Aaron Talbot wondered why he ever came to Camp Grant in Arizona and signed on as a civilian scout for the Yankee army. He had been a Lieutenant in an Arkansas regiment during the war and spent the last six months of that war in a Yankee prison. Now his family was gone, and he lived in the middle of a desert inhabited by deadly enemies.

Texas had seemed like a good idea after the war, and he had spent a brief time as a Texas Ranger before the Carpetbaggers took over the state. Then in New Mexico, he had met Colonel Prescott and helped him find his daughter, Ruth. The Colonel had made him a scout for the army. After spending time in Albuquerque with the Colonel, he decided to go along when Colonel Prescott assumed command at Camp Grant, northeast of Tuscon.

Now he was helping the army by scouting for renegade Chiricahua Apaches in southeastern Arizona. His good friend, Red Hawk, a Tonkawa warrior, was with him, also as an army scout.

They were two days out of Camp Grant with a patrol of twelve troopers under a Lieutenant Monroe when they caught a party of hostile Apaches unawares near the Dragoon Mountains. The Lieutenant decided to attack before they could get away. There were twenty warriors in the party. Instead of trying to escape, they turned on the patrol and chased them into a box canyon.

Aaron, Red Hawk, the Lieutenant, and eight troopers made it into the canyon and set up a defensive position at its entrance. The Apaches knew there was no water in the canyon, and if they waited, the men would have to come out sooner or later.

This group of Chiricahua Apaches had been raiding ranches and stealing horses for several weeks across southern Arizona. They were ready to return to their stronghold deeper in the mountains. A chance to defeat a party of soldiers was too good of an opportunity to ignore. So, they waited and fired an occasional arrow at any movement inside the canyon.

The soldiers ran out of water during the second day under siege. They could survive the third day, but then their situation would become desperate. They needed to either end the blockade or find water.

Lieutenant Monroe had been sent out of Camp Grant to locate hostile Apaches raiding throughout southern Arizona. He was to follow them without making contact until the Colonel sent more men to assist them in capturing or killing the Indians.

The main problem for the patrol was named Cochise. He was the leader of the raiding party and had outsmarted the Lieutenant. They thought the Chiricahua were headed back to their stronghold and had gotten careless. Instead, he had tricked them into thinking they would be easy to defeat and had channeled them into a trap.

The Lieutenant had sent a courier for help, but there was no way to know if he had gotten through. If he made it, support would be coming, but it was still a couple of days away. That would be too late to save the patrol. Men cannot survive for long in the Arizona desert without water.
Aaron and Red Hawk met at the rear of the canyon. Each man had scouted different parts of the canyon, seeking a way out. It was their third transit of the box canyon walls, and it was just as fruitless as the other two times.

“Cochise know this country and trap us in a bad place,” Red Hawk said.

“He can’t rush us without losing a lot of men. Of course, we can’t leave either,” Aaron replied.

“Without water, we soon die anyway,” Red Hawk said, rolling a pebble around the inside of his mouth before securing it under his tongue.

They started back toward Lieutenant Monroe’s position to report the bad news when they heard a flurry of rifle shots.

Rushing to the source of the shots near the mouth of the canyon, they arrived just in time to see the Lieutenant ride away at the head of his eight troopers. They were chasing a small group of Apaches. Dust in the distance made it appear as if the main force of the war party was leaving. Lieutenant Monroe believed that Cochise was departing. The few Apaches who rode into view were just a rearguard of some sort.

“Lieutenant very foolish,” Red Hawk said.

“Let’s see if we can catch him before Cochise lifts his scalp,” Aaron said as he ran toward his horse.

The Apaches were out on the open desert as the charging soldiers raced past the opening to the canyon. Aaron and Red Hawk were some distance behind them when Cochise sprang his ambush.

The six Chiricahua who were fleeing stopped running and turned back. At the same time, the rocks on both sides of the canyon entrance disgorged Apaches on foot. They were firing all kinds of rifles at the soldiers.

