

OF LIONESSES AND LIONS

By

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CHAPTER 1

Leona Zimmerman looked into the bright light shining into her tired yet still open eyes as it penetrated into them. They burned with the kind of fire that would burn her soul if gone unchallenged. It baked her face and neck, though she still had the latter covered to protect herself from being seen, and exposed. The light came from a mechanical beast this time, more beastly because it was mechanical perhaps. One that would survive everyone who created or used it, in the end. But it was the shadow on the wall that the light threw up which caused her more worry than the light itself. And what those shadows would do to the 'cave-dwellers', all of which were mostly half asleep.

The smell of the cavern penetrated into Leona's nostrils, no matter how hard she tried to hold her breath, or keep it shallow enough to remain 'detached' from the matter at hand. It was not that the odor was foul, or even noxious. It was the 'cleanness' of the air that made it most dirty, and toxic. And as for toxic, such was the nature of the shadow on the wall as well as it displayed a victim not yet afflicted.

"This is Rover," Dr. Zimmerman said to the students in front of her as she pointed to the overhead projected on the wall of the Biology lecture hall, a concave cavernous cage which had the capacity to keep 300 students hostage for 45 minutes at a time, or whisk them off to places beyond any buildings made by man, or woman, depending on who was at the podium. And of course what the overhead projector light splattered onto the screen as shadows, forms and 'data'.

Leona looked up at the picture of the healthy, happy Labrador Retriever which had been taken by photographers with two legs who had far less brains, ethics or vitality than the pup. She let her eyes rest upon the creature, imagining its primal roots and, if she had her way, ultimate destination. "Yes," she thought to herself as she looked at Rover. "You have eyes of a wolf, not a dog. The mind of a fox, not a mutt. And a Soul that is not worthy of the brain-dead humanoids who own you, nor the soul-dead veterinarians who take the credit for keeping you alive, nor the medical researchers who developed the carbon and hydrogen-containing molecules that, well, work enough of the time for us to keep using and believing in them," she continued in her ever-racing mind. "And if you were my responsibility to take care of, I would never name you 'Rover'. Never make you play games that I wanted to play and you didn't. And never make you...become the victim of toxins that..." She stopped there, glancing at her reflection in the glass in the back of the lecture hall above where the students were.

In that reflection was a woman in her early 40s with long black hair flowing over her shoulders to the middle of her back, her sleek hips wrapped and shaped by a tan pencil skirt, complimented with a brown satin blouse that accentuated a slender neck on the inside and fit into a white lab coat on the outside. Her legs were messaged by dark brown hosiery, her feet kept firmly on the ground by black, stiletto heels. A reflection which was 'respectable and alluring' eye-candy for any man glancing at the cover of a biomedical supply catalog, and any woman who needed to be reminded of how she had to look like to find or keep a man. The best genetic features of 'Injun' and 'Paleface', combined into one hot looking body which Leona worked so hard to get,

and was still working on further so that she could feel 'right' on the inside. As for what was under the 'perfect professional' attire and which she was required to wear, and champion, this was another matter. How much she wanted to share with her students the truth about herself, Rover, and the potential harm that biologists too well skilled in their craft could really do. And what biologists were doing to themselves. But, one lesson at a time, and the most important lesson Leona had learned this day, was that if she received another comment from a disgruntled or dissatisfied student, it was her ass that would be kicked out the door, having to scrounge for dog food in dumpsters that Rover had passed up eating. Or worse, being treated like a dog. A slave who has forfeited the will to live, and replaced it with the obsession to please. Pleasing Masters who enjoy inflicting pain and humiliation on her as she would begin to yearn for her own destruction, one degrading step at a time.

The inner voices in Leona's mind seemed to foreshadow something to come, but that would be then, and this was now. But she had been AWOL from her currently-assigned Earthly duties. After all, a Wizard or Wizardess is only kept alive by the villagers below if he, or she, is the keeper of knowledge they need for their survival or if he/she can keep them entertained. And, for better or worse, Leona's yearn for survival was still stronger than other instincts competing inside of her.

Assistant Professor Zimmerman made her brain give her mind a swift kick in the ass and gave voice to what had to be done in the here and now. Her eyes awakened to worldly lights again, as she looked at the writing on top of the next overhead. "Toxins and Antedotes," she read with as much self-enforced lifelessness as possible, in the exact words and subtext of the officially-approved verbiage, leaving to the students the task of reading the top ten list of common toxins and antidotes that afflict canines as she smelled the light in the overhead lamp attempt to fry the un-burnable plastic upon which the party-line 'truths' were printed. "As inferred by the graphic of Rover here, and the Marauding Toxins trying to do him in. But Rover doesn't have to..." she continued, keeping on script with regard to the verbiage and non-offensive 'humor' of textbook from which the overheads were extracted. Then she paused, recalling events from the past that were very personal, and not on the course curriculum at this, or for that matter, any other established University.

Trying to bridge the inner and outer worlds, she let her eyes wander over the 'audience', seeing if anyone was really listening to what she had to say. They of course had no reason to actually listen. Education these days was about disseminating information to students, the students regurgitating it back on an exam, then if they behaved enough like trained dogs, they got a reward bone in the form of a passing grade they could use toward getting a certificate for a job, or a higher grade if they aspired to a career which would eventually become just a job. But there was one 'monkey' in the cage of trainees who really was listening. Who really was here because she wanted to make a difference in the world rather than merely be accepted by it for maintaining the status quo.

By outward appearance, Rachel Russell could be said to look like the rest of the herd, whose clothing involved three to five different styles of fabric forced to make peace with each other, held together only by some respect for color coordination. Footwear made for comfort rather than fashion. Hair, when it was present on the head, that was never one color, with roots that

were a different hue than anything above them. Such was true of both the young women and young men, who passively read the hand outs that were exactly what was on the overhead. But Rachel's eyes were ancient, and hungry. Listening and wanting more to feed what was behind them, as she rummaged through textbooks, rather than her lap top, to see if the antidotes for the toxins listed on the overhead were effective, and if there were better alternatives. In previous courses Leona had taught, Rachel had questioned what Leona had read from the overheads before, and added to them on occasion, resulting in interesting discourses between the two of them while the rest of the students zoned out, since none of it would be on the exam. Leona got into big shit for discoursing more than pontificating in that course, and was given notice that if she ever did it again, she would be out of a job, and a career.

"Yes," Leona found herself saying, as a prelude to something in the first day of this new course that would lead to something far beyond, yet still encompassing, what was in the curriculum that the students, or someone else, were paying \$300 a credit for. Promethian defiance shot into Leona's spine from her gut, pushing it into a more upright, passionate and, interestingly enough, alluring position. "Rover, our dog who has been exposed to these toxins, does NOT have to roll over and play dead, if we go beyond what is in the books and---"

Leona stopped, having seen her reflection as a Warrior Princess in the glass above the last row of slumbering students. Next to that reflection just beyond the discretely opened door was John Ditka, more accurately Professor Herr Doctor John Ditka, Chairmench of the Biological Sciences department. His lab coat neatly pressed, every graying hair on his aristocratic Germanically-trained head in perfect place, his eyes framed by wire-rim glasses. With a slight movement of his fingers, he 'suggested' that Leona say what was on the per-approved party-line overheads rather than what was on her mind. It was a last warning that Ditka meant this time.

"Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," came to Leona's logical brain, as this was the way you got your 'citizen papers' as a researcher, teacher and potential changer of people's minds and hearts from the inside of established institutions. "But give to God that which is God's," she recalled with her 'Mind-Heart' who understood the original speaker of those words in ways that most other Christians didn't, or couldn't. She recalled that Jesus was crucified. But if the same were to happen to her, she had no 'Dirty Dozen' of Jewish publicists to carry on her work, and those publicists of Jesus were crucified themselves eventually.

While she was deciding which road to take, Ditka pointed again towards the overhead, his suggestion now a command.

Leona decided to 'render to reality' again both in tone and content. She flipped on to the next overhead, wincing at the scientific limitations of the print and the lifelessness of the graphics associated with it.

"The established protocols for antidote administration for commonly observed toxins are..." she read eyes turned down, with as lifeless a voice as possible. She continued to passively pass on the data on the overhead prepared by the publisher of the Department-approved textbook, word for word, without any rhythm or musicality her speech. It seemed to please Ditka as, once again, she was an instructor rather than a teacher. A conduit for data transference rather an an

interpreter and builder of knowledge. It seemed to please everyone, though. The ‘what do I have to know for the exam?’ students. The Department Chairman who valued protocol over thinking. And even the cartoon of Rover, put into ‘so-Disney’ cheerful lifelessness by a G rated artist who knew nothing about edge, heart or pathos. Even Leona felt okay with the deal, thinking that if she gave in to Ditka here in the lecture hall containing 50 student, she could still keep her lab from which she could educate 50,000 or more minds by publishing innovative work that would perhaps someday wind up in an enlightenment-written textbook, which would not only contain innovative data and ideas, but..humanity and that so necessary but always missing element in science---Vitality-based humor.

No, there was a reason why Leona became a biologist who specialized in developing antidotes for toxins which existed now, or would be created later by vicious men, and women, for anti-life purposes. Reasons she never voiced to anyone on her way up the ladder, even the few “Rachels” she had run across along the way. And as in all strategies for a higher good, or to correct previous ‘bads’, sometimes you have to take a step to the side or a step backward to make a significant forward leap. That All-American strategy of compromise.

But there was one person who was not happy with the compromise. “I paid from my own fucking pocket, \$300 a credit for this!” Leona could hear, come out of Rachel’s mouth. “This ‘revolutionary’ is betraying me just like everyone else. Guess that means that I should give up the revolution business like everyone else has. Just ‘go with the flow’ into the toilet like everyone else, then ‘accept my limitations’ like a good girl, a smart girl, a girl who will be taken care of by everybody, a slave who doesn’t have to think about anything at all except what I’m supposed to do to other slaves to serve the master,” she could feel coming out of Rachel’s defeated eyes.

Something snapped in Leona’s mind. A life-changing moment, perhaps. A flash that came from the Core to body, mind and spirit. She suddenly stopped reading the overhead, and read the Agenda of the Spirit in the room. And the strategy of the devil outside it. Yes, to serve the angels she would have to get ride of the demons first. There was one thing she did not do for Ditka, that now seemed necessary. “The standard treatments for toxic exposure in dogs has been carefully and thoroughly worked out by the North American Veterinary Association,” she said with a big, wide smile. “Following the protocols given by them will guarantee positive results. Diazepam at 0.5 mg per kg BW for strychnine exposure. EtOH if given early enough for antifreeze exposure. Atropine and other AchE inhibitors for organophosphate exposure which---”. She stopped, noting that Ditka had left. But though that carrier of Dull Out Virus had left, other demons came into Leona’s head. Rachel closed her books, her heart and her mind, dozing into a world of hopelessness behind her distant eyes.

Leona recalled her past, and the many toxins she had encountered in the world outside the University walls. And the walls of standard North American morality. In places where toxins made to kill bugs, mice and bacteria had been used against mammalian species, particularly the one that walked on two legs. And where flesh-eating microbes were ‘hired’ to clandestinely do the job of even more vicious men, and women. The faces of the victims in those places that could not be identified on a map by 95% of the students in front of Leona haunted her. Along with the other sufferings that were inflicted upon them by Leona’s comrades, and her.

Sometimes by accident, sometimes by design. “Do a little harm now to stop a lot of harm later,” the rationalization for it. “You are all privileged to be necessary evils, for a greater good,” the battle cry that was used to justify so much of what Leona had witnessed, and done, in the past. But, she was a different person then. Someone who had been part of the problem. Thank the Spirit of spirits that she was now part of the Solution, though doing so would require yet another bold, brave and illogical decision.

“And NOW for the Truth!” Leona boldly said as she raised up her eyes. “The truths behind the facts. The data. The protocols. Such as if an animal, or person, gets wacked with Organophosphates, and you can keep the parasympathetic nervous system from fucking up short term with atropine, you still have to worry about delayed neurotoxicity where the long tract neurons get tangles at the distal ends and start dying in inches further up till the cell bodies croak out. Stoppable by no protocol in this textbook, but with...as I speculate and think I show work, these.” Leona grabbed a piece of chalk, grateful the room she was assigned was one of the ‘vintage’ lecture halls that had a blackboard upon which NEW ideas could be written, erased, and modified. Upon it she wrote a list of no less than ten treatments, ranging from thiamine to pyruvate, revealing how she think they might work.

“And as for other toxins that have killed a lot more animals and people than the ones in this textbook,” she continued.

The ‘what do I have to know for the exam?’ kids freaked out as Leona frantically wrote out the ‘most beloved’ industrial chemicals that would reek havoc on biological flesh, describing their mechanisms of action and potential cures with lightening speed and very emotionally-infused language, incorporating the ‘f’, ‘s’ and even ‘mf’ word at appropriate places, the Redskin Assistant Professor’s black humor conferring a Reality to the data and speculations. Rachel smiled with delight as her classmates asked Leona ‘is this going to be on the exam?’ and she replied ‘the exam of life, unless you want to continue being a lifeless corpse.’

“But this isn’t a course in microbiology,” one of the students said sheepishly,.

“It is now. Because bugs can kill you quicker and more powerfully than drugs,” Leona said. “Which I do NOT recommend for recreational or enjoyment purposes because the Madness of being a Creative Soul and an effective one is best enjoyed...straight,” she said, indulging in a laugh. A very private joke she had shared with no one in the Department, or the University.

Rachel looked at Leona, asking to explain the pun or elaborate on it, but sexual orientation was for later. Humanity was for now. Leona grabbed hold of another piece of chalk as if it was a machine gun, aiming it at the board in the War against cruelty, ignorance and passivity. “Anthrax,” she went on, writing the key points on the board bold enough for anyone to read it, even Ditka without his wire-rimmed glasses. “A gram positive bacteria that despite what the manufacturers say, isn’t always nuc’d into obedience by third generation cephalosporins. Its playmate on the field of living death, Yersenia Pestes, AKA, the Black Plague, which didn’t take a permanent exit after killing half of the population of Europe back in the 14th Century. Then we got Influenza A H5N1. Filovirus. Riff Valley fever....”

As Leona went on, she could hear her voice change as the place from which she was firing it out of becoming more fueled with Passion in the service of Compassion. She could hear herself sound more Southern, more Western, and then more 'Injun'. Such was, as she self-observed herself, acceptable and part of what was required. But she found herself wondering about other things she had witnessed and done, or allowed to be done, in the past. All of those wars in which killing people now, often innocent ones, was necessary to stop slavery in one form or another. The kind of slavery that pulled in women and children most often, in ways that were irreversible.

As Leona went into the biological actions and potential cures for Scrapies, Rinderpest and Ebola Virus, she was battling above all the most insidious virus. DOV. Dull out Virus. Which infected the SOUL of so many people, most particularly scientists. Then she noticed, as she became exhausted in this assault against Ignorance and Cruelty, something else happening with her voice. It went down one, then two octaves. She tried to cover it up with a cough that lasted a minute or longer. She looked up and noticed that there were more Alive eyes in the room now.

Half of the congregation, by her calculation, wanted her to continue. And Rachel felt...not as alone as she did earlier. And open to what had happened to Leona's voice, and why.

Leona chose to focus on something more understandable and tolerable to the group than her own inner secrets, and demons. She accessed the microphone in the podium, and continued with a tension-driven 'whisper' voice, a modality of speech made famous by Clint Eastwood and obnoxiously sterile by all of those 'professional sounding' women who were the head Cops on the TV detective shows. "If anyone wants to leave now, that's ok. But if ya'll want to stay, that's ok too. I won't ask anything on the exam that's not on the handouts for the course, which ya'll can pick up at the library at anytime."

A handful of the kids left. Rachel intimidated the fence sitters to give this Mad Scientist lady another shot. She nodded to Leona to continue. Leona did so, with a victorious bliss that rivaled the a century and a half ago when her ancestors whipped George Armstrong Custer's ass at the Little Big Horn and sent him on his way to the Happy Hunting grounds, most probably to an incarnation as a monk, or nun, in someplace where there were more colored faces than palefaces.

CHAPTER 2

Leona's chronically-underfunded but always prolific laboratory was more like a trailer-park garage than a Massachusetts University instillation for scientific investigation. Most of her equipment was from surplus asset sales at the university and or trash bins from nearby hospitals, none of it less than ten years old and most of it being made to be operative again with the masterful hands of Carlos Fernandez, a master, mostly-self taught, engineer from Equador who had to work as a janitor to keep the bills paid at home and the immigration lawyer bills to keep his family from being deported. Perhaps it was his thick accent that prevented Carlos from being acknowledged for his engineering skills. Or his humility with regard to such, and refusal to put others down to elevate himself up the socio-economic ladder.

Room 206A for most of its history was a storage area in the undesirable area of the Biology Department which was bordered on one side by the climate control machinery that was very loud even on the temperate of days, and on the other by the Anatomy lab, reeking of formaldehyde that preserved for all time the final facial expressions of dead animals and people. Leona seemed to have more intimate contact with them than her fellow scientists, in part because to her those dead bodies were more alive than her colleagues. But she did have a solid room-mate in Room 206A who gave her hope, vitality and a chuckle or two even on the most challenging of days.

On this day, Leona was watching something happening in a series of tissue culture dishes under a microscope. If her hypothesis was right, the neurons she had transplanted into the dish in the presence of a toxin that simulated ALS, MS and diabetic neuropathy would be in the process of growing to their target tissue rather than dying. That is, if the antidote which stimulated glycolysis and ATP production in the absence of an active Krebs' cycle was working, and if it didn't create too much lactic acid in the process of doing so. Turning a neuron into an astrocyte, though, was a difficult job. But if it worked, it could mean that one could turn any healthy cell into one that would outgrow and out-survive any cancerous or scaring tissue that wanted to destroy it.

She counted the number of neurite branches and surviving neurons in the ten dishes, each with codes on them. Then, she said a prayer as she looked up which of the dishes had 'treatment elixir' in them and which didn't, so that she would not be bullshitting herself with the results. She observed herself cautiously smiling as she ran the statistics in her head, then on paper. "Hmm...a ten percent increase in survival and 15 percent elevation in neuritic growth with this elixir that is statistically significant, but...hmmm."

Carlos Fernandez walked in, unloading his mops, buckets and brooms onto his side of 206A, singing a Spanish song of hope and joy at the top of his lungs.

"Shh!" Leona said, questioning why this batch of herbs from back home on the Rez, specially sent by Granny Storm Cloud, was having a far better effect than any she was able to buy in town, determined to find out why, scientifically. "I'm agonizing."

