The nine Comanche warriors were returning to their territory in West Texas after spending a week raiding in the Mescalero Apache territory of southern New Mexico. They were supposed to meet with another group of warriors from their village who were aiding a group of Comancheros riding up from Mexico. Then they would all return to Texas and do some trading.

Their leader, Black Scorpion, wanted to be a war chief and planned to trade two white women for a new Winchester rifle with much ammunition. He knew the Comancheros valued white women and would give valuable things for them. Then they would take these women back to Mexico and sell them as slaves for much of the yellow metal. The Comancheros were foolish to want this metal and be willing to give a good rifle for them. Black Scorpion smiled to himself as he had these thoughts. Perhaps he could even get two rifles for them.

When no one appeared at their meeting place, Black Scorpion and the others spent much of a day searching for them. A short while after noontime, they came across a destroyed wagon with the remains of four dead Comancheros scattered about the area. Searching the vicinity, they found the tracks of just two attackers. One rode an iron-shod horse while the other was on an Indian pony. Black Scorpion studied the imprints carefully and memorized every little detail. Once he was sure he could identify these tracks under any conditions, he led his warriors onto their trail.

The tracks were two days old and showed the two men were moving at a slow pace as if hunting for something. Perhaps they were searching for the other Comancheros.

Black Scorpion knew that all the Comancheros were not with the wagon when it was attacked. Two Moons, the Comanche scout, was not among the dead. Also, there was no sign of the other three warriors who were supposed to be with him by now.

It was near the end of the day when they came upon an abandoned campsite with five Apache graves near the western edge. Tracks showed that the two riders left with another man afoot. They were headed northeast.

Just before dark, they reached another abandoned campsite. This one showed the signs of a recent fight. There was a single grave, again belonging to an Apache, and several abandoned bodies. Two Moons was among the dead, and he had been scalped. The other three Comanche warriors were at the south edge of the clearing, also scalped. They studied the signs of the fight and saw that the two men they had been following were joined by two Apache men, one woman, and three children.

Black Scorpion decided to spend the night at the site. They would follow the tracks at sunrise and kill them all. He would leave the two white women here at the camp with Broken Tree. They would only slow them down but were still valuable. He would have to find other Comancheros to buy them.

As darkness settled in, the men sat around a small fire. At the same time, the two women, Priscilla Prescott, and her daughter, Ruth, huddled together far away from the warmth of the fire.

“Oh, mother, what is going to happen to us? I have heard terrible stories about the Indians and what they do to white women,” Ruth said.
“I am certain your father is searching for us by now. We were supposed to be in Albuquerque two days ago. When the stage did not arrive, he would have sent soldiers out looking for us,” Priscilla responded.

“Do you think the army would let him send soldiers away from the Albuquerque garrison?”

“He is in command of the garrison. I believe he can do as he pleases.”

“Until some general tells him otherwise.”

Before Priscilla could continue, Black Scorpion walked over to them and lifted Priscilla by the hair, saying, “Old woman worth maybe one horse and an old musket. Young woman worth many rifles and bullets. You talk more, and I give you to my braves.”

He threw her down and walked away. The two women huddled together more tightly and tried to act unafraid. They were not particularly good at it.

The next morning, the Comanches buried their dead companions while letting the Comanchero bodies lay for the vultures. The sun was just peeking above the horizon as Black Scorpion led seven of his men out of the camp. They were following the tracks of their prey.

Broken Tree remained behind to watch the women.

He was a big man whose face was severely deformed on the left side. He had taken part in a raid on an Apache village and fought with one of the warriors defending it. The Apache had shattered his left cheek and broken his eye socket with a terrific smash from a war club. Before he could make the killing strike, one of the other Comanches killed him with an arrow into the chest.

Broken Tree seldom talked and was hard to understand when he did. None of the village women would even look at him and turned away when he came by. When Black Scorpion said he must remain with these white women, he was not upset. He wanted to avenge the dead men they found here, but he also wanted the young white woman. While Black Scorpion was gone, he would have her. He would not damage her. That would lower her value and make Black Scorpion terribly angry.

Twenty miles to the west, Aaron Talbot and Red Hawk were leading their horses while talking to Yellow Quill, the leader of a small family group of Mescalero Apaches. Aaron had recently served a brief time as a Texas Ranger along with Red Hawk, a Ranger scout. They had met each other and became friends while hunting buffalo together in central Texas.

