

THE VISION SONGS, UNFINISHED:

A Tale of the Greasy Grass

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Author's Note

The fight at the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, is remembered in popular imagination as Lakota and Cheyenne against Custer's 7th Cavalry. History has dwelled on the logistics of the battle—the angles of approach, the distances measured, the volleys fired—and on the gruesome deaths of soldiers whose names fill the record. It has preserved the words of Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Gall, and many of Custer's soldiers and scouts. But in truth, the field was more crowded, the grief more tangled.

The camp at the river the Lakota called the Greasy Grass was vast, a gathering of many nations who had their own rivalries and long histories of conflict. Among those riding with the 7th Cavalry were Crow and Arikara scouts — men who had also lost kin to raids, horse takings, and killings at the hands of some of the very tribes gathered in that valley. For them, the battle was not fought in service to the soldiers alone, but in defense of their own people's survival. They carried long memories of wrongs and displacement. Each nation brought its history to the Greasy Grass that day, and each left with wounds that would never fully heal.

At the Little Bighorn, many died. Not only soldiers, chiefs, and famous warriors, but the very young, the very old, and anonymous ones whose names have all disappeared into the dust.

This short tale follows four Lakota boys — Red Hawk, Charging Elk, Swift Dog, and Little Rain — and a young Arapaho, Little Bear Robe, whose family camped with their Cheyenne allies. His presence in their company reflects the reality of that summer: in the great village, bonds of kinship and alliance often carried boys across tribal lines. Such moments of play and hunting were as much a part of the encampment as the battle that followed.

Their names will not be found in any oral tradition, scout's testimony, or officer's diary. Yet the truth they carry is real. By shaping their voices into story, I hope to give presence to those who remain faceless in the written record, yet whose laughter, courage, and loss belonged to that day as surely as the names history remembers.

The boys in this tale are imagined, but the Crow and Arikara scouts in this story, who rode with Custer, were real. Their names and losses remain part of the record, and their voices remind us that the tragedy of the Greasy Grass was complex.

This story does not belong to one side or the other, but to the many. To the boys who did not return. To the scouts whose tribal grievances were old and bitter. To the warriors who desperately defended their families, lands, and way of life. To the mothers whose cries joined in the night. To the soldiers in the civilizational flood that kept pressing west.

What *The Vision Song, Unfinished* attempts to achieve is to stand among traditions, to remind us that the record is incomplete. The imagined Lakota boys embody those whose names were never written but whose lives mattered. The inclusion of Crow and Arikara alongside the Cheyenne and the Arapaho, honors those whose testimonies survive but whose voices are too often lost beneath the shadow of Custer and his officers. By holding imagination and history together, this story is neither myth nor strict chronicle, but something more human: a meditation on grief, courage, and survival.

The value of such fiction is not that it solves the debate over tactics or outcomes, but that it restores the sense that history is lived by people — young and old, victors and vanquished, remembered and forgotten. If readers come away with some sense of the shared human weight of this tragedy across nations and generations, then this story will have given voice to the unfinished legacy of the Greasy Grass.

Montana Territory, — June 25, 1876

The great encampment stretched for nearly three miles along the Greasy Grass, hundreds of lodges clustered by river bends and cottonwoods, horses grazing on the uplands. It was no single village but a gathering of nations: Oglala, Hunkpapa, Miniconjou, Brulé, Sans Arc, and Blackfoot bands of the Lakota, together with Cheyenne and Arapaho allies. It was the height of summer strength—buffalo hides stretched in the sun, children darting between lodges, the smell of meat fires drifting on the wind. The people moved as one camp, many nations joined.

The village still lay folded in sleep, the lodges black humps against the faint glimmer of stars. Long before dawn, four Hunkpapa Lakota boys rode out as hunters. There was talk of a deer herd in the southern pine breaks, and each boy carried the quiet expectation of meat. Riding light, they turned their ponies south, following the ridgelines that shadowed the river's western bank. The river ran dark below them, its bends hidden in mist, only the soft murmur of water marking its course. They rode steadily, climbing where the land lifted, dipping where coulees cut toward the valley, keeping to the higher ground as hunters always did. By the time the east began to pale, they were deep among the broken ridges, the Wolf Mountains rising ahead, their outlines etched against the first thin light.

