

# DEMON SHADOWS

## CHAPTER ONE

Excerpts from John Thorburn's diary, 1845 — 46, published in *Trails of Promise — The Way to California*:

*November 18, Tuesday — First chance to write since a week ago, when we came to the lake. The snow was deep; we couldn't make it through the pass, even though the summit is only two miles from here. Tried again yesterday, but there was a terrible wind and it began to snow, so we came back. Only the Lord knows if we will be able to cross these Sierra mountains.*

*November 23, Sunday — Snowing four days now. The Stillwell families are in an abandoned cabin on the lakeshore. It is a pathetic shack, with a roof of pine branches. The other cabins we built are not much better. Two are near the Stillwells. Ours is along a creek some distance away. I think that is best, because of all the arguing that goes on among us. We are sharing the cabin with the McClains, an agreeable family.*

*December 6, Saturday — The first storm lasted seven days. This new one has gone on for three. Hard wind from the west. Very cold, snow up to the roof. Our food supply is low. The McClain baby has a bad cough.*

*December 12, Friday — Clear and cold today. Meeting this morning by the lake. Ezra Mackey died from the consumption. Mrs. Hardman (the mother) will not be with us for long. We are bad off for food. If we had enough, we could endure here till spring. Tried hunting, no game but a couple of squirrels.*

*December 14, Sunday — Very cold, but not snowing. The McClain baby died last night. Krueger the German read from the Bible. Mrs. Hardman is failing. My teamster, Milt Ramsey, is making snowshoes. He and young Georgie McClain are leaving at dawn tomorrow to try to reach Sutter's fort. May God be with them.*

*December 24, Wednesday — It is without joy that we await the Christmas day. The Gibbs boy is the fourth of our party to die at the lake. One of the oxen was uncovered by Noah Tyler, frozen in the snow. The creature had been gaunt when we came here. Its meat will not last long.*

*January 2, Friday — Snowing again, not hard. No sign of snowshoe party or rescuers. I am sure they never made it to Sutter's. Ada Krueger died. Ate our children's dog, as there is nothing else. Everyone is starving. George Stillwell said we should think about eating the flesh of our dead. We heard stories at Fort Bridger of mountain men doing it. God in heaven help us if this is our only hope! So far I have forbidden it.*

*January 4, Sunday — Jordy Fry said he saw a figure through the trees in the direction of the pass. Tyler thought he saw it too. Maybe our Salvation is near.*

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Patches of snow dotted Fallen Leaf Meadow. Despite the cold, the winter camp of the Washo people stood far enough down the mountainside, and they were comfortable in their lodges. The fishing and gathering time was far off, when they would climb to the high water, the great Ta-ho lake, center of their world. For now, though, they had enough food.

Tall Runner, wearing three layers of rabbitskin blankets, hurried across the meadow to his lodge, where Red Fawn waited. He knew he'd made her angry for going off so many times lately. Perhaps he

would tell her what he'd found in the mountains. In any case, the recent trek had been rewarding. Two plump hares were slung over his shoulder. Red Fawn would be pleased.

Strong Bow, the *tebayu*, knew about the white men's camp on the North Lake. It was Tall Runner's duty to inform him of anyone trespassing on Washo land. Strong Bow felt indifferent toward these white devils, these *musbege*, who had recently begun crossing their mountain world. But he continued to send Tall Runner back to watch them. Everything would be all right, Strong Bow believed, as long as the *musbege* left with the spring thaw.

A few village *suku* barked at Tall Runner as he neared the uneven rows of cone-shaped lodges. Smoke from many fires twisted upward above them. It pleased him to think of warming himself by one, with Red Fawn pressed alongside him.

The shaman sat in the sweat lodge. Tall Runner knew this even from afar. The steam that escaped from the small hole in the peak danced wildly, agitated by the *gumsuc*, the dream-thoughts of the medicine man, now wrapped in the stifling heat.

Red Fawn was grinding dried piñon nuts into meal on a flat stone when she saw Tall Runner. She stood with great effort, for at sixteen she was full with their first child. The old woman that helped her accepted the hares from Tall Runner.

"You were gone so long," Red Fawn said.

"Only three days," the man replied. "Are you well?"

She patted the roundness under her robe. "We are. Your son is strong. He kicks with the legs of a jackrabbit!"

Tall Runner smiled and gestured toward the lodge. "Come inside."

"Not now. Strong Bow stopped by earlier. He wants to see you. You must go." She touched his hand. "Later, my husband."

The *tebayu's* lodge stood at the other end of the camp, close to a stream that ran across Fallen Leaf Meadow. Strong Bow's old wife and young wife knelt by the frozen rivulet, looking for pockets where schools of minnows had been trapped by the ice.

"Uncle, I am back," Tall Runner called at the narrow entrance.

