



## My Name is Qaletqa

By Tarah Satterfield

My name is Qaletqa. It's not a traditional name for my people, the Creeks. My mother gave it to me when I was born after my father died of white man fever disease. It means "Guardian of the People." Many moons ago my great-great grandfather, who was Sioux, left on a spirit journey to the West to follow the sun. When he returned they called him Qaletqa.

I was born in 1836 in my grandfather's wagon as the people of the Creek Nation were being forced from their homes in Alabama to the New Territory by the white man. By 1837, approximately 15,000 Creeks had succumbed to forced migration to the West. They had never signed a removal treaty. It was not just the Creeks, but also the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations were all removed from their lands in order to make the way for white Americans eager for land to raise cotton. All of these southeastern tribes inhabited the southern part of the Indian Territory.

The New Territory was strange for the Indian people. There were so many different tribes, which were forced to live together. It was difficult to say the least. My people, the Creeks, were split into the Upper Creeks, which I belong to, and Lower Creeks. In the beginning we barely came into contact with one another, but as the years passed and the white man began to push and settle in the New Territory, the Indian Nations began to merge.

In our tribe, Grandfather says that the children of each generation are brothers and sisters whether by blood or not. I was one of the older children in my tribe but not the oldest. Menewa, "great warrior," was the oldest and one of my few brothers of true Creek decent. With the Sioux blood that raced through my veins, I often felt out of place with the other boys in my tribe but got along well with one of my younger brothers, Tayanita, or "young beaver."

Growing up in this merged village, I found my soul mate, Talisa, the most beautiful girl in the village. Unfortunately, she belonged to Menewa, or so he made everyone believe, but truth be known, she didn't really like him and called him Wuyi or "turkey vulture."



Life for the Creeks was difficult. Many of my people never truly adjusted to the New Territory and continually mourned for the land of their births. So my brothers and sisters grew up in this state of unrest. We were used to it, but little did we know that the same events that drove our people west were beginning to merge into this New Territory and send us on a journey none of us would forget and few of us would live to tell about.

Opothleyahola was the chief of the Upper Creek nation. I had only seen him a few times when he visited our village. He was very cautious in his decisions about our tribe. They said he could not be corrupted or bribed.

It was the summer of 1859 and some of my brothers and I were going to listen to Opothleyahola. It was my first council meeting. We were going to the North Fork; Menewa, Chitto, Yaholo, Yansa, Fala, and even Tayanita was tagging along because I let him. Menewa was angry with me for bringing the boy.

“You had no right to bring him.” He sneered at me with his beady eyes and crinkled nose. “He is a boy! Not yet a man, not like us.” He motioned to the four behind him.

Chitto, which means “Brave,” stood like a mountain next to the others. He was tall like us but his body was cut like stone; a warrior, he was powerful and there was absolutely no doubt in my mind he could kill a man with his bare hands. He was also a true blood Creek.

Next to him stood Yaholo. He is a Yoskolo, “unknown, outside.” A white man attacked Yaholo’s mother and nine months later Yaholo was born. His mother died after she gave birth to him. His aunt looked after him and gave him his name, which means “crier.”

Yansa was half Creek, half Cherokee. He’s short and fat like a bull and just as mean. His name means “buffalo.”

And last was my Choctaw friend, Fala. His family settled near our tribe not too long ago, and we’ve been friends ever since. Fala watches Menewa, waiting for the chance to fight with him.

“I told you when we left not to worry about him. I’m taking care of him.” I step between Menewa and Tayanita, keeping the twelve year-old boy behind me.

“Do what you want!” He stormed off toward the large bonfire where the people were gathering with Chitto and Yansa.

“He sure is full of himself, isn’t he?” Fala snorts, tugging playfully on Tayanita’s hair braid, as Tayanita slaps his hand away. Yaholo walks silently towards us, his small frame ever so hunched inward.



“Come on, let’s go get good spots,” I say, walking toward the orange light and black shadows of people dancing across the golden grain. The stars of our ancestors seemed to dance with them in anticipation of the gathering. I sent a prayer to my father and his fathers for guidance.