Three of the troopers were shot out of their saddles, and the soldiers became confused. Apaches were coming at them from three different directions. They were uncertain about how to react to the various threats.

The Lieutenant started to signal the men to ride back into the canyon as Aaron and Red Hawk reached his side. Bullets were flying in all directions. A fourth trooper went down when his horse got hit. He was able to grab a riderless horse and was remounting when an arrow hit him in the neck, and he went down to stay.

“We gotta break through those Apaches or die,” Aaron yelled to the Lieutenant as he pointed toward the warriors on horseback who were returning at a breakneck pace.

The Lieutenant started to argue when an arrow clipped his left ear. He swung his horse around and signaled the men to follow. Three troopers were still alive and able to fight. Their pistols were empty, so they holstered them and drew their sabers.

The approaching horsemen collided with the determined soldiers. It was a short fight as the larger cavalry horses knocked their ponies aside, and the sabers gave the troopers a close-in advantage.

Aaron and Red Hawk had loaded pistols, and they used them to help clear a path through their attackers. After a short fight, five men were through the Apache horsemen and riding away from the scene. Three Apaches lay dead while the rest of them nursed bullet wounds or saber slashes to their bodies.
The Lieutenant and two troopers survived the fight. Aaron and Red Hawk led them away from the canyon toward the Dragoon Mountains. He had talked to various Apache scouts back in Camp Grant and thought that he knew where to find water. They needed it if they were going to survive.

Cochise was not happy. Six feet tall and well-muscled, he had a physical presence that enhanced his position as a chief among his people. His ambush had failed, and now they had to run them down.

Signaling his men to get their ponies and prepare to chase after the soldiers, he had to wait while the ponies were brought back from the trick they had played on the longknives. Bushes had been tied onto ropes and dragged behind the ponies to stir up a lot of dust. While the ponies gave the impression that the Apaches were leaving, Cochise had his warriors set their ambush. The braves leading the ponies turned back as soon as they heard the shooting start. Even so, it was ten minutes before the Chiricahua could start after their prey.

Meanwhile, the five survivors were pushing their horses hard, and Aaron knew they could not keep it up for awfully long. They had opened a good lead, but it was temporary. The horses needed water as badly as the men, and they must find a defensible position with water nearby.

They had just about given up hope when they noticed a cloud of dust in the distance. It was northwest of their location and several miles away.

Stopping for a moment, Lieutenant Monroe asked Aaron, “Do you think that might be a column from Camp Grant?”

“Apaches don’t make much dust when they travel, and judging by the amount being made, it could easily be Yankee cavalry. But it is moving awfully slow, even for Yankees.”

“Do you think we can reach them before Cochise catches up to us?”

“I don’t think we need to worry,” Aaron said, pointing at a small rise about a half-mile along their backtrail. Apaches were sitting on the high spot looking at them and then at the dust.

“I think Cochise knew help was coming. That’s why he used a ruse to bring us out of that box canyon.”

The Lieutenant did not respond other than to say, “Let’s go join that column.”

A half-hour later, they came up to the column. It turned out to be about a hundred head of cattle being driven by ten heavily armed Mexicans.

As soon as they were spotted by the Mexicans, things became hectic. The men all raced to the front of the herd and brandished an assortment of rifles and pistols.

“What do you think, Talbot,” Lieutenant Monroe asked his scout.

“If’n they was legal, they wouldn’t be so touchy when some soldiers show up.”

“I think I’ll bluff them into thinking a column of cavalry is nearby. We’ll ride up to them and ..”

Before he finished, the Mexicans started shooting and charged toward them.

Lieutenant Monroe signaled a retreat just as a bullet caught him in his chest, knocking him backward off his horse.