Aaron had fought for the Confederacy in the recent war. He had come west after discovering his wife and children had been killed by Confederate deserters. Red Hawk was a Tonkawa warrior who had also lost his family. They had been killed by raiding Comanches two years earlier.

Yellow Quill pointed north toward two gaps in a distant mountain range and said, “The opening toward the setting sun goes to Albuquerque, the other goes to my people. We take separate trails before the sun gets high in the sky.”

Aaron still carried his Texas Ranger badge, but circumstances had made it into a worthless chunk of shiny metal. He took it from his pocket and handed it to Yellow Quill, saying, “Someday you might find a use for this badge. I no longer need it.”

Red Hawk stood impassively beside Aaron, holding his rifle across his chest. He nodded at Yellow Quill and said, “Maybe one day we meet again. Until then, go in peace.”
The two men mounted, and Aaron said, “We’ll scout ahead a bit to where the trail forks off to the north.”

They rode for almost two hours and did not see anything along the trail except a wide assortment of cacti and a few horned lizards. When they reached the fork in the track that Yellow Quill had described, they dismounted and filled their canteens from a spring he had mentioned.

As they waited, Aaron said, “I got a bad feelin’ that somethin’ is gonna happen along our back trail. Maybe we should backtrack a bit.”

“I think not,” Red Hawk said, pointing toward the west.

A distant dust cloud had become visible, and it was approaching their position.

“Many white men come,” Red Hawk said.

Aaron just shook his head and said, “Apache and Comanche move without making any dust. Even the white men around here know better than to be so visible. It must be Yankee cavalry.”

“They an hour away,” Red Hawk said. “It takes many men to make so much dust.”

“We’ll just wait here and see what they want,” Aaron replied.

Red Hawk grunted his agreement and found a patch of shade where he could sit and wait in some comfort.

A half-hour passed before Aaron could barely make out some shadowy shapes at the base of the dust cloud. He was about to comment to Red Hawk when he heard two shots off to the east.

Without a word, both men quickly mounted and rode toward the distant shots. As they got closer to the area where they had been fired, the men heard another single gunshot followed by indistinct shouting and high-pitched war cries.

They had been riding more cautiously as they approached the area where the sounds had originated. They wanted to avoid throwing up any dust as well as running into an ambush. Now they urged their horses into a fast gallop and raced to the scene of the fighting.

Several Comanche warriors were dispersed among some boulders and intent upon reaching the top of a hill projected above them. Some movement near the top of the hill indicated where their quarry was hidden.

Red Hawk and Aaron dismounted and moved to catch the Comanches in a crossfire.

They were almost positioned when the Comanches jumped from cover and rushed the small hill.

Red Moon, Yellow Quill’s one-armed brother, stood and fired a shot from an old musket, knocking down the nearest Comanche. The others were almost upon him when his wife came out of hiding. She plunged a knife into the back of another attacker.

Before the others reached Red Moon, Aaron and Red Hawk opened fire with the repeating rifles, killing one Comanche and scattering the rest. The Comanches quickly disappeared, and things became noticeably quiet.

As Aaron and Red Hawk began to move toward Red Moon’s location, they saw a small dust cloud moving off toward the west. The Comanches appeared to be leaving.

Red Moon came out into the open with his wife and three children. Aaron waved to them and wondered where Yellow Quill was waiting.
He found him lying behind a large boulder where he had bled to death from a hole in his chest. A dead Comanche was curled into a fetal position beside him with a knife buried in his stomach. Yellow Quill must have still been alive when a Comanche decided to take his scalp.

Red Hawk and the others arrived at the same time. He helped Aaron carry Yellow Quill to a suitable location where he was buried with three Comanche scalps.

Red Moon now had three ponies and two single-shot rifles from the dead Comanches. He would be able to mount everyone for the journey back to their people. His wife and oldest son would carry the rifles.

After a sorrowful night together, reliving the feats of Yellow Quill, Red Moon and his family continued their journey home.

As the family rode out of sight, a column of cavalry came into view from the west. Three Mescalero scouts arrived ahead of the column. Two of them spoke to Red Hawk while the other rode back to the soldiers.