We found good seats on the rocky shelves that over lined the plateau and were just above the fire. Men were singing old story songs of the Great Spirit and famous chiefs who led the people with wisdom and strength.

It got very quiet all at once and the only sounds to be heard were that of the fire’s crackling and the wind’s laughter. A man split the crowd with his men. I knew him when I saw him. Opothleyahola, the Upper Creek chief.

His large and imposing form was draped in a colorful blanket, which hung gracefully from his shoulder. A bright shawl encircled his head. He addressed everyone in the circle and smiled when he saw us perched on the rocks to hear him speak.

“My Brothers,” he began, “many, many years ago, when I was a child, there was a beautiful island in the Chattahoochee River. It was covered with stately trees and carpeted with green grass. When the Indian was hungry and could not find game elsewhere, he could always go to the island and kill a deer. An unwritten law forbade the killing of more than one deer, and even then, the hunter might resort to the island only when he had failed elsewhere.”

He closed his eyes for a brief moment, and I could imagine the place he spoke of.

“But the banks of that island were of sandy soil. As the floods of the river rolled on this side and that, the banks wore away and the island shrunk in size. When our people left the country, the island had become so small that there was only room for two or three of the giant trees and most of the green grass was gone. The deer, once so plentiful there, had entirely disappeared.”

He looked sad as he looked at the crowd. No one seemed to move, to speak, to breathe, because of the magnitude of power and strength and yet sadness and weakness in his voice.

“I have since learned that there is a kind of grass which, if it had been planted on the banks of that beautiful island, might have saved it. The grass strikes its roots deeply in to the sandy soil and binds it so firmly that the waters of the flood cannot wear it away!”



His gaze lingered on us on the rock as he continued, “My Brothers, we Indians are like that island in the middle of the river. The white man comes upon us as a flood!” he growls the statement, and I hear murmurs of agreement. “We crumble and fall, even as the sandy banks of that beautiful island in the Chattahoochee. The Great Spirit knows, as you know,” his wise eyes circle the crowd, “that I would stay that flood which comes thus to wear us away if we could. As well might we try to push back the flood of the river itself.”

“As the island in the river might have been saved by planting the long-rooted grass upon its banks, so let us save our people by educating our boys and girls!” he comes and lays his hand on Tayanita’s shoulder, and it looks as if the boy is going to faint with happiness for being recognized by the great chief, “and young men and women in ways of the white man. Then they may be planted and deeply rooted about us and our people may stand unmoved in the flood of the white man.”

Once again there was disagreement between the people. Some agreed with Opothleyahola while others wanted nothing to do with the white mans’ ways.

The Civil War of 1860 opened old tribal wounds and brought back to life ancient frictional antagonisms. We had no government to keep the Creek Nation in check while Opothleyahola planned with Cherokee leader John Ross and other tribal leaders to keep the Indian Nations neutral.

There were constant fights between Lower and Upper Creeks, which fueled intensity and conflict into the other nations as well. Our village was in complete chaos; people fighting over trivial things. Grandfather told me to stay out of it, and I did my best until the day I lost my brothers.

I was fishing down at the river one warm morning, trying to clear my head of things that had happened in the year since I’d heard Opothleyahola’s speech. I could have gone hunting, but it seemed like a good day to just watch the water and wait for a big fish to take the bait of my line like I was being forced to take the bait of war.

Talisa was walking down to the river with her family’s water buckets. I was going to just watch her until I caught her eye and she smiled and waved at me from the bank.

Her hair was as black as night sky and her eyes were dark brown like everyone else’s but, but her eyes shone when you looked at them.

“What are you doing?” she laughed, shaking me out of my trance.



I lifted my pole and showed her with a smile, “Fishing. What else could I do with all this craziness?” I motioned back to the village.

Her face changed slightly, a different emotion crossed her face. She walked toward me with her water buckets in hand. I looked back out at the water as she sat down.

“Qale?” she shortened my name. Everyone in the village did that because it’s not a real Creek name, but I didn’t mind when she did it. “I’m scared. I don’t know what’s happening out there.” She looked over her shoulder then back at the water. She slipped off her sandals and dipped her feet in the water.

