

Tanner McSwain

The Conquistadors

I met the angel in the Jumano encampment in 1535, and she gave me hope and a gun and told me not to worry. It was the first time that I had an inkling that we might survive this, although I did not take her gun. Nor did I tell Cow-Head about this, and I let him go on believing that it was he himself who had saved the Karankawa chief and all those others. He had forgotten who he was, but that was okay with me. The angel let me keep one of the feathers from her wings, which were like an owl's, so I would not forget.

Saving the Karankawa chief was our first miracle. He had begun to die from plague shortly after we were brought to the settlement, a semicircle of mud huts around a shallow river bend, not too many miles from the great gulf. Cow-Head told me that it was the wrath of God killing the chief, eating him from the inside as he had done to our friends. I would stay outside of his hut while they fed him oysters and rabbits and the sides of deer because they had made me watch him devour the heart of Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, who had been my master, to reap his wisdom and magic, and now I could not watch him eat. The shaman told the chief that it was the three of us who had survived the shipwreck and the raid, Cow-Head, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and myself, who were killing him, that we were working our dark magic into his organs. The shaman had Alonso del Castillo Maldonado hurled from a cliff into the sea to prove to the chief that he was right, but he had been wrong. The chief's condition worsened, and the shaman could do nothing for him. They filled his hut with pillows and feathers and stuffed his

body full of meat and sweet juices to make him happy before he died. No women would go near him, though, because they were afraid of his sickness.

On the first day that I was invited into his hut, I told the chief stories of where I had been. I told him about Azamor in Morocco where I was born, dry and dusty and hazy and desert-hot, and about Carranza where I had lived most of my life as the slave of Andrés Dorantes. Carranza had been much greener and more humid, and I had been treated well at the villa, tending the vineyards on the precipice which overlooked the stony Portuguese coast. Andrés had taught me to read and write, and I discovered that God had blessed me with an affinity for languages. Under his guidance, I learned English, French, Dutch, Latin, and Greek, all in addition to Spanish, and I was able to pick up foreign tongues quicker than most. The Karankawa chief spoke to me because I had learned his language since I had been there, and because he trusted me, the only one of our party who did not look like Cow-Head and Alonso del Castillo Maldonado and Andrés Dorantes de Carranza. I told him about the places Andrés Dorantes had taken me, to Hispaniola and Cuba, and about Pánfilo de Narváez, who had wanted to conquer Florida with 600 drunken men brandishing cutlasses and muskets. That is where I met Cow-Head, Narváez's treasurer and very much one of those belligerent drunks, and that is also when the first ship wrecked in 1528. Most of them, including Narváez, were killed soon after we landed, either by the natives or hunger or cold or the insanity of their compatriots. By the time we reached this island by raft, there were only 40 of us, which the Karankawa reduced to four, then three, then two.

"Esteban," the chief had said, weakly, gesturing for me to come near where he lay so that he would not have to strain his stringy voice. He was old, and his skin looked like

beaten leather, a frown permanently creased into his face. His breath was musty and wet.

"What do you know of healing magic?"

"I know of no magic, sir, save the miracles of God."

"And has your god not yet forsaken you? All of your friends are dead."

"Only one of my friends is dead, sir. These men are not mine."

"You are still a Spaniard, Esteban, no matter where you began, and you are still a slave, no matter who your master is. They will blame my mortality on you, and torture you both to death for working your magic. We have all seen you and the other speaking chants and making signs with your fingers, and we have heard on the winds that the Christians are immortal. Is there no sign you can make for me? Is there nothing that you can do to save your own lives, if not mine?"

I went back to Cow-Head and told him what the chief had told me. Cow-Head said that the chief was going to die and that there was nothing we could do except make ourselves right with God. There was no escape for either of us, naked and in chains and monitored constantly. So I knelt in the dirt and prayed for the chief to live, and Cow-Head did the same.

The guard who saw me pray reported this to the chief, who ordered me and Cow-Head to do so in front of his hut every hour until he either died or was healed. We spent the entirety of the next day on our knees in the dust at the entrance to his hut, smelling the rich perfumes wafting from within, and prostrating ourselves before God the creator and healer. It was a selfish prayer disguised as an unselfish one; I feared that I was too young to die, and Cow-Head feared that he had grown too old to die young. For three days we groveled and wailed, as the shaman and other slaves passed in and out of the tent like

ghosts. At the end of the third day, when we were unable to produce sound from our throats for lack of water, after the words had long ago stopped being Latin or Spanish or Karankawa and descended into syllables, and then into nothing, and we could no longer remember to which god we were praying, the chief lay his hands on our heads and told us to rise. As my vision refocused, I could see that his disease was gone, as were the old diseases that he had carried from his birth. He smiled at me, which looked unnatural, and called me brother. Cow-Head remained on the ground because he did not understand, and waited to be killed.