With them rode a boy from the small Arapaho band camped with the Cheyenne. His name was Little Bear Robe. He had joined the Lakota boys that morning not by chance but by courtesy: his father, a respected warrior, had been invited to let the boy ride with them. In a great village, allies showed kinship in many ways — in the sharing of meat, in the lending of horses, and sometimes in letting their sons prove themselves in the company of friends.

At the bottom of a narrow draw, they found water running cold over the stones, and there they reined in, the sound of the brook loud in the hush of first light. They let their ponies drink, the animals blowing softly, sides damp from the morning ride.

Red Hawk, sixteen and the eldest, knelt to cup water in his hands, then sat back in the grass. The others settled beside him, their voices low, as if the cottonwoods might carry their words away.

“It is larger than my father ever spoke of,” Swift Dog said, shaking his head. “So many *tipis*, so many fires.”

Charging Elk plucked a blade of grass, held it between his fingers. “They say no greater camp has ever been made.”

Little Rain leaned on his rifle, eyes fixed on the moving water. “Like the buffalo herds. You cannot find the end.”

Red Hawk nodded toward the uplands, where dust hung faint in the early light. “And the ponies — more than the stars.”

Swift Dog grinned, kicked at the stream with his moccasin. “If we played *shinny* there, the ball would be lost for a whole day among the lodges.”

Red Hawk shoved him. “Always games with you. Better to strike the hoop with a spear. My throw does not miss.”

Swift Dog laughed. “That is not truth. Last moon you missed twice before you hit once!”

Charging Elk lifted his eyes, a faint smile at the corner of his mouth. “Better to miss the hoop than the enemy’s horse.”

Little Rain shifted the rifle across his knees. “And when you miss, the Crazy Dogs will laugh at you, too. When I am counted among the Kit Foxes, you will still be chasing rabbits.”

For a heartbeat the others stilled, the boast hanging in the morning air. It was rare to hear such certainty from Little Rain, whose words were usually few. In his tone was not just jest, but a hunger to prove himself, to step beyond boyhood faster than the rest.

Swift Dog stretched out on the grass, eyes bright with mischief. He began to hum a teasing tune, the kind sung in camp when hoop games were played. His voice rose into a chant:

*“Swift Dog’s throw goes wide,
even the children laugh!”*

The others barked with laughter, and Charging Elk added a verse of his own:

*“Red Hawk’s pony stumbles,
and the deer all run away!”*

Little Rain shook his head and sang a line in mock solemnity:

*“Better hunters than you
sit by the fire with the women!”*

At that, Little Bear Robe finally spoke, his voice soft but clear. “In my father’s camp, our Fox men say you Lakota chase horses as if they want to be caught. But an Arapaho rides until the horse gives up. No one laughs then.”

The Lakota boys erupted with laughter, and Swift Dog pointed at him. “Even the Arapaho boasts!”

But there was no edge to it — only the warmth of teasing among companions.

The stream carried their voices down its bends, soft and fleeting. Then the laughter faded, and Red Hawk grew quiet. He looked toward the east where the light was sharpening over the Wolf Mountains. Almost under his breath, he hummed a different kind of song — a low, steady note, one he had heard in his dreams, half-childish yet already shaping into a vision song. The others fell silent. They listened for a moment, and the sound of water over stone seemed to answer it.

The ponies shook their manes. Each boy grew quiet. They thought of hunts yet to come, of horses yet to be taken, of names yet to be spoken beside a fire. They thought, too, of the great warrior societies whose songs they had heard since childhood—the Strong Hearts, the Kit Foxes—men who carried the honor of the people and whose deeds were remembered in camp. Someday their own coup sticks might be counted, their own stories retold as the drums pounded through the night. Between boyhood and that hope lay battles not yet fought, wounds not yet borne, and the long path toward a name that would outlast them.

Red Hawk stood first. “Enough dreaming. The deer won’t wait for us.”

With a tug on his reins, he set his pony forward, and the others, stirred from their thoughts, swung easily into the rhythm of the ride.

They rode on, climbing back toward the long ridges. Under a grove of pines, they came upon a narrow trail pressed into the grass, the earth chipped with fresh prints. Red Hawk slid from his pony and knelt, brushing his fingers over the sharp imprint of a hoof. The others leaned close, the damp scent of the trail rising from the soil. Swift Dog grinned, pointing toward the coulee where the tracks disappeared. They listened in silence for a rustle, the faint crack of a branch. Then, with no sound but the river below, they followed the ridge south.

Suddenly, Charging Elk raised his hand and halted them.