“Over what to eat, yes I can see that,” Carlos said. “You look thin as a rail, Doctor Z.”

“You can’t eat science,” she replied, allowing herself a break from the work, and the other agonies in her always thinking head. “And as for calling me Doctor Z, I thank you, Doctor Fernandez.”

“Just ‘Carlos’, in this hemisphere,” he answered as he looked at Leona’s Ph.D. diploma on her side of the wall, and the one she designed and had printed in Spanish and Latin for him next to it, from the ‘International University of Innovative Accomplishments’. “But, for better or worse we are roommates,” he said as he handed her a taco, loaded with everything. “We are both at the bottom of the totem pole in this department.”

“Depends on which side of the totem pole ya look at it from, Doctor F,” she said, discrete wincing at the excessive spice entering her nostrils then bravely taking a bite from the taco. She noted with intense internal pleasure that it tasted more like Reservation-prepared banuk than Boston-baked cornbread. “And any well intended deed of defiance against evil or societal-approved self limitations always sets in motion a liberation of the Soul that is unstoppable.”

“You should be a philosopher, Doctor Z,” Carlos said. “Not a scientist.”

“I thought that they were supposed to be the same thing,” she smiled back.

Carlos’ return smile seemed more like an ‘offer’ this time. An offer to share more than an oversized supply closet with him during the day. Though the short, cherub-faced, balding man of forty hard years of living amongst the spiritually dead was not the most handsome man to look at, he was Prince Charming between the ears. But was Leona really ready to be his Princess? Or for that matter, was she ready for a relationship with any man, or woman, who didn’t know who she really was now. Or more importantly, who and what she was before entering her current Calling and life here in the Industrialized NorthEast, after having left the Reservation out West, and getting ‘sidetracked’ into so many places far more ‘exotic’ and dangerous than Equator in between.

Feeling the need to change the subject, so that the truth could be expressed more clearly, Carlos looked at the tissue culture dishes and notes that covered an oak desk that on at least two occasions he had seen without being cluttered with works in progress. He picked up her most recent paper, a rough draft of it containing more self-made corrections than stellar first draft discourse. “I can’t understand most of the biological terms here, but what you claim here in the conclusion section seems to be not sure of itself.”

“Because I’m not sure yet what the data really says, or wants to say,” Leona replied.

“Which is because your working hypothesis is flawed?” a deep baritone voice of logical reason echoed from behind Leona’s back. “Or the reason for asking the question is irrelevant?” Herr Professor Ditka said as he strode into the room with an upturned chin, and confident smile. “Or you are in need of collaborators who can offer scientific insights and upgrades with regard to your investigative tools?”

“And I can get both of such by kissing more ass?” Leona said as she noted Carlos taking the sidelines, disappearing into his pile of cleaning supplies as the ‘illiterate janitor’.

“Or perhaps...you know...” Ditka continued once Carlos had gone back to his ‘station’. The good Professor took off his wedding ring, holding it in place above his open lab coat pocket.

Leona let herself ponder the offer, speculating on what might happen if she accepted, or what calamity ensued if she refused.

“Maybe you get more funding by wiggling your ass, Doctor Z,” Carlos interjected in a particularly thick Spanish accent made more ethnic by wiggling his own derriere. “This is how things get done in America, yes? Kiss ass or kick it?”

Leona smiled at the impish philosopher’s wisdom. Ditka did not.

“Mister Fernandez,” he said with a firm, Germanic sense of command with as minimal volume as possible. “The floor in the cadaver lab could use with a better shine.”

“To impress the dead?” Carlos replied, knowing fully well that he had as much to lose as Leona if he bit the hand that fed him his daily bread as well as ration of shit.

“Or walking dead,” Leona added. “Which describes most of the faculty here. And the students if they are instructed rather than actually taught, or inspired.”

Leona and Ditka shared a battle of wits and wills between the eyes, with an intensity that had never been felt before. At least by Leona. She dived down deep into her Core to find the strength to keep her dignity, and perspective, as Ditka used his most reliable tools against the humble and self-examining souls.

With an added boost of sure-footed condescension, he addressed his words to Carlos, his real intentions to Leona. “We must make the cadaver lab aesthetically pleasing to flatter the living.”

“And their dead bodies?” Carlos continued, shifting his emotion gears into being human, open and kind, something which even Ditka had been once in his life. “You know, my son was a medical student in Mexico City, and did very well, till he uncovered the drape on his cadaver and saw his ex-wife’s face. ‘This time I can finally win an argument with you!’ he said to her before he---“

Ditka stopped Carlos bold and intelligently-designed attempt to share the human commonality with a loud snap of his fingers, followed by his index finger pointing Carlos out to door to his newly-appointed rounds. Ditka’s face was as dead as the cadavers, his intentions in the land of the living far more deadly.

Carlos shrugged an ‘I did what I could’ gesture discretely to Leona as he showed Ditka a downward stare of obedience. The kind everyone with any brains does while crossing from one

country to another with immigration officers who have guns on their hips and less restraint with regard to using them than any Cops on either side of the border. But this time Carlos stood his ground, refusing to leave.

“It’s ok, Carlos,” Leona said to him in English. “Dealing with assholes is part of my job,” she continued in Spanish, a lower-caste language the high-brow Ditka never bothered to learn.

“You are sure?” Carlos replied to Leona, in Spanish. “You’re the only one in this department who doesn’t shit on the floor and expect me, or anyone else, to pick it up.”

“It’s ok, Carlos, really,” she answered in English with her mouth as her eyes continued the battle of wits and wills with Ditka. “Via con Dias. Or via con Buddha. Or, no...via con the Great Spirit.”

Carlos took his broom, bucket and mop and left Leona to fight her own battles. Meanwhile, Leona translated what needed to be translated to the, so he said anyway, quadro-lingual Chairman of the department. “‘Via con’ means ‘go with’. ‘Con Dias’—‘Go with God’. Get right with Buddha, get re-connected with whatever or whoever---“

Ditka halted the metaphysical discourse with something very much from the material world. He pulled folded file from his left lab coat pocket and pushed it into her face. When she opened it, her bravado based in the Beyond Realm turned into extreme worry about the world as it was. “So, half of the students want me burned at the stake. Half of them want me canonized.”

“Which means that your teaching evaluation score is AVERAGE,” Ditka replied. “And to keep your job, ‘L J’ Zimmerman, who never did provide us with transcripts from your high school days, nor said what the L or J stands for, you need above average teaching evaluations.”

“Yeah,” was all that could find its way to Leona’s deflated mouth, and spirit.

Ditka inspected the lab with a brief cursory glance, then let his eyes fix upon Leona’s ass. Then here legs, then her breasts. He closed the door, then turned to her. This time with kind eyes, with a vulnerable and lonely soul behind them. He seemed...not only bargainable with but somehow trustable. “I could have these teaching evaluation scores recalculated,” he offered. “Do the appropriate statistics on them after throwing out the lower score outliers.”

It was a trick that many scientists did when most of the values were in line with your hypothesis but one or two of them weren’t. Completely legal, mathematically and scientifically. And something that she had done on occasion with her own data in the lab so that life-saving concepts could get to press, and perhaps bedsides of dying patients, sooner than later.

While Leona was considering the practicality of the various compromises for a bigger good, Ditka took her hand into hers. “We have more in common than you think,” he said, saying it from his heart. So it seemed anyway.

“Do we?” Leona replied, assessing her own life baggage and special needs with regard to any personal relationship, or professional alliance. “Tell me what we have in common,” she continued. “Between the ears that is.”

Ditka edging his way closer to Leona, in stages, explaining the rationale for each advancement as he took it. “I am a reductionist. The brain is a series of reflexes that we, in our more wishful moments, think is a soul. The seat of the soul is—“

“---here?” Leona replied as she moved his hand onto her thigh. She felt his shaking Paleface white hands to be cold and clammy on her firmly-held in place Injun skin. She smiled at him, allowing him to reveal more of what was in his heart, and mind.

“Hardly,” Ditka said regarding Leona’s location of the brain or soul hypothesis, as he felt more grounded in his true self.

“Then maybe the seat of the brain and/or soul is...here?” Leona said with an alluring smile as she moved his hand further up the inside of her leg. “More cranially. That there’s medical talk for the head,” she continued with a naturally-flowing Western drawl.

“Yes, I know,” Ditka said as his hand moved further up Leona’s leg, sometimes by his initiation, sometimes by her invitation. A light embrace initiated by Leona turned into a tight hug, then one that was unbreakable, at least from Ditka’s perspective.

All the while, Leona saw more and more of what Ditka was about between the ears in his brain, and soul. And all the while she pondered from the depths of her Soul what her Agenda in life was now. And knowing what had to be done for the greater good, as she had been and knew she always was ‘a necessary evil’.

Ditka’s breathing got heavier and heavier, his penile organ getting straight then very hard as his hand moved up Leona’s dress towards her most private parts. “Yes...I see we can collaborate on many projects, together,” Ditka said, his artistic German accent sounding like trailer park ugly from its Core. His agendas crude, cruel and ignorant, as was he on the inside. “We can forget our political, social, religious and other differences,” he continued as both a dirty old man and a horny inexperienced boy. “Collaborate...together with...”

Just as Ditka’s hand reached Leona’s ‘flower’, Leona snuck out her cell phone from her pocket and took several picture, displaying all parties and anatomical parts in full, exposed view. As well as Ditka’s face when he reached his most desired position with her. “My God!” he screamed out. “You have a---“

“Penis, that’s right,” Leona said. “An Adams’ apple too,” she continued in a deep, baritone voice, taking off her scarf and attempting to wrap it around Ditka for another round of passionate discourse. “Must have not told you about that in my application to this department.”

Ditka pulled away, trying his best to wipe the ‘smut’ off his hands in the sink. “Get out of my department! Out of my sight! How dare you---“

“Give you a reason for leaving your wife?” Leona said, as herself rather than the him she used to be. She picked up the wedding ring that Ditka had taken off his finger. “Let’s see, what do I want.”

Ditka grabbed hold of a scalpel and lunged out at Leona. She grabbed his wrist with an effortless move that she had learned many years ago, and hoped to never have to use again. “Little boys shouldn’t play with knives,” she said to him.

“Give me back my ring!” Ditka pleaded, pinned to both the wall and a very painful twisting-of-front-paw position.

Leona consented to the request, pushing it back on his finger so tight that he could perhaps never take off again.

“And those pictures!” Ditka screamed out. “I’ll give you anything you want!”

Leona pondered the proposition. Potentially, she could get whatever funding she wanted now. And with whatever terms she demanded. She dreamed about how many diseases she could find cures for, and how many toxins she could develop antidotes for. And how magnificent it would be for Carlos to have his own lab, to be cleaned up periodically by Ditka and his other Ivy League shitheads. But reality set in when the cell phone rang. She looked at the display, the text, and the sender.

Leona hesitated, not knowing what to do or think.

“Please, I’ll give you anything you want!” Ditka pleaded.

“Which we’ll talk about when I get back,” Leona said, civility in her voice, shock in her heart.

“From where?” Ditka said.

With that, Leona opened the door, snapped her fingers, and pointed Ditka out of her lioness’ cave. Pulling his wet pants up and covering the stains on them with his lab coat, he ran away from Rm 206A like a scared rabbit. Meanwhile, Leona knew that she had to get home fast. She looked above her at the picture of the soul she cared about more than herself, and more than any other. “Paul,” she said to the photo. “Why or how did you get yourself killed? I was the one who was supposed to go first.”

Interrupting her was Rachel, books in her arms, questioning eyes between her open ears. “I was, like, coming here to ask you about doing an independent study course with you when I ran into Doctor Ditka, as he ran into me, then down the hall. What’s going on?”

“For you, independent study here,” Leona said, giving her the keys to her lab. “For me, going back home to deal with the death of my brother,” she continued, packing her most essential belongings and walking out the door.

CHAPTER 3

The undertaker did a great job preparing Paul Zimmerman's body. His face did not have a single blemish on it, a white glow emanating from his skin like a halo. His lips were fixed in a happy smile. His hair was neatly trimmed into a classic 'Bond' cut. And over his legs and feet was a suit that 007 would have been proud to wear into any top end Casino. Indeed, if Saint Peter saw Paul appear at the Pearly Gates, he would be welcomed in by two hot looking angels, given a martini, shaken-not-stirred, and given a primo seat at the blackjack table where you always scored 21, and the house kept paying you with every bet you made. But Leona didn't buy that reality. Neither did her brother Paul, whose physical appearance now bore no resemblance to him in real life.

Though Paul and Leona were born of the same White mother and Cree father, Paul was always far more Indian than Leona was. At least when she left the reserve a decade and a half ago as Leon, not telling anyone where she was going and not knowing who she would become as Leon or Leona. But the Arrowhead Casino where Paul had been employed was happy to pay the bill for the funeral, as long as it was on their terms. Such was the way the new casino did things with regard to all of its transactions, as there was not one broke or economically-challenged Indian left on the Rez. At least by outward appearances as Leona recalled the new split level 400k houses she saw on the way in that replaced the cabins, trailers and shacks where most of her fellow band members had lived ever since they were vacated from their teepees. And outside those new dwellings were not horses for summer and sleds for winter, but new cars which rivaled even what Herr Doctor Professor Ditka proudly drove in on each day back from his home on Beacon Hill back in Boston. As for the mourners' attire, they were all in black. None of them had a stitch of clothing on them that was from past times and cultures. Not a single item that said 'honest Injun Native American' or even 'no bullcrap cowboy', except for the occasional man wearing \$400 cowboy boots or woman strutting around with Native-design Jewelry in which store-bought diamonds and pearls replaced Great Spirit blessed stones and rocks.

Leona felt as out of place here as she did at faculty mixers at the Old Boys' and New Bitch's faculty mixers back at Massachusetts University. She stood out like a sore thumb in the traditional buckskin dress, brown bead-work shawl which complimented her long black hair, and moccasins that had been walked in by two generations of healers before her, the ensemble having been given to her long ago by Edna Thunder Cloud, otherwise known as 'Granny'. Oddly, and ominously, Granny came to the funeral as herself, all 98 pounds of her, looking the same way as her Great Grandmother would have appeared when the her village encountered the first Paleface from where the sun rises. Granny was being ignored as much as Leona was. No one seemed to notice the old woman, so she walked around as if she was in her own universe. One that was shared by Leona as well, who only Granny recognized.

But to be fair, there were some honest mourners in line to give their last respects to Paul. Some seemed concerned. Others were procedural. But there were several who seemed guilty. An intuitive feeling that Leona got as she took her place on line to say goodbye to her brother who perhaps she should have been there for before it was too late. Her parents, still not present in the room, had faxed her only that Paul had died after finishing his shift at work at the Casino. When Leona asked from what causes, she got evasive answers. The longest delay between her asking

for an answer and being given a fabricated one was when she inquired about the most common cause of death on the Rez----by one's own hand.

Leona looked across the room for her parents, and they still were 'elsewhere', as they had been since her arrival at the Rez. Maybe they were still mad at because of the way she had left, as Leon. Or at how she neglected to check in with Home Base on any regular basis when she was off seeing and/or transforming the world. But, today was about Paul, not Mom, Dad, herself, or even Granny. Still, home was nothing like when she left it..

Across the room of neuvo-riche mourners who were talking about matters more about business than the departed. Granny and Leona were separated by a mass of murmuring people looking important who were talking about, in the grand scheme of things, very unimportant things. Granny pointed to Leona's boobs, asking if they were real. Leona proudly said 'yes' with her hands and an enthusiastic thumbs up. And silently mouthing "finally, yes," in Cree. Granny pointed to the intersection between the upper part of her two still-standing and still-defiant legs. Leona replied with a 'not yet' with a shrug of her shoulders and apologetic grimace of her lips. "That's okay, for now," Granny seemed to say with her eyes, and mouthed in Cree, a language that Leona could still understand, and expanded vocabulary with only AFTER Granny had tried to teach her the basics when she was a lad who didn't quite feel right becoming a man. Leona had kept up communication with Granny for her sabbatical away from the Rez, writing her long letters in English with whatever Cree she could remember or find on the internet. Granny's replies would always be briefer, in English and Cree, inviting her to come home even though there would be very few who would welcome her back. Now, paradoxically, Leona felt as 'unseen' by the people she grew up with as a fly on the wall. Insignificant in their eyes, as she surmised, perhaps because she looked nothing like Leon. Perhaps because she was more Injun than anyone who stayed on the Reserve. Or perhaps it was written in the Arrowhead Casino protocol manual that you only smile at strangers if it looks like they have lots of money they want to spend on booze, over-priced moose-meat and banuck, or lady luck at the gambling table.

But Leona felt one set of eyes looking on her, the kind that happened when you were a round hole in a square peg world. This time it was from a White man. A Catholic Priest, who was very White, ministering to a Native parishioner with a Russian accent. It was odd that he was Catholic and yet Slavic, as the only way of being Catholic East of Prague was to be Eastern Orthodox. But Leona's suspicions about what was not right with this Priest were replaced by rage at what he was, and was saying to a Jackie Winterhalt, Indian Princess Home Coming Queen twenty years ago who the then dumpy-looking Paul yearned to have even one date with. Jackie was now 50 pounds heavier and a heap lot uglier both between the ears and below the neck. But it seemed that she still loved Paul, or wanted to. She clung to the Priest in a desperate embrace, shooing off the vagabond 'Pagan' Leona with his angry eyes while he continued to console the parishioner. "Paul Zimmerman was a Christian man, as you are a Christian woman. A God loving man, A God FEARING man, Who knew that the only way to the Father is through his Son, Jesus Christ. Savior of us all," he said.

It was a lie, as Leona felt it, and as Paul believed it to be as well. But Jackie seemed to need to believe it, and it was this Priest's job to say it. And he did so in the allotted time, as he snuck a look at his watch to note the time. "All on schedule," he seemed to say to himself as he gave

Jackie a blessing and invited the next mourner to be consoled by him. Moving the line closer to the coffin. Being sure that there were even more people in front of Leona now than before.

Behind Leona came someone even more indifferent than the Priest. Someone who still harbored feeling for her that she never resolved, and probably never would. “You have a lot of nerve coming here, dressed like that!” a sixty year old impish woman with a blacker than black dress, bobbed brown hair, pale skin and tearful eyes blasted at Leona while still smiling to everyone else who was looking at her.