Before Monroe hit the ground, Aaron had his Henry up to his shoulder and fired two quick shots, killing the two men leading the charge. The others milled about for a minute, deciding what to do, while Red Hawk and the three troopers shot at them.
A third man went down, shot by Red Hawk with his Spencer, and another took a bullet in the shoulder from one of the trooper’s pistols. Aaron hit two more with his Henry, one in the shoulder and another in his stomach, before putting it away and drawing his gun.

Waving his pistol around over his head and kicking his heels into his horse’s ribs, Aaron shouted, “Let’s get them.”

Seeing that the sides had been evened and only four of them were unwounded, the Mexicans turned away. They skedaddled back through the herd, scattering the animals. The injured men had to fend for themselves. The one who had been shot in the belly fell to the ground, and he soon bled to death.

Aaron noticed a wagon trailing the herd. The driver had tried to turn it, but the panicked steers had knocked down one of the mules pulling it. The driver had run off after the fleeing Mexicans.

About ten minutes later, the men gathered next to the wagon and drank tepid water from the barrel attached to its side. The herd was scattered over a wide area of the desert. Still, they had caught three horses, and they were tethered to the wagon, along with Lieutenant Monroe’s mount.

The wagon contained assorted supplies of food and whiskey. It also held many things that had obviously been stolen or looted from ranches and farmhouses throughout the region.

After watering their horses and filling their canteens from the water barrel, the men waited for Aaron to speak. Corporal Bascomb was the ranking trooper, but he knew little about fighting Apaches. He had the two surviving privates burying Lieutenant Monroe while Aaron decided on their next step.

Aaron placed a hand on the side of the wagon. He said, “Judging by what I see in the wagon, and the actions of the men we fought here, they must have been doing some of the raiding and killing throughout this area. We ran into them by accident. I’m sure they were returning to Mexico. Luckily, Cochise thought they were cavalry from Camp Grant and pulled back before discovering otherwise.”

“Do you think Cochise heard the shooting,” Corporal Bascomb asked.

“If’n he did, the Apaches would be here by now.”

“Think we have time to butcher a steer? We’d have good eatin’ on our way back to Grant,” Bascomb said.

Aaron thought about it for a minute before answering, “Cochise will notice pretty quick that the cavalry isn’t chasing after him. He’ll come to investigate and discover his mistake. We don’t want to be here when he arrives. We’ll grab supplies from the wagon and pack them onto the extra horses. Then we’ll clear outta here.”

Red Hawk found a piece of higher ground where he could watch for any signs of activity to the south. The Mexicans had fled toward the southwest while the Apaches had been last seen in the southeast.

The Lieutenant had been buried and supplies secured onto three packhorses when Red Hawk heard distant gunfire from the southeast. It was just a brief flurry of shots but too close for comfort.
Hurrying back to Aaron and the Corporal, Red Hawk related what he had heard. Then Aaron asked, “Do y’all think the Mexicans were circling back to ambush us, and they ran into Cochise?”

“Me think so. Apache make short fight. Be coming here now.”

Aaron thought things over for a minute before saying, “Corporal, you and the other two troopers take the pack horses and head back along the cattle trail. Follow it until dark. Red Hawk and I will find you by morning.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“We’re gonna make some dust toward the west with some of these cattle. With any luck, Cochise will think we are all making a run for it.”

“What if they don’t fall for it?”

“If they come after you, you’ll have to fort-up somewhere. We’ll double back, and if we get the Apaches between us, maybe they’ll back off. The Apache don’t like to fight unless they know the odds are stacked in their favor.”

“Sounds pretty sketchy to me.”

“Unless you can think of anything better, we have to get moving before our company shows up.”

Corporal Bascomb turned to his two men and said, “Mount up. We’re gonna get out of here.”

The troopers headed along the trail made by the cattle. Their tracks tended toward the northwest and were hard to follow in the torn-up ground. Aaron and Red Hawk drove a small group of cattle toward the west. The cattle were still unsettled from the earlier gunfight. It was a simple matter to hurry them along and kick up a lot of dust.