The tribal leader of the Washo band emerged from the lodge. Tall Runner took a step back. In his fifties, Strong Bow had always been an imposing figure, and remained so, even though Tall Runner stood a head above him.

"What news from the North Lake?" the *tebayu* asked in his blunt way.

"There are five death markers in the snow," Tall Runner replied. "They did much arguing before, but now seem too weak for that. They do not fish and are poor hunters. There is little food in the camp."

"Those who left have not yet returned?"

Tall Runner shook his head. "I met one of our western brothers. He said that only one of them made it, but was nearly dead when other *musbege* found him in the foothills. This happened a few days ago."

"He will send others back," the *tebayu* said.

Tall Runner shrugged. "It may be too late."

Strong Bow kept silent for a long time. Tall Runner knew his uncle well, and realized the troubled look on Strong Bow's face was from more than his report. Finally the *tebayu* said, "I dreamed."

Tall Runner nodded. "What was the dream, Uncle?"

"I moved with the wind, high above the snow, and saw the North Lake. The *musbege* were outside, holding up their arms, trying to speak to me, but without sounds. I looked down at them, turned my back, and went on."

The *tebayu* paused for a moment, shuddering. "I was traveling toward the great Ta-ho lake when the sounds finally came to me. It was like our women wailing over the dead. I ran on the clouds, and it grew fainter.

"Then, from Ta-ho, I heard the cry of Water Baby — "

"No!" Tall Runner exclaimed.

"It beckoned me. I turned in another direction, but could not control which way I went. Water Baby pulled me down from the wind, close to the snow. Then the wailing began again. It tried to pull me back, but Water Baby was stronger. I saw his shadow and knew that, in a moment, I would see him."

"That is when the dream ended," Tall Runner said hopefully.

Strong Bow nodded. "The shaman sits in the sweat lodge to learn its meaning. But from what you told me, I fear that I already know."

Tall Runner, though puzzled, knew better than to question his uncle. "What would you have me do?"

"Go to your woman, for now." His piercing eyes found Tall Runner's. "You may be returning to the North Lake sooner than you think."

The short winter day ended abruptly for Tall Runner. To his chagrin, he'd slept away most of it. He hadn't planned that; he wanted to lie with Red Fawn, tell her about what he saw in the mountains, listen to her talk about their baby. But their lodge was warm, his belly full from the rabbits.

Red Fawn still slept. In the way of their people she continued to work hard, despite her condition. Too hard, Tall Runner often thought but never said. As he slipped gently from her arms, he looked at the smile on her smooth child's face. It pleased him that Red Fawn was his.

Tall Runner stepped outside. The night air was crisp, but not as biting as it would be when the wind started. Although a few small fires burned, the light was too meager for him to see much beyond the lodges that flanked his own. As he stared into the darkness, a small boy appeared.

"Hurry, Tall Runner," the boy said. "Strong Bow wants you. The shaman has come out of the smoke!"

The boy turned and jogged back through the village. Tall Runner stayed close with long strides. Others watched them pass, aware that something significant was happening, a rarity during the snow time.

The boy completed his important task by leading Tall Runner to the opening of the *tebayu's* lodge. Inside, the shaman sat cross-legged on a thick pile of rabbit furs. Though not an old man he was respected, even feared. His was the power of Great Bear, the spirit being held in high esteem all through the mountain world of the Washo.

Strong Bow and two elders also sat inside the lodge. They looked at Tall Runner impatiently, not because he was late, but because they were anxious to hear what the medicine man had to say. As he joined the circle in the place indicated by the *tebayu*, Tall Runner suddenly became aware of his own importance, however brief it might be. He nodded solemnly at the others.

The shaman spoke immediately, his voice filled with emotion. "I waited for Great Bear by the bay of Ta-ho. It seemed to be the hunting season, for there was no snow anywhere. He came and told me to climb upon his back. We started for the North Lake. On the way we saw *musbege* riding in their wagons to the California land beyond the foothills. Then they were gone, and as we came to the North Lake the snow again covered the earth."

"What was their camp like?" Strong Bow asked.

The shaman closed and opened his eyes as he rolled a shell necklace around in his hand. He did this with the sacred fetish the entire time he spoke.

"Three lodges," he said, "together near the shore, and a fourth, apart, all covered with hides and branches. Thin strings of smoke rise from them."

Strong Bow looked at Tall Runner, who nodded. He'd never described the camp to anyone but the *tebayu*. This impressed him.

"None of the white devils were to be seen at first," the shaman continued. "Great Bear carried me to a place in the snow where small flat trees grew. There were many of them." He held up five fingers. "This, more than three times."

Tall Runner was confused. "Five. There were only five death markers," he said. The others glared at him. Strong Bow made a gesture that warned him to hold his tongue. The medicine man went on.