“It will be alright,” I told her confidently, even though I didn’t truly know. “Are they waiting on you?” I asked, nodding my head back up the trail.

“No.” A sad expression covered her face. “Tyee left this morning for the war.”

Tyee was Talisa’s brother and only adult male in the family. He was the head of the house and responsible for his family. With Tyee gone, the outlook for the family was bleak.

The Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole tribes were the only Indian tribes who took an active part in the Civil War. Slavery was not viewed the same by the tribes and very few Indians had slaves. But once again the tribes occupied valuable territory, and the Confederate army was quick to try and win over the tribes’ loyalty and wanted to organize the Indians to oppose the Federal government. The Confederates met with the full-blood leaders and wanted the tribes to end their relationship with the United States. The leaders, led by Opothleyahola, were very cautious and decided to remain neutral; however, this decision was not unanimous. The Confederate agents won over ex-Chief McIntosh by appointing him colonel, but the majority of the tribe preferred to be guided by the advice of their valuable old chief, Opothleyahola.

I looked at Talisa. I really looked at her. I wanted to help her. I wanted to be there for her.

We fished all day, and I hauled the baskets of fish and a bucket of water for her and walked her back to her home. Upon arriving home, we heard her mother crying, grief stricken no doubt from losing her only son.

“Mother, please listen. Everything is going to be okay,” Talisa tried to reason with her mother. “Qaletqa is going to take care of us. Look, mother, he brought us fish! Please come help me clean it.”



Her mother looked at the fish then at Talisa and then at me. “Take care of my Talisa. She is my last.” Tears streamed down her face. “Opothleyahola is going to take the tribes to Kansas where they’ll be safe. You must go with them. Some of the young men have already started to join war. My Tyee joined the Confederacy without even telling us.”

“The white man came and took your brother and other boys to the army camps.”

“Talisa, I’m going to find Tyee and bring him back. You must go with Qaletqa and his family to the new land. We will meet you there.”

Talisa nodded and hugged her mother; the old woman simply walked away. Talisa and I reached my home. I went in and explained the situation to my mother and grandfather who agreed to Talisa traveling with us.

The next morning was completely chaos. It’s November 5, 1861; lots of people were getting ready for the move. Talisa’s already up helping my mother pack belongings. We traveled light.

I placed the packs on the wagon and turned around right into a closed fist. It connected with my jaw and sent my head spinning to the ground.

“Qale!” I saw Talisa in my blurring sight but I was still looking for the owner of the fist. As I rolled on my back, the looming figure of Menewa stood above me.

“Talisa will travel with me!” He swung again but I shoved him away. This time my fist collided with his mouth. Blood spewed from his lip into the air.

“She does not belong to you!” I shouted back at him. I offered my hand to help him up.

He spat at it and shoved himself up and looked at Talisa. “So you would rather keep company with a half-blood? You are a true Creek. You disgrace us.”

I had never been one to fight over anything, but he thought he could push me around, dishonor me; well, not any more. I went for his throat.

“Peace, brothers!” Tayanita shouted. He had my wrist in his boyish hands and was telling me to release Menewa. Talisa was there in my ear, too, telling me to stop.

My hand relaxed, and I let go of Menewa. He held his throat with his hand, gasping for air, slowly creeping away, wheezing. “You’ll be sorry, Yoskolo.”

“I saw what happened,” Tayanita said quietly. “I didn’t want you doing something stupid.”



“You are very wise and brave, young brother,” I told him. I turned to Talisa. “I’m sorry I lost control.” I couldn’t even look her in the eye.

“Yeah ole “guardian of the people” never could keep himself out of trouble,” Fala slapped my back. “I would have come to your rescue, but you looked like you had everything handled.” He grabbed his throat.

“You have a very unhealthy sense of humor,” Talisa growled.

“I guess you heard about the move,” Tayanita slapped the wagon.

“Yes, we were preparing to leave today,” I replied, going to fetch another pack to load the wagon.

“My family were wondering if we could travel with you? With our own horses, of course, but could we journey with you?” Fala asked me.