In the 1200's, a poor family aided the Christian crusaders in attacking a village of Spanish Moors. The family, who knew the land well, left the skull of a bull on the crusaders' path to signify a secret passage through the mountains. The crusaders forged through by torchlight, and massacred the Moors in the night, hanging or disemboweling those who refused to proclaim the divinity of Christ. The family's act was so exalted that the head of the household was enlisted in the service of the king, and his children were bestowed with a new title: Cabeza de Vaca, the Cow's Head. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca often told me that he regretted that his own deeds could never be as great as those of his forefathers, due to circumstances beyond his control.

Cow-Head had dreams of grandeur, of following his countrymen like Hernando de Soto into the new world across the perpetual sea. He wanted to be a conquistador, to convert or demolish the primitive savages and return to Spain with gold flowing out his ears and two lifetimes worth of stories to tell. In his portrait, he is tall and slight, with canny, condescending eyes and a regal black beard jutting from his chin like an

accusatory finger. He is dressed in the ruffles and silks of Spanish finery, with a golden cross laced around his neck. Among the Karankawa, the beard had grown raggedly inconsistent and matted with mud and blood, he was naked, and all traces of wiliness had left his eyes, replaced by desperation and despair. That was, until the miracle.

After the chief's health returned and they told the two of us that we were medicine men, Cow-Head began to feel safer in his new circumstances. He would demand things, like extra rations and clothing, and I would translate. When he would demand too much, like private quarters or the return of his medallion, I would mistranslate on purpose. We became quite valuable slaves, to the chagrin of the shaman, and our status slowly rose. They would bring us the sick or wounded, and I would pray while Cow-Head made the sign of the cross over them. Within a matter of days, each would be fully recuperated. It was astounding.

In the spring of our second year with the Karankawa, we were sold and sent to live farther north with the Jumano. The hike was arduous and merciless; we trekked for nearly a week through the uncut wilderness in the hands of people whose languages we did not speak and who had heard only spotty legends of us. The Jumano were drastically different from their neighbors. They hunted and farmed less, amassing vast amounts of wealth through trade and craft. Their language was similar, but more hollow and rounded, a slower and emptier tongue without much inflection or variation. It made them sound heartless. By the time we reached their encampment, I was able to understand most of what they were saying, although I kept this knowledge to myself for some time. I learned that we were once again trade goods, inhuman objects worth only what we can produce. I did not know if our magic would work here.

We were lodged in a hut with the first person we were told to heal, a fourteen year old girl who had been converted to Christianity by white traders. She was an ascetic, and she whipped her back to ribbons on a daily basis. She had fallen into a coma with her eyes open, from self-starvation and self-administered beating, and her father, a rich man named Pataotzei who had made his fortune in rabbit fur, had paid most of the ransom that acquired us. We did not get to rest from our journey when we arrived, but instead spent the first two days and nights praying by her sick bed. She was beautiful even through the sallowness, with lustrous hair and eyes that looked like candles behind her smooth face. Her name was utterly unpronounceable, but I tried in my prayers. I knew that I was growing selfish like Cow-Head had become, because I prayed not only for her to get better, but also for her to fall in love with me.

Despite the taint of our pleas, the girl awoke on the second day, laughing. Cow-Head was asleep and there was no one else around, so I spoke to her in her language.

"Girl, why are you laughing?"

She saw me and my snoring partner, and smiled all the way across her body. She was naked, and her skin had regained its dark brown color. Her scars looked like routes on a map of the sea. "I saw an angel," she said, "who told me that I would meet the man I would marry today. She told me that our love would make me well."

"Did she tell you to stop whipping and starving yourself?" I asked.

"Yes," said the girl. "Actually, she did."

The rich man Pataotzei held a feast that night in celebration of the miracle, and in celebration of us. We were showered with delicious foods and drink and beautiful whores, all of whom looked like the girl. The Jumano had a translator, through whom

Pataotzei asked Cow-Head why he could invoke the healing power of the Christian God and his daughter could not. Cow-Head smiled into the man and told him what, by now, he had truly come to believe: "It is not the power of God," said Cow-Head, "it is my power."