Cochise had given his men a few extra minutes to torture the one Mexican they had taken alive. As he listened to the man’s screams, he was thinking about the soldiers who had gotten away earlier today.

Four of his braves were dead, and three were wounded. He wanted to catch them and take their lives. He would have done so earlier without losing any braves except for those two scouts.

When they heard the shooting earlier, he had been leading his men back toward their stronghold. He realized then that the dust cloud was not from the movement of longknives. It must involve the soldiers he was after. The war party changed direction and moved cautiously toward the source of the shots.

They caught the small group of Mexicans moving in the same direction. At first, the Mexicans waved, thinking they were Comanches. They realized their mistake when Cochise put an arrow into their leader. As his men killed the Mexicans, a few of them replied with pistol shots. Cochise had wanted to approach the soldiers in silence. That was no longer possible.

Cochise had sent a scout on ahead to look for any signs of their prey. He returned in a short time to say the longknives were fleeing to the west. They were making a lot of dust and moving fast. Their horses would not last for long. Slashing the throat of their prisoner, Cochise ordered his men to mount and ride.

Aaron and Red Hawk drove the cattle hard for almost a half-hour before abandoning them and turning north. The cattle continued on their own for nearly another five minutes before
realizing no one was driving them. When they came to a stop, they continued to mill around for a few minutes, still kicking up some dust.

Aaron and Red Hawk had left the cattle near a broad exposure of bedrock. They led their horses across it and into a region of scattered hills and massive boulder fields. They followed a broken trail while being careful not to disturb anything.

After an hour of careful walking, they shifted to a more northeasterly route and mounted their horses. There had been no shooting sounds, and they should intersect the troopers’ trail before nightfall.

Another hour passed without any sign of pursuit. Hopefully, everything had gone as planned, but with Apaches, especially those led by Cochise, one never knew what might happen. They had a habit of surprising even the most experienced Indian fighter.

Meanwhile, Cochise and his men had reached the cattle. He was angry at being tricked and sent scouts searching back along their tracks to see where the soldiers had left them.

The day was almost gone when one of the scouts returned and reported that he had found where two men had left the cattle to head north. Cochise signaled his men to set up camp. They would go after them in the morning.

While the Apaches were settling into their camp, Aaron and Red Hawk found the main cattle trail and spotted tracks left by the troopers. They caught up to the men a short while after dark. The men were easy to find. They had started a campfire in an exposed position.

Aaron was uneasy approaching the camp. There was a lot of noise and activity for just three tired soldiers. He hesitated to ride in until he saw Corporal Bascomb talking to a civilian near the campfire.

After shouting a warning, Aaron and Red Hawk rode into the camp. The Corporal met them and said, “We came across these fellas when they were settin’ up their camp. They are from several ranches north of here. They got tired of being raided by Mexicans and Apaches. They decided to chase that bunch we ran into.”

“Did you tell them about Cochise and his war party? We bought some time, but they’ll probably be in this area before noon tomorrow.”

“Didn’t they follow you two and the cattle?”

“Yeah, but that’ll only sidetrack them for a while. Cochise probably picked up our trail before dark.”

While they were talking, the leader of the ranchers joined them. His name was Ben Preston. After Aaron explained the situation, Ben said, “I got fifteen men with me, and they’re all good with a gun. Most have even fought Apaches at one time or another and lived to tell about it.”

Aaron scratched an itch at the back of his neck before answering. He said, “If’n Id been an Apache, I’d be headin’ back to Cochise with most of your horses right about now. Camp security is poor, and the men on guard are looking in instead of out. Numbers don’t frighten Cochise, and he is smart.”

Preston was upset for an instant, but he settled down fast. “You are right,” he said. “How should we handle tomorrow?”

“Make a small fire, suitable for five men. Keep it going through the night. Before dawn, move your horses about a quarter-mile north of here. Leave one man to watch them and hide all
the others in the rocks at the camp’s north end. Make certain they are out of sight. I expect Cochise to show up sometime in the morning, but he does have a habit of messing up a person’s plans."