“Why of course!” I said, smiling. “You didn’t need to ask,” I smirked at him.

It’s late in the afternoon when Opothleyahola arrived with many tribes behind him. Hundreds of people were journeying with the Creeks, though many of my brothers joined the war. Menewa, Chitto, and Yansa joined the Confederacy, while Tyee and his brothers joined the Union.

There were other nations coming with us. We were to meet them at North Fork and the Deep Fork of the Canadian River in Oklahoma near a town called Eufaula. And so from our tiny little village Talisa and I, along with Fala and Tayanita, made our way to Kansas and hopefully peace from the war.

We were a colorful cavalcade of armed warriors, covered wagons, ox teams, carriages, buggies, droves of livestock, women and children, old men and women, bright headdresses and robes, beautiful horses of every color, and the red and gold leaves of the forest. It looked as magical as it seemed. This is what Opothleyahola’s dream for unity between tribes looked like.

We made camp that night at North Fork. As we topped the hill, everyone was making camp. There were Creeks, Choctaws, Cherokees, and Seminoles everywhere. There must have been at least two thousand people. Small fires dotted the area like fireflies. There was music being played, food cooking, children crying and laughing. Just so much activity from so many people it was difficult to take in.

There was talk among the people about the Confederacy wanting to destroy Opothleyahola and the people he marched to safety of the northern state.



“You know, I was thinking that if you’re not on anyone’s side then that makes both sides hate you,” Fala said perceptively.

“I suppose that has some truth in it.”

The next ten days we traveled to Round Mountain and stayed there until November 19<sup>th</sup> when our world of unity and harmony came crashing down.

Troops of the Confederate army had been following us for a while. We thought that maybe we could outrun them to safety, but that afternoon atop Round Mountain, lead and arrows flew and rained from the sky. We had already moved our women, children, and old ones away from the battle. Talisa and Tayanita were with them trying to get ahead of the battle. Fala and I were shooting from the trees trying to keep the element of surprise among the enemy. I saw Chitto running through the trees with his knife, attacking Indians he had shared a village with – his own brothers. Someone began shooting at him. Blood ripped from his chest and stab of pain went through me as well. He was my brother and yet my enemy. As night fell both parties of the battle retreated for the night, trying to gather the dead as they went.

The men of the Confederate army had no idea they were being followed by twenty or so Indians. Fala and I were a team, and we waited for the signal of the morning birdcall that our leader would sound at the right moment. We could see the men sitting around their fires. Some were nursing the wounded or their own injuries.

A few minutes went by and then we heard the call. Fala and I immediately scraped the rocks together in various places, starting small fires. It didn’t take long for the dry prairie grass to completely ignite the Confederates’ camp.

Under the cover of darkness, the warriors retreated to a place known as Bird Creek, where we found our families. I couldn’t find myself tired at all. I killed men today. Men who had wives and sons and daughters and mothers and fathers. Men who would never see their children grow up, and I took it away from them.

I awoke to my own moans of sorrow. I was dreaming of the bullets ripping through the air and people. But this time it wasn’t the enemy being shot at, it was my friends and family and Talisa and Opothleyahola. And I could feel all their pain at once. I moaned again with sorrow.

“Qale, it’s alright,” someone whispered. “It’s over now.” But they were wrong. It wasn’t over. Not yet.





It was December 8<sup>th</sup> and the man that led the attack against us was Colonel Cooper. He wanted to make peace agreements with Opothleyahola. It sounded like a trap to me so Fala and I agreed to go with a small group to protect our leader. We met fifteen miles south of our camp. There were only thirty or so that we could see, only a few white men and three companies of Cherokees.

We exchanged greetings and found that one of the white men was Major Pegg, one of Cooper's men. Opothleyahola spoke mostly to the Cherokees as friends and in the native Creek tongue, which they could understand.

"Brothers," our leaders said sadly, "It saddens my heart to see us fight this way. We can remember a time when our fathers stood side by side in our native streams in the East and the path between them was the white path of peace," he paused and looked in the eyes of our Cherokee brothers, "and the chain of friendship that bound our tribes together was kept bright and shining with the deeds of brotherly kindness and good will!" His voice rang through the multitude of Indians. "The white man hammers at this chain, breaking us apart. Our fathers in the land of the Great Spirit weep to see us this way."

