

Raquel Todd
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Eagle and River

My mother chose my name carefully. She said Awohali means eagle, a bird meant to watch over others and lead when the time is right. Rivers, she told me, was a reminder that responsibility is about giving life and support, the way water does for the land around it. She believed that one day I would be expected to lead and to care for others, even when it was difficult. When I was younger, I didn't think much about it. Now that I am eighteen, I understand why she worried so much about the name she gave me.

It is the year 1883, and I live near Tahlequah in the Cherokee Nation, in Indian Territory. This land was set aside for my people after forced removal decades earlier, and my parents were told it would belong to us forever. The red dirt stains your shoes, and the fields have been worked by Cherokee families for generations. For most of my life, this place has felt permanent. Lately, it does not.

Although the Civil War ended years ago, its effects still shape our lives. During Reconstruction, the United States government rewrote treaties with Native nations, including the Cherokee, often without our consent. These treaties placed our government under increased federal control. Officials now visit more often, claiming to protect order and law. Some mornings, I wake up to the sound of horses before I hear my mother's voice, and I know the government men are coming. My father grows quiet and puts on his jacket, then tells me to stay close.

The officials arrive with folded papers and polite voices. They speak English quickly and confidently, using legal words that are meant to sound final. My father understands some of what they say, but not all. Because I am learning English, he looks to me to help read and explain

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documents. I hate those moments. The papers talk about land boundaries, regulations, and agreements made before I was born and changed after I was born. They always say everything is legal. I can tell by the way the men watch my face that they hope I will not question what I am reading, and I do not, at least not out loud.

After they leave, my father stands outside for a long time, staring at the ground. He tells me the law is supposed to protect people, but it is becoming clear that the law often protects those who write it. During Reconstruction, Native nations were excluded for many of the rights promised to other Americans. Even though we have our constitution and government, federal officials now oversee our decisions, especially when it comes to land.

At night, my mother teaches my younger siblings Cherokee words by the fire. She keeps her voice low, not because anyone is listening, but fear has become a habit. She tells stories about a time when Cherokee words were spoken freely and without punishment. I try to remember everything she says because I know language is one of the first things taken when a people are controlled.

Americans say this is a time of rebuilding and progress. They call it Reconstruction, and they speak as if the war fixed the nation. For us, it feels like the war only reached later. New rules keep coming, along with new expectations. Education is offered, but with it comes conditions. Boys are expected to cut their hair, abandon Cherokee customs, and accept American ways are superior. Cherokee traditions are treated as obstacles to civilization. I want to learn, especially English, because I know understanding the law is necessary for survival, but I do not believe education should require erasing who we are.

People outside our Nation often look at me as if I am unfinished, as if I must be reshaped to be acceptable. They expect obedience without explanation and respect without return. Being

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young does not protect me from the pressures; it only means I am expected to adapt faster. Some days, the weight of responsibility sits heavy in my chest, and other days I remember my name. Eagles observe before they act, and rivers continue forward even when the path is narrowed.

I cannot stop the government or change the laws that control our lives, but I am not powerless. I watch, I learn, and I remember. I help my father understand the papers that threaten our land, and I listen to my mother as she preserves our language and history. If I have an American dream, it is not of wealth or power but of remaining. During Reconstruction, survival itself has become a form of resistance for Native people. I believe the world should be governed by fair laws that honor their promises, and that land should belong to those who care for it, not those who claim it through paperwork alone.

My mother named me for leadership and responsibility. Some days, that feels like more than one person should have to carry. Still, like the eagle above and the river below, I remain. I watch carefully, I carry what matters, and I move forward in a world that keeps trying to push my people aside.