A faint glint of movement. A reflection.

Red Hawk leaned forward. "What do you see?"

Charging Elk squinted toward a high ridge to the southeast. "Not sure."

They waited in stillness. The wind quieted. A hawk wheeled above them.

Then—another flicker. A flash on the ridge.

Little Rain spoke at last. "Sun off stone? Or bone?"

Red Hawk frowned. "Or glass?" He saw only dust and shimmer. The ridge was far away.

One by one, the others caught his glance. Charging Elk straightened his back, bow still resting loosely in hand. Swift Dog's grin faltered. Little Rain shifted the old rifle across his lap. For a heartbeat, they held each other's eyes in silence, the unspoken weight of the glint passing between them.

Then Red Hawk clicked his tongue, turned his pony downslope, and the others followed. They kept their ponies to the grass, hooves soft on the slope. Hunters did not waste breath or stir dust.

Their eyes were sharp now, their ears open to every stir of wind. The joking was finished.

High on a far ridge that the soldiers called the Crow's Nest, a rough knob of sandstone and shale rose above the broken country. Shadows crouched among the rocks—one in blue, sweating beneath

wool and leather. Others wore braids and feathers, Crow and Arikara scouts, their faces still, eyes sharper than the field glass the officer carried.

White Man Runs Him squinted long into the haze, the glass heavy in his hands. "I see a big camp," he said at last. "Many lodges. Ponies like worms in the grass." His voice was low, steady, but the others knew what he carried inside. The Lakota had raided Crow country for a generation, driving families from the Powder River, stealing horses, killing kin. His own uncle had fallen on such a raid years before, his body left in the coulees, his horses gone to Lakota hands. The sight below was not just a report for soldiers; it was the measure of enemies who had pressed hard against his people's survival.

Mitch Bouyer took the field glass, steady in his hands. He was a mixed-blood interpreter and scout, half French and half Yankton Sioux, married into the Crow tribe. Trusted by both the Crows and the Army, Mitch was invaluable to Custer because he spoke Lakota, Crow, and English, and could read the land as well as the scouts themselves.

He studied a long moment. "He is right, Lieutenant. There's a big village down there."

Lieutenant Varnum, Custer's chief of scouts, squinted into the haze, but saw only the shimmer of distance. He let the glass fall. "I can't make it out. But if you men see it, that's enough for me."

Moments later, White Man Runs Him pointed to the northwest. "Indians along the ridgeline."

Mitch Bouyer looked through the glass and nodded in agreement.

Lieutenant Varnum tried to find them with his own glass. "How many?"

"Four, maybe five?" Bouyer wiped sweat from his brow.

Varnum said nothing. The riders had stopped, yes. But then they had moved on. Not fast. Not vanishing the way true lookouts would.

Beside him, the Arikara scout, Bloody Knife, spat into the dust. His thoughts were also sharp. The Arikara scouts viewed the huge village with mingled dread and bitterness. For the Arikara, whose

earth-lodge villages had felt Lakota and Cheyenne raids for decades, the Greasy Grass was another turn in a much older war.

As Varnum, Bouyer, and the scouts conferred on the hillside, far to the northwest in the folds of the broken ground, Charging Elk had loosed his arrow and dropped a deer at the edge of a draw. The animal had taken two staggering steps before falling into the grass. The boys were on it at once, swift and practiced. Red Hawk slit the throat to let the blood run clean, while Swift Dog steadied the haunch. Little Rain laid his rifle aside and helped roll the body to its back. With a quick stroke, Red Hawk opened the belly, steam rising in the cool dawn, the sharp scent of iron filling the air.

They pulled the entrails free and set them aside for the coyotes. Before the sun broke the ridge, they had the carcass quartered, the meat bound in the hide for carrying home. Yet Charging Elk's thoughts flickered back to the ridge where the light had flashed—stone, bone, or something else. He spoke quietly and laughed a little, but the glint lingered in his mind. The hunt was successful—yet their caution was sharper now.

At the Crow's Nest Varnum gave the ridge one last look. "They might not have been scouts", he thought. "But they have probably seen us. Hesitation could be delay. Delay could be disaster."

He turned to the men. "We must inform the general. Who rides with me?"

Bouyer replied first. "I'll go. Best he hears it from more than one voice."

White Man Runs Him, and two others nodded, already rising.