Aaron and the others waited for the soldiers in a clearing away from the boulders and Yellow Quill’s grave.

In a short while, the column entered the clearing. There were about thirty troopers led by three officers, one of which was a colonel. The men looked exhausted, even though it was early in the morning. Their horses did not look much better.

The Colonel dismounted and approached Aaron. “My scouts tell me you had a fight with a party of Comanches. I believe them to be the ones we are after. They have been raiding throughout this region. Several days ago, they attacked a west-bound coach, killing everyone on board and taking my wife and daughter as prisoners.”

“And who might you all be colonel,” Aaron asked.

“Colonel John Prescott. I command the garrison at Albuquerque, and I intend to catch those savages.”

Aaron scratched at an itch on the back of his neck before answering. “So does that mean you are lookin’ for revenge, Colonel?”

“No, it does not, Mister, uh?”

“Aaron Talbot, sir, formerly Lieutenant in the Army of Tennessee.”

“Well, Mister Talbot, my wife and daughter were taken alive. I am led to believe the Comanche will trade them to Comancheros for rifles. I plan to get them back.”

“I am sorry, Colonel, but a blind man could see y’all comin’ from miles away.”

Colonel Prescott cleared his throat before continuing in an agitated manner, “I thought a show of force would frighten these Comanches into surrendering without a fight.”

“You all must be new to Indian fighting. When Indians see they can’t win, they just up and disappear. If prisoners slow them down, they kill them.”

“What do you suggest?”

“A small group could travel ahead of your main column. Any hostiles would be watchin’ them while the smaller bunch sneaks up on them. There aren’t many of them left, and they won’t be itchin’ for a fight.”

“You and your Indian friend are now hired as United States Army Scouts. I will pick three troopers and two of the Mescalero scouts to go with us. The other scout will guide the column under Captain Rogers along our trail.”
Aaron stood quietly, staring off into the distance for a moment before replying. “I never thought I’d be helping the Yankee army, but I know of quite a few former Confederate soldiers who serve here in the west.”

Then he went on, “We’ll move out in an hour. I think I know where these Comanche have their camp.”

As they rode out ahead of the column, Aaron felt better about working with the army. The three men riding with the Colonel had served in a Texas cavalry regiment during the war. Aaron figured the Comanche war party must have followed Yellow Quill’s trail from his camp. They would have left the prisoners there under guard and were probably returning to it.

The four surviving warriors, one of which was Black Scorpion, were moving at a slow pace. One was wounded, and the group was concealing any evidence of their passage. They were disappointed, and Black Scorpion’s leadership was close to being questioned.

Aaron and Red Hawk led the small party out of their camp, following the Comanche trail for a short distance. When Aaron was confident as to their destination, they were able to travel faster. They might even arrive ahead of the slow-moving warriors.

Earlier that morning, as Black Scorpion led seven warriors away from their camp, Broken Tree sat staring at the two white women. Priscilla sensed that something terrible was about to happen. She decided that whatever it was, she would defend her daughter.

Broken Tree did not move for almost an hour after Black Scorpion left with his men. Priscilla kept watching him out of the corner of her eye. Gradually a crooked smile formed upon his disfigured face, and finally, he stood. He was a big man and utterly naked except for a filthy breechcloth.

He approached the women with a knife in his right hand. Priscilla stood and made to step between him and her daughter. He slapped her with the back of his hand and knocked her down.

He hardly gave her a glance as he stood over Ruth. He reached down to grab her by the hair when he felt a sudden sharp pain in his side. He looked at the source and saw Priscilla with a long needle. She was pushing it into his side for a second time.

As the pin skewered his kidney for the second time, the pain was excruciating but not disabling. He twisted to the side and plunged his knife into Priscilla’s neck. As he pulled it back for a second stab, a severe pain erupted in his right foot, and he tumbled to the ground. Before he could recover, Ruth smashed his head with the large rock she had used to fracture his foot. She repeatedly hit him with the rock until his features were completely deformed.

Catching her breath, Ruth muttered, “You should have checked our bonds before you got so careless.”

Dropping the rock onto what remained of his head, Ruth knelt by her mother. She wanted to help her, but it was too late. She was gone. Her grief was almost more than she could bear. She thought about carving Broken Tree into little pieces with his own knife but knew she had to get away before the others returned.