“This is a funeral, Mom. I’m half Indian. As was my brother Paul. And as WERE most of the people in this room,” Leona replied, calmly and as compassionately as she could, “I’m honoring Paul and what he believed in by coming here, as I am.”

“Dressed like that! In a Pagan dress. Which is a dress, LEON! I wish it were you who died and not your brother.” She broke down in tears, turning her back on Leona.

A handsome, tall man with long black hair generously interspersed with natural grey streaks and very Redskin features came up behind the woman, putting his long, strong hands around her. “Your mother’s still upset with the surgery you had done,” he said to Leona.

“Am about to have, Dad,” Leona answered the man clad in a plain black suit who was the only Injun in the room not wearing a two hundred dollar Boland around his neck or a fashion-designer tie pushed up to the neck like a hang-noose. “But I didn’t yet. Financial considerations.”

“Thank God!” Leona’s mother, Emily, said, crossing herself in the Catholic AND Eastern Orthodox manner.

“You’re thanking God because I’m still your ‘son’, technically, or because I’m broke?” Leona shot back, unable to control herself. Hoping that the only weapon she would use would be her voice this time. If Emily gave her another one of those ‘stares’, Leona would not be responsible for her counter-attack,

Leona’s father, Tom, intervened as the Peacemaker, once again. He gently put one of his big, strong right hand on Leona’s shoulder to calm her down, and the left arm around Emily’s hunched over, shaking back to try to console her. “Leona, Emily. This is not the time,” he said to both of them,

“It’s name is Leon,” Emily spat back at Tom, then the progeny who she had written off years ago as both defective and dangerous. “Not Leona. Both of you, have some respect for Paul here.”

“I do,” Leona said, reconnecting to the Compassionate or at least pragmatic Core inside of her. “I came here, like this, to honor Paul’s wishes, and Soul.”

“A CHRISTIAN Soul,” Emily insisted, as she grabbed hold of the cross around her neck, twisting it in her hand with desperation as it seemed to choke the words out of her mouth. “Who

died of a...yes, heart attack,” she said to herself. “The Coroner said so, so it has to be true, right Tom?” she continued, looking to Tom for an affirmation of that wish.

Tom nodded ‘yes’, as such is what Emily needed to believe and, as Leona felt it, he needed to believe such too.

“Tom didn’t believe in Pagan magic or Old Injun fairy tales, right Tom?” Emily asked her husband.

Tom nodded ‘yes’ to Emily, then hugged the affirmation of such into her. With a clear eye-line to her father for the first time, Leona asked him with her eyes what was going on. Helplessness was the only answer he could give to it all. And the hope that the Great Spirit would take care of Paul better than his fellow brethren here did. But it was time for the gracefully aging elder of the family to speak to the only ‘tribe’ he had left.

“Paul would have wanted us to get along,” he said to his wife and son-soon-to-be-daughter. “And for us to send him to wherever he is going with whatever Faith or Magic works,” he continued, noting a bag of sweet-grass in Leona’s left pocket.

Tom, master of discretion, gently took Emily to another group of mourners. He then looked at the Priest, and TOLD him, with his fingers, to move the line away so Leona could say goodbye to her beloved brother.

As the line cleared away, Leona seemed reluctant to go up to the coffin. Not because of the stares she was getting from people she knew in the past who saw her as a drunken squaw just off the bus after being in a rehab facility. Or the few sets of eyes that seemed to think she looked familiar, mostly the married men who perhaps were more interested in a new mistress who didn’t blimp out like their once-attractive trophy wives did. And not because of the very-well dressed White mourners around, who seemed to have Eastern European faces and mannerisms, who all seemed to be hiding as much under their coats as behind their confident eyes. No, it had to do with unfinished business with Paul. She hesitated, terrified to cross the wall that materialized in front of her remorseful eyes that set in between herself and her brother.

Another set of eyes pulled Leona in, and wouldn’t let her go. Granny commanded Leona to go up to the coffin and face her brother, her past and perhaps her Maker. It was a command that Leona wished she could have disobeyed, but couldn’t.

On the way up to the coffin, Leona kept her ears, nose and eyes open while trying to get a glimpse of what people were looking at through the series of mirrors in the room. Yes, men were looking at her with yearning, the once-attractive Injun princesses with envy. Yes, the White mourners, especially those in ‘Church going’ cowboy attire, were mumbling more amongst themselves in Russian and other European languages than English. The Priest’s coat smelled of extractions from female as well as male reproductive organs. And there was a coldness to Paul’s body.

She knelt down next to the corpse. To bring some kind of life into it, or resurrect the Soul inside of it with a softly delivered prayer in Cree, mispronounced most probably, and improvised in parts, but Paul would understand. Most certainly Granny, with the kind of ears that could hear a crow cawing in the woods a mile away while trucks are zooming past her at full speed on the highway, would correct her for her mispronunciations later. As the prayer became a song, Leona burned sweet-grass over him. She looked at him more closely. Paul had been artificially altered to look 'A OK', as the lines around the lips and ocular sockets were not consistent with the rest of the face. His eyes registered fear. His face registered terror. She blessed his left wrist than his right. The latter contained some slashes, but they were very fresh, missing the blood vessels underneath. Rope burns were around both of the wrists and the ankles. And under his sleeve, injection marks. Fresh ones, from someone who refused to go to any doctor for anything, even a tetanus shot. And someone who had kept his body clean of all foreign substances, even weed. And inside his mouth, the smell of 'mouse', reminiscent of hemlock. As for the injected toxin, such would require blood work. As for taking out samples from the chest and abdomen, that would have to be done more discretely.

Through a mirror, Leona noticed the 'Russian cowboys' talking with the Tribal Police, all of them looking curiously at the strangely attractive, familiar-looking Indian chick who was lingering at the coffin for a longer period than they were comfortable with. With them were young, attractive young women who had lifeless faces and hopeless eyes, each attached by what seemed to be an visible chain that was attached to their 'owners'. As the men had the guns, and Leona and the 'nieces' with them didn't, it was a wise thing to move on to what she COULD do something about. Armed with the painful knowledge that Paul was murdered, and the conviction that his death was only the tip of the iceberg of something very evil that had taken over the Reservation she once called home. And that before going anywhere else, she had to put her former house and teepee back in order, no matter what it took. And it was for more than just her own tribe now. Leona caught a glimpse of one of the 'nieces', a slender red-haired, Paleface beauty no older than 15 made up to look like she was an established, and legal, 23 year old. When her uncle wasn't looking, she lowered her scarf, pretending that it was hot, turning the view of what was underneath to Leona. Then staring into Leona's eyes, hoping she could do something about what was underneath it.

Leona didn't recognize the brand of the metallic collar underneath her scarf, but she no doubt knew what it was used for. Such was confirmed when the bearer of it was called back into obedience by her uncle, one of the Russian cowboys, who saw what she was doing and pressed something in her pocket. The electric jolt shocked the red-haired beauty back into a state of 'submissive'. She re-wrapped her fashion scarf over her neck and limped back to her owner with as a seductive gait, asking him to forgive her for her transgression. "We'll see," he said with his cold, indifferent eyes.

Meanwhile, Leona looked around the room to see who else had noticed what had happened. One person did. Tom, her father tried to assess what was going on, and made steps towards Leona. But before he could, Emma turned him around saying 'no' with intense affirmation, and unbridled terror.

Leona considered what to do, not having a plan in mind yet. But she was now determined more than ever to get to the bottom of whatever was going on here. As she perused the room with her eyes as discretely as possible. Leona felt herself pulled back to the world she entered after leaving the Rez which she never talked about with her family and would never talk about to anyone on the legal side of the law. Yes, Leon was a good soldier when he signed up for service in the regular Army to see the world and maybe make a difference in it, an exceptional soldier when he was admitted to the special forces program after he displayed an intelligent set of reflexes in combative situations, and a very unofficial soldier when he accepted the offer to work for contractors who the US Military paid off in hard, cold cash. Cash that he hoped, one day, would be spent the way HE saw fit after he deserted his post on that fateful that made him an outlaw to both the good guys and the bad guys. Those worlds were about fight or flight, depending on the circumstances. Just when Leona was getting a crude intuitive Vision of these circumstances, she felt a hand on the back of her shoulder. Perhaps it was a real hand, perhaps it was one of those ghosts. This time, he would not run away or go ballistic. Renewed with the strength that only Leona could provide, he/she turned around, prepared to stand her/his ground against this mighty foe.

The opponent smiled, all 98 pounds of her. “Go, do what you need to do,” Granny said to Leona, handing her a business card. “But be very, very careful.”

With that, Granny left the room, as unnoticed as when she was there. Leona looked at the card, and the face on it smiling back at her. The graphics on the Arrowhead Casino card redeemable for ten dollars of White Wampum to its bearer portrayed a welcoming Indian Chief in full headdress. His face was very warm, kind, and inviting. But with only one problem. His facial structure was very White, and after one deciphered what had been photo-shopped prior to the picture being taken, ominously familiar to both Leona, and Leon. Then again, every demon looks familiar when you find yourself stuck in hell trying to rescue those pulled into the murky, smoke filled pits.

CHAPTER 4

The Cherokee came back from the trail of tears after being displaced from their ancestral land in Georgia by becoming the biggest producers of wheat, livestock and other goods West of the Mississippi barely a year after their arrival, becoming rich by even White man's standards. As measured by how much Wampum they had in their pockets. How much pride they had in their economic potentials. And, as was inevitable, how many Black slaves they had working their land. Of course, the slave they wanted most to be working their fields was Andrew Jackson, the 'landlord' who evicted them from their Ancestral lands in Georgia and the Carolinas.

The Thunder Mountain Reservation had far more Cree, Sioux, Denei, Northern Apache and Blackfoot in its pedigree than Cherokee, but there was something very odd about the economics of the Casino here as Leona entered it. It was loaded with White patrons who loved the spectacle of it all, and Asians obsessed with staying at the gambling table as long as their luck held up. All watched by Easterners Europeans trying to look like cowboys or Indians, and Indians trying to look like White Russians. Each of the European 'uncles' had a 'niece' on his arm a third of his age, as did many of the upscale Indians doing their best to look and feel white. But, oddly enough, very few of the nieces were Indians.

From behind a blond wig with big hair and matching Niemann Markus 'Real Hot and in Charge of Everyone Housewives of New Jersey' outfit, Leona observed so many of the people she knew as kids now all grown up as adults. All working at the tables, the bar or the overpriced banuk concession stand feeling good about their new jobs. Truth be told, Leona feared that if they stayed on the Rez they would have joined the 40 percent of Indians who had no jobs to go to in the morning, and a bottle of booze to keep them going till the end of the day, or the end of the life. Though they were serving drinks, they didn't look like they were consuming them. At least in the light from the lamps atop of the ceilings in the building which had been a storage barn back in the 1880s, a Christian school in the 1890s, an auditorium after the Great Depression where there were fewer and fewer plays and powwows, and then a rehab center that was nearly burnt down by one of the stoned managers. No, this building was now a place of employment, and a place where Injuns were making money. But for who? And how?

Leona sashayed around the tables in 'man hunting mode', peering through her "Bangles" sunglasses at the money going from the patrons to the house, and vice versa. A quick calculation said that it was more or less an equal exchange. In keeping with the promise of the Arrowhead Chief's picture on the wall pledging that in HIS house, 'The customer always comes away a winner.' But with what goods? Perhaps Granny, who was notably not here and who did not answer her phone nor door when Leona came-knocking, would know. The childless woman known as "Granny" to everyone on the Rez since they were knee high to anything was always good with numbers and, till now anyway, was the most valuable book-keeper for all of the businesses on the Rez. Or maybe this was one of those lucky days for the customers that would be made up for in stages by the house later on. Only finding out what was behind the doors in the back of the Casino guarded by large framed men with Red and White skin would tell. Men who Leona did not know, but who she was determined to get to know, anyway she could.

With features that were half Indian and half White, Leona could slip between worlds very easily. Though she admired her Red Skinned ancestors for standing up to cannons and machine guns with lances and arrows, she knew that wars are won by superior weaponry, or failing that, superior intel. Leona super-loaded her cell phone prior to coming into the Rez with all of the bells and whistles with respect to taking pictures, recording voices, then checking data bases on the internet with regard to the people recorded and photographed. Those bases, accessible through the passcodes Leona knew but never wrote down, were far more international than the installer of them on the OFF-Rez computer store knew, or ever could know. A remnant of Leona's days as Leon before she dropped out of the various professions she was all too good at.

After making the rounds, looking with her eyes as well as her technology of everything the average customer was supposed to see here, she retreated to a table in a dark corner, pretending to be on her earphone yapping away in 'Longgggisslandese' to her girlfriends back east about the Injun boy-toys she would bring into her penthouse teepee that night. She actually felt herself getting into the role, enjoying being 'taken care of' by an absent hubby who had something on the side of his own but would keep the money trail to her 'flowing like river in springtime from snowy mountain' as long as she kept her big, overly-lip-glossed mouth quiet about it. But the fantasy about living someone else's life vanished quickly when someone she knew came up to her. She shut off the phone in her hand, hopefully before the intruder saw what she was really looking at, via the link to a website only the most trusted, or devious, high level government staff had access to.

"Miss," the six foot 3 man with a tightly-pulled back long black pony tail said with his hand extended to her phone. "May I have a look your phone?"

It was the kind of question that could only be answered 'yes, of course, Sir,' to a man who was never denied any request. But he was a man, and Leona was, at least with regard to everything except the lingering vestigial organ between her legs, a highly desirable and commanding woman. "Is there a problem?" she asked Russell Johnston, all-star Athlete in every sport on the field, and under the sheets afterwards, to the best of her recollection. Russell almost made it to the NFL as a first-draft pick from the Denver Broncos. To improve his chances for the next year, he played with the Saskatchewan Rough Riders in Canada, injuring his left knee irreparably in game which won the team a place in the playoffs and sent him back to the Rez to coach, or warn, others about putting too many eggs in one fragile basket.

Russell didn't recognize Leona, despite the fact that she had played many games shoulder to shoulder with him when Leon and his brother Paul wanted to explore their athletic potential back in High School. "Thank the Great Spirit for that save," Leona said to herself, while Russell, in a fine, top end suit with a name-tag on his lapel that only acknowledged him by first name, continued to keep his hand out.

"I need to see if you were taking pictures at the tables," he said. "It's against the rules," he continued, pointing to a sign on the wall.

"What happens at the Arrowhead stays at the Arrowhead. Please, respect your fellow customers' confidentiality," Leona read in her most obnoxiously crude Longgggisslandese recalled from

reruns of “The Nanny”, daring to take off her sunglasses to do so. “I must have not seen the sign, sorry,” she said, keeping her eyes directly on Russell all the time.

Russell did not recognize Leona’s face. Point for her home team, she thought. Potential weapon for rest of game, she projected. But Russell had a job to do, and he held firm. “I need to see your phone,” he insisted.

“Sure, no problem,” Leona said as she handed him the phone, pressing the hidden ‘delete’ feature which would save the data in her special files that could not be accessed, nor detected. Or so she hoped anyway, as the new software had not been road-tested yet.

“Just plain Russell’ looked at the items on the phone. His face went from concern to curiosity to confusion then to...

“Yeah, I chuckle each time I see it too,” Leona replied at the family picture of her ‘hubby back East’ at a recent Halloween party that she had planted on the phone. “Him and his secretary at an office party. That’s him, drunk, wearing the dress, and her, sober I think, with that ‘I got you anyway I want now’ smirk on his horny, selfish face.”

“The last taboo,” Russell smiled, handing the phone back to Leona. “Sorry to have inconvenience you,” he continued, with defeated eyes that reeked of sorrow and regret if you looked deep enough into them. Perhaps even guilt. “Enjoy your stay at the Arrowhead,” the man who affirmed as a kid that he would ‘not be anyone’s Red Nigger’ said with a customer service smile.

“Maybe if you eh...are still working here, I will?” Leona smiled back at him, pushing her luck, hoping that she was not putting too much on the table, and that the female charms in the cards she was holding would hold up to any bluff.

Russell smiled a ‘thank you anyway’, pointing to his wedding finger, a ring on it.

“Too bad, but if that ever comes off,” Leona smiled. She wrote a number on a napkin, handing it to him. Perhaps Russell was still Russell, somewhere. A fellow warrior who would join her in the fight that was ahead. Russell picked up the napkin, considered it, then reached into his wallet. He showed Leona a picture.

“You, a wife, and two happy kids,” she noted regarding the picture of a worried woman, a fearful man, and two very joyous youngsters.

“Who I care about a lot,” Russell said.

“And will do anything for to keep them happy, healthy and safe in a dangerous world,” she surmised, handing him back the photo.

Russell put the photo back in wallet and turned around to leave. Just when it appeared that he was moving on with what was left of his life, he turned back to Leona. "You do look familiar, though," he commented.

"We all do. The darker the room, the more familiar we seem. And you sometimes seem to us," Leona said, about to phase into her next identity, but holding back on it. For the moment anyway. Perhaps Russell did know something about what was going on between the 'uncles and the nieces'. And any other 'nieces' behind the well guarded doors that admitted special clients with darker sunglasses than hers. And the weapons three of the guards were carrying, state of the art pistols and more subtly designed bullet-less inactivating devices that had not made it to the gun-shows yet.

Russell left to tend to other duties at the poker table, putting on his poker face to deal with an Asian businessman whose eyes were shifting in a way that would make even the most naïve interrogator suspicious. After she was out of range of the inspectors at the Casino and the cameras above her, she could look at the pictures of the potential mobsters she had taken. But for now, her focus was on past memories and present re-acquaintances.

During her days back in the 'places of change and turmoil' as Leon, Leona developed a sense of if someone was lying, deceptive or just plain scared to want to know anything. Russell seemed to fit into that third category that most 'safety first' people did. As did every Redskin face in the Casino. It was a source of comfort to consider that whatever dirty business was being done here was as a result of Palefaces with bigger guns than Redskins reclaiming the land and everyone on it as their own. It was also a source of shame. Shame which Leona's brother Paul, and perhaps Granny, if she was still alive, had overcome. But, to be fair, people who valued the lives of other people could not be faulted for letting fear get the better of them. Not so for those who were 'necessary evils' like Leona, who had far larger and darker challenges to deal with.

Bringing her back to those obstacles, and demons, was a distorted reflection of her in a glass from a complimentary drink given to her by a waitress dressed in a skimpy but tastefully designed Indian Maiden outfit. Its deliverer was Ashley Deerclaw, now all grown up with the kind of boobs she dreamed about having when a child, and a curvy ass, rather than the 'straight like rail' hips that most Indian women had. "From the house, on the house," Ashley said with a perky smile.