They moved quickly down the slope to the hollow behind the Crow's Nest where the horses were tethered, reins looped over brush. Varnum pulled himself into the saddle, Bouyer mounting beside him, the scouts close behind. Together they turned their horses downslope, carrying the urgent word back toward Custer's bivouac.

By mid-morning the haze lay heavy over the valley, the sun already bright on the ridges. General Custer stood at the Crow's Nest. He raised his field glass, frowned, and lowered it. "I have as good eyes as any man here, and I see no village."

White Man Runs Him pointed into the haze. “There is a camp. Many lodges. The pony herds — they look like worms in the grass.”

Bouyer nodded. “The scouts are right, general. It is there. A very large village.”

Varnum shifted uneasily. “I didn’t see it clearly, General. But I believe them.”

For a long moment the wind carried only the sound of grass hissing over stone. Then White Man Runs Him spoke again, his voice low. “General, there are more Indians down there than you can handle.”

Custer’s head snapped around. His smile was thin. “I think we can handle them.” He looked back down the valley.

Half Yellow Face, older and broader of frame, his braids streaked with gray looked at Custer in silence. Among the Crow scouts, he carried the greatest weight, a leader in both years and renown. He did not need the glass. His eyes followed the dust rising far off, the pony herds scattered along the river bends, and the faint lines of smoke that drifted upward like threads. Later he would give Custer his warning in words that would echo like prophecy. For now, his silence and the set of his jaw was its own kind of judgment.

The scouts exchanged glances. They had given their warning. Whether it was heard or not was no longer theirs to decide.

Custer turned his glass one last time toward the haze but said nothing more. By midmorning, the regiment was moving west across the divide, the sound of iron shoes on stone carrying into the coulees. Dust lifted behind the column as they dropped into the head of Ash Creek. Custer believed the command had been sighted and that the village would scatter. There would be no delay.

At the forks of the creek, Custer called his officers forward. Maps were scarce, but the lay of the land was plain enough. He divided the regiment: Major Reno would take three companies and press the trail directly into the valley; Captain Benteen, with three more, would angle off to the left, sweeping the broken bluffs and ridges to guard against a scattering of the hostiles; the pack train,

slow with its mules, would follow behind. Custer himself held the five remaining companies in hand, prepared to strike when the time came.

The four boys turned their mounts toward the long ridges that led home, ponies loping, breath steaming in the heat of the climb. Dust clung to their leggings, blood darkened their hands, but their voices were quiet now. Their eyes and ears stayed sharp to the ridges. Red Hawk reined in suddenly, pointing with his chin. Across the broken ground to the south, a string of riders moved in file — three companies, their line tilting along the ridgeline. The sun struck metal from their carbines, bright in the sunlight.

“Soldiers,” Little Rain murmured.

The boys watched in silence, the ponies sidestepping beneath them. Out in front of the dust plume rode a small knot of men, spread wide, their ponies picking carefully along the broken ground. They paused often, rising in their saddles to peer into the coulees, scanning the valleys ahead.

“Scouts,” said Little Bear Robe, though his voice barely carried. The others nodded. These were not hunters or travelers — they moved with purpose, watching the land like men searching for sign.

Swift Dog spat into the grass.

Captain Benteen’s columns angled away, the blue-clad line fading into the broken hills. The boys kept still until the dust thinned, then turned their ponies and pushed on. No one spoke. They rode fast, driving the ponies until the land offered a westward draw. The descent was sharp. They splashed through a trickle of water at the bottom and pushed hard across the creek bottoms, angling for the ford that led home.

They felt it now — what the old men had warned of, what the songs had spoken. The blue coats were coming, and with them, the fight. They pushed their ponies harder, urgency rising with every stride.

Little Rain - *The Reno Skirmish Line, 3:00 PM*

They came in from the ridges at a gallop. The deer meat was bound in hide, dark with blood. It swung against the flanks of their ponies as they rode. They moved toward the southern end of the village, where the Hunkpapa lodges stood thick along the river bend. Beyond them the Oglala and Miniconjou, and further downstream the Cheyenne tipis with the small Arapaho band camped beside them. To their right Captain Reno's skirmish line stretched in a thin arc, firing into the village in volleys, carbines snapping like a brush fire racing through dry sticks. The battle had begun.

By the time the boys reached the tipis, the camp was already breaking apart. Dogs barked, women shouted for children, ponies broke free of picket ropes. Smoke from cooking fires hung low in the morning heat, and the boys rode straight into it — past dead bodies, past women clutching infants, past children scattering in panic. Men were gathering horses, painting their faces, and raising war cries that split the smoke.