There was a murmur in the crowd. Major Pegg looked unsteady at the proud chief in front of him.

"Brothers, I do not want to fight you. I only want to save our people."

With that a Cherokee warrior kicked his horse forward and extended his hand to Opothleyahola. They clasped wrists, and the warrior spoke in broken Creek to the chieftain.

"I won't speak for my brothers, but I will ride with you."

One after another the warriors left a very exasperated Major Pegg, who turned his horse broadside and shouted, "You ALL are acting in treason of the Confederacy and will hang for this!" he roared and ran his horse in the way from which he came with a handful of white men who had rode behind him.

The Cherokee brothers told Opothleyahola of Cooper's plan to attack the refugees tomorrow if the peace negotiations did not succeed.

"Well, we have the forest on our side, I suppose," Opothleyahola smiled to his brother.

The day of battle was eerily gloomy on December 9, 1861. The clouds rolled overhead with a sullenness of disaster brewing. Our forest stronghold was gray and lifeless as we waited for the march of the enemy.



Our position gave our adversary almost insurmountable obstacles. First the enemy had to walk or ride across the vast prairie. Then the creek slowed their approach, being thirty feet high and very deep in most places, and caused men to be swept downstream. The land after the creek was occupied by fierce forces and covered with heavy timber, matted underbrush, and thickets. The next line in our defense was the abandoned farm and farmhouse. There was a fence that stretched four or five hundred yards in length and was thickly wooded and covered with interwoven weeds and grass, which we could lie behind and shoot. With all of these obstacles, we could have the upper hand against the enemy.

I was with Fala in the woods of the middle part of our defense. We were to wait for the enemy to get ahead of us so we could start shooting from behind while the fence warriors shot from the front.

We began to hear shots ahead of us, splashing in the creek as the men were trying to get across. We could hear screams and shouts of men as the gunfire slashed through the air.

A few minutes later our men ran through the forest to protect the fence. Not long after that, the enemy came through the underbrush, thorns tearing their clothes and limbs. We opened fire on the Confederates. I had only shot twice when my foot slipped, and I fell from our roost.

The fall knocked the breath from me and my vision was hazy, though I could see bullets whizzing overhead. Fala was screaming at me.

“Qale! Are you alright? QALE! QA...” A bullet finds its mark, and Fala fell from the tree and landed a few feet from me, coughing blood, gasping for air, and gripping the hole in his chest.

“Fala!” I wheezed his name and grabbed his hand. “Fala, it’s alright. It’s alright!”

“Don’t lie to me,” he choked on his words. “Just go, Qale. Hide. NOW!”

I saw someone walking back to Fala’s body. They hadn’t seen me yet.

“Go,” he whispered.

I hid under a cedar tree. It’s not Confederate clothing I saw when Fala’s killer came into my view, but deer skin pants and moccasins. I followed the legs up to the arms and hands that held the gun. And finally I saw the face that just killed my best friend and brother – Menewa.

“Murderer!” I roared, coming up from the tree and tackling Menewa to the ground, knocking the gun away from him.



“Qaletqa?!” he rolled with me on the ground. “Get off!” he shouted.

My hands found his neck, and I pushed him away from me. “You killed your own brother!”

“He is not my brother,” he said with a deadly tone in his voice and pulled a knife from its sheath, “and neither are you!”

He lunged at me with the knife. I spun out of the way, and he fell on the ground. He grunted and got up and came at me again. I grabbed his arm, and we tripped over each other. We fell, and I heard Menewa scream with pain. When I jerked away from him, the knife was deep in his chest, close to his heart. Then all was quiet.

These were my brothers lying dead next to each other. One was my enemy; one was my friend, lying dead next to each other. My heart was sick with grief.