"Heap powerful firewater, Pochahantis," Leona said in Longisslandese as she sniffed the 80 proof contents in the 20 proof-looking, pink umbrella-containing glass.

Ashley, who grew up defiantly proud of her Native heritage, seemed to ENJOY the condescending, overbearing racial slur. But such was Ashley's issue now. Leona had her own to deal with as she dared to take a small sip. Made all the more real by the reflection in the glass as she courted 'demon rums' enticement to go back to those dark days of living hell as a drunk on the Rez, and a soldier with a drinking problem in the field. This time, she saw the face of herself as Leon. Gaunt, then defeated, then sadistic, then possessed by a demon. Her ears heard gunshots, people screaming, begging for their lives. Then Leon realizing what he had become, overcome with guilt and terror. Then his mouth opening up, the mutilated bodies of the dead and

dying flowing out of them as he turned into a skeleton himself, degenerating into a cloud of hellish red toxic smoke that smelled of death.

“Something wrong?” Ashley inquired.

Leona woke up from that trance which once day would never let her go, and sniffed the drink again. It was not the usual mixture of rum, coke and vodka. “Who sent this over?” Leona asked. “Really.”

“House policy,” Ashley said. “But if you don’t want it, I can...”

Ashley took the drink back, placing it on the tray. Grabbing hold of it as if she would claim it as her own when the bosses weren’t looking.

“No, it’s okay,” Leona said, taking the drink back. Doing what she could to prevent at least one more beautiful Indian girl from becoming an ugly Injun drunk before her time. Or from ingesting something that someone behind the bar perhaps wanted only Leona to drink.

Leona looked over to the congregation of men behind the bar, wondering who was ‘courting’ her, and why. And how the courting could be turned into the game that Leona was plotting in her still-sober, still-thinking and still-alive head.

Leona was admittedly a slow learner. But one thing she had learned was that if something was fucked up in the short term, you couldn’t wait for the long term to fix it. One of the Eastern European cowboys next to the bar was trying to have his way with one of the ‘nieces’, watching the football game on the big screen with his buds. This niece was white, barely 15, and didn’t fit into her sexy cowgirl outfit any more than her terrified face matched the confident, grubby paws of her ‘Uncle’. With every forward pass his team accomplished on screen, he inched forward to share his Slavic victory yells with his private cheerleader. In stages, he moved his large left hand over her shoulder, and his grubby left under her skirt. The tremors in her frail, underfed body went up another notch on the Richter scale.

Leona worked her way over to them, timing her entrance for when the Slavic wannabe cowboys’ and gangsters’ team was just about to score a touchdown. She discretely grabbed hold of the fringes then attached fabric on the young woman’s dress. “Hey, girlfriend,” she said in her most tacky Brooklynese, thinking it better to change Boroughs accompanied by simulated gum chewing. “Really great outfit. Is that, like, a Guiber Jackson original? I used to design for them, ya know. Here...lemme see...lemme look at the lines, the stitchery, the...”

After the touchdown had been scored, and the mobsters had downed another shot of rockgut, the niece’s ‘uncle’ noticed Leona. Before he could say or think anything, he felt her presence as well.

“Hey ‘Guido number nothin’,” Leona whispered to the Uncle as he felt her firm, hard and non-nonsense fist grabbing hold of his very private parts. “You tell me who your REAL boss is or I’ll rip these balls of yours out and shove them your ass.”

While he was thinking about the proposition and the consequences of refusing it, Leona motioned for the Neice to make a beeline for the front door, aided by an offer of money to her for bus, cab or if gotten to the right clerk at the airport, plane fare. But the young girl remained, more afraid to leave than stay.

The Mobster Uncle smiled back at Leona. “She is my fiancée. From Old Country,” he said with a proud and confident smirk. “Who speak no English.”

“Who want no trouble,” the girl replied, with less of an accent than her ‘fiancée’. “Want work here.”

“Pleasing me, and others who take care of her,” the Mobster said with a proud, procedural grin. “We are two consenting adults here, and you will be charged with assault if you don’t put your hand back where it belongs,” he continued, pointing Leona’s attention to the Tribal Police in full uniform standing guard next to the wall behind them.

Leona was always a brave fighter, but never a stupid one. She let go of the Mobster Uncle’s private parts, putting aside for the moment that it would save a lot of medical bills if someone ripped her testicular tissue and associated phalanx out. “So, what kind of leash do you have this filly on?” she continued, with a more Uptown diction to her voice, and from the other side of the morality line, this time looking at the ‘niece’ like she was a piece of marketable meat, examining rather than looking at her. “Crack? Special K? Or some new exotic dope that you got her hooked on? Or maybe she’s being a good girl to protect the safety of her kid or little sister back in ‘old country?’ Or an ex boyfriend who doesn’t deserve to---“

“---She is my fiancée,” the Uncle said. “And you have watched too many movies. This is real life, and you---“

“---Will want to do business with your boss,” she said. “Who keeps good kroysha, da?”

“I am Albanian, not Russian,” the junior level mobster with the inflated head said with a condescending eye-roll.

“Da, I know,” Leona replied.

“And what else do you know, or think you know?” he said whimsically after being noticed and joined by his buddies from ‘old country’.

“That we all are going to be working together, very soon,” Leona replied, in Albanian.

“Why?” the next level up junior mobster inquired as the girl’s ‘fiancée’ was absorbing the shock of Leona being for real.

“Because I am a necessary evil,” Leona continued in Albanian, one of those tongues she picked up while in the Balkans doing UN Peacekeeping duty, or so her military dossier said anyway. “And I know things about you, your friends, and your bosses that you don’t. And I know things about this place, and its people, that all of you should.”

The words were pre-rehearsed, and Leona had nearly exhausted her Albanian vocabulary. A fact that she hoped, and prayed, her new collaborators would not pick up nor detect as they conferred amongst themselves. Meanwhile, Leona had to answer the call of duty, biological duty that is. “I will be in there, while you are making the arrangements,” she said as she pointed to the rest rooms, making her way to them.

But before she did, she turned around one time, calling over Ashley. “A steak with all the trimmings for this girl,” she commanded in Longislandese, handing over the wad of liberation cash to her as payment. “And steak dinners for all of her roommates.”

“She doesn’t have any roommates,” the Albanian mobster said regarding his new ‘wife’ as he brought her closer to him, displaying a ‘happy hug’. One which, unless you were looking to see what was really going on, seemed mutual.

By the confounded look in Ashley’s face, she knew nothing about what was behind the guarded back doors than what she was supposed to. Just that money came out of there, and on time.

But as in all times of war and those uneasy times in between, when you have to go you have to go. “I’ll be in there,” Leona said as she pointed to the ladies room logo. “And I expect to have you arrange what you have to out here while I’m gone,” she repeated to the Mobster Uncle. “Or sooner. My card. I’ll expect to hear from you by midnight, or tomorrow I take my business to your competitors.”

Leona gave the next level up Mobster her card, making the niece’s husband feel as small as she could. Standard protocol for working your way up the ladder, in that time honored tradition of moving up by pushing others down.

CHAPTER 5

Leona's decision to go into the men's can rather than the ladies' washroom was based on two very real facts. First, the line to the woman's room was long and she had to make an exit from her new 'collaborators' as soon as possible. Second, the men going into their latrine seemed more devious than the women. And if it's one place where men talk about things they do to other women, it's the little boys' urinal while they are evacuating the fluid from their wee-wees. And if there was one thing that Leona did remember it was that the plumbing and sewage system at the 'big hut' which was now the Casino had room for only one bathroom on the ground floor.

One of the men milling around the little boys' room was uniformed, Deputy Sheriff Stevenson according to the name-tag on his Tribal Police uniform. At least HE was entitled to have a nametag with a surname on it. Throughout the night he was taking regular piss breaks, every ten minutes or so. Maybe it was the 'coffee' he was drinking or the donuts that were always in his mouth. But it was not his bladder condition that drew Leona into eyeing him as the first cop to employ, or avoid. He seemed the quietest amongst his peers, and most aloof. Both here and, as Leona recalled, when he was in his civilian black suit at Paul's funeral.

Between Stevenson's third and fourth 'bladder break', when the facility seemed empty, Leona snuck into the men's room, quickly finding a stall to hide out in. As she was planting a microphone, she noticed that she was not the only woman in there. The stall next to her had two feet with shaved legs in it. Between two feet with hairy ones, which she discovered few hot and heavy moments later. Between the heavy breathing, there was some talking. Mostly promises about 'eternal love' that would be fulfilled forever and ever. At least in the imagination of the seemingly young lovers. The aroma of reproductive secretions was then quickly replaced by hallucinogens as they both celebrated with a smoke of cocaine-infused pot. Stevenson came into the room just as they were finishing, heading to the urinal for another long whiz, which by the sounds of it was more like a small, long delayed tinkle.

From the cracks in the stall walls, Leona could see both lovers quickly dressing and placing their feet atop the toilet seat. And Stevenson smiling with vicarious delight at what was transpiring between them. Stevenson seemed particularly proud of his own penile erectile organ, then hid it quickly when two three other men came in. They were as different from each other in dress and temperament as Moe, Larry and Curly. But none of these movers and shakers were anyone's Stooges. One was a rich White cowboy from Texas oil country, according to his diction, upscale Western duds, laments about how Dallas lost the game to the New York Giants and complaints about the coldness of the November Montana air. The other spoke with a Middle Eastern accent that was heavily tinged with very proper British vocabulary, not a hair on him out of place. The third was a Chinese gentleman who came off as humble to his business associated but felt superior to them economically, socially and culturally. The talk between them was brief, but boastful. About the bargain they were getting from the back room 'merchandise', rating it with numbers. Never referring to what, or who, the merchandise referred to of course.

Stevenson listened as the men continued to talk, as if he wasn't even there. Indeed, maybe he wasn't. Leona got a closer look at his face through hole in the stall wall as the Redskinned Lone Ranger stared at himself in the mirror. He seemed lost in a world of his own, unable to get out.

And unable to do anything about it. Meanwhile, Moe, Larry and Curly finished their bodily functions and left, checking out the condom machine on the way out, making fun of the blue collar graphics. The Texas oil mogul jokingly asked Stevenson if he had change for a hundred, pulling out a Franklin. Stevenson did, and happily retrieved it. With it, he purchased not only one but three condoms for each of the gentleman. "Be careful out there, gentleman," he smiled at them, more like a waiter than a lawman. The Texan offering him a tip. He refused it, not saying why.

The three now-protected Wisemen left the bathroom, leaving Stevenson inside. The Deputy Sheriff looked into the mirror again, his eyes connecting the hole in the stall behind which Leona was hiding. For what felt like ten seconds he stared at the hole, with desperate intensity. His cell phone rang abruptly, pulling his attention elsewhere. Without saying a word he followed the orders of the text message and left the room. Next to leave were the two lovers. They were, as Leona suspected, young. And very much in lust with each other, having enjoyed the thrill of doing it in the mens room. She wondered if the next place would be the ladies room or perhaps even Stevenson's bedroom while he was taking a shit in the can. But such was for consideration at a later date. For now, it would be a night of waiting.

Leona spent the rest of the night in the rental car she had taken out using one of the credit cards she had on reserve from the old days. She parked in a discrete area of the lot outside the Casino, from which she could see both the front and back doors. There was nothing particularly odd about the traffic going in and out of those doors. And nothing very notable on listening device connected to the planted microphone. Between the flushes, belches and barfs that happen after 9 pm at any bar, particularly ones that serve firewater to Indians, she did hear some colorful conversations. Red dudes telling crude jokes about White ones. White Rednecks spouting 'Red Nigger digs' aimed at Injuns. And an assortment of attacks against bitchy women from men who were perhaps bastards or perhaps merely victims of the battle between the sexes. But from Stevenson and his superiors, nothing. Nothing that had anything to do with Paul's 'accidental heart attack', or his 'tragic suicide'. Nothing about the girls who were most probably chained up behind the back doors when not being showcased by their owners. Nothing about the other illicit trades of 'merchandise' which made the Casino lots of money behind the scenes while it was probably losing it at the front line gambling tables with the legitimate customers. Then the sounds of body functions and drunken banter about copulatory functions ended, replaced by footsteps that were very real, and outside microphone. Then, a flash of light pushed into Leona's face.

"Having car problem, Ma'am?" Stevenson asked from the other side of the flashlight.

"Yeah..." Leona said, faking a futile attempt to get the rental car going again, pumping the gas pedal in desperation. "Maybe if you can help me adjust the corroborator. Damn rental cars."

"Which will work if you stop flooding the engine," Stevenson said in the manner of a true gentleman. "You get more gas into the engine by touching the accelerator than pounding on it," he said.

Leona discretely shut the listening device off and gently touched the gas pedal. As she predicted, and perhaps Stevenson intended, it did the job. "Purring like kitten again. Thanks, officer."

"No problem, Ma'am," Stevenson said, tipping his hat to Leona. Seeming to see through her, not into her thoughts, but into her Soul somehow. Like he knew her deepest secrets, and was somehow ok with it. Under normal circumstances, something she yearned for from ANYone. But this was not a usual circumstance. As was the text that came into her cell. "Chief Boris will meet with you tomorrow at noon," it said. "In his office."

"No," she texted back. "MY office," she send back, nervously waiting for a reply.

The next ten seconds felt like ten years. Perhaps Leona had overplayed her hand? Perhaps feminine charm rather than seductively bitch mode was the best way to finally meet Chief Boris. A name with which she was very familiar, but then again, just as every second Greek was named Nick, every third Russian was named Boris. One of those traditions of having the first born being named after the paternal grandfather, the next by the maternal one.

"Something wrong?" Stevenson asked, his heart extended, his mind somewhere in his own universe which had nothing to do with the one Leona was about to dive into.

"I'm okay, as long as..." she said, stopping herself when the answer came back. "Your office then, but ten o'clock rather than noon."

Leona smiled with delight, and confidence, texting the location, with a special note attached. "Bring lunch, a coat and an appetite for some tantalizing conversation."

"So, you are ok," Stevenson asked Leona.

"We'll see tomorrow at noon," she replied, not knowing or caring if he picked up on anything she had said. He was probably a harmless victim of whatever was going on, like everyone else. Who knew as much about Chief Boris as he did about Leona OR Leon Zimmerman.

CHAPTER 6

Leona's office was where she did her real Work, big W. There were many branches to that office. In Newton, Mass, it was the woods in back of her low-rent trailer. When working overtime in the lab in Beantown, it was under the window where the few plants she could keep alive inside still flourished. Out here, it was a new branch at an old location she had known about since she was a child, but never quite knew until now. This time she had an assistant, a new worker who flew in specially for the occasion.

"Yeah, I'm finally back," she said to the Raven that perched itself on a precarious tree-limb on the outskirts of the Medicine Wheel on a secluded meadow an eight of a mile hike off the road over the hill that was proudly called Thunder Mountain. A place of special power to those who could hear the Silence. A collection of rocks some deluded Pagan Injuns put into a circle to those who chose to keep their third eye closed.

"Granny's Medicine Wheel," Leona said to her Life assigned avian co-Worker. "Others before her. And...hmmm...maybe mine, someday." she continued, edging her way to the outer edge of the circle of stones, considering whether it was appropriate for her to enter into it.

The Raven flew in and tugged at the bottom of her black cape accompanying her low long flowing beaded dress of the same color. Talking to her in a language she could feel more easily than translate.

"I know, all of this black," she replied to the bird's inquiry. "Not traditional Cree, Sioux, Blackfoot or even Apache, but...It's necessary camouflage for the suits who can't handle seeing who and what I really am and their boss, who..." Leona took off the top layer of the dress, looking at a blossom bordered by well-endowed, sized-perfect and highly-priced breasts, then moving aside the slit on the skirt that went up nearly to her waist.

The Raven cawed in approval, seeming to be impressed with Leona's hard earned and fully-paid for feminine anatomy.

"I'm hoping he likes it as much as you do. For different reasons, of course," she smiled back at the Raven as he tugged at the the hem of her dress again, this time forcing her to trip then fall face down into the middle of the circle. She felt its power from every portion of her body, which now felt light and heavy, both at the same time. As if it and every part of her now mostly-transformed body had merged with the Earth below it and the sky above, and everything in between.

The Raven cawed up to the sky, offering the prayer of 'thanks' on her behalf in bird speak, which was far more intricate and deep than any human language. He stood guard between her and the pathway up from the road and let her have her own dialog with the Beyond.

"I thank You for forcing me to come back here," she said to the Spirit in the sky and earth. Then to each of the four directions. She settled on the sky for the rest of the Communication, big C. "I know I've stayed away for way too long. And I should have come back sooner. But I wasn't

ready yet. Science says that you don't exist, you know. Psychiatry says that you are just an imaginary friend built on constructs of what we fear, love or want to become. But I say that...I'd like you to exist. That I need You to exist. And that I need to be as effective an Instrument of your Will, or best intentions, as possible. I know that Granny said this in Cree words that are not as awkward or long winded or as non-musical as mine. And that I only listened to them with half an ear. But I have both ears wide open now. And need, no, want you to give some clear and understandable instructions to me in ten minutes or so," she said, still cognizant of human time, checking with her watch.

The Raven cawed, pointing Leona's attention to the sound, then sight, of two black cars that extended the walking path into a road, edging up the hill slowly but deliberately.

"Or...now," Leona said to the Lord and Lordess up in the sky. "The Eternal now," she continued with a mild chuckle. "That's a joke," she said by way of explanation. "Maybe we can laugh at it later, if indeed you, they or I make it possible for there to BE a 'later' for me."

The Raven flew in front of the lead car, cawing at it. It stopped, at his command. Three mobsters, one Native American with slicked back, recently shorn hair and two with matching Slavic goatees came out of the lead car. All were dressed in 'business attire' black, all well armed with guns that looked light, efficient and deadly. The newest model of everything. But the crow stood his ground, disallowing them entry past his checkpoint.

The Native American mobster pulled back from the Raven. One of his Slavic co-workers laughed at him. The other aimed his gun at the bird, ordering it to move, then firing a warning shot in front of its feet. The bird held its ground, cawing all the more loudly at them. The Native mobster put away his weapon and backed away, then looked Leona straight in the eye. Her penetrating stare was too much for him to handle.

"This place, and everyone here is bad medicine," the apparently well-paid and well-groomed Indian warned his comrades, turning his head away from Leona's piercing eyes.