"It was as I looked at the flat trees that Great Bear suddenly reared and threw me into the snow. I felt his anger. Rising, I wondered what I might have done to provoke him. With one paw he pointed at

the cabin that stood alone. *Mushege* were coming from it; not walking, but dragging their bodies through the snow. Their faces were gray, lips cracked and bleeding, eyes sunk deep. Their feet were bare; toes were missing from the cold. As they pulled themselves along, they left trails of something dark in the snow. It hurt them to move, and they cried out the whole time. I became afraid when I realized they were crawling toward me.

“Make them stop!” I called to Great Bear, but he stood silent.” The shaman twisted the necklace furiously now. “I turned to run away, and I saw many more of them coming from the other lodges. Arms were raised, fingers pointed, faces angry. The closest was a bow’s length away. I could not run or say another word. It was then that Great Bear spoke.

“*You knew the mushege were here,*” he said. *You could have saved them but you did nothing. Now they are all dead.*” “I will help them!” I cried. *It is too late,*” said Great Bear. “No, they are still alive!” I told him as the fingers of the first crawling corpse reached for my ankle. From somewhere I heard the call of Water Baby and wished that I could go to him. “The Washo can help them!” I insisted.”

The shaman paused for a moment. Tall Runner could see how shaken the others were. *For one to wish he could go to Water Baby!* Tall Runner, also uneasy, dared not do or say a thing.

“I spoke those same words, over and over,” the shaman said, his voice wavering. “Then I became aware that I was sitting in the smoke. Great Bear had let me go free of the dream. I knew that I was right, that there was still a chance for our people to appease the spirit beings. Do you understand, Strong Bow? Do you see the meaning of your own dream?”

The *tebayu* nodded solemnly. “We must help the *mushege* at the North Lake. They cannot die on Washo land without our trying to do something about it. Tall Runner, you must return!”

“I will start at daybreak,” the young man said.

The elders leaned over and spoke quietly to Strong Bow. Finally the chief said, “You must leave tonight. You will bring them food and blankets, gather dry wood for their fires. We will do this until their own people come for them, or until the snow is melted.”

Tall Runner looked at the medicine man, who nodded. It was a strange request, to journey into the high mountains at night. The Washo usually avoided it. The thought made Tall Runner uncomfortable, but he understood the importance of what had transpired since Strong Bow’s dream. He dared not question his fate.

In his heart he wished he’d never set eyes on the *mushege* camp at the North Lake.

“I will send others with him — ” the *tebayu* began.

“He must go alone,” the shaman interrupted. “The next time, others will go. But Tall Runner must do this by himself. I . . . know it from the dream.”

The elders were puzzled, but Strong Bow understood. So did Tall Runner. *Mushege* were not fond of Indians. With their thunder sticks they could kill many before they realized the Washo just wanted to help them. This way, only one need die.

“Go, then, Tall Runner,” the *tebayu* said. “Tell Red Fawn you are leaving. All will be ready for you. Do not take too long.”

Tall Runner returned to his lodge. Red Fawn still lay under the blankets but was awake when he slipped inside.

“You are going back to the mountains,” she said, not needing to ask.

“It is important,” he said.

“So important that you must leave at night?”

“Yes. Do not worry about me, Red Fawn. I will return soon.”

“I will worry anyway, no matter what you tell me.”

He shrugged. “I must go.”

Red Fawn lifted the rabbitskin blankets. “Just for a little while,” she said softly. “They cannot deny you that.”

Strong Bow had sent a travois to Tall Runner’s lodge. The supplies were being tied down as Tall Runner came out. There were plenty of blankets, but not as much food as Tall Runner thought there would be. Piñon nuts, the Washo staple, filled two baskets. There was some dried meat and the whole

carcass of *mogop*, the fox, which had been caught that day. Despite his respect for the spirit beings, Strong Bow knew he had to look out for his own people in this season, not a good one for hunting, gathering, or much else.

“Stay close by the *mushege* for a day or two,” Strong Bow instructed Tall Runner. “If you can hunt for anything, then all the better. Make them understand that you will be back.”

“I will try,” the young man said, but with doubt.

No ceremony preceded Tall Runner’s departure. The travois slid easily across the frozen ground of Fallen Leaf Meadow. It would become harder on the mountainside, and in the deep snow farther up.

Tall Runner was not concerned about finding his way in the dark. All Washo boasted that they could travel anywhere in the mountains with eyes covered. Something else worried him, something that his people had come to know at their earliest time of understanding.

Their world was a terrifying place, especially at night, with many spirit beings wandering through it. Even the benevolent ones were given to whims of frenzy. There was Ang, the great bird creature, and Hanglwuiwui, the cyclopean, one-legged giant, both of whose favorite food was Washo flesh. There were the hairy wild people, who people always saw darting among the trees, and the fearsome Water Babies, who occupied *every* body of water, no matter how small. And there were many other things that horrified the Washo. Some of these they dared not even think about, at the risk of bringing down the worst kind of misfortune upon themselves.

