They were already taking aim.

A soft, metallic click, then a thunderous *crack!* Another! The still valley air was rent in two. And before they had loosed a single arrow, Naneneh and Kaise fell to the ground.

I looked back at the riders and saw that one held a smoking pole of metal – no longer than Tazhi's spear – in his hands. Beside him, another soldier clasped a similar length of iron. I feared it was dark magic. I had never seen a warrior slain from such a distance; never smelt the acrid tang of gunpowder; never seen a gun.

A cry of command pierced the dreadful silence. The Mexican force raised their swords and spurred their horses forward. They were galloping into our camp – stampeding through it with the rage of battle, smashing our provisions, shattering wickiups, ripping hides. Our people ran. It is the Apache way. In the face of overwhelming force: run, dodge, evade, hide. Escape. Survive. Then regroup, and on a better day fight once more.

Nahasgah fled on her aged legs, her water jug clutched in a gnarled hand as if it contained her life itself. She was felled like brushwood by a Mexican sword.

Tehineh lifted her baby from the blanket, then seized her small daughter's hand and ran. If she had thought only to save herself she would have escaped – Tehineh could run with the swiftness of the wind, and vanish into the land as if Ussen had drawn her into the clouds. But she paused, desperately looking for her son. A shot ripped first through the babe on her

hip then lodged itself in Tehineh's tender heart. Blood bloomed on her deerskin shirt – sudden scarlet – like the desert flower. Her children were hacked to pieces.

And then there was Tazhi, standing motionless in the middle of the camp, his spear raised. He did not run. No one had taught him cunning. He stood and faced the Mexican force, as he had faced Golahka in play the day before. Above the noise and the screaming I could hear his high-pitched, furious shout: "Away, miserable coyotes! Away from my women! Away from my children! Away from my tribe! Away, away!"

He did not hear me call.

It happened with the swiftness of a striking snake. A Mexican with a moustache waxed sharp as the points of an arrow pulled up his horse in front of Tazhi so hard that the animal reared, its hooves flailing close to my brother's dark head. The Mexican's sword was reddened with the blood of my people; his eyes gleamed with the thrill.

Terror dizzied me; I was faint with it. I clung to the tree to stop myself falling.

Tazhi did not move. He did not take one step. He pointed his spear as if he were invincible.

The Mexican smiled upon my brother. He laughed aloud at this infant bravado.

And then he lifted his sword.

* * *

It was a long time later that our warriors returned from trading. A long time that I sat and swayed in the wind, my forehead pressed so hard against the rough bark of the pine tree that it drew blood. I did not feel it. For in that long, dead time I slipped into another place: a place of chill, numbing cold, where no pain could reach me.

And then in the soft darkness I heard the cry of a bird: the signal of Chodini, our chief. The warriors, and the women and children who had fled the Mexicans, crept quietly back into the camp.

We could not even bury our dead. We were asked to leave by our chief, silently, and at once.

I took the spear from Tazhi's stiff hand. "I will find him," I promised. "One day, little brother, I will plunge this spear into the heart of the man who killed you. You shall be avenged."

And then I left Tazhi slain upon the ground for the dogs and birds to pick at.

Through that long night's walk I said nothing. All words had withered and died within me. Even had they flowed, to whom could I have spoken? In the space of five summers the Mexican had deprived me of all: father, mother, brother. I was entirely alone.

And yet not so.

For when I had sat – head pressed hard to the pine, eyes shut against the horror spread below me – a face had formed in the darkness beneath my eyelids. Black eyes had gazed unblinking into mine, holding me still, stopping me falling.

For that long, dead time I swayed in the wind, I had looked into the eyes of my father.

I did not weep for Tazhi.

I had cried for my father when he did not return, sobbing against my mother's breast as the certainty of his death settled heavy upon us. When my mother was killed my tears had run without ceasing for a day and a night, until Tehineh had taken me in her arms and urged me to be strong, to have a heart of oak, for my brother's sake.

Perhaps I had no tears left. Through that long night's march I found that I could not weep. Grief lodged in my chest, jarring against my ribs as sharp and hard as the head of Tazhi's spear. And above and below the grief – wrapping it as the fire enfolds the log – the need for revenge burned like a cold, dark flame.

We walked in silence. There were near seventy warriors amongst our tribe. The Mexicans had numbered more than two hundred. Against such a force we could not fight. Not yet. We were deep within the

land of our enemy. They had taken our horses, our weapons, our food. If they attacked again we could not hope to survive. But one day we would take our revenge. And when that day came, I swore before Ussen, I would be there to see it.