"Bad medicine corrected with good shot, first aimed at bird," the self-elected gunman said, aiming his weapon at the bird. "Who if he had any brains, would fly away and leave us alone."

"Leave the bird alone!" Leona heard from a man in the second car. He emerged slowly from the back seat, another two bodyguards next to him, one Native and the other Slavic. "It's bad manners and bad business to kill those who are in our way when we can work around them, or perhaps with them." As he approached, Leona could make out his features slowly. First, his deliberate, confident stride, every motion of his limbs as minimal as possible. Then his broad shoulders, made to seem all the more handsome and frightening by the cut of his black jacket, despite the fact that he was six inches shorter than any of his subordinates. Then his face, chiseled at the chin with tightly held cheekbones. Then his eyes, which were ominously familiar to Leona, telling her that she was a key point in a merging of life coincidences and karma which few people are blessed, or cursed, to ever experience.

“My associates call me Mister Petrovitch,” he said with a welcoming smile as he approached Leona, who still remained inside the medicine wheel, feeling a need to access its power, wisdom and protection. Rather than shooting the bird or challenging it, he walked a good twenty feet around it, tempering his own fear of the bird as best as he could. Taking his position at a spot that the bird seemed to approve of, as well as his alluringly-clad Pagan Mastress. “My supporters, fans and friends call me Chief Boris,” he continued. “But you, can call me whatever pleases you. And what should I call you to please you?”

“Leona,” she replied, out of bravado or perhaps stupidity, the words coming out of her mouth without pre-thinking about it, thinking afterward that it would have been far better to use one of her former or perhaps a new alias. To the man whose vicious eyes were embedded deep into the photo-shopped image of the welcoming Indian Chief on the Arrowhead Casino logo. The man who seemed by all of Leona’s logic and intuition to be the man in charge here, nay, the Mench in Command. And the man who was once her closest and most trusted comrade back when she was Leon, in the places where comradeships and alliances are tested hardest. The memory of those times flashed through her head.

The first frame of the movie within Leona’s mind was seen through the nose. She recalled having Leon’s large nose and an overgrown strip of hair under it which when combed out right was a handlebar mustache. Through the tuft of dried, snotty, sweat and blood-stained hair came the aroma of dried dust, burning wood and degenerating human flesh. Then the touch of a military uniform with insignias ripped off of them against young Leon’s desert-dried skin. Then the sound of women screaming for help to Allah above after being dragged out of their houses along with what was left of their families by Leon’s comrades below, and dumped into what had been a coral for goats and sheep in the middle of the village square.

“We know nothing. No terrorists here! Just old men, helpless children and widowed women!” the one most conversant in English said with their mouth, eyes and tears.

“Bullshit!” ‘Colonel’ Petrovitch replied as he wiped his brow, nodding for his Corporal to deliver a punch into the woman’s belly, the first one to be delivered away from where her very pregnant womb would be. Then placing the fist for the second one straight in line with the terrorist in training incubating inside of her. All according to the Company’s procedure. A Company hired by the Army to do the kind of work that would get the Generals pulled in front of Congress for a class action dishonorable discharge and a lifetime in jail for war crimes. “We come here to build schools for your daughters, and protect you, from men who want to kill you and you give us more bullshit!”

“No Taliban terrorists here,” the woman elected by the rest of her villagers to speak to their NATO ‘liberators’, using the best English she could recall from her 3 years living in Cleveland with her Uncle. Meanwhile the other woman’s fear of the Law and Security Unit was turning into hatred for them and the countries which sent them. “We are not Taliban terrorists!” the woman insisted, inviting every one of the other women to say the same, in the best English they could pronounce. Particularly the ones who had children with them. Their houses had been searched, shot into, and in some cases ‘accidently’ burned after killing five men who were close

enough to the pictures they were given to shoot first and ask questions of the surviving relatives later. Those survivors all seemed too scared to be lying, but Petrovitch thought otherwise.

“You are not trained as well as I am,” he said with a warm, even fatherly voice to the woman. “Perhaps you can tell me about someone who looks like a terrorist. Or who you think might be a terrorist. Who is hiding somewhere here that maybe you know about, or one of the other women, old men, or children know about.”

“You have a quota of heads to take home with you?” she challenged.

“We have information, and, yes, quotas also,” he whispered in her ear. “Ten to fifteen according to my boss’ calculations and requirements. That we will meet by getting the answer out of you, or any of the other women, or children in this shitty, insignificant village that no one will miss when it’s gone. Maybe someone else will tell me what I need to know,” he said as he motioned his finger up and down the rows of contained ‘bystandards’ with his right index finger, as well as the point of the pistol with his left hand.

That possible ‘someone else’ was an old man, mostly crippled and half blind, being escorted out of a coup barely large enough to keep chickens. “Maybe HE saw something,” Leon offered as he helped the old man across the main street of the village to the interrogation tent. “Or he knows someBODY,” ‘Major’ Leon offered.

“Hmmm...maybe he does,” ‘Colonel Boris’ replied, a plan brewing in his head. That plan was already intuited by his ex-French Legionnaire enforcer and his two British-born now Irish assistants, officially a Sargent and two privates.

The old man was put against the wall, one gun pointed at his head, the other at his crotch. The interpreter asking him in Arabic where the terrorists were. The old man smiled, and simply said, with a calm voice, “I don’t know, but since you think I do, let Allah’s will be done,” first in his own language, then very clearly in English that he learned in school, then in Russian that, perhaps he had learned in Chechnya.

“He’s not afraid of dying, which means he’s telling the truth,” Leon said.

“No, that means that he is lying to us!” Boris said. “But maybe if his telling us what we need to know, or can use, involves someone who is closer to the cradle than the grave...” The Russian commander of the international unit let the business end of his rifle peruse the faces of the young women and more mature girls in the cattle pen, letting it chose the one with the most innocent face and kind eyes. “Him!” he commanded the ex-Legionnaire Sergeant. “The one who looks like she is this old coot’s granddaughter.”

Leona recalled how Leon tried to stop his comrades from snatching the young woman from her prematurely-aged mother’s arms. And how the eyes of everyone else in his Unit were possessed by the rush of dominating an already conquered village in which most of the men died fighting for the NATO forces several months earlier. And how he, on other occasions, was pulled into the Wolf Pack by the thrill of the kill, the smell of blood and the ‘fun’ of being top dog in

whatever realm you decided to go into. Normally, Leon would have gone along with Boris. For the sake of the command integrity. For the sake of the Mission, which was, according to mental calculations, always for the greater good. And for the sake of, yes, the money he could get to send home to help his folks, and maybe to get a family of his own who didn't have to know anything about the Rez.

Leona also remembered what Boris had told Leon when, in an unexpected rash of conscience, he pulled the young woman away from his potential executioner, shielding her and her grandfather with his body while he pointed his weapon at his own troops. "You do remember why we're here, Leon," Boris said after ordering, then convincing his fellow soldiers to not drop Leon where he stood with clean shot which they all could easily get. "You remember who REALLY signs our checks. Or maybe you WANT to go back to being a Beat Cop in Cleveland for thirty thousand dollars a year? That is, if you can beat the charges raised against you there, and still can arrest you for now."

"For doing the right thing," Leon replied regarding those two cases in which the right side of morality was on the opposite side of the law, as well as Police Procedure. And the Blue Code of protecting one's fellow cops before protecting the public. "I did the right thing!" Leon said, trying to convince himself of such.

"At the wrong time, for the wrong people. Who hired the wrong lawyers, who, because you saved MY ass out here and in Africa, I can make things right with," Boris promised.

Leona recalled Leon remembering Boris' promise, and his ability to keep it. They had been in many campaigns together, in three continents. Boris had many talents, but his most valuable one was to remain on top of the totem pole no matter what Regime was in control of it. His status as one of the most powerful unknown men in Soviet Russia held firm during the Glasnost years and till the time when the Soviet Union was no more. A high level KGB security officer while at the same time being head of one of the major criminal networks that organization was mandated to stop. Who was doing the mercenary circuit for the adventure of it, and to investigate opportunities abroad.

"Well," Boris asked Leon again, as he looked at his watch, then the hills above the village. "Do you want me to make things right for you back home so you can go home?" he pressed.

"For a fee of?" Leon asked, still protecting the old man and the young woman.

Boris laughed. Madly and loudly. "Special sale today!" he announced, for all to hear, then delivered the rest of the pledge in a soft but sincerely meant whisper to Leon alone. "I take care of your legal problems. And your family problems at the Reservation. Who you are not able to take care of yourself anymore. Keep their asses out of jail, and the ground."

"My brother," Leon surmised, whispering it softly, his arm around the boy, his gun still keeping Boris' Wolf Pack at bay.

“All you have to do is...” Boris said with an honest, and sincere smile, again taking note of the time.

“Do the wrong thing here?” Leon said.

“The effective thing,” Boris explained into Leon’s very listening ear. “Giving me the pleasure of seeing you be the man I knew three ‘geological survey expeditions’ ago. By...hmmm. Fucking this woman.”

“An evil act.”

“Or making her think you will fuck her, unless her grandfather talks.”

“An evil gesture,” Leon contemplated, finally following Boris’ ‘logic’.

“We are both necessary evils, my friend,” Boris said as his final word regarding the matter.

Leona recalled how Leon somehow trusted Boris. How Leon lowered his weapon, then stood aside while his comrades in unofficial arms took the woman to one side of the street and stripped her nearly naked, and took her grandfather to the other side of the street and asked him more questions about what he knew about any remaining Taliban in the region.

“And now your turn,” Boris said, looking down at Leon, asking him to unzip his pants.

Leon delayed, then refused.

“Then my turn,” Boris said, dispassionately as he unbuttoned the hold on his copulatory cannon with his left hand, noting the time on the wrist as he laid his hand on the trigger of his rifle.

“And as I approach our dear lady there, the bait. You and the rest of our team of liberators will take note of the bigger fish up in the hills who---“

Boris nodded to his troops to take cover as gunfire from the hills poured down upon the village. “The Taliban who everyone said were not supposed to be here,” he explained to Leon after pushing his head and body under cover before his own.

Leona recalled how Boris always did protect his people from every other people, and how Leon was always his most valued ‘people’. Like a brother, father and uncle combined into one.

Leona recalled the rest of the details of that eventful day. How Boris had saved Leon from being killed at least three times. And how at the end of the fighting, he and Boris were the only men, or women, still standing, as the Taliban fighters considered the women in the village as expendable as the former NATO troops turned mercenary.

Leona also recalled how Leon tried to save the wounded, futilely trying to bring them back to life while Boris laughed, helping himself to a drink of vodka, then offering it to Leon. And how, for the first time in his legal and illegal military career, Leon refused. And how Leon decided on

that day to see the world sober, no matter how hard it would hurt his eyes, heart and far-from-innocent soul. And how Boris took out his rifle and shot at the crows that swooped down from the sky to feast on the bodies of those killed that day, scared of the birds far more than he was afraid of any Taliban.

“This means we are not friends anymore?” Boris said as Leon packed his gear, prepared to walk out into desert to get lost in it, somewhere, somehow. “Such may be the case,” Leona recalled Leon’s once-most-beloved comrade saying. “But you owe me!” he insisted. “I saved your life three times today. And three times before that! That makes five!”

“I saved your life too!” Leon yelled back,

“With bravery and distinction,” Boris said between gulps of Bolshevik firewater. “Three times. Which makes you owing me, let us see, three times. Which I will collect on one day. Someplace. Sometime.”

That someplace and somewhere was perhaps now. Leona noted that Boris in the very real present day was extremely interested in her now very feminized body, from the top of her long-haired head to legs that came in and out of view through the slit in her skirt that went up to her shapely hips. “You look familiar,” he said.

“We all do,” she replied as a woman flirting with a man. “And so do you to us, sometimes,” she continued as she sashayed out of the circle, noticing that Boris’ interest in her body as a man was replaced by something else.

The Raven came between her and Boris, trying to hold back his advance. The avian guardian launched out and pecked at his trousers, then arm. Boris froze, with the kind of terror that happens to soldiers paralyzed by fear. None of his men could see it, and it would be disastrous if any of them did. Death to his position as ‘Colonel’ or ‘Chief’ Boris. Connecting to the Lordess in the sky, and the woman that she wanted most to be, Leona said something in Cree to the bird, knowing that she probably mispronounced it and that the grammar was incorrect. “Leave him. He’s my responsibility to understand or neutralize now,” she thought it meant.

Whatever it meant, the Raven understood Leona’s alluringly delivered message and flew away. Boris’ reputation and by inference life, was saved. Leona counted one of the three debts paid off. With a hard and uncertain two more to go, as she motioned for Boris to join her for a private conference under a tree, which she vacated of avian observers, and hoped was free from any human ones as well.

The tree Leona chose to have the meeting under seemed much like the fabled 500 year old oak that Hippocrates used to do most of his teaching back Kos, a small, insignificant town relative to Athens, Hippocrates having saved Athens from a plague that nearly decimated it during the War with Sparta. As she sat on a moss-covered rock a few inches higher than the cold stone she had chosen for her guest, she wondered about Hippocrates. How his knowledge and practice of

medicine would have had even deeper dimensions to it if he had taught as man women as men. Or if he had ventured into the exploration most men consider at one time or another---becoming a woman, living as one a short while. Such was a required education for healers in many Native American tribes before a man was allowed to treat patients of both genders. And, truth be told and cataloged, most of the actors and writers in contemporary times who took it upon themselves to heal the collective human soul through the Arts had at one time or another put on the dress, wig and heels and felt the feminine side of themselves either in front of camera, or when none of the cameras were looking. Marlin Brando, Dustin Hoffman, Daniel Craig, Robin Williams Boris Karloff and virtually all of the established and insightful edgy British comics. Leona's spiritual awakening occurred after she decided to be true to the feminine side of herself that she had been repressing for so long, and by so many means. From never allowing Leon's hair to grow out more than a crew cut after he left the Rez, to enrolling into as many macho sports and occupations as possible, to looking the other way when an trailer for "Some Like it Hot", 'Tootsie' or 'Mrs. Doubtfire' flashed on the movie screen or a scene from a 'gender bender' film happened to be on the tube in a house where he was visiting. But now, Leona knew now more than ever that to be the most effective human in the service of humanity was to use all of the tools available to both genders. But by being perceived as a woman, by a homophobic man who made Vladimir Putin look like a bisexual gay activist.

"Sit, please," Leona said to Chief Boris with a welcoming smile as she took her position as both entertainer and teacher. She felt as if she was channeling the spirit of Aspasia, the most alluring courtesan and philosophical educator in Ancient Greece, whose lover was non other than Pericles, the noble and freely elected mayor of Athens and whose prize student was Socrates, an impish stone mason by day who never got paid a drachma for his innovative philosophical ideas and ideals. But to the 'mainstream' citizens of Athens, foreign born Aspasia was whore with regard to her love affair with the very married Pericles and a witch as it pertains to her being more philosophical than men. The trick to staying alive in that state of Enlightenment of course was to never get pregnant, and to always let the man in charge think that the ideas that emerged between you and him came from his head.

"Interesting relationship you have with the animals here," Boris said as he noted the creatures bearing wings, fur and scales all looking at him while somehow protecting her. He paid particular attention to the Raven, birds being the only other life form on the planet that he feared, and apparently still did. "Is that raven a friend of yours?" he asked.

"All of the birds, beavers and bears out here are my friends," she replied.

"So, you are a witch?" he surmised, glazing at her black dress, being pulled into what was on the other side of it. "Who loves animals."

"Almost as much as I love money," Leona answered. "And power," she continued from an even deeper 'Yang' side of herself, but still bearing two X chromosomes with respect to her real meta-physiologic biology.

"And I should let you share my power because...?" he said, as if it was indeed a conversation between Aspasia and Pericles.

“You will, and want to,” Leona answered with logical, and non-offensive affirmation. “Because we speak the same language, with a few variations on the diction,” she continued with a warm smile. That smile became warmer and more inviting as she sung the Russian National Anthem in Cree, with a few of the animals joining in with the appropriate sounds, which ominously, were in the same key, and provided an interesting harmony. A gift from the Great Spirit, Leona thought, saying that the evil moves she was planning were indeed part of the overall Plan for the Common Good.

Boris’ men, old guard Soviets by the looks of them, seemed to like it. That ‘oh, but for the good old days to be back’ warmth came over their stone cold faces as they melted into becoming boys again. Boris seemed to recall the good old days as well, but enjoyed the power of it all. The absolute Order that was not questioned by anyone. And which he was unable to share with any woman at the time, nor since.

Leona directed the next few verses not to the sky, the birds or Boris’ men, but to him and him alone. She stroked his arm, gently, as she gave her feet the power of dance. Then her his cheek. Then she pulled away just as he was about to grab hold of her. Taming the beast, for his own good, she invited him to dance with her, gently. She of course let him lead, but was sure that he was more interested in the two mountains on her chest than the taped down vestigial cannon between her legs.

At the end of the dance, he was his. For the moment anyway. “So, now we talk business?” she commanded, as a question of course. “In English, please. My conversational Russian is not so ‘dobrey.’”

Boris corrected her for the correct pronunciation of the Slavic word for ‘good’, then pointed out that Russian may sound like Albanian, but it wasn’t. He took out two cigarettes from an Arrowhead Casino pack that bore his likeness under the full-feathered headdress, lighting one for himself and one for Leona. Trusting that there was tobacco and not some kind of truth serum, or perhaps death serum, in it, she accepted. It seemed like tobacco. Very good tobacco. The kind that the Reservation was able to sell to the public to make heap big White Wampum profits and, no doubt, to transport across state and even Canadian lines to other locations for even bigger profits, along with illegal human cargo and, knowing Boris’ most aspired to main line of work in the past from sessions when Boris was piss drunk and Leon was merely buzzed, weapons of limited as well as mass destruction. For selective clients of course.

“Tell me,” he said as he smoked the cigarette, seeing that Leona was inhaling hers as well, as Boris insisted on never drinking or smoking alone. “How it is that you know Albanian?”

“Travel,” she said, knowing the art and power of keeping one’s answers short, particularly when you are relating half truths and half lies. “Lots of travel.”

“And the business you are in which makes this travel possible?” he inquired.

“The business of pleasure,” she said alluringly. “Other people’s pleasure. Provided by other people of course. Better business that way. And delivering other things to people in places where their governments don’t want them to have them. ”

“Such as what is in that medicine pouch tied to your belt?” Boris said.