It was nearly a year before anyone required our services again. Because I was a slave, only in secrecy could I see the rich girl whose name I could not say. She would take me when she could, and she talked of returning to Spain with me when we had enough money to commission a ship and run away. I had never had any money and suspected that I never would, and the both of us knew that there would certainly be no ships, but I decided to believe her and love her alone sometimes in the tall grass north of the encampment. She said she was beginning to have visions.

"I saw the angel again," she said, "and I dreamed that you trapped her, and wrestled all her secrets out of her. Would you like me to help you catch her?"

"Okay," I said. "That would be nice."

The opportunity to lure the angel who, I presumed, had saved me and Cow-Head so many times arose when a troupe of young Jumano traders were attacked by a Kiowa raiding party en route to a neutral outpost. Most of them were killed, but three of the young men were brought back to the village, and Cow-Head and I were roused from our sleep and brought to the square. The women wailed over the bodies of the seven dead, while the men shouted at the three who looked as if they would soon join them, to keep them conscious and not allow them to succumb to sleep. The eyes of the dying lolled in their sockets, rolled up into their skull even as they were shaken, temporarily darting back

to alertness only when their names were shouted into their ears. They bobbed and bled, and the villagers began to move what was left of them toward an empty hut which had belonged to one of the murdered traders.

"Put each of them in a separate hut," I told the frightened squirrels of men who carried their brothers. "That way the evil spirits cannot get them all at once." They followed my direction, and Cow-Head clasped me on the shoulder.

"Where are they taking them? What did you tell them?"

"I told them that you have never healed three men at once, and that if something were to go wrong with one, the others shouldn't be there to see it."

"You told them that I might fail? They'll kill me for certain if I do."

"If we die, then we will sit beside Christ in heaven for all the good works we have done in his name."

Cow-Head told me to go to one of the wounded traders, a man called Hokhmah, and prepare him for the now routine ceremony of chanting and making the sign of the cross, and he would administer to the one called Nistarah on his own. The Christian girl would pray with the third until Cow-Head was able to take her place.

Within the hut of Hokhmah, I looked into the face of a man already possessed by death. He had lost most of an arm, and a tourniquet had not been tied until an hour later. There was a broken-off arrow in the back of his shoulder, and I dug the head out with my fingertips. I don't think he could feel it. I wanted to let Hokhmah go. I did not want to trap the angel any longer, and I did not care about saving myself or Cow-Head, I just wanted to allow this one to die. I did not know what power could save him from the memory of this suffering, and the phantom arm which he would always not carry. I

dropped to my knees beside him, wiped tears and his blood from my cheeks, and prayed that the angel would not get to him. But it was not up to me.

"I've caught her!" shouted the girl, rushing in to where I was kneeling and weeping by Hokhmah's cot. "Come quickly before your friend comes out of his tent."

I followed her running, and no one saw us enter the tent of the third man. Inside, a creature that at first looked like a large patchwork owl perched at the head of the man's cot, breathing yellow smoke into his mouth. Upon closer inspection, I saw that she was not an owl at all, but a white human woman of forty or fifty with the wings of a giant nocturnal bird pushing out the back of her clothes. She was not beautiful, but falsely tanned and tense and angry. Her stiff yellow hair was pulled back and tied with some sort of stretchy, ruffly ring. Her clothes were strange indeed, wearing pants instead of a dress, which were made of a thick and rough, dark blue fabric. She also wore a thin, red, strangely sewn cotton blouse that cut off at the base of her neck and around her biceps. The inscription of the blouse was in English, mostly, and read "Red Sox."

"Can you see her?" said the girl.

I told her that I could, but I was unsure if she could see us.

"I can see you," said the angel in English with a curious accent, never removing her eyes from the stiff shade of a man. "But you'll have to give me a minute before I can talk much."

We waited on her, and when she finished, the man got up from the table, his wounds mostly closed up, and he left the tent in a daze. It did not look as if he could see us, much less her.

The angel looked into the girl's eyes, and the girl reeled as if punched, and turned out of the room in the same bedazzlement.

"I need to talk to you alone, Esteban," said the angel. "And don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid," I said. "I will talk to you if you swear to let Hokhmah die."

"Fine." She sat on the bloody cot and adjusted her wings so that they hung comfortably off the opposite side.

"Those aren't real," I said. I could see the poor stitch job where the wings were sewn into her shirt with thick, uneven thread. The left one was slightly higher than the one on the right.