So Tall Runner was apprehensive as he started up an old trail from Fallen Leaf Meadow. Even the sight of the half-moon, appearing from behind clouds for the first time in a few nights, brought him no comfort. Its pale light cast twisted shadows of hemlocks and foxtail pines on the snow, shadows that moved, Tall Runner swore, when he crossed them. At times he found himself giving them a wide berth.

When he finally thought about it, he realized the sight of the moon meant less chance of another storm hindering his journey. The most recent one had ended just before his last visit to the North Lake. But lulls of more than a few days were rare. Perhaps the spirit beings planned on helping this time, rather than leave it all to the Washo, which was usually their way.

It would be well after sunrise before Tall Runner came anywhere near the North Lake. The narrow pass through the mountains was choked with the snows of all the storms that had come since the end of the gathering season. The pass had stopped the *mushege* the first time; now it held them prisoners. Tall Runner would get through — he always did — though not as easily with the supplies.

The rueful cry of *kewe*, the coyote, followed him during the night. He had never cared much for the sound, but at least it was familiar, unlike others he had no desire to hear. At times of silence he realized he would anticipate the next howl from the unseen creatures.

Early in the morning, before sunrise, *kewe* fell silent. The white world became as a place of the dead. The travois slid along soundlessly; Tall Runner’s snowshoes crunched the snow where it lay soft and deep. Though glad for the noise, he also feared it would rouse the spirits of the ancestors, who inhabited the land during the time when men feared to walk.

The trees surrounding him were different now — lodgepole and whitebark pines, mostly. Their shadows danced in the snow all around him, and he could avoid them no longer. He moved quickly, ignoring the fatigue as his pumping heart echoed in his head.

There! Beyond the trees! Something had run in and out of his vision between two heartbeats. A wild man! What else could it be?

Can’t stop, he told himself. Must keep going or it will bring others! The wild men kill the Washo, cut out their hearts . . .

Two mule deer stood upwind of Tall Runner, rooting for shrubs under the snow, and were not aware of his approach. He could see their silhouettes against the backdrop of white hills. Immediately the wild men were forgotten as he reached for his bow.

But he did nothing, for *memdeve*, the mule deer, was *his* spirit being. It was the deer that made him the swiftest of his people. To kill it would be to destroy part of himself. Leaving all this meat frustrated him, but that was the way.

“Go on, off with you,” he muttered, and the pair bolted in terror.

For a while the valleys and slopes were less ominous to Tall Runner, and he put many miles behind him. At daybreak he reached a summit from which he could gaze at the distant northwest corner of the great Ta-ho lake. In other seasons all the Washo bands camped along its shoreline. Now it stood desolate. Usually he stopped to gaze at its jewel-blue splendor, but more important things were at hand. He started down another valley, and the lake fell from view.

The sun shone strongly and made the snow blinding. Though cold, the biting wind of recent days had diminished. Still, Tall Runner wished he had more blankets with which to cover himself. He looked wistfully at the pile tied on the travois, decided against it, and tried to shrug off some of the chill.

Only the tops of two towering peaks indicated the presence of a pass, now buried under tons of snow. Most of it had fallen from the sky, but the rest came from avalanches on the tenuous mountainsides. With each step the young man nervously scanned the slopes for any new activity that could threaten his passage.

“You are lucky, *patalni*,” he said to an eagle riding wind currents high overhead. “The earthbound problems of man have no meaning to you. For you the way is ever open.”

Unlike the *mushege*, who waited for death in the shadow of the pass, Tall Runner would open the way for himself, as he’d done all the times before. Not over the summit; he would turn away from that. The travois must be left where he stood, for now both hands must be free. His way to the North Lake was not without risk.

With the supplies tied on his back, Tall Runner climbed up to the rim of a steep bank. He slid down to a partially concealed base, actually falling the last six feet or so and jarring himself. Above, sheer cliffs rose thousands of feet, eventually tapering to form Arrow Point, one of their sacred places. There, known only to the Washo, was the start of the way to the North Lake.

An upheaval in the mountains centuries past had forced a crack in the rock facing. A crack hard to see, even harder to squeeze through. Tall Runner knew that for the first twenty yards or so the supplies would have to be carried along piecemeal. It meant undoing the pack and making several trips. But it was the only way.

The narrow passage turned sharply twice and in one place appeared to dead-end. There, Tall Runner pulled himself up nearly four feet of smooth, sloping rock until he could again see the rift cutting into the mountainside. Here he left the first load. Not until all the things for the *mushege* were there did he pull himself through. It took him four trips and more than an hour of time.

Fatigue began to affect him. But beyond this passage the North Lake was not far. And the rest of the way was easy, except for one place near the end of the rift, where for a couple of yards the crack yawned deeply and plunged into blackness below the mountains. The path along it, an arrow’s length wide, seemed to be sufficient, unless you were the one traversing it. But the spirit beings walked with Tall Runner that late morning, and soon he could see the glint of sunlight off the ice covering the North Lake.