I began walking back to the fence. Bodies were lying everywhere. Twisted, lifeless bodies. I found a gun and just started firing like everyone else. This continued for four or five hours until close to sundown, and it was time for the refugee warriors to ‘disappear.’ I made a giant circle around the enemy and made it back to Bird Creek, where what was left of my family and friends awaited.

I found Talisa and told her about Fala and Menewa. We wept for our brothers for a long time before I left to find Fala’s family and tell them of their son’s death.

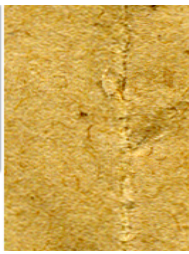
We moved again but were delayed at a place called Hominy Falls. My sleep was troubled, and I was awake before the sun rose. I had to go get orders from Opothleyahola.

As it turned out, Colonel Cooper never followed us to Hominy Falls but went back to Fort Gibson. Our supplies were running low.

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, a man by the name of Colonel James McIntosh found our camp with a great number of troops. I knew we had many warriors but the looks of this army had my confidence falling.

The Seminoles were in the front-protected trees and rocks and were drawn up in the battle line at the top of the hill. This meant they were first to receive fire from the Confederates. Fragments of other tribes held strong strategic positions at outposts. Every tree and thicket sheltered a warrior determined to sell his life in defense of the last stronghold.

However, when McIntosh launched his attack at 12 o’clock with such force, they swept all before them. I was hiding under a thicket bush and shooting at the Confederates as they went by. They were like a swarm of locust



that descended upon a prairie in the summer, devouring everything they could. We fell back, unable to withstand the fierce onslaught. Women and children fled in terror; it was nothing but chaos and confusion.

As the sound of war gave way to the stillness of the woods, I began to make my way back to the camp of my people. I found my entire family, including my mother and grandfather, dead. Gunfire and smoke clogged the air. I couldn't think, I just began to run. There was no hope for the refugees. We were being hunted by wolves.

My running slowed to a walk. I'd walked past the bodies of women and children, all dead. An entire family consisting of one man, one woman, and three children, slaughtered. I kept walking past the bodies until there were no more.

As night fell I found a group walking north, refugees like myself. We walked and walked and slowly there were twenty or so of us just walking.

A blizzard came that night. It blew sleet in our faces as we walked over the snow-covered ground, some of us thinly clad because in the commotion of the mayhem, we had not gathered proper clothing. Some were even without shoes.

One young man had his small, frail grandmother on his back and was carrying her. She begged him to let her die to ease his burden, but he always refused. One woman had her dead baby in her arms and cried for it every moment of the day we traveled until she laid down in the snow and refused to go on.

After three days of walking in the snow we finally made it across the Kansas border near the Walnut River. The town they took us to had a place where you could find your family or loved ones. I sat on the wooden step of this place for two days and waited.

"Qale?" I was watching the ground and the snowflakes melt on the mud as soon as it touched it. "Qale, is that you? It is! Talisa! He's over here!" I heard Tayanita's voice, and I looked up to see him battling through the crowd to get to me.

"QALE!" Talisa's voice was in the crowd though I didn't see her. But it was impossible anyway...my family died, all of them.

Tayanita was hugging my neck and praising the Great Spirit and asking if I was alright. Talisa threw herself in my arms. I snapped out of it after a while, coming out of my trance that everyone was dead. I hugged them



both, and I noticed that Tayanita was missing three fingers on his left hand, one from frostbite and the other two from a bullet going by him. Talisa was fine except a few scratches.

I later learned that within two months of arriving in Kansas more than 240 Creeks alone died of famine, pestilence, and exposure. Of the 9,000 followers of Opothleyahola, only 7,000 survived the battles, disease, and bitter winter. More than 100 limbs were amputated. For weeks refugees continued to arrive. The Indians were destitute, they lacked food, clothing medicine, or shelter. Many slept on the bare ground. Many died after arriving at the camp, including Opothleyahola's daughter. Ten thousand refugees pitched their tents and stayed the rest of the winter and following spring in 1862.

Opothleyahola died in the Creek refugee camp near the Sac and Fox Agency at Quenemo in Osage County, Kansas. He was buried beside his daughter near Fort Belmont in Woodson County, Kansas.