"I've been watching you for a long time," she said. "God is very pleased with your faith."

"I didn't really believe our prayers could heal people," I said. "I never thought that God would send an angel."

"Well He did. And He is very pleased with your faith. I have helped you and watched over you every step of the way, and now I need to ask you a favor." From a pocket in the hip of her pants, she produced a small metal object and a long, thin paper cylinder. "Do you mind?" she said.

"Mind what?"

She clicked a button on the metal device, and it produced a flame. She held it to the cylinder, and the end lit in embers. She sucked on the cylinder, and breathed smoke out of her nose. She sighed contentedly, and I coughed. "I've watched you every step of the way," she said, "and you're a very brave young man. You're smart too, which helps. Do you love the Jumano? And the Karankawa?"

"The Bible says to love all of my neighbors. Yes, I do."

"And the Han and the Capoques and Ananarivo? Do you love all of the native people of North America, even... no, especially the ones you haven't met? Do you love the Zuni, who will kill you when you meet them?"

"I don't understand you."

"I've been to the future, Esteban, and it's not a pretty world for these people. The Europeans, especially the English, will kill and infect and steal from the natives until they can no longer defend themselves. And then the Americans will come and finish them off, found an entire nation of hypocrisy on their bones. They will commit the largest genocide the world has seen up to that point, the one that will set the standard for all genocides to come, most of which these Americans will be responsible for. In five hundred years, when people think of Indians, they'll think of gambling and alcohol. It's a disgrace."

I barely understood a quarter of the words she spat at me, but they were all grave, even when they slipped into incomprehensibility. She seemed to be in a hurry, and gave no indication that she would be willing to slow down and explain. I was beginning to suspect that this woman, whoever she was, was not the one who had been healing these people, or at least not the only one.

"And your people, the Africans," she continued, "your fate will be almost worse. You'll always be slaves. You will always be second class citizens, hated and overpowered by the white man. The Americans will never allow you to be free, even after they fight a war with themselves that says you are. It's a horrific existence for everyone who isn't a rich white Christian."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"But you are in a unique position to save them. All of them." She puffed on her cylinder, and tapped ash onto the floor of the hut. "I've got something for you. You can change the future, if you'll let me guide you." She swung her legs over the cot and removed a knapsack, from which she produced a large, complicated-looking musket.

"This is called an Abdomat Kalashnikova assault rifle, better known as an AK-47. In 500 years, this will be the most popular and reliable weapon in the world. It is far simpler to use than your muskets, and a thousand times more effective. You could use this gun the rest of your life, and so could your children and your children's children."

"What does it do?"

"It kills things, Esteban, will you listen to me? I want you to take this and go to where Cabeza de Vaca is working on that man, and kill him. Then I want you to show the rest of the Jumano what power you wield, and when the Spanish or the English or whoever comes next arrives, I want you to kill them too. I can give you more, and bigger weapons. Show the natives how to use these, and the Europeans will never be able to take the continent. The Africans will be fully citizens, the Native Americans will live long, peaceful lives."

"That's what God wants me to do?"

"Yes."

I did not believe her, but I knew she would never answer me honestly. I remembered then something that Andrés Dorantes de Carranza had told me in the green and purple gardens of his villa at Spain: "If you're not getting answers, ask better questions."

I cleared my throat. "What happened to you?" I asked.

She was clearly taken aback.

"Angel, if angel you be, you speak to me in a language I cannot hear, about stupendous, terrible things that will happen after my descendants have long been dust. Is there something that has happened to you so traumatic that it has brought you here, that you think could be reversed if I were to destroy your world? Do you think that because I do not look like them, because I am not English or Spanish or white in skin, that I am more pure than them? That I would make better decisions? Angel, I am afraid that you do not know me. I do not want to change the world. The conquistadors want to change the world, so speak with them if you would like. I am not a better man. I just want to go home."

She sighed a puff of that grey smoke, and put her cylinder out on the cot. "Look, kid, do you want to stop an evil people from doing evil things or not?"

"Not if it takes doing evil things myself."

"Suit yourself," she said. She stuffed the rifle back into her pack and slung it over her shoulder. "But I'll find someone who will." She marched out of the tent, her wings drooping behind her. They did not look as if they were attached to any muscle, and I doubted that they worked at all. I remained in the hut for a bit, staring at the cylinder and a dead feather that had fallen off.