Leona smiled, Boris having taken the bait hook, line and sinker. She pulled out the Traditional Cree Medicine bag that matched her Wicken ‘Emira’ outfit so well and retrieved five ampules of powder, all with coded labels. She offered the to Boris, allowing him to examine them.

“Interesting scientific labels here,” he said.

“For very scientifically formulated compounds,” she commented. “Ricin, the most effective variety, that kills in hours rather than days, thanks to mixing it in with liposomes, which comes in a slow or ultra-fast acting form. Anthrax that are resistant to the standard antibiotics, but which is neutralized by medications that I can provide for a special price to special customers. H1N1 for nuisance clients. Rinderpest that puts down people as well as cattle. And finally, the last one,” she continued, opening up the vial, and allowing Boris to sniff it.

By the way he was avoiding it, he was convinced that the powders were real. Leona took in a whiff of the fifth ampule, then offered it to his host.

“A mousy odor,” he noted with a familiar smile. “For an ancient elixir. Hemlock. Which we can label, Socratic Perfume. To give give as a gift to ungrateful and dangerous people.”

Leona gently took back the vial of the easily prepared poison she had made the night before, seeing all too well that Boris had plans in mind to mix it up as perfume for any of the ‘nieces’ who knew too much about their ‘uncles’, or himself.

“You are planning your own suicide tonight?” Boris said, seeming a bit suspicious.

“Only if I, or we, get caught with these,” she said of the other vials, which for the moment, were still sealed. Thanks to the Great Spirit, he didn’t open them. And thanks to the Great Spirit he still respected Leona’s feminine virtue. “There is one thing that we will need for our expanding operation,” she continued. “An honest Injun who can be trusted to keep the books.”

“You have someone in mind?” he asked.

“An old woman who is harmless. Has been here forever, according to everyone I asked. She goes by the name of Granny.”

“She goes by the name of ‘useless’ now,” Boris said. “Her head can’t figure out numbers anymore. Or life. Better that the crazy old lunatic live in past when buffalo owned the plains and the only way to stay warm in winter was to collect and burn their shit. Better for us that way. And better for her. Da?”

“Da, Comrade,” Leona answered, sensing that Boris was fully capable of putting Granny in a locked psych ward if she decided to give voice to the way the world here was now, and how it should be to the wrong people on either side of the law. “And I expect to hear from you about the specific terms of our new arrangement in three hours,” Leona added. “Or in seven hours I will be forced to work with someone else.”

With that, Leona walked away from Boris, the animals surrounding the Medicine Wheel and into the newly shined rental car which required some adjustment before visiting the next person on her list.

CHAPTER 7

It finally occurred to Leona why Granny had not opened her door to her when she stopped by twice before. “Clean, shiny cars always have dirty people inside of them,” Leona recalled from the last summer she had spent with Granny. That summer when she, as Leon, was considering many transitions ahead, not only dealing with gender. That summer when Granny taught Leon everything she knew, or tried to anyway.

As for this fall, the snows had not yet come down from the graying sky but there was a foreboding chill in the air. Leona felt it after she traded in her rental car as a Longggiantde housewife on a new husband or boy-toy finding expedition to someone more like herself. As a painter-songwriter from New Mexico, she insisted on getting the most broken down car on the lot from ‘Rent a Wreck’ two towns away, claiming that she liked the color of the rusted out beater available. The clerk was more interested in getting into her pants than checking into her credit history or psychiatric profile, and was happy to give her the keys to the worst looking twenty-five bucks a day sedan in the shop after she offered \$800 in cash for the week, pretending that she got the better part of the bargain.

But as ugly as the multicolored rust-bucket looked, it for the most part ran well. Everything worked on it except the horn, which was perhaps why it had been in so many collisions. But the muffler was more ornamental than functional, creating enough noise for anyone to get out of the way, or take notice of its arrival. To make it her own even more, Leona put her own stickers on it, duplicates of what she had on her own car that she hoped some of her students in Boston would put on theirs. They included “God: The Mystery that NO one really knows”, “Make love not lust” and “No such thing as too much Intensity”.

This time, Granny did answer the door behind the shack nestled in amongst wild growing grass and knarled up pine trees almost as old as she was. “I was wondering when you would get here,” Granny said to Leona as she emerged with a shotgun under one arm and a handful of sacred sweet-grass in the other. “That is if you are who I think you are.”

“It’s me,” Leona said to her, in Leon’s voice. “I used to be Leon.”

“And now you are someone...truer to yourself,” Granny smiled, lowering the business end of the 50 year old shotgun adorned and empowered with beaded fringed leather that looked like it was old enough to have been used at Little Big Horn. “Astam,” she beckoned.

Leona, now clad in artist clothing that was part Santa Fe chic and part Albuquerque real, had not heard ‘come’ said in Cree in a long, long time. It made it sound more like ‘welcome’, a state of Soul which she now felt, and realized that she had not felt such in a long, long time.

The inside of the shack was just as Leona both remembered and imagined it. Every inch of shelf space was occupied by something from the earth, honoring it. From the herbs Granny was concocting for healing, to the old photographs of those she had healed over the decades. Leona recognized her own picture as Leon amongst them, along with her brother Paul, both atop horses with big fat confident grins on their faces. Leona began to allow herself to go back to that

golden summer of exploration and discovery. When things between her and Paul were the tops. And when both siblings were on the best of terms with their father, a radical American Indian Movement activist, and their mother, then a White hippie who truly did embrace the gentlest aspects of the 'all you need is love' 60s. Somehow, everything worked during those times, even though very few Indians or Half-breeds were allowed to work at high paying jobs in town. But somehow during those times everyone knew that broke was a state of economics, and poor was a state of mind, and no one at that time on the Rez was poor. Most importantly, Granny, who wore her second hand jeans, hand-me-down leather fringe coats, and hole-ridden moccasins with pride then, and now. But though master herbalist, healer and psychological councilor Granny seemed to live in the past, she was very much concerned with the future, and lost no time in reminding Leona of such. The old woman who never surrendered to old age went on with the job preparing an herbal remedy for body, mind and spirit custom made for yet another confidential customer who the doctors, shrinks and priests could not help. "So, how are you going to stop these Russian Palefaces from taking out dignity, after the American ones took our land?" Granny asked Leona after allowing her two sips of tea and three bites of homemade banuk.

"I don't know yet," Leona answered. "But by the berries in the stream and the green corn in the ground," he continued in Cree with a clenched fist, looking yet again at her watch, as impatient as she was now intense.

Granny laughed.

"What?!!" Leona grunted back in her father's ancestral tongue.

Moving away from her herbal preparation counter, sensing that Leona needed her full attention, Granny walked over to Leona and sat in front of her. "You mean to swear by something else, I think," she said with her usual kind yet always assertive voice. "Your Cree is very rusty. Maybe because of all of those new poisons from sterile bottling you've been studying, and taking."

"Medications, Granny," Leona said. "Scientifically-formulated medications. I'm a scientist now," she asserted with pride. She looked at her watch again, the time table in her head saying that soon the call from Boris would come in and she was 36 minutes late with regard to getting the intel from Granny to most effectively handle that call.

"Who now tells time according to her wrist," Granny said. She ripped the watch off Leona's arm, throwing it across the room. "And who should expand her research beyond Palefaces' agendas and limitations," she continued. "Heal yourself before healing others, Professor Doctor Leona," she offered with her mouth, followed by the herbal concoction she had been working on since Leona entered. "Two pinches of this under the tongue, one on top of it."

Leona smelled the 'medicinal', finding it as displeasing to her nostrils as Granny's digs aimed at her self-taught Internet Cree was on her ego. "What is this?"

"Something to open up this," Granny said, pointing her shriveled up arthritic index finger at the point between her two tired, burnt out and vengeful eyes. "Like you becoming a woman opened up this," the Elder continued gently placing her open palm on Leona's heart. "Which will open

up this,” Granny said in that ‘I’m sure it will work because it has a thousand times before’ voice of hers pointing yet again at her third eye. Then the skull housing the brain behind it.

Granny’s touch always felt ‘weird’. But not it felt...electric, somehow. Something that channeled both fire and warmth, and the metaphysical common sense to use them both effectively. Leona considered taking Granny’s special very non-scientific and most probably FDA NON-approved medicinal again. But she was still reluctant to take it, maybe because she knew too much about biology now, or maybe because those stories about people getting screwed up by Granny’s medicines Leona’s mother wrote her about really were true. And Leona’s body was still in transition with at least five female-promoting hormones, requiring a strict and carefully-regulated regiment of medications so that stroke, heart attack, osteoporosis, diabetes and any of four kinds of cancer didn’t materialize unexpectedly.

“When you were a young boy, you used to trust me with everything,” Granny lamented.

“And I still do,” Leona replied, staring at the space in front of her eyes and the memories brewing inside her head. “With what matters,” she continued, turning her head up to the the old Healer, and friend.

“And what matters most is what, Leona?” Granny asked, allowing her prodigal student to determine where the ‘lesson’ would go next.

It wasn’t how Granny asked the question, or what it was, but how it was addressed that mattered most to Leona. “You called me ‘Leona’,” she said with gratitude. “Not Leon.”

“That’s your name now, isn’t it?” Granny replied, getting back up on her two knarly feet that on THIS walk to her workbench got hit with another rash of arthritic pain. “You aren’t stupid, tacky or ‘cool’ enough to have named yourself something like Ashley, Bree or Krystal with two ys and three k’s. Gotta be who you is. No, even as Leon, you were Leona. And that is who you are now.”

“Not according to my family, and friends, who I still thought I had here,” Leona said. “Narrow minded idiots and assholes. Fucking apples.”

“Red on the outside, white on the inside,” Granny lamented through a cough which did not seem healthy, perhaps due to natural causes, perhaps by causes not so natural. “Yes, I know.”

“And the Band Cops?” Leona inquired. “Who were supposed to be protecting and enforcing OUR laws?”

“But not our principles, or morality,” Granny replied. Her sorrowful face turned beet red with anger. Her gentle cutting hand turned into a clenched fist, directing her righteous indignation at the plants she was now demolishing into powder, mixed in with a small amount of blood from her snipped finger. But still she remained quiet about the details.

Leona brought up one of those details, the one which brought her out here. And the one that was now merged into details with regard to many others now. “My brother Paul,” she said, calculating the best strategy to make Granny’s heart, mind and brain all agree to open her clenched mouth. “Who was the first person other than me to see me in a dress. And didn’t look at me like I was a pervert or sicky for needing to wear it. What did he know or do that got him killed?”

“What’s going to get you killed if you don’t leave here while you can,” Granny warned. “And about your brother Paul, there are some things you should know...Which you will find out, in the right time.”

“I’m a necessary evil!” Leona asserted. “Who needs to know what he knew, and did, and was. NOW!” Leona grabbed hold of her watch again, strapping it on. Indeed time had passed faster than she calculated.

“And you need to know what you think I do,” Granny said, coughing once again. She looked at all of the photographs on the shelves and the walls, recalling much that she didn’t say. They looked out the window and what she was thinking she didn’t say. Finally, she did say. “Up here on this mountain, they call me ‘Granny’. Still with respect, to my old tired face. But behind my back...well...” The demons of old age seemed to have caught up with the old woman, about to corner and devour into their vortex of defeat.

“They think you’re harmless,” Leona put forth. “Finished. Washed up. Helpless to do anything about anything.”

“Which maybe I am...now,” Granny said with a hopelessness and helplessness Leona had never seen. A despair Granny would have slapped, laughed or medicated out of anyone else in the past no matter how old or young the afflicted patient was.

“Well, I’m not helpless,” Leona said, feeling the contagiousness of depression moving into her. “And you shouldn’t be either! Paul wouldn’t want us to be. And the enslaved girls who are living as walking corpses now under Chief Boris’ care. How many and where they are I don’t know yet. And the people elsewhere who will be killed by the weapons he’s selling that can kill whole populations of people whose only crime is that they want to continue living another day. What kinds of weapons and where they will be used, I don’t know yet. And---“

Granny raised her hand up, requesting Leona to stop relating the details. “I know,” she said with her tearful and defeated eyes.

“So,” Leona said, self-promoting herself to becoming “Granny”, “It’s a good day to die?” she continued in Cree, saying that battle-cry with the conviction of Sitting Bull and the passion of Crazy Horse, and the confidence that Granny had said each time she did, or wanted to encourage others, to do something expansive that was also scary. From getting on a kind horse that was still a bit too green. To climbing up a mountain when you were afraid of heights. To giving voice to song on stage at the Rez talent shows even though you felt intimidated by the ‘cool kids’ who had more fans than you did.

Granny answered Leona's challenge with a smile, and a restatement of those words as a statement rather than a question, correcting Leona's Cree diction, then accusing the designers of Internet Programs that offered online lessons in that almost-forgotten language of speaking the words with their brains instead of their hearts.

Granny hobbled over to cabinet which when she hit it the right way, opened up into a drawer, upon which there was a lock. She reached into the very private parts between her legs and pulled out a key, opening it. With reverence and terror, she took out a ledger, handing it to Leona.

"The REAL accounting books for the Rez before Chief Boris came, while he was building the Casino, and everything that went on there until two months ago when I was asked to leave, because of my bad health," she said.

"Or what would happen to your health if you didn't leave," Leona surmised.

"What's in here doesn't exist," Granny said, as she coughed up blood as well as phlegm, the breaths that followed sounding like a rattle. The kind that Leon heard all too often in places that Granny, or most anyone else in the 'safe' countries of the world did not know about. "Do what you have to with it," she commanded Leona. "And only with people you trust," she warned.

"Which is you, who I will see tomorrow, yes? Like you always told me, Nature never gives you a problem without a solution" Leona said, determined to honor Granny's will to live with the SCIENTIFIC medical means to do so using all of her Ph.D. biological research knowledge and, if necessary, the services of any number of MD docs in Boston she would fly in to discretely keep her in fit and fighting condition. "It will be a good day to die tomorrow too, right?"

"Yes, it will be," Granny said, sucking in the Fire in her gut and forcing her lungs to breath normally. "Tomorrow, or many tomorrows from now will be a good day to die for both of us," Granny said as she laid her re-empowered hand on Leona's shaking shoulder.

Leona let the shoulder assurance merge into a hug. Granny slipped the ledger into her purse. A familiar-looking horse came in to the window to watch, as if on cue. So many things were 'on cue' with a script known only the the Great Spirit at Granny's house.

"That's... Wild Thunder," Leona said regarding the horse. "Who taught me how to ride when I was a kid! By throwing me off every time I did something wrong,"

"Whose done most everything right since then," Granny said, stroking the head of the horse, then retrieving a bridle and a saddle. "He's called Gentle Rock now. Soft Mud by those who think his kindness and slowness is because he's stupid or weak. It's time I go for a ride on him, to ask the mountain about all of this. And for you to take that rental pony down the hill to see what kind of shit is coming down in the valley below."

Leona insisted on helping to put the tack on Wild Thunder, which Granny allowed her to do. But

when Leona offered to give Granny a leg up on the now swaybacked long-in-the-tooth gelding, she stared her down, choosing instead to move the horse to a downward slope which allowed for easy mounting. “And if you’re worried about me here, don’t. Thunder has never tossed me off.”

“Because you never do anything wrong?” Leona yelled out as Granny rode off into the hill above her hut at a slow trot.

“Because he always does everything right,” Granny replied.

Leona wanted to feast herself on a view of an old woman and an aged gelding who refused to surrender to age, and particularly to the limitations other prematurely aging people want to impose on them. She hoped that when it was her time to have more gray hairs than black ones, more wrinkles than smooth patches of skin on her cheeks, and have to hold her head up high with a hunched up back, that it would be like Granny, wherever it was. But life as it was called her back, though the ‘minions of evil that plant toxins into your brain’, according to Granny.

Leona put the cell phone to her ear two rings after she saw who it was. “Boris,” she smiled. “You’re calling me back early.”

Boris related the time and place for the meeting, mentioning the menu options at the restaurant as enticement. Ominously, steak and crab indeed were the most favored food to Leona’s palate. As they were to Leon’s as well.

In any case, Leona calculated how long it would take her to get to the eatery, and the other things she had to do along the way for her own agendas. “Yes, 6 pm is it then,” she said to Boris appended with an alluring and businesslike “Dasvidania”, being sure to have diction correct this time.

The road down from Granny’s shack, and meta-physiological laboratory, was bumpier than the drive up. And noisier. Maybe she had picked a path through the grasslands that had more rocks than grass on it. Or maybe it was time for the shocks, pistons and exhaust system to do an ‘it’s a good day to die’ defiant yelp of protest on the beater which, like all American made cars, was built to self-destruct at a time most inconvenient for the trusting buyer. But no smoke was coming out of the engine, no indication of fire under the hood. Such could not be said about Granny’s shack on top of the hill.

Leona heard an explosion far louder than a missing piston or a backfiring exhaust system. Through her rear view mirror she saw Granny’s shack blow up with three more explosions, replaces instantly a blazing inferno.

Rushing away from it was a rider-less Wild Thunder, the old gelding somehow finding the strength and smarts to run towards Leona’s car.

Leona mounted the horse and galloped up the hill as fast as she could while still keeping control of the octane in Wild Thunder’s well-aged gas tank. “Granny!” she cried out to the hills, hoping that the old woman was still alive somewhere. She got no answer from the mountain, or any of

its four legged inhabitants. Then when she looked at the shack, or what was left of it, she saw a lifeless, burnt body outside the 'charcoal' line. Granny's eyes were still fighting, But her Spirit had left the body, a pool of blood emanating from her left wrist, a bloody imprint of her hand on knife in her right. Next to the body were tracks from a car, very fresh. The sound of the vehicle could be heard as it zoomed over the hills, then back toward the highway. Then vanishing as a cold, cruel North wind emerged out of the ominously dark blue sky.

CHAPTER 8

“I’m sorry about what happened to your grandmother,” Stevenson said when he came on the scene after the other Cops arrived and were on the way to completing their investigation. “And the way it happened,” he continued.

“Suicide?” Leona shot back seeing that same laziness of Soul in Stevenson’s idiotic head as was in his asshole colleagues. “That would make the paperwork at your end easier.”

Stevenson offered Leona a cup of coffee from his thermos. More if it winded up on his jacket than her mouth and she pushed it away, in a very masculine way. “Fuck off, all of you!” she observed coming out of her mouth, in the voice of Leon. “Please,” said after faking a cough, as Leona. “Just go away. Please.”