Her mother had saved her life at the cost of her own. She could not even take the time to bury her. She said a short prayer and took Broken Tree’s knife and tomahawk. She threw his bow and arrows onto the coals of last night’s fire to destroy them and walked over to his pony. It was nervous, but she calmed it with her gentle voice. She was soon mounted and headed toward the southwest.
Ruth planned on riding toward the southwest for an hour or two before turning west. She had a good idea of the road to Albuquerque and planned to go in that direction. Hopefully, she would swing south of the route being taken by the Comanches who took her and her mother. Having spent some time in the driver’s seat of the coach talking to the driver about the country and Albuquerque would pay off.

It would take her several days of travel if she could even find the landmarks he had described to her. She hoped the waterskin she had taken from Broken Tree would last for the whole journey. The driver had never mentioned any waterholes since the stage had a full barrel of water for their trip. Travelers had to be self-sufficient since the stage company had not built any waystations along the route.

It was near dark when Aaron and Red Hawk led their group into the Comanche camp. They had arrived a short time after the Comanches. The men rushed into the clearing, ready to fight, but it was empty. There was just a fresh grave and the mutilated body of Pricilla Prescott.

While the Colonel and his men buried his wife’s body, Aaron, Red Hawk, and the two Mescalero scouts explored the area in and around the camp. They soon determined what had happened and where everyone had gone.

With darkness settling in, Red Hawk started a small cooking fire, and the men gathered around it. The Colonel posted a guard before joining Aaron off to the side of the clearing. Before he could ask any questions, Aaron said, “From the signs in and around the camp, it appears that your daughter rode off to the southwest on an Indian pony. Your wife must have been killed in a struggle with the guard who had stayed behind to watch them. We dug him up and found small punctures in his side. One still had a hatpin stuck in it.”

“My daughter escaped?”

“It looks that way. The Comanches we fought earlier were here a short time before us. They followed her tracks out of here. She had a good head start, and it will take them some time to catch her.”

“We have to go after her.”

“Not until sunup. We would just fumble around in the dark and lose any trail we tried to follow. The Comanches won’t be following her in the dark for the same reason.”

“Very well. We will go after the Comanches at sunup since they will lead us to her,” the Colonel said as he turned to join the men at the fire.

The night quickly passed, and the men were ready to go at first light. The troopers were anxious to find the Colonel’s daughter while the scouts wanted to take Comanche scalps.

The men moved out right after a cold breakfast. The two Mescalero scouts rode ahead with Aaron and Red Hawk while the others followed about a half-mile behind them. The trail was easy to follow since the Comanches were in a hurry and did not believe they were being followed.

It appeared as if the Comanches had pushed on into the night. They must have figured a frightened woman would be easy to catch.

Aaron waited for the others at a point where Ruth’s tracks diverged from those of the Comanches. They must have assumed she was fleeing in a southerly direction and stopped looking for signs of her passage in the dark. By changing to a more westerly path, she temporarily threw them off the scent.
When the Colonel came up to Aaron, he decided to stay on Ruth’s trail. They turned away from the Comanche tracks and rode toward the west, along the route followed by his daughter. The other scouts had been watching for any signs of the Comanches in case they were backtracking. They did not want any surprises.

As they followed the new track, Red Hawk and one of the Mescalero’s followed the group, watching for any sign of the Comanches. They had traveled about ten miles when they came across the body of Ruth’s pony. It had broken its leg, and been killed with a knife.

As the men stood by the dead animal, Aaron mentioned to the Colonel, “Your daughter did right by the animal, but she should not have been riding in the darkness. She won’t be far from here. Let’s set up a short camp here. The scouts will find her while the rest of you watch for the Comanches. They will be coming along and looking for trouble. They know we are after her and will be following our tracks.”

Her trail was more difficult to follow while she was afoot. She traveled over rocky outcrops and used branches to wipe out her tracks in the sandy stretches. Eventually, she was becoming exhausted and careless, making her easier to follow.

It was just past noon when they caught up to her. She was sitting in the shade of a large boulder and nodding off to sleep. Red Hawk was leading and came across her first.

His movement disturbed her enough to cause her to stand and scream while rushing at him with a tomahawk. Red Hawk caught her wrist, and she dropped it.