I heard joyous shouting from outside, and looked out to see several villagers hoisting Cow-Head on their shoulders and cheering for him. The three healed men wandered around the plaza looking bewildered. Hokhmah had both of his arms. I stepped out into the night and saw the angel on the far side of the crowd, sucking in another one

of her cylinders. No one noticed her. I held up the feather and smiled. She raised her right hand and extended her middle finger, and stomped into the forest.

I never would know how much of what the angel said was true, but I know a fair amount of it was. Shortly after the healing of the three traders, we were sold to the Han people, where we remained for a short time before being sold again to the Capoques, who lived on Malhado, called the Island of Doom, an astounding distance from the southern tribes with which we had had contact thus far. The rich man Pataotzei died in his sleep shortly before we left the Jumano, and the unpronounceable girl told me that she would seek her fortunes north at the Zuni pueblos in Hawikuh or Matsaki. I told her that I would miss her, and that I would come find her one day if I could. We were with the Capoques for almost a year before being sold, finally, to the Ananarivo, hundreds of kilometers into the west. Throughout all of this, we performed healings sporadically, and they always worked without exception, even after Cow-Head stopped showing the sign of the cross and forbade me to pray. I did not see the angel again, and I do not know if it was she who stayed with us or some other divine being, perhaps even God Himself. It had long ago ceased to matter.

We saved our second chief with the Ananarivo, and that turned out to be our last healing. Cow-Head negotiated with the chief that if he were to cast out the demons infecting him that he must release Cow-Head from captivity. I translated to the chief, telling him that Cow-Head had included my freedom in the bargain as well, and the chief agreed. Cow-Head laid his hands on the chief's forehead and spoke nonsense for a few moments, then released him dramatically and staggered, as if a great energy had been

drained from him. In the morning, the chief was fully healed. He held a ceremony that day to officially release us from our bonds. He gave us rucksacks full of supplies and a shaman's staff each, an intricately carven stick with gourds and charms tied to the head. The chief told us that we would always be welcomed in Ananarivo territory, and declared us honorary members of the chiefdom. I immediately tied my feather to the staff, and thanked him from the both of us. We left that afternoon for Sinaloa, further south than we had ever been, where Cow-Head had heard that the Spanish had established a colony. In 1537, six years after we wrecked near the Karankawa, our adventures had come to an end.

"What will you do when we find the Spanish?" I asked him, as we dried off from fording a wide river near Culiacán. We were in fantastically torrid territory now, dry and dusty and hazy and desert-hot.

"I will write an account of what we have seen, and they will appoint me governor of Florida."

"And what will I do?"

"You will be appointed governor of La Plata, and we shall meet in Madrid every five years to drink stout ale and relive the days of when we were younger and better men."

"Do you think we can make things better? Do you think we can save the natives from the Europeans?"

He laughed, at first, and then seeing my concern, threw an arm around my shoulder. "Save the Europeans from the natives, you mean. I'll tell them, and they'll believe me because they'll have to, that this continent can never be conquered. Not with

all the musketballs in the world will incompetent tits like Narváez or de Soto overpower these people. They're not smart enough."

"And if they try?"

"If they try," said Cow-Head as we entered a clearing, "you and I shall stop them."

The Spanish slavers who had stopped to rest in the clearing were dumbfounded at the sight and sound of us, and were not sure how to take a Spaniard and an African dressed in the furs and leather of natives. They told us who they were, and we told them who we were, and everyone had a good laugh about it all, and they offered to take us back to Sinaloa, where the Spanish had an army. Cow-Head enjoyed having someone to speak to who wasn't me, and he and the slavers joked on the short trip about the backwards ways of the savages, and how they had been silly enough to believe that Cow-Head had magical powers. In Sinaloa, we met Hernando de Soto and the Spanish army, who were driving M-48 tanks, rolling down the woodlands, with 90 mm cannons and .50 caliber machine guns on the turrets, pulling 105 mm Howitzers capable of firing armor-piercing, high explosive, and white phosphorous rounds, resting 3.5 inch German Panzerfaust bazookas on their ruffled silk shoulders, and drawing caravans overflowing with AK-47 assault rifles, two for every soldier and a bullet for every atom of every Indian in the new world. Cow-Head clapped when he saw, and Alonso del Castillo Maldonado leapt out from behind one of the tanks, proclaiming that he was still alive and that everything was going to be okay. They would kill everyone, he said, and de Soto would be appointed governor of Florida, and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca would be sent

to La Plata at the bottom of the world, and I would go north, with a staff full of gourds and feathers, looking for a girl whose name I did not know.