Something caught Tall Runner’s attention before he left the base of Arrow Point. Even more than with the opening of the rift on the far side, none but the most skilled in the ways of the mountains would have noticed what he did. He knew it would do him no good right then, but he put it in his memory. Another time, he would be back.

Once again the snow was deep. Tall Runner refastened his snowshoes and wished he still had the travois. He could make another if he wanted, but why bother? The *mushege* camp was close, the way mostly downhill. He would be there soon.

Excerpt from John Thorburn’s diary:

*January 5, Monday — Very cold, but the sun is up. Our luck has turned slightly for the better. A Digger Indian came into camp at noontime. He brought food and blankets, which we have divided. He is gone right now, but I think he’s coming back. The news is not all good, however, for an illness of some kind seems to be affecting many of our people. We have bigger fires going, and the extra food will help. Still, I am growing concerned.*

The first thing Tall Runner did when he came down the last hill was count the death markers in the snow.

The same five as before. At least no more had died, as in the shaman's dream. Perhaps none would now.

They had been watching him from the moment he appeared through the trees. First, one had called an alert; now most of the men awaited him at the bottom. Some held thunder sticks, but Tall Runner believed they would not use them. He had already made a peace sign, had held out the food and blankets for the *musbege* to see.

Not many Washo had come face to face with the white devils before. The excitement offset Tall Runner's uneasiness as he reached the bottom of the hill. Some of the *musbege* took a step backward. He laid the food and blankets on the snow then backed away as the *musbege* looked over the gifts.

"Has anyone let Mr. Thorburn know?" Louis Gibbs asked.

"Don't worry about him," Edward Stillwell said. "He'll be here soon enough."

Women and children, who had stayed back from the savage, the likes of which had worried them on their journey from the Great Plains on, were called forward. There was no outburst of emotion, only relief on their drawn faces. A few nodded at Tall Runner; some managed to smile.

Tall Runner recognized all of them, having watched for so long from the trees. He had grown fond of one yellow-haired boy, whose actions never reflected the hopelessness of his people. Often Tall Runner had watched Simon Parkhill search for wood in the snow or look for fish along the edge of the lake, his small black dog following closely. Even now, with the dog an inadequate meal of a few nights past, eleven-year-old Simon still walked more vigorously than the others.

"Boy, you get back here!" William Parkhill called, noticing where his son had gone. But too late, for Simon stood in front of Tall Runner, smiling up at him. He held out a hand; the Indian understood and took it.

"Hey, thanks a lot," the boy said, and rejoined his father.

People from the cabin on the creek were plodding through the snow now. Tall Runner watched them with interest because the silver *tebayu* walked among them. That was what he called the man who was obviously the leader of the *musbege*.

John Thorburn of Pennsylvania — successful businessman, would-be writer and historian, now pioneer — was a strong and dignified presence. Even the ordeal in the mountains, for which he wrongfully bore so much guilt, had not diminished that. His thirty-eight-year-old wife Nancy, sixteen years younger than he, stood just as straight as she kept pace with his long strides.

Trailing after them and the McClain family was a man who caught Tall Runner's attention. The Indian had never seen this one before. Yet that was impossible, for he had spent days at a time watching the camp. He had seen them individually, and together when they gathered for meetings or to bury one of their dead. Had the stranger been confined until now? Had he just arrived at the North Lake? The former seemed more likely, although Tall Runner found either possibility hard to accept.

The gaunt, stooped man wore a long dark coat and a wide-brimmed black hat. Half his face was covered by a gray scarf. He fixed his small dark eyes on Tall Runner, while the others looked down, paying more attention to the precarious footing. Tall Runner felt a growing concern within him.

The others parted to let John Thorburn through. Louis Gibbs spoke to him as he pointed at the Indian. Thorburn looked at the supplies then started toward Tall Runner. Some of his people followed, and for a moment Tall Runner lost sight of the stranger.

"My name's Thorburn," the big man said. "I don't know if you can understand me, but we're grateful for this. Why don't you come sit by a fire?"

The silver *tebayu* made elaborate hand signals as he spoke. The words sounded garbled to Tall Runner, but he sensed the gratitude of the whites. This pleased him, not so much for them but because the shaman's Great Bear and the other spirit beings would not be so angry now with the Washo.

Then the stranger reappeared and stepped forward, stopping at Thorburn's side. His disturbing gaze remained on Tall Runner, who shrank back a few steps.

"Here's the start of it, like I told you," the stranger said to Thorburn without looking at him.

“Coincidence,” Thorburn said. “He would have come. There’ve been times some of my people swore they saw Indians watching us.”