Stevenson wiped the coffee off his jacket with the spare bandana in his pocket, took in a deep breath, and answered her in calm, collected voice, seeming to be more concerned with the issues of the case rather than Leona’s personal history. “Look, Leona. The Fire Inspector said the blaze was no accident. And she had a long history of being clinically depressed. The slashes on her left wrist, the fingerprints on the bloody knife on her right.”

“I know,” Leona conceded. “Which would fit in very well with your story, if she was right handed.”

“And the peyote-laced weed in her mouth,” Stevenson continued. “She was doing some heavy duty tripping, which when mixed with being afflicted with mental illness already---“

“---She would have and did endure her ‘mental illnesses’ without any pharmaceutical or herbal health!” Leona shot back. “For as long as ANYone knew her. She told everyone that if what goes into your mouth to take you to a sacred or satisfying place, even blessed peyote, it takes you no place real. No place you can really trust. No, to Granny ‘Madness is best enjoyed straight’.” Leona self observed the pun, and the irony of all. “Straight!” she said, with a chuckle, then a ‘what else do I have to lose’ laugh. “Funny choice of words now, ‘straight’.”

Leona didn’t plan to scare Stevenson into submission with her mad laughter, but it did. The most harmless of the Cop, who was a misfit amongst his peers, just stood there as a pick up truck with apolitical ‘pro-Injun’ bumper stickers on it roared up the hill. Emerging was a man in a faded denim jacket and knee-high fringed moccasins. He approached Stevenson first.

“Is he...my eh, ya know...kid alright?” Tom said, feeling the words before thinking them.

“Your daughter?” Stevenson replied.

“Which is another issue that I don’t want to get into now,” Tom said. “Her mother doesn’t want to, or need to, either.”

Meanwhile, Leona continued to laugh, cry and agonize, caught between worlds past, present and imagined black holes in the future. But she could hear the conversation about her, thinking it best to just let them talk and get all the accusations out into the open, each one of them trying to avoid uses of pronouns.

“I don’t know what got into...my kid over there, after... my kid over there, left,” Tom said. “And after enlisting in the Army and getting caught up in wars that my kid never told me or my wife about.”

“But sent back a lot of money after getting into them?” Stevenson proposed. “Maybe to your other kid, Paul?”

“I never saw that money,” Tom said. “And I didn’t want it either.”

“Interesting, very interesting,” Stevenson said nodding his head as Leona was hitting hers.

“What?” Tom asked.

“That you’re more concerned with your daughter...eh...kid’s craziness than your mother in law’s death,” the soft-spoken Deputy Sheriff said.

“Huh?” Tom replied.

“Granny,” Stevenson explained. “This young woman here kept referring to the older woman as Granny.”

“Everyone here calls, or rather called, her ‘Granny,’” Tom replied with a condescending eyeroll.

“Not like your kid over there did,” Stevenson’s reply.

“‘Granny’ is not my mother, or mother in law. And never was!” Tom shot back.

“Does Leona...eh...or Leon know that?” Stevenson inquired.

“Does she have to?” Tom asked.

“No, I suppose not,” Stevenson concluded.

Whatever Leona did not see of the interchange of secrets between the two men the Raven did. She would ask him about it later. But for as for the moment at hand, she still had a very important date to attend, and be attentive at.

After a quick change of wardrobe, venue and strategy, Leona found herself waiting for Boris at a reserved table at the Arrowhead Casino luxury lounge. Though the light was minimal, she could

still read the headlines on the Thunder Mountain News Gazette. “Granny Mae dies in accidental fire.” Though the wording was a bit different, the photos and the headlines on the Bismark Herald and Colorado Times were not much different. Boris strode over to table, ten minutes late, apologizing for his delay, not explaining the reason for it. “Good food and good company is worth waiting for,” Leona smiled back at him.

Boris saw the way Leona was looking at the headlines, and made comment on it. “Tragic. I heard you knew her.”

Leona put on her best ‘I don’t give a shit’ face, something she was very good at as Leon when circumstances required it. “Everyone did,” she gave as an explanation. “Or wanted people to think they did. For a time anyway. But, the old coot is smoking peyote with the Great Spirit now.”

“While we become gods, and goddesses, here,” Boris proposed as he asked permission of Leona to sit down. She granted it with a goddess like nod, in keeping with her fabricated station as head of an organization that didn’t exist.

A full-blood Indian teen, barely drinking age, in a skimpy and sexy Pocahantas outfit came over with two menus. The same one who Leona recognized when she was a Loonggislandtte housewife. The girl didn’t seem to recognize her, but then again, the young woman was having her own problems. She had a glazed look about her eyes, a yellow tinge to the whites of them. And fresh marks on her arms, along with what looked like rope burns on her wrists and neck. But there was a big, bold happy smile on her face.

“What will you be having tonight, Mister Petrovitch?” she inquired.

“The usual cocktail to start,” Boris smiled back. “And for my associate---“

“---water!” Leona interjected. “No firewater.”

Boris looked at her strangely.

“Some temporary liver problems,” Leona replied. “Which are NOT transmittable, she assured her host. “And besides, Madness is best enjoyed straight, and True Vision only happens with a clear mind.” She turned to the waitress, reading her new nametag. “Right, Running Flower?”

“The customer is always right,” she said, going on her way, still in a daze but perhaps opened up to something beyond the fog by Leona’s metaphysical and physiological suggestions.

Boris absorbed it all, and sat back as Leona looked at the rest of the menu. “Refusing to drink with a man used to get you killed in the Wild Wild West. A bullet from a Colt 45 straight to the head.”

“Well, this is the new West, with different weapons,” Leona answered while still perusing the menu, offering Boris a look at the firearms in her oversized but still chic shoulder bag.

He was aghast at what he saw. And impressed.

“Yes. It’s a variation on an internationally-based theme that isn’t supposed to even exist,” she said regarding the sample inside. “More durable, dependable and reliable than the Tokarev SVTH 38 your father used to push Hitler back to Berlin. And in the hands of whoever will pay top dollar, rupee or kopeck, converts a common Untermench into a Superman that NO one can stop.”

Just as Boris reached for the weapon, Leona pulled it away, as it was a replica the Carlos made for her from metal pipes and plastic toy guns which he intended as something she could use to scare away his Latin American immigrants who had chosen to join gangs upon entry into the US who made their pocket-change taking pocketbooks from female faculty and students who worked late and went home alone. Boris decided to not pursue the matter either, as regular customers were coming into the lounge, one of them a State Senator and the other a Congressman, all of them with women old and domineering enough to be their real wives.

Leona was grateful for the excuse to pull back her purse and its contents. Boris seemed impressed that she was smart enough to keep the real business of the Casino away from the consciousnesses of those whose job was officially to shut such places down.

After Boris waved a ‘hello’ to the governmental customers, and pointed to Running Flower to tend to their table before any others, he focuses attention back on Leona.

“You seem to know a lot of things about a lot of people,” he commented. “A particularly smart, and clever woman.”

“That’s because I’m a SUPER woman,” she said by way of explanation, still trying to decide what the most expensive item on the menu would be. “Who needs to work with a Superman so business is not so...hmmm...”

“Boring?” Boris said.

“Da, Comrade,” she smiled back.

“But I am particularly interested in the kind of weapons you have which are more biological than mechanical,” he said. “With safeguards built into them so that if any of ‘our’ people get exposed to them, they will be protected, or cured, of course. Such is something that few business partners I have had were able to deliver.”

”Which I can deliver,” Leona affirmed putting down the menu and staring Boris straight in the eye. Eyes that still did not recognize her, nor the fact that she was bluffing more than she ever had in her life.

“I will need proof of such,” Boris said. “As a scientist in the service of, us, I think you will understand.”

“That I do,” Leona smiled back. “But there is one rule of biology that the idiots like the ones who obey all the rules and assholes like us who MAKE them must obey.”

“Above all else, do no harm to the people you are working for?” Boris proposed.

Leona laughed at Boris’ joke, as such was expected of her both as a woman, and a new partner. Once his ego was satiated, she went on to explain her point in plainer English. “If we don’t eat we can’t think effectively. So it stands to reason that if we eat well, we think very effectively.”

“Which means you will have the most expensive items on the menu?” he asked.

“It’s my duty to do so, and your pleasure to enjoy me doing it. Is that not so?” she smiled.

“Yes, it is so,” he said, smiling at her joke, for now anyway.

CHAPTER 8

Leona delayed the next meeting with Boris as long as she could, as she had to get resupplied from back home. From back in Beantown, anyway. If she needed something from the lab in a remote location, it was usually Carlos who she called but his wife had just gotten pregnant, and Leona didn't want the baby's father to have to first set eyes on its Dad while he was in Prison fatigues or buried under a pile of dirt in an unmarked grave. Besides, Rachel, Leona's most recent 'I want to make a difference in the world' student' deserved to be put to the task, even though she didn't know how global and potentially dangerous that task was. But morality and motherly-mentoring aside, Carlos knew mechanical machinery, and Rachel knew biological chemistry. Only she could be trusted with retrieving the right toxins to send and which of the antidotes Leona was struggling to develop really worked. Most of those toxins created in a rodent some kind of neurological disease that naturally occurred in people. Then again, Leona was contemplating the idea that perhaps the new varieties of ALS, MS, beri-beri, Alzheimer's Dementia, Parkinson's disease and the other 'classical' dying back neuropathies that were popping up around the world were maybe not so naturally caused, the inducing agent perhaps introduced to unsuspecting populations not-so naturally.

But that was for later, a single patient awaited her now, 'Doctor Boris' diagnosing her condition as terminally 'difficult'. She was housed in the treatment room of the old Reservation Health Care Unit, now replaced by a completely new hospital that had 'Chief Boris' logos generously displayed in places that were always seen but never consciously noticed. Around her wrists and ankles were the latest in psych patient restrains, meant to be strong but unable to make any mark in struggling flesh. A feather, bead and leather--fringed Indian Maiden necklace matching her facial features, for at least the uniformed Paleface who could not tell the difference between Latinos and Indians, hung around her neck. It was stained with fresh blood and dried fecal matter, as were large portions of her skimpily, seductively-clad body. Under the ethnic necklace, was a tightly fitted metal 'bitch' collar bearing her name and number, 'Maria 3'. Holding the device that activated the electrocuting unit attached to it was one of Boris' senior goons, a new one with sadistic eyes. Two young ones, who were more obedient than passionate about the matter at hand, stood by in white lab coats wearing rubber gloves.

Leona watched it from the one-way mirror that had been placed into the glass, Boris by her side. "Sometimes training people to do what is in their best interest is easy. Sometimes it is harder," he said. He pressed a button on the wall, causing a light inside the room to go on. The senior goon nodded to the younger ones to proceed with the matter at hand. The two younger men took off their lab coats and proceeded to make 'love' to Maria, with ample male anatomical parts at the ready to do so. "Smile, Maria," the older goon requested of the 'patient'.

"I am not Maria!" the woman claimed, then asserted, then tried to believe as she pushed off her lovers, persisting in resisting the 'affection' being shown to her despite the fact that she was electricuted each time. Having nothing to lose, she bit the fingers of her two 'lovers', causing them to back off, and, for the moment anyway, knocking the senior 'doctor' on his ass, making him unable to elevate the intensity of the jolts.. While being electro-shocked, she yelled out to the mirror. "I am not Maria Beaver Mouth! Or Maria 3!" she screamed to the mirror in front of her. "I am Eva Anna Rodregrez, from---"

Before Eva could voice to anyone who was listening where she was from and who she really was before she had become a slave to owners who administered laws that did not allow that ancient 'so-yesterday' abomination, the enraged senior goon put the electrocution unit up to maximal. Had it not been for Boris shutting the power down on him and commanding through the microphone that led to the goon's ear plug to stop and be reasonable, Maria and Eva's suffering would have been over forever.

Leona didn't recognize the language Boris had used to command his subordinate to use reason rather than rage, but then again it had been many experiences and many travels since Leon left Boris and his world on that fateful day in the Arab village in one of the 'Stans'. Maybe, as Leona's psychology professor in College while transitioning from being Leon, people don't change, at the Core anyway. The head goon with Maria went into a tantrum when he was relieved of duty by the next in line. Boris never lost his temper, or composure. He hired others to do the hurting and agonizing for him, pitting one person against each other, for their own eventual good of course. Then he would just watch, satisfied that he had done the right and justifiable thing, as 'God' never did. Indeed, like his idol, Joe Stalin, Boris considered himself to be in competition with God, an entity which he perhaps secretly feared but Whose existence he would always deny.

But just as God created Adam et al. to alleviate his loneliness, Boris needed companions to rule the world with. Leon was once one of those trusted companions, and Leona now had to take over that place without being noticed. Leona was capable of getting Boris alone, putting a dog collar on him and frying he brains out til there was no life in his body, but that body and mind was still connected to a network of other Boris' which would not be stopped until Leona got ALL the goods on THIS one.

"Maria 3," Boris said, admiring his prisoner and opponent behind the glass who still looked at him with vengeful eyes. "It is hard to say if she is giving that vengeful stare at herself in the mirror that her eyes can clearly see, or if it is at whoever she is imagining is behind it. In any case, she is a suitable model for the medications you say that will turn an angry, thinking, assertive bitch into a happy, dumb and obedient puppy dog? And I trust that your special medications will make obedient people HAPPY and not merely buzzed like all the others that I can easily get."

"You mean like Country Music and Top Forty Pablum Muzac which woes free thinking listeners into head boppers, toe tappers and clap-along crowds that do whatever the Master says to do at their factory jobs on Monday morning after spending all their money on concert tickets where they worship the Mistress on stage all weekend?"

Boris smiled at the joke, Leona finding herself finally finding some common moral ground with him. But that ground gave way to a shaky foundation when he pointed to the bag \of biological tricks in her briefcase, then to 'Maria Beaver Mouth'. "Is there anything you will need from us for your demonstration, Doctor?" he asked.

"To be alone with her as I give her the treatment," Leona replied.

“Of course, with the appropriate precautions,” he answered, taking Leona’s hand, stroking her manicured fingers, which thankfully were not excessively large for her new gender.

Leona was not sure if ‘precaution’ meant being sure that Maria didn’t bit off her fingers or that Boris wanted to see who ‘Leona’ really was. In any case, the audition of Leona’s special biological agent that could convert mass numbers of free-thinking citizens of a ‘disobedient’ country into passive, happy slaves was on.

Boris allowed Leona entry into the treatment room by herself. Maybe because he trusted Leona or maybe because he was running out of assistants with even tempers and intact fingers. The key element here was whether Maria 3 would trust her. By the expressions spewing out of her mouth, she didn’t. Leona recognized some of the Spanish curses delivered between the spits Maria had somehow directed at Leona’s face. Leona held her hand up to Boris on the other side of the mirror, telling him to not come in and defend her honor as a woman, as all real Russian men were obliged to do. While the spit and curse fest continued, Leona kept silent as she unpacked her the biological ‘goodies’ that thankfully arrived at her motel room from Rachel just in time. But she had to say something as loaded the syringe with just the right mixture of coded solutions A, B and C when Maria unleashed an insult to Leona in her own language. Cree, which was pronounced correctly. And delivered from eyes which did indeed have some Injun blood mixed in with White Latino.

Maria repeated the curse, and label appended to it. “It means die in hell, you sick bitch,” she said, in English.

“A necessary evil,” Leona said in her best Cree, then in what she hoped was passable Spanish. “Do a little harm now to do a lot of good later,” she whispered in a mixture of the two languages, that Maria 3 seemed to both hear and understand. “A mathematical calculation, which will go much easier for you if you---“

“---just fucking relax!” Maria shot back, expecting the worst as Leona moved the solution toward her mouth.

“Yes, please,” Leona said with affirmation. “This syringe under the tongue now,” she said in the Spanish, very understandable to Boris’ Latin-affiliated assistants. “And this for later, when you are alone, Eva,” Leona appended, in Cree, shoving a wrapped pill into her crotch, instructing her to take it in thirty minutes, indicated by six shows of five fingers and a discrete pointing at her watch, all out of view of any cameras, so Leona hoped anyway. Attached to the pill was a small key which could, in the hands of someone who self-awoke themselves from a happy trance, could be used to release or inactivate the electric dog collar.

Maria somehow let Leona see Eva, as Eva seemed to connect back to herself. She opened her mouth and let Leona move forward with the elixir that was formulated a sedative, a very real one, as Leona knew that one of the chemists in Chief Boris’ Army would check it out. Perhaps Mister Colt, the nearly full-blood, ‘go with the flow of whoever is in charge’ Indian who taught

chemistry at the High School for twenty years and still hoped to continue till he could collect his pension.

“Pretend this is what they out there think it is,” Leona whispered to Eva as Leona put the syringe containing the official ‘obedience’ cocktail into Maria’s mouth. “Under the tongue.”

Eva raised her tongue up and allowed Leona to squeeze a bolus of one part super-diluted real sedative and 99 percent real hyper-concentrated koolaid into Eva’s mouth. All was going according to plan as Leona pushed the elixir into Maria’s mouth while discretely inserting the antidote and potentially workable release key into her crotch. “Now,” Leona said, sensing curious and watchful eyes on the other side of the mirror. “I want you to smile for me.”

Maybe it was the specific command given to smile, or the spot in Eva’s vulva that had been touched, or a combination of the two. Maria’s Post-Traumatic-Stress-Syndrome buttons had been pushed, in the same way that Leona’s had been as a result of what he did and saw when he was Leon. Maria turned into a raging animal, somehow getting loose from her restraints, grabbing hold of Leona’s long black hair, turning her neck briskly to the right than smashing her head to the floor. Then grabbing hold of the sharpest scalpel in Leona’s kit, about to slit her throat.

This time, Leona’s PTSD put her in shock rather than rage mode. For a fateful two seconds that gave Boris enough time to neutralize the demon in Maria by firing a weapon at Eva’s head. She fell to the floor instantly.

Leona had enough presence of mind to grab hold of the reversal agent and a stolen master key to the bitches’ collar attached to it, placing them under her dress with her left hand while examining her patient. Though there was large hole dent in her cranium, only a small amount of blood flowed out of it. No breath came out of her mouth or nose either.

“Specially-designed bullet,” Boris explained by way of explanation. “Leaves no mess afterward...but perhaps we can design a bullet that leaves NO bleeding afterward,” he said. “Which I am sure you can devise better than we can.”

“About this case, this girl...” Leona said.

“...was once very valuable, but she had many biological problems. Probably too many drugs that make yours not so effective. I can’t supervise the medications of ALL of my employees or what they do with their property. We have other specimens which are perhaps more suitable for your, no our, expansions,” Boris continued as he helped Leona up from the floor.