The women called out, voices high and fierce, urging the men forward. Some carried water to the wounded. A few mounted ponies themselves, anger burning hotter than fear.

The tipis shuddered as bullets punched through their hides. A bullet splintered a lodge pole near Little Rain's shoulder, and his horse reared in panic.

The thunder of carbines cracked in ragged volleys, leaves spinning down as shots ripped through the cottonwoods, buzzing like bees.

Little Rain ducked low, heart racing. Then came the sharp, hard blow striking his chest.

His breath stopped. The rifle slipped from his hands as he pitched sideways, the world tilting. He struck the ground hard, vision filling with sky and smoke. His pony bolted, the meat bundle tumbling after, dark with blood.

The boys reined back in shock, shouting his name, but they were carried forward by the flood of people — women crying, children wailing, warriors on their ponies. There was no stopping.

A shadow bent close as his eyes closed. A Hunkpapa woman knelt beside him, but the blood was pooling fast, and Little Rain was already gone.

Charging Elk - *The Timber and Reno's Retreat, 3:30 PM*

The village was not scattering. As resistance poured out, Reno's skirmish line buckled. The warriors flanked the soldiers, circling around them, firing. The neat blue line dissolved into fragments, men stumbling back into the timber at the river's edge. A horse holder panicked, yanking at reins as the four mounts reared and screamed, eyes rolling white. A shot cracked, the soldier fell, and the riderless animals broke free, thrashing into the shallows.

Charging Elk pushed his pony through the trees near the river, bowstring taut, the blood of Little Rain still in his mind. Smoke hung in the air. Soldiers were dismounting, firing from the brush in the timber, their eyes wide.

Out of the smoke came an old warrior — a Cheyenne, his hair bound with otter fur, riding bare-backed, his cries sharp and urgent. He raised his rifle in greeting, teeth bared in a fierce smile. "I am Two Feathers! We strike together!" he shouted. "I am Charging Elk!", he called back, as he wheeled his pony beside him.

Two Feathers shook his rifle in the air. "They thought we would run," he cried out, voice rough in his throat. "Now they will learn we stand."

Charging Elk felt the force of it then — the camp had risen like a storm.

The warriors closed around the soldiers, yelling, shooting from behind trunks, pressing them into the bends. Then suddenly the timber filled with men trying to mount. The line gave way. Soldiers spurred their mounts hard, the formation gone, each man bent low and clinging to the saddle, trying to find a ford in the river. Warriors swept in from both flanks, ponies cutting close, rifles flashing, arrows whistling. A rider pitched sideways, struck clean from the saddle; another clutched at his chest before tumbling headlong into the dust. Horses screamed as lances jabbed their flanks, some rearing and throwing their riders before bolting toward the river. The air filled with powder smoke and the high cries of warriors, closing fast on the blue coats.

Charging Elk pressed his pony hard through the smoke and dust, the shouts of warriors all around him. Just behind him, Two Feathers, the Cheyenne, leaned forward on his mount, firing his rifle into the fleeing soldiers. The two warriors surged side by side into the chaos, their fierce cries knifing

through the clouds of dust. Charging Elk came alongside a soldier, the bowstring tight against his cheek. For a breath, he met the man's eyes, wide and white, his brass buttons flashing in the sun.

Just as they reached the river, the arrow loosed with a sharp snap. It struck deep beneath the man's shoulder. He cried out once, pitched sideways, and fell hard to the earth, his boot catching for a moment in the stirrup before the horse dragged him a few steps and left him in the dust.

Charging Elk wheeled his pony clear, already reaching for another shaft. All around him, men shouted, gunfire cracked, and dust swirled — but he carried the fierce knowledge that his arrow had flown true. Charging Elk drew back his arrow, sighting on a trooper splashing across the ford. The man's mount lurched in the current, then checked just long enough for him to wheel halfway around. Water streamed from the horse's flanks as the trooper raised his carbine, the barrel glinting above the spray. He fired first, the shot cracking through the smoke and noise.

Charging Elk's pony jolted, legs folding in the shallows before pitching him sideways into the mud. He rolled hard against the bank, breath torn from his chest, the bow still clenched in his hand. For a heartbeat he tried to rise, but the press of men and horses surged over him. A hoof struck his head, the current caught his limbs, and his body slid loose into the river.