“What will you be doin’?”
“We will be the bait to bring him into the open.”
“Do you really think he will ride into this trap?”
“We’ll be sittin’ out in the open on a few logs.”
“Like sitting ducks.”
“That’s the general idea, except we’ll have rifle pits behind the logs.”

It was mid-morning when Cochise struck. He was tired of chasing this small group of soldiers and wanted to end it now. Cochise saw an excellent opportunity and rushed to take it. He sent ten braves in from the east and the same number from the west. They were all on horseback. The rest of his men, he led from the south, and they would be on foot.

Aaron felt uneasy as he waited out in the open. Red Hawk shared his unease while the three cavalrymen were tense and ready to bolt at the slightest hint of an attack. Aaron detected some movement on the southern edge of the camp. Still, before he could say anything, one of the troopers was hit in the back with an arrow. It was a long shot, and the penetration was shallow, but it thumped the man into Corporal Bascomb, knocking him off his seat and saving his life. A bullet from Cochise’s rifle passed through the spot where he had been sitting.

The others rolled off their logs into rifle pits and prepared to fight off the attackers. There were six or seven of them attacking from the south on foot. They were rushing the camp while firing rifles and arrows at the defenders. Cochise was in the lead and firing a repeating rifle.

As the men returned fire, the Apaches dropped to the ground, and horsemen rushed in from the east and west. As they swarmed toward the center of the camp, the men hunkered down into the holes they had dug, presenting almost no target at all.

The mounted Apaches were confused for a moment. Several dismounted to rush the defenders on foot while the rest milled about, trying to find targets.

Suddenly, the men hidden on the north border opened fire on the Apaches. They caught the Indians by complete surprise. The men had repeating rifles and pistols, which meant they could fire a lot of bullets in a short time. The sheer quantity of lead slugs flying at the Apaches caused several casualties. Wounded warriors rode away from the fight while others fell from their horses and died in the dirt. When he saw the ambush being sprung on his men, Cochise signaled a retreat.

By the time the Apaches cleared out, four lay dead on the ground. The wounded had either ridden off on their own or been helped by their friends.

Everyone remained in their positions for several minutes in case the Apaches came back. Aaron and Red Hawk were the first ones to come out into the open. They quickly trotted out of sight toward the south.

When they returned after about ten minutes, the men had all gathered in the center of the camp. One trooper was dead, and Corporal Bascomb had a flesh wound. Everyone else was uninjured and talking about the fight.
Aaron and Red Hawk joined the men and said, “Cochise and his men have pulled out and gone south. I suspect they’ll spend the day sorting out their wounded and deciding their next move.

“Should we follow them and finish this fight?” Preston asked.

“We are still outnumbered, and they’ll be the ones setting up any ambushes. Your rustlers are dead, and the cattle are scattered over a hundred square miles of sagebrush and desert. You all should head back to your ranches and let the army take care of Cochise.

“What do you say, Corporal? You are the ranking soldier here.” Preston said to Bascomb.

“I agree with Talbot. He and Red Hawk are my scouts, and they know the Apache and the way he thinks. Besides, as soon as we report back to Camp Grant, Colonel Prescott will be here with several companies of cavalry.”

Preston was still hesitant. He looked at his men and sighed. Then he shouted to them, “Let’s mount up. We’re heading home.”

Several of the men walked toward the dead Apaches.

“Where are y’all going?” Aaron asked.

“We be takin’ some souvenirs back with us,” one of the men replied.

“No, souvenirs,” Aaron said. “We’ll bury those Apaches beside Private Smith.”

“We ain’t buryin’ no damned Apaches,” the man said, signaling the other to head back to their horses. “Damn, scalps are greasy and too full of lice to take anyway.”

As the men slowly rode out of the camp, Preston said to Corporal Bascomb, “You comin’ with us or waitin’ here to be scalped?”