“You don’t believe that,” the stranger said in a mocking tone. “Your whole pathetic band is a few days away from death. Without food, and with the worst storm now on its way — ”

“You’re only guessing!” Thorburn snapped. “How can you know that?”

The stranger shrugged and started toward Tall Runner. The Indian backed farther away, until a tree blocked him. As his eyes bore into Tall Runner, the stranger pulled down his scarf. He resembled the other white men, with dark stubble across a thin, angular face. But Tall Runner knew something else lay underneath. The stranger motioned him forward; the young Washo obeyed.

“Go and get it, bring it back here,” the stranger said in words Tall Runner understood. “You know what I mean.”

“I know.” He was not surprised that this one spoke his tongue.

“You can talk to him!” Thorburn exclaimed. “Will you tell him what I tried to before?”

The stranger glanced at Thorburn and nodded, then looked back at Tall Runner. “Do it quickly, and don’t even think of not coming back.”

Tall Runner turned and left. Thorburn watched him go then asked, “You told him?”

“Of course.” The stranger again wrapped his face in the scarf.

The trek back went quickly. Tall Runner’s footprints from the morning lay untouched. He tried not to think about what had happened but concentrated on what must be done.

At the base of Arrow Point, the keen-eyed Washo went right to the place he had noticed earlier. Around one side of a jutting boulder, where brush lay thickly, was a low but wide opening. Studying the spoor confirmed that he had found the den of *taba*, the grizzly, who slept his winter sleep. There might be more than one; Tall Runner would find that out first.

The deep cave twisted a few times. On the last sharp turn he nearly bumped into a slumbering mound of coarse fur. The tunnel ended a few yards farther along. This creature was the only one there.

Tall Runner backed slowly out of the cave. Near the entrance he began to shout; he unslung his bow and rapped it repeatedly on the walls and floor. He raised a terrible clamor, continuing it even when he stood outside again. He paused once, listened, and knew it had worked. With a last barrage of noise he climbed up onto the nearby boulder and waited, an arrow nocked in his bowstring.

*Taba* emerged, groggy and confused after being roused from its deep slumber. That became Tall Runner’s advantage. Still, the formidable creature was enraged over the intrusion. It swiveled its head from side to side, looking for an enemy to maul. It did not see Tall Runner until he had loosed his arrow, the flint head lodging deeply in the creature’s neck.

Bellowing in rage and pain, *taba* tried to raise itself up on its hind legs, but toppled backward instead. Tall Runner shot another arrow into its underbelly, then nocked a third, waiting. Mortally wounded, the creature roared a last warning that this matter would be settled in another place, then was still.

Here was meat for the *mushege*. Tall Runner would rather return with the prize to his people, but this time it was not to be.

Still, he had killed a bear. That was something that must be known to the tribe. Drawing his knife, he crept cautiously to the great carcass and prodded it with his bow. There was a slight reflexive shudder, then nothing. Satisfied, he cut off one of the front claws, drained it of blood, and put it inside a pouch. The silver *tebayu*’s people would not care, nor — he hoped — would the other.

The heavy carcass could not be carried back to the North Lake, yet there were enough pine branches to fashion another travois. In a while Tall Runner departed again for the camp.

Partly fatigue, and partly the thought of what awaited him there, made the trip longer for Tall Runner. Daylight was fading when he again saw the thin smoke from the cabins. Only a few *mushege* wandered outside. The stranger was not among them, Tall Runner noticed on his way down the last slope. This time he dragged his burden to within five yards of the nearest cabin.

The *mushege* hurried to summon the others. In a couple of minutes those from the nearby cabins had gathered around the carcass and the silver *tebayu* was on his way.

“Move away, Washo. You’re finished for now, but don’t leave.”



The stranger's voice startled Tall Runner. He stood behind the Indian, and close. Usually no one could take him off guard like that. He decided it must be the fatigue.

Walking past Tall Runner, close enough for the young brave to feel a thousand flint needles prick his flesh, the stranger intercepted John Thorburn. They met face-to-face, Thorburn glaring at the smaller figure. Yet something in Thorburn's expression hinted at defeat.

"Say it, then," he snapped.

"This was done, like I told you it would be," the stranger said. "Your time runs out tonight. Agree, and it will be over. Refuse, and the spring thaw will uncover a graveyard."

He walked off, not looking back. Thorburn watched him go then approached Tall Runner. This time he wasn't smiling.

"If only I could make you understand," he said, frustrated. "*Damn, what are we doing!*" Noticing that Tall Runner was startled, he added in a softer voice, "Please, come and get warm."

He pointed at a cabin and gestured the Indian forward. Tall Runner understood but shook his head, indicating a spot nearby, where the hillside and a couple of broad Jeffrey pines formed a natural shelter. Leaving Thorburn, he walked toward it, stopping to dig up brush from under the snow. When he had a substantial pile, he fabricated a windbreak for protection. Soon he huddled in front of it. By that time the sun was nearly down and the *mushege*, having apportioned the bear, had gone back to their cabins.