The Little Bighorn pulled him away, drifting among the churn of spray and foam, turning him slowly. His face rolled upward, eyes already clouded in death, fixed on the wide blue of the summer sky.

Swift Dog - *Medicine Tail Coulee, 3:45 PM*

Custer's main command came down through the dust and heat where the ground widened near the river. Medicine Tail Coulee opened there, water shallow over stones, willows bending low along the banks. Company E, the gray horse troop, edged close to the river, firing hurried shots from their saddles. Bullets cracked through the willows, spat into the water, and startled the ponies on the flats. Swift Dog crouched low behind a screen of willow, loosing an arrow at the riders. Beside him, Red Hawk fired a carbine, the stock warm against his shoulder. Their shouts mingled with those of the warriors around them, a storm rising against the blue-coated line. For a moment, it seemed the

soldiers might cross into the village, but then came the bugle's thin cry. The gray horses wheeled, the line folding back toward the bluffs.

Swift Dog jumped to his feet, laughter breaking from his chest. "They run!" he shouted. He sprinted to where his pony was tethered and swung onto its back. In a heartbeat, he was in the water, spurring hard. Spray burst around him as he leaned low against the mane, eyes fixed on the soldiers ahead. Red Hawk and several others called for him to hold back, but he pressed harder, chasing into the dust and gun smoke as the gray troop climbed the bluffs.

When he was halfway across the river, one of the gray horse riders checked his mount, reined in on the slope above. He turned in the saddle, carbine steady. He held still, then fired.

Swift Dog toppled sideways, plunging into the shallows. His pony staggered on, riderless, reins trailing in the current.

The gray horses vanished into dust, their pale hides flashing once more before the bluffs swallowed them.

Red Hawk saw him fall. Without thought, he ran forward, plunging into the ford where the water ran shallow but fast. He caught Swift Dog by the arm and heaved, pulling him against the tug of the current. The body was heavy, limp.

With a guttural cry, Red Hawk dragged him back to shore. Warriors thundered past on ponies, arrows and bullets snapping overhead as they chased the fleeing soldiers up into the hills. No one stopped; the battle raged on. Red Hawk laid Swift Dog on the muddy bank beneath the cottonwoods, cradling his head. His cousin's eyes flickered once, a shallow breath escaping his lips—then nothing. The hand that had held the bow slackened, fingers falling open.

Red Hawk and Little Bear Robe- *Last Stand Hill, 5:00 PM*

Two Feathers and Little Bear Robe had fought through the press at Reno's crossing, their ponies lathered, eyes wild. But gunfire from downstream pulled them northward. They wheeled sharply, racing back toward the village with other warriors.

At Medicine Tail Coulee they splashed across. Ahead, the blue soldiers formed skirmish lines, firing hurried shots, then remounting to climb the slopes.

Warriors pressed into the ravines, dust choking their throats, gun smoke burning their eyes.

Two Feathers spurred harder, teeth bared in a fierce grin. Beside him, Little Bear Robe urged his pony up the cutbank, hooves scrabbling in the dirt. Together they crested a rise, shouting with the others as the bluecoats reeled backward.

The soldiers broke one knot at a time—Calhoun Hill, Keogh's line, the scattered clusters along the ridge. Each fell beneath the rush of warriors, dust and smoke swirling, the air thick with the stink of dust, powder and blood. Yet not all came on horseback. Warriors on foot pressed forward through the coulees and draws, slipping from cover to cover, their bodies low against the earth. They rose from the grass to send a shower of arrows arcing high into the soldiers' ranks, then firing rifles from behind rocks and ridges. The air quivered with their volleys, a ceaseless rain that drove the troopers back step by step. As the mounted charges struck from the flanks, the foot warriors' fire pinned the soldiers in place, until every knot unraveled, every defense caved in, and the ridge itself seemed to collapse under the weight of the assault.

Then the shot came — sharp, hard, above the din. Little Bear Robe jerked, the cry torn from his throat before he fell. His body struck the earth with a dull thud, his pony veering riderless into the melee. He did not rise again.

Two Feathers reined in hard, staring at the still form in the dust. There was no time for mourning. The charge swept on, carrying him and the others into the breaking lines of soldiers. Behind them, the boy from the small Arapaho band lay motionless.