Before she could take any additional action, Aaron caught up to them and shouted, “Ruth Prescott, we are friends. Your father is with us.”

Fearing some sort of a trick, Ruth pressed tightly against the boulder at her back. She held a knife, ready to defend herself.

“Why should I believe you,” she asked while waving the knife from side to side.

Pointing at Red Hawk, Aaron said, “Because y’all can see we ain’t Comanche.”

Before she could respond, gunfire erupted along their backtrail.

“Comanches must have doubled back and attacked the camp,” Aaron shouted to Red Hawk.

The two Mescalero Apaches stepped out from where they had been hiding and joined Red Hawk. The three of them exchanged a few words, and the Apaches left at a fast trot. Red Hawk waited just a moment before Aaron signaled him to go with the others.

Ruth took a few hesitant steps with the knife lowered and held by her side. Aaron reached out his hand to help her. “I know you are exhausted, but we have to hurry to rejoin your father and the others. There were four Comanches following you, and they may have been joined by others.”

The shooting was getting louder, and the other scouts were well out of sight when an arrow hit Aaron in the back, grazing a rib and sticking just under the flesh on his left side. The shock of the arrow’s impact caused Aaron to drop his rifle and spin to his right. As he did, he drew his .44 Colt Army Pistol with his right hand. Aaron saw a Comanche warrior fixing a second arrow onto his bowstring. Without any hesitation, he fired a snapshot, blowing the man off his feet with a hole in his chest.
Facing the dying Comanche, he missed Black Scorpion attacking from behind a large boulder to his left. He did catch Ruth’s eyes widening in surprise and her mouth open to say something when a slight scuffling sound caused him to duck.

Black Scorpion’s warclub made a slight whistling sound as it was swung over Aaron’s head. If he hadn’t ducked, it would have crushed his skull. Unfortunately, by dipping, Aaron lost his balance and fell to the ground. He landed on his face and stomach.

Black Scorpion cursed his bad luck as he was also overbalanced from the hard swing of the club. He had to catch his balance to resume his attack. As he regained his advantage, Black Scorpion smiled when he saw Aaron trying to get back up, but with some difficulty. He could finish him with his club, but that would be too fast. He wanted some pleasure from this kill.

He knocked Aaron onto his back by hitting him on the side with the club. Since it was his wounded side, the pain caused him to nearly lose consciousness. For a moment, he was unable to defend himself. Black Scorpion kneeled beside him and pulled him up by his hair. He had his knife out and prepared to take his scalp. Then he would watch him die. The blade was coated with scorpion venom. The poison would get into Aaron’s blood, and he would die a painful death.

With a loud whoop, Black Scorpion swung his knife toward Aaron’s head. Before he cut into the skin, his whoop changed into a gurgling sound as Ruth buried her tomahawk into the side of his neck. The tomahawk was stuck in his neck vertebrae after severing his windpipe and carotid artery, killing him instantly.

The shooting had stopped, and Red Hawk came running back to where Aaron lay next to Ruth. He was conscious and said, “About time y’all got back here. Dig this arrow out of me, and let’s go see the Colonel.”

Red Hawk looked around and said, “Two longknives dead. Two Comanche attack the camp and die. Their ambush no work, and all are dead.”

“How about the colonel?”

“He waits at camp. We take the arrow out there.”

Aaron shakily got to his feet and said, “Let’s get goin’ then. I got aches on top of my aches, but that arrow bothers me the most.”

“You want I bring you these two scalps?”

Pointing to Black Scorpion, Aaron said, “That one belongs to Miss Prescott. The other one is mine. I don’t think she’d mind you keeping hers, and you can have mine as well.”

As Red Hawk took the scalps, Ruth helped Aaron reach the campsite. Ruth and her father had a lot to talk about. Aaron settled in until Red Hawk came in and proceeded to do some doctoring.

The next morning the column arrived. Aaron was patched up and able to ride. Ruth was rested and made quite a sight in her army breeches with a tomahawk stuck in her belt. The tomahawk had a lock of braided hair from Black Scorpion’s scalp.

Aaron and Red Hawk decided to stay on as army scouts. They both figured they might as well since Albuquerque was their next stop anyway, and Ruth would probably make it an exciting place to be.