As darkness fell around the camp on the North Lake, Tall Runner ate his next to last strip of meat and a handful of piñon nuts, washing them down with clean snow. Just finishing, he noticed a figure coming toward him. He stiffened. Under the blankets his fingers tightened around a knife, although he knew how foolish that was. Soon the figure stood over him.

"Hi," Simon Parkhill said. "It's cold out here. I thought maybe you could use this. No one will miss it."

The boy held out one of the blankets Tall Runner had brought. Tall Runner stared at Simon, then took the blanket and nodded. Simon smiled and hurried off.

"Gotta go," he called back, waving. "They'll wonder where I am."

It was a mild night compared to others at that time of year. The young Indian, comfortable now, closed his eyes and thought of Red Fawn. He was with her in the meadow when the creeks ran full from melting snow, and at the piñon nut harvest, and at the great Ta-ho lake, with the other Washo bands. It would be that way after the snows, only next time they would have another with them. The idea pleased Tall Runner.

But he would not let his thoughts turn into dreams. As tired as he felt, he denied himself the comfort of sleep. Perhaps later, when the camp was settled. Occasionally people moved between the cabins, though, and Tall Runner sensed an unrest he could not explain. There was something disturbing about the night.

The moon rose in a clear sky. Its pale light cast eerie, dancing shadows of pine boughs on the snow. Now hours past dusk, the *mushege* remained active. None came close to Tall Runner's windbreak, but their conversations grew louder.

Looking toward the creek cabin, he saw a glow in the sky. A large bonfire had been started, and it summoned the people. They traversed the distance in small groups, probably by family. Another one of their councils, Tall Runner thought.

When all of them reached the silver *tebayu's* cabin, there was much talk. It was not loud, and it came to Tall Runner as an intermittent murmur. He watched, curious. It suddenly occurred to him that this seemed a strange time to hold a council.

It was nothing that concerned him, the young Washo told himself. He looked away from the cabin and pulled the blankets tightly around his body, for it had grown even colder. Must sleep, he thought. Must let the dreams have their way. But still he fought against it. If he were farther away from the North Lake, where he could not hear the *mushege* or see their fire, then maybe . . .

The meeting continued for an hour. Despite how hard he tried to ignore them, the intensifying voices pierced Tall Runner's defenses. So much anger there; so much. Why? What was happening? Was it because of . . .

The stranger. He had not gone with the *musbege* from the nearer cabins. Tall Runner had assumed he was already there, awaiting them. Not so. Without looking he knew the dark one lurked close by. His hunter's instincts told him, as well as the crawling of his flesh. If there was any consolation, it was that his faculties had not yet gone dormant from the terrible fatigue.

Tall Runner turned slowly. The stranger was not as close as he had imagined, a vague shadow standing in front of some trees thirty yards away. Tall Runner had no doubt the small eyes watched him across the snow. And while his fear screamed at him, he could not get up and flee.

The stranger started for the silver *tebayu's* cabin. Tall Runner's gaze followed him as he moved like a wraith. Soon he was lost in the fire's glow among the people of the camp. For the first time in a while the North Lake fell silent.

Tall Runner tried to watch the activity by the creek cabin. The silence grew as unnerving as the loud voices had been. They must be saying something, he thought. If he could be closer . . .

Soon the curiosity overcame the fear. Shedding all but one of the blankets, Tall Runner moved quickly to the nearest trees. Enough cover stood between himself and the *musbege*. Instinctively he used it, until he was more than halfway to them. Only then did he consider that the silver *tebayu* and his people would not care that he approached, while the stranger would *know* he was coming, even if he crawled through a tunnel below the earth.

Tall Runner stepped out into the open, ninety yards from the cabin. Why go there? he wondered. He could not understand what they were saying. Nor did he know how close he would come to them before he stopped. He walked slowly to prolong that decision.

The snow directly in front of Tall Runner lay smooth, unbroken. That the white people's footprints went off in wide arcs on either side of him, as though they had deliberately avoided the direct route, went unnoticed by the Washo. A single sound rose from where the *musbege* gathered, halting Tall Runner in mid-stride. It came from a woman's throat, he believed, but was catlike, a pitiful mewling that hinted at pain and fear. It was low and grew gradually, affecting Tall Runner as the proximity of the stranger had earlier.

Closer now, fifty yards from the cabin. Tall Runner suddenly wondered why the *musbege* had not walked straight across the snow. The mewling cry slowed him. He tried to find the source of the suffering but the blinding flames denied him.

*Why did they go around?*

Then, in his path, there was . . . something. *In* the snow or *on* the snow, he couldn't tell. There were three of whatever they were.

*Holes dug through to the earth.*

He stood frozen, watching them, which was how he knew they moved.