The ridges and coulees were cauldrons of smoke and dust, the grass seared flat by hooves and fire. High on the side of a hill, soldiers crouched behind their dead horses, mouths open as they fired and fired again until the clicks of empty carbines replaced the cracks of shot. Swallow-tailed guidons—stripes with a blue canton pricked with stars—snapped weakly in the wind. Near them a small command flag stirred in the hot breeze, a marker of authority even as the line buckled.

Red Hawk charged with the others through the haze. He leapt from his pony, lance gripped tight, his war cry cutting across the din. It was rage and grief knotted together, the sound of a boy breaking into manhood in the only way the day allowed. In that moment, Red Hawk no longer thought of names to be earned or honors to be counted—only of the friends already lost.

A soldier rose from behind a dead horse — face blackened with powder, eyes wild, hands empty of cartridges. With nothing left to fire, the man swung his rifle like a club. The blow cracked across Red Hawk's shoulder, staggering him. He reeled but raised his lance and thrust it into the soldier's thigh. The man bellowed, half in rage, half in agony, and wrenched the lance aside. The second blow came down hard, the stock smashing against Red Hawk's temple with a crack like dry wood breaking. Sparks leapt in his vision, the ground tilting beneath him. He dropped to one knee, breath ragged, the roar of battle suddenly muffled.

The soldier lifted the carbine for the final stroke. Another warrior's war club struck first, crushing the soldier's skull. The soldier toppled across Red Hawk's body, the two entangled — boy and man, warrior and soldier, their blood mingling in the dust.

As the sky narrowed above him, a sound stirred faintly in his mind. It was the brook at dawn, water running cold over stones. It was the laughter of friends and the teasing songs they had sung beside the stream. And beneath it all, steady and low, came the hum of the song he had carried in his chest — the half-formed vision of a name he would never live to claim. The song rose once, then faded.

Silence pressed heavily over the Greasy Grass. The ridges and coulees lay strewn with broken bodies — soldiers sprawled in their blue coats, warriors fallen among them, ponies still and stiff in the hot sun. The smell of gunpowder hung in the heat, a stench that clung to skin and hair. Women moved across the river in a tide of grief and anger. Some wailing, gathering weapons, stripping the bodies, some striking and cutting at the dead and those who yet breathed. They searched among the fallen, seeking husbands, brothers, and sons. They rolled bodies gently, brushed away dust and blood to find a familiar face, and lifted mourning cries when they did. For others, there was only despair, searching until darkness fell and names still went unanswered.

Down the river, Captain Reno's battered command had retreated to the bluffs above the river. Having been prompted by couriers to hurry forward, Captain Benteen and the pack train finally

reached their position. Too late to be of any use to Custer. Ringed by warriors through the long day and into the next, they dug in, enduring assaults and sniper fire until relief finally approached.

The chiefs, warned of General Terry's column moving from the north, knew the village could not remain in place. It was the voices of the grandmothers also, steady even in grief, that urged the people to rise and move. Their counsel carried weight — the battle was done, but survival demanded the camp be broken and the children carried into the mountains. On the morning after the battle, June 26, they began to break camp. The people moved away from the Little Bighorn Valley, scattering into the folds of the Big Horn Mountains.

They had won the day. The victory at the Greasy Grass was fierce but fleeting, a bright flame already shadowed by the weight of what would follow. For the Lakota, Cheyenne, and their allies, it was a defense of home and a defiant cry for freedom; for the Crow and Arikara who scouted with the soldiers, it was another chapter in older struggles for survival; for the Seventh Cavalry, it was a disaster, written in blood, that would bring a storm of retribution. No one left the valley untouched. The river ran on, as it always had. The great encampment would never again gather in such strength, nor would the nations of the Plains stand so united. The soldiers would come again, and again. The battle was over, but its cost endured—in every family, in every nation, on every side.

About the Author

Mark Anderson is a retired Lutheran pastor whose ministry once brought him to Billings, Montana, where visits to the battlefield deepened into years of research on the Plains tribes and the Indian Wars. He holds a degree in history from Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, and has authored several works of historical fiction. Though his other works explore ancient Rome and Egypt, they apply the same principles that shape this tale: rigorous historical research joined to a narrative imagination attentive to human voices. *The Vision Song, Unfinished* continues this work by restoring presence to the overlooked, whose lives bore the cost of history as deeply as the soldiers and chiefs whose names survive. Across empires and battlefields, his stories ask what endures when power passes — and what voices remain when the record falls silent.