Bascomb looked back and forth, wanting to leave but hesitant to ride out without the scouts. The two troopers were already mounted after burying Private Smith.

“You all go on with this bunch,” Aaron told Bascomb. “We’ll follow along after burying these four Apaches.”

The posse was nearly out of sight as Bascomb mounted and led the two troopers after the men. They left a packhorse for Aaron and Red Hawk.

They laid the four bodies next to the fresh grave of Private Smith and started digging. The ground was sandy and full of loose rocks. It was hard digging and would take a while to complete all four graves.

As they dug, Red Hawk asked Aaron, “Why you want to bury these men? Many times you leave bodies for Coyotes and vultures.”

“If I kill a man who has done many bad things in his life, I will let him rot in the sun. These men were warriors and were killed in battle. I do not know if they did evil, and what I call evil is sometimes just their way of life or death. I will not judge these men, so I will treat them as a brave enemy who died in battle.”

The first hole was finished when Red Hawk sat his shovel off to the side and reached for the nearest body. Aaron started over to help him but stopped when Red Hawk dropped the body and reached for his rifle.

Turning, Aaron saw that Cochise had returned. There were at least twenty warriors scattered through the rocks and boulders behind him. Three men stood near the center of the camp. Cochise was the one in the middle.
Red Hawk held his fire. He knew he’d be cut down if he raised it to his shoulder. He would wait and see what happened. Cochise and the others were just standing and watching.

Aaron was startled and annoyed with himself that he had not heard anything while the Apaches were sneaking upon them. He was about to draw his pistol and start shooting when Cochise raised his right hand and stepped forward.

Aaron had only seen Cochise a few brief times during the fighting of the past few days. He was a tall man, almost six feet in height. His bronze skin, darkened by the Arizona sun, had a sheen to it and was only partially protected by his breechcloth and a frayed cotton shirt. He was not a heavy man, but his thinness was deceptive, as evidenced by whipcord muscles stretching the skin tightly over every inch of his body. Black, greasy hair was held in place by a leather band and hung loosely down to his shoulders. Finely chiseled features formed his face where a mixture of confidence and sadness could be seen in his eyes.

As Cochise approached Aaron, he held his Winchester rifle cradled in his left arm. He showed neither fear nor malice in his manner as he came nearer to the scout. His confidence was evident as he stopped just a few feet away.

“Why you honor our dead brothers?” he said, looking Aaron in the eyes.

Momentarily surprised at the precise English, Aaron took a few seconds to reply. “It seemed the right thing to do. Your warriors were our enemies but died as brave men and should not be left to feed the vultures.”

“You did not take scalps, and you stop others from doing that,” Cochise said, letting Aaron know that he had been under observation for a while. Then he continued, “Even the Tonkawa with you honors our brothers.”

“He is my friend and thinks as I do.”

“We not kill you today. You go in peace. If we meet in future battle, I promise you a quick death, no torture.”

As Aaron and Red Hawk stepped aside, the rest of the Apaches came into the clearing, and several of them prepared to remove the dead braves.

In just a few minutes, the place was empty, and the four dead men were gone. Cochise stood alone during this activity, and when it was over, he took a knife from its scabbard in his belt and handed it to Aaron.

“If you and your friend come into Chiricahua land without longknives, this knife show you honor us, and you not be harmed. It has my markings, and all will know it.”

Taking the knife, Aaron reached out with his right hand. Cochise gripped it in his own. Aaron said, “Thank you for this gift, Cochise. I will carry it with pride. If we meet in battle, I also promise you a quick death.”

Sticking the knife into his belt, Aaron mounted his horse and rode after Red Hawk. The packhorse was left standing by Cochise. Aaron figured it was a fair trade for the knife.

The ranchers and the troopers left a trail a blind man could follow. They would be able to catch up to them quickly and then reach Camp Grant sometime tomorrow.