I walked alone. Behind me, so far distant that I could barely hear his soft footfall, walked Golahka. Pain swelled within my chest, making each breath hard and sharp. But even in the depth of my sadness, I could feel how mountainous a burden of sorrow he laboured under. He had lost all in one swift strike: mother, wife, son, daughter, babe. I did not wonder that he limped so far behind: I wondered that he walked at all.

At sunrise we stopped. The warriors went forth to kill what game they could, while some women lit small fires, twirling a stick between their palms until the wood beneath began to smoke. Embers were then shared with others, but my fingers were clumsy and numb. I had to sit, helpless, and watch while others worked.

When we ate, the wife of Naneneh came to me, her cheeks wet with tears. She sat beside me, cutting small hunks of meat and offering them to me on her knife. The meat tasted sour in my mouth, and my bile rose against it when I tried to swallow. She was as patient with me as with her own babe, nodding with

encouragement when I forced the food down. It gave me fresh strength, and I should have been glad of her care. But when she put her hand on mine, hoping to give me comfort, I stood and walked away. I wanted no woman's softness. No purpose would be served if I broke down into weeping and wailing. My pain could not be soothed away. I did not want comfort; I wanted blood.

All this time, Golahka spoke not. He made no move to kill game with the other warriors. He ate nothing. He sat apart, and looked upon the rising sun with the eyes of a dead man.

We paused only long enough to cook and eat. There was to be sleep for none, and in truth I was glad, for how could I sleep, feeling the absence of Tazhi's small body beside me? As soon as we had finished, we marched on once more. All knew that the Mexicans might be on our trail, and that they were armed and on horseback. We were on foot; to survive, we must keep moving.

Thus we continued for two days and three nights. Hatred urged me forward and compelled me to put one moccasin before the other, until, bone-weary, we reached the southern edge of the Chokenne mountains. In this vast range of high cliffs and deep chasms we were safe. Although the Mexican claimed this land as his own, no farmer had settled this far

north, and no soldier would follow where every rock, every tree, might conceal an Apache waiting in ambush.

At last, in a gully that ran into the heart of the mountains, we made camp. Here we could rest, and sleep. And here, at last, Golahka spoke.

I saw him moving amongst the warriors, talking softly to those whose loved ones lay dead. He exchanged a word here, a muttered greeting there. Then he came to me, squatting on his haunches beside where I sat in the dust, clutching Tazhi's spear. In a voice hoarse and cracked with lack of use, he spoke my name. "Siki."

He did not say more, for what more could be said? Our eyes met once. In his face was etched a loss that was past enduring. The sight of it blistered my eyes, and I lowered them to the ground. Golahka's jaw was clenched tight. He ached for vengeance. I was certain that the Mexicans would rue the day they had made him their enemy. With each heartbeat his desire for blood grew stronger. My own heart thudded in response.

After a long silence, Golahka spoke once more.

"You saw them?"

"I saw them."

"You would know them again?"

"I would."

Golahka asked me further questions, seeking to learn the colour of their clothing, and all else I could recall. From this, he could discern from which town they had set forth so he would know where to direct his attack when the time came.

"I will avenge them all," Golahka promised, standing once more. "I will slay ten Mexicans for each of our tribe. For your brother, Siki, I will slay twenty."

I shook my head.

Golahka frowned and his voice quivered with sudden rage. "Do you doubt it?"

"No," I answered, staring at the dust, wondering how I had the courage to address the mighty warrior so. "I do not doubt it. I know the rivers will run red before your thirst is satisfied. But *you* will not avenge my brother." I stood, and lifted my eyes to his. "I will."

For a brief moment Golahka's sorrow-dulled eyes blazed, then he gave the smallest of nods and was gone.

For two days we rested. The tribe ate, but talked little. Many slept; but sleep would not come to me during the long, dark nights. Grief gnawed at my soul and gave me no respite. I curled around the cold, dark place where Tazhi had once lain. The aching

wound of his absence could not be eased. Weary I was – desperately weary – and yet I could not be still either. I was glad when we moved once more.

Some days later, we entered our own Black Mountains, and arrived back at our settlement.

It was a bitter homecoming.

It is the custom of our people to burn the possessions of the dead.

And thus I burned our tepee, for I could scarce bear to look upon the dusty fingermarks that Tazhi had left on its sides. I placed his playthings in the flames – the small bow and arrows I had once fashioned for him – and watched as they crumbled into ashes. The tiny moccasins Tehineh had sewn and beaded – that had filled Tazhi with such delight that he had stared at his feet with fascination as he took his first tottering steps, and had thus fallen headlong into the dirt – these I threw into the heart of the flames.