*Stains. Some kind of spreading stains . . .*

. . . each the size of a man's hand, but they were growing, moving farther apart.

*Shadows.*

But shadows of *what*? Were they cast by flames, or moonlight? Tall Runner looked up reluctantly, afraid of what he might see. But he saw nothing, even though he turned everywhere, and this made him more afraid.

The spots of darkness on the snow had grown three times their earlier size but for now seemed to have stopped moving. The cry from the meeting place trailed off into silence.

Then the shadows grew more rapidly than before as they stretched toward the *musbege*. It was as if the sun had fallen behind a triad of towering monoliths. A new sound was born at its full intensity, a sound of the wind howling fiercely through rockbound canyons. But at the North Lake he heard only the *sound*, felt no wind at all. Tall Runner tried to cover his ears but could hardly raise his arms.

The shadows stretched halfway to the cabin. The cry began again, and there were others, as loud and as full of fear. *They are watching*, Tall Runner thought. *They can see what is coming.*

Windsound ripped through his brain. *Please, memdewe, don't make me see this. Don't make me a part of what is happening.*

Tall Runner willed his body to turn away. The shadows touched the edge of the meeting place, but he saw nothing else. He covered his ears yet could not run, for his legs shook.

The whites knew the shadows now. Their screams and wails were like those in Strong Bow's dream. Tall Runner also screamed, mostly in fear, but partly in a hopeless attempt to deny the windsound and the shrieking death from the meeting place.

*Turn around, Washo. Turn and see what casts the shadows in the snow.*

He lowered his hands. It was senseless not to. There was something nearby, at his back — reaching for him, wanting him, willing him to turn. He fell forward, hands clutching at the snow, trying to grab hold of something, crushing the snow, feeling it seep through his fingers.

*Look, Washo, look at them . . .*

The cries of the *mushege* rose above the windsound, striking him like the back of a giant hand, driving him face down in the snow. His eyes squeezed tightly shut, for he was afraid that *it* would make him turn. His body knew pain as he dragged himself toward the lakeshore. Soon he reached the windbreak, where instinctively he gathered up his blankets and other possessions.

The thing eased its hold on Tall Runner. Able to stand now, he staggered toward the slope that would take him away from the North Lake. He opened his eyes, fighting not to look back. The windsound again dominated as the cries of the *mushege* grew faint.

But this changed halfway up. One loud, terrible scream was followed by more, probably from the throats of all the *mushege* — those still able to scream. This time Tall Runner nearly glanced over his shoulder. But he surmounted the need and again covered his ears as he struggled for the summit.

*Turn around, Washo, turn and see . . .*

He made it to the top without understanding how he had done so. Falling, he began to crawl again then pulled himself up. The pain of his first step warned him that he had twisted an ankle. *No time for this now.* He dragged the leg through the snow, still forcing himself not to look back.

*Turn, Washo . . .*

In a few yards the hill sloped down. He fell on purpose and began to roll, disregarding the scrape on his arm from a protruding clump of brush halfway down. He could no longer see the North Lake; nor would he look upon it till many hunting seasons had passed, for it would be shunned as taboo by the Washo people. Even so, Tall Runner could not escape the screams of the *mushege*, which never ceased but after a while faded into the night breeze beyond the snow-covered hills.

\*.\*.\*

He had no memory of when the darkness ended and morning came. Even when he could think about it, Tall Runner didn't know how he came to be at Fallen Leaf Meadow the next day. He must have squeezed through the rift in the mountain below Arrow Point, a dangerous passage at night. But the young Washo remembered nothing until he saw the worried face of Red Fawn, who stood in front of a crowd of their people, between Strong Bow and the shaman.

"What is it, my husband?" she asked, holding out a hand but hesitant to touch him. "Why do you sit here like this?"

He sat just outside the camp, his legs spread. The bear's claw, taken from the pouch, lay beside him. His clothes were torn, with stains of dried blood from his cuts. He looked around from face to face, confused. Then he remembered, and his body shook. Someone handed Red Fawn a blanket. She put it around him, but it did not help.

Strong Bow knelt and caught Tall Runner's darting gaze. "Stop this!" the chief ordered. "Tell me what happened at the North Lake!"

Tall Runner stopped shaking. He looked into Strong Bow's eyes, and the rest of the people closed around him.

"The *mushege* have seen the shadows in the snow," he said and began trembling again.

Excerpt from John Thorburn's diary:

*January 7, Wednesday — We rejoice this morning, but also grieve. Some men from Sutter's made it through the pass. We are going off the mountain and will soon be in California. But we are leaving sixteen of our people at the lake, because of the terrible illness that befell us so near the end. Mary Ann Parkhill was the last to die, at dawn. We buried her alongside William and their two children.*

*Everyone else seems as well as can be expected. We said nothing of the epidemic to the rescue party, lest they turn and leave us here. I think everything will be all right, once we are away from this place.*