I did not burn his spear.

I watched as the fire consumed all that remained of my brother. Fingering the sharp spearhead, I recalled how the stone had chipped and formed with such ease beneath my hands. I could not coil baskets as other girls did, yet I could fashion fine weapons. It seemed that my fingers already knew

what my mind had only just begun to realize: my destiny was not amongst the women.

I must follow the path of the warrior.

It was in the moon of many berries that we returned to our Black Mountain home. In but two moons more, winter would be upon us. Our people were without provisions; and all, according to their age and gender, set about the task of gathering food for the lean days that stretched before us.

Thus, at the sunrise that followed a night of many fires and many tears, Chodini prepared to lead his finest warriors, Golahka the first amongst them, into the land of the Mexican, where they might find horses and cattle. Others would stay behind to hunt the deer. The women and young children readied themselves to set forth and pick such nuts and berries as had ripened in our absence.

Dahtet, a woman of some fifteen summers, in whose family's tepee I had lain through the long night, held out a basket towards me and said with a gentle smile, "Come, Siki. We shall gather berries, side by side, as sisters."

I said nothing. I had told no one of my decision. But when the men assembled for the hunt, I silently took my place amongst them. I stood, chin high, challenging any to speak against me. The women cast

furtive glances towards Chodini. Our chief saw where I stood, holding Tazhi's spear stiffly by my side. He looked at me for a long time, before he turned back to his warriors, but he said not a word. He did not deny my choice.

Keste, an impatient youth of some seventeen summers, not yet a warrior but who burned with the desperate desire to be so, crossed hastily to Chodini. I did not hear his muttered words, but saw him gesture angrily in my direction. Keste was known to be a fine hunter; many would heed his judgement. Yet Chodini shook his head, and when Keste persisted in his protest, our chief laid a hand upon his shoulder to silence him.

"Siki will join the hunt," he said in a calm, low voice that carried clearly to all in the camp, and admitted no further argument.

And so, that day, I took my first step on the path of the warrior.

When Ussen created each tribe, he also made their homeland, putting upon the earth all that was needed for their well-being. He set forth creatures to run upon the plains, and made such plants to grow as would provide grain and nuts and fruit. There were herbs too, and he showed the Apache how to use them to heal the sick. All that was

needed for food and shelter and clothing he placed in their land.

As I walked upon the earth that morning, I felt a rising joy in my heart. I suffered still, and yet it was a soothing balm to return to my homeland. My soul, which had withered into a small, shrunken thing on the long walk from Koskineh, now expanded within me as I drew in the sweet, familiar air; for this land fed my spirit as surely as it would feed my body. The earth, my mother, seemed to set the grass singing beneath my feet as she welcomed back her people.

Softly, silently, we tracked the movement of the deer across the broad plain until at last we had sight of them in the far distance. We edged towards the herd with the wind in our faces, crawling upon our bellies, advancing one thumb's breadth at a time, carrying brushwood before us so the animals would not see our approach. I had not hunted deer before, but in truth the skills I used that day were ones I had known and practised for many summers. While my parents lived I had, in jest, spent much time creeping upon my belly that I might approach my playmates unseen, and startle them into shrieking with fear. As we came nearer to the herd I thrilled with the thought that I could make a fine hunter.

But I had not yet tried my aim. I had with me Tazhi's spear and my knife. I knew the spear to be well crafted; the head was sharp, and would penetrate the flesh of a deer easily if it were used well. But had I the skill? I did not know.

My heart began to pound as I crept towards a small doe. I sensed the excitement of the hunters either side of me as they poised to attack. Suddenly there was the soft hiss of a bowstring and an arrow flew forth, striking into the heart of the first deer with barely a sound. It was so stealthily done by Keste that the rest of the herd did not even raise their heads but continued to graze, not seeing that one of their number lay slain.

And then I cursed my stupidity. I carried naught but a spear. A spear! I could not use it from where I lay. I was not close enough. And if I were I would need to be upright, so I could draw back my arm and thrust the weapon; yet if I stood, the herd would scatter and be lost to us.

In my eagerness to join the hunters I had not seen that they carried bows – yet this was something I had known since I was an infant! My determination to become a warrior had blotted all sense – all wisdom – from my mind. I lay motionless in the grass and my cheeks flushed hot with anger and shame. How all would laugh at my simplicity! Chodini had seen how