“Thanks, I owe you one,” Leona said.

“Yes, you do,” he smiled back.

CHAPTER 9

It wasn't what Leona saw when she entered the 'dormitory', but what she smelled in the room housing the 'specimens' to be experimented with, played with or sold to the highest bidder, each labeled and kept in line with a collar around their neck. Rushing into Leona's nose was the stench of copulatory juices, feces, urine and blood, all connected by the aromas of terror and hopelessness. The young women ranged from the tender age of twelve to the ripe old 'seasoned' age of 35. Most of them were emaciated, though in an alluring sort of way. Some were allowed to be 'plump' in certain areas. Their skin pigmentation was white, black, red, and yellow. Their hair, for the most part, was long, alluring and well kept, despite the fact that they were not allowed to wash it themselves. Indeed, they were not allowed to do anything except remain chained to their beds to cry themselves to sleep, eat whatever rations they were allowed and avail themselves of 'standard' pharmaceuticals to either numb their pain or maintain a 'buzz' which they had become addicted to courtesy of their caretaker 'uncles'.

An Amanda 21 and a Jacque 3 were shooting themselves up with dope, while a Rainbow 2 and Carla 5 were having it be done by a 'medic' who, ominously, looked a lot like Leona would have at this point in life had he remained as Leon.

"The usual accommodations," Boris commented to Leona regarding what was inside the closed, condemned and now windowless building that had been the old Rez Recreational center, ironically. "They like it this time of day. Feeding time and medication time."

Another woman was dragged into the room, still struggling, Yolanda 2 according to her new 'employee' number. Though she was gagged, she still managed to grunt out her accusations and anger which were quenched after the second injection of 'happy juice' went into her arm, causing her extended third 'fuck you' finger to join the others in a flaccid, flaying tremor that finally subsided into just limp.

Leona looked at them all, but none of them looked back at her. Some because they were looking back at their own lives that would be no more. Some because they were instructed by their caretakers to keep their heads down in the presence of unapproved strangers. And others because they were lost in a world which Boris the addictive medication given to them provided. But Yolanda 2 looked up at Leona before fading into being someone else. "Help," she mouthed with her lips as her eyes closed half way and faded into semi-consciousness.

"Take a look at them," Boris said. "See which ones are most suitable for experimentation with those drugs you say make obedient people happy as well. Happy is far better for business than submissive, or high, after all."

"Yes, indeed," Leona replied pretending to be well versed in the management and sales of such merchandize. And enjoying it, once the humans put into her charge were dehumanized. It was something that Leon was well experienced in, as the most effective soldier is one who can dehumanize his enemy and enjoy the thrill of dominating him. That primal hunting instinct that predator needed in order to act quickly and rapidly enough to neutralize prey, and not become prey for other predators.

Boris was handed medical charts for all of the women. He glanced at them, then handed them over to Leona. "Their current medical evaluations, blood work, psychological proclivities and cultural backgrounds. I took the liberty of gathering all the information you would need on them so you could make them into what WE will need, between the ears and below the neck."

The information was thorough, and not all of the details regarding their origins were coded. Boris was always a thorough military leader, and on more than one occasion he claimed that the effectiveness of the Soviet Gulag system could have been far greatly improved if the Russian record keeping matched the level of completeness and sophistication of the Nazis. Then again, combining the most sadistic elements of Joseph Stalin with the mass-pleasing charisma of Adolf Hitler was something that Boris always did so well. Even when hired by private companies or clandestine government agencies to be on the 'right' moral side of a war. Had it not been for the UN having their own private 'CIA' and 'KGB' that even the Secretary General didn't know about, Boris would have probably taken over the infrastructure of far more 'insignificant' countries than he did. Leon was his favorite protegee, and perhaps only trusted friend. At least as Leona recalled it as she found herself fading away into 'shoulda's and coulda's land' behind her eyes while trying to look like she was assessing which of the five rows of girls chained to iron cots would be most suitable for her psycho-active drug trials.

"There is something wrong?" Boris asked Leona, in a gentlemanly manner.

"No, nothing. All is in order," she answered with a cold, insensitive voice, as her heart recalled the history of how these women got here. Scenarios she had heard about, and was unable to stop as a cop in Cleveland and soldier abroad because the intel or tools to do so came too late.

Stories like a barefoot, 13 year old dirt poor East Indian girl coming home from getting an A in her reading assignment in school proudly telling her father that the teacher wants to promote her to the next grade ahead of schedule. Having her father smile with sorrow at the news, as he made arrangements to have her 'schooled' by an 'Uncle' from Australia who needs an addition mistress for himself, and play-toy for his clients. Having her mother begging her father to not let 'Uncle Jim' take her, but knowing that the sale and services rendered by her daughter in a strip club in Sydney will enable her other ten children to eat this year, and perhaps the next.

Stories like two Albanian girls arriving in Italy on a private yacht after winning a talent and modeling contest back home, greeted not by an executive from MGM studios on the peer with a supermodel-singer who will be their coach, but an ugly over-the hill Madame who instructs one of her associates to take their passports and the other to take them into a black limo with shaded windows.

Stories like an honor student from Englewood, New Jersey who is given special permission by her Mom to celebrate her 18th birthday in Manhattan with her best friend who just moved to Soho. Dancing till closing, after only having two beers, so she could not get pulled over by the Cops for a DWI. And after saying goodnight to her best girlfriend, and to her perhaps first worth while boyfriend, being pulled into an alley by one of the sleezes she avoided in the bar, and

given a free cab ride to private jet at Westchester airport destined for a special client awaiting her in the Cayman Islands.

Stories like an Amish girl on the first trip to the world outside of the Amish Colony, on the first day of her required year-long trial to see if she will venture off into the ever-changing world or remain at home to maintain the family traditions that have been unchanged for two hundred years. Stepping foot off the bus at the Port Authority in New York, still in her traditional dress, carrying a suitcase with dresses and skirts that have hems that end at the knee, with shoes that have actual elevated heels on them, looking at an address in her notepad, where she will get a makeover from her cousin who decided to become a nurse in urban Brooklyn rather than a midwife in rural Pennsylvania. Looking up to see where her two brothers are, and noting that one of them has his eye on the luggage and the other on attractive woman on a cell phone. Then looking up again and seeing a baggage handler with no uniform on, bearing a wide smile, offering to help her with her bag. Then saying God Bless you, to the man while his assistant pulls her aside from the crowd and into cab operated by an off duty Cop who has a parallel off-duty profession he never tells his boss, or family about.

“Thirty million more of them, around the world,” Leona said to herself, softly. “And that’s probably the tip of the iceberg.”

“Iceberg?” Boris inquired, having heard her.

“For dinner tonight,” Leona replied. “And some steak. Potatoes. And vegetables.”

“I know just the place,” Boris said.

“Which is right here,” Leona insisted. “I can’t experiment with specimens that aren’t well nourished, no matter how normal their blood work and physical exam says they are. And any rancher out here knows that well fed cattle always bring in the best prices. Da?”

“Yes,” Boris said. “But the extra expenses will come out of your cut of the profits.”

“Profits that will be very large indeed, if we work together,” she said. Seeing the need to up than ante, she continued, gently stroking Boris’ beard with her tender fingers. “And play together, once the work is done?”

Boris said ‘yes’ with his eyes the terms Leona conveyed to him. The ones she hoped would be conveyed to him anyway. In any case, it would buy her some badly needed time. While her brain strategized over what to do next with Boris, her mind considered what had happened to her.

She had initially left her new life in comfortable Academia and came to the Rez to investigate the death of her brother Paul. Who was family. She escalated her efforts after Granny was killed, She was family, But now, everyone who was under Boris’ thumb was family. And the estimated 30 million other owned pieces of human merchandize being held someplace in the world by other Boris’. A conversion that she could never go back from. Knowing painfully well that her own biological family, what was left of it anyway, was useless. Or, perhaps not. Such

is what Leona thought as she accidentally slipped on the floor and non-so-accidentally inserted a high-powered mini-microphone on the wall next to the 'dormitory' administrative office.

CHAPTER 10

“So, you understand all that Russian?” the listener next to Leona asked as she moved closer to the three hundred dollar static-producing computer to hear what was coming out of the four thousand dollar microphone that Carlos had built for her for twenty bucks, in the event that she ever wanted to listen to what the faculty or students at Massachusetts University were really saying about her behind closed doors. A microphone she never used, perhaps because she was honorable, or afraid of finding out that her friends were really just temporary allies or undiscovered parasites. “Whatever they are saying, it sounds nasty, and cruel,” the co-listener.

“And ‘cool’ to those with power and influence, Dad,” Leona said to her father Tom as he upped the volume and did what he could with a few wires in the back of the mismatched speakers to make them behave better. Somehow it did, the words coming out clear as day, the subtext of the conversations Boris was having with his subordinates there and his collaborators on the phone dark as a moonless night. “I can get most of the Russian and some of the Albanian, but to be sure of what we have, we’ll need a translator. The Chinese and most of the Arabic is all Greek to me.”

Tom understood none of the mixed international phrases spoken as he recorded the live conversation between very deadly people as he checked the blinds on the basement window in his usually-private domestic ‘man cave’ to see that they were really closed and that no one was outside watching them. But one word frightened him most, particularly when Boris said it. “Leona,” he said. “Boris keeps referring to you as Leona with a scary agenda.”

“But a respected title,” Leona replied. “Doctor Leona.”

“And he still doesn’t know your last name, Leona?”

“Only from all those research papers I published, which are public record, Dad.”

“And a big accomplishment, Leona,” Tom said trying to get used to addressing his oldest and what he thought was most responsible, establishment, and manly offspring by that title. He pointed to the duplicates of the college and doctoral diplomas which he hung proudly on the wall next to the photos of him, his wife and his two sons during the good old days in front of the converted school-bus they called home when they were rich in Vision, affluent in defiance and broke in pocket. His eyes were focused on the name that followed the ‘L.’ on the awardee. “Boris knows your academic background as Doctor Zimmerman,” he commented.

“But not the name I grew up with, here and with him. Not the first name nor the last name,” she said. “I had to get a buy a new identity to earn a legitimate life as a scientist, teacher, and whatever else I’ve become after leaving behind everything and everyone here, for EVERYone’s good,” she said.

“But Chief Boris, or whatever his real name is, will figure out that you have a legitimate job as a research scientist and college lecturer,” he warned. “Which isn’t consistent with your being whatever you’re trying to pass yourself off as to him.”

“It is COMPLETELY consistent with it,” Leona assured Tom. “Academic people have lots of time to themselves, take lots of trips, and only have to check in to their posts to do a schpeel at the lectern for 30 hours a year, go to a few fund raisers, and be around to pick up their mail as their papers get approved for publication and to sign the release forms from the granting agencies giving the department fifty cents on the dollar as ‘facilities contribution’. And as even the stupidest bagman in South Boston knows, any mob boss who doesn’t keep at least one legit business going is going to be out of business faster than you can say ‘Godfather gone fishing with cement goulashes’.”

Tom seemed both proud and regretful that Leona had become a more assertive boss as gal than when he was a dude. He seemed to let go of so many questions incubating in his troubled mind, as he eye focused on a ledger in front of the computer screen. “Do I want to know what’s in there?” he asked Leona regarding Granny’s ledger, given to her before the old woman died in her ‘accidental’ fire following her suicide.

“The truth shall set you free,” Leona said.

“Or get you killed,” Tom continued, still keeping the book closed.

“It’s always a good day to die,” Leona reminded Tom, in Cree. “Isn’t that the battle cry Granny always told us. And isn’t that also the battle cry you used to say to yourself, and others, when you fought against the Palefaces as an Indian Liberation Organizer?”

Tom considered the dare, then took it. Leona narrated what he saw, informing his heart and soul while he was providing data to his mind.

“Numbers, figures, conversational transcripts and dates,” Leona said. “From someone who was once the most respected book-keeper and personal counselor on this Rez and five others around it. Dirty laundry on LOTS of ‘clean’ people.”

“Who are not so clean now,” Tom said, quietly. “But, in a court of law, or a Cop’s interrogation room, no one would believe it,” he continued, closing the book and handing it back to Leona. “No one would believe it. Granny made up stories about animals who talked to her in the woods. She could have made up these financial figures and business transactions as well. And used her bookkeeping skills to make them look balanced. It’s all, as they say on those cop shows which are NOT reality...speculation.”

“Like the speculation that Paul died of natural causes?” Leona challenged. “Who was rising up high in Chief Boris’ Casino till his job and life were terminally ended.”

Tom didn’t have the courage to affirm Leona’s conviction that her brother and Tom’s died by the hand of Chief Boris, nor the stomach to keep denying it.

“Come on, Dad,” Leona said as she put her hand on Tom’s shoulder just as she had done as Leon. “I don’t believe the official Medical Examiner’s report any more than you do.”

Tom thought long and hard, then finally gave voice to his most effective suggestion regarding the dilemma. "Sheriff Stevenson," he said.

"Deputy lap Dawg Stevenson?" Leona mused, as disappointed in the man as she was angered at him.

"What does he know about all of this?" Tom asked, demanding and needing to know a direct, black and white answer.

"That he'll keep 'investigating' it," Leona said. "In his spare time of course. While he gets paid by the Band Council to not investigate anything of course." She turned to Tom. "Look, Dad. At one time you, and Mom, wanted to change the world. Merge the American Indian Movement with the Woodstock Flower Power People's Revolution. For REAL people everywhere! I know that AIM sold out to the man after Disco came into power, and that the only power left in the People's Revolution is in their ability sell tee-shirts to mall rats who think Woodstock is a Swedish brand of upscale furniture. But this Revolution here. This chance to be Alive and Free again, is up to US!"

"More like it's up to you," Tom replied from his wrinkled, tired face, pushing back his long black hair with had turned far gray than Leona had ever noticed, and with what looked like a Paleface bald spot developing on the crown which would have never found its way into First Nations during the days when they were their own people.

Leona felt disappointed, then powerless, then the kind of weakness was unique to members of her newly acquired gender.

"You can do it," Tom said. "You used to be a Cop in a city loaded with crime, remember? A man's man. An Injun and a White man's man?"

"Until the night I went undercover as a woman. An assignment I didn't want to do. But as soon as the dress me my legs, and my feel slipped into those heels," Leona said, recalling the internal and external events of that very eventful day.

"You found out that you liked it," Tom offered.

"That I ALWAYS liked it," Leona related, and confessed. "Ever since I was seven. And needed to do it to be me. To be complete. Like the manly Army commercials said, to 'be all you can be.'" Leona released the sorrow, pain and anguish of those times into ironic laughter.

"You could have told me, Leona," Tom said, seeming to be understanding.

"And YOU would have understood it?" she challenged, holding back tears of regret as she faced the only man she ever loved, in the truest sense of the word, straight in the face. "Or TRIED to accept it, Dad? I asked you once, I think it was at a powwow, when I think I was nine, as a

'joke', what you would do if I came to the Powwow, or to a basketball game, or to school wearing a dress. You said, without any humor at all in YOUR voice, 'I'll kill ya'."

"Maybe I would have, then," Tom replied, eyes turned downward. "But now..." he continued, head up, eyes open, heart and mind willing to accept whatever came into them.

A special moment was in the works for Tom and Leona. Finally, they would see each other. And see themselves. The flower of that evolving Liberation, Truth and Bonding unfolded as they looked into each other's faces, smiled, then edged toward each other in an embrace that would ease all of the pain, and redeem all of the suffering. But the universe, small u, had a different idea.

"Happy birthday to you," Leona heard from her Mother Emily, clad in a white woman's dress with a very large Christian cross around her neck, as she shuffled into the room with a gait more befitting a frumpy 'Everyone Loves Raymond' Grandmother than the freewheeling, musically-rebellious Hippie Mom that she once was. "Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday dear Leon," she continued, pushing a birthday cake addressing Leona as Leon in front of her, thirty eight candle all lit ready to blow out. Then insisting that Tom join her in the last chorus of that song.

"Happy birthday to you," Tom sang along with Emily, closing up his heart, and spirit again.

"Blow out the candles, Leon," Emily asked, then insisted.

Leona looked to Tom as to what to do next. He replied with a 'your mother is one of 'them' nod of his head when Emily wasn't looking.

Leona had no choice but to blow out the candles, then say 'thank you' to Emily, who had grown into the kind of woman who could not handle the truth. While Leona was now dedicated to it more than ever.

CHAPTER 11

Deputy Sheriff Stevenson's secluded office at the Cop shop was First Nations on the wall. It included items that were too authentic to go into the Cultural Museum, from his Canadian Grandfather's more-stain-than-shine hunting knife to the moccasins his grandmother wore down to nothing on the soles waiting for him to come home from excursions in the bush that were always longer than expected because of being too successful or not successful enough. As for what was on the old desk that no one else wanted, with only half of the drawers in functional order, it was overloaded with case files with incomplete paperwork on the left hand side and memos from the brass taped to the right side warning him that unless the parking tickets, building code violations and complaints about excess noise were dealt with quickly the desk and he would be removed from the building permanently.

But for the moment, his attention was on Granny's ledger, and the stranger returning back to town who gave it to him. As for that stranger, Leona rummaged through a large 'Happy Birthday Leon' bag given to her by her mother. 'Deputy Lap Dawg' Stevenson examined the ledger and the excerpts from the hidden microphones Leona had written down. Leona went through the birthday grab bag her mother had bought for her son Leon.

Mom had gone all out financially this year for Leon, completely ignoring Leona in her selection of 'suggestive gifts'. Subscriptions to Playboy, Field and Stream, Guns and Ammo. Wax for the mustache she electrolyzed away a year ago. A ZZ-Top beard for her naked chinny-chin-chin, with a note reading 'till your real one grows back again'. And a gift certificate for a complete makeover at Big Bob's Man's World Barber shop. "Just what a girl needs," she commented to Stevenson who, by now, had to know who she really was as a result of his hearing 'Leon' on more than one occasion come out of her mouth, and giving more stares at the area between her legs than those legs themselves or the breasts above them. But most importantly, Tom suggested that to gain Stevenson's trust, he had to be let in on her biological secrets, and origins.

"How many people on the Rez know about you being a...ya know...a--"

"---Human being?" Leona shot back. "Who wants to get the shitheads listed in that ledger and recorded in the 'dormitory' office out of our lives here, so we can get back to the crappy lives we used to live before we got affluent."

Stevenson put down the ledger and gazed at the collection of artifacts from bygone days which were trusted tools then. "Lives that were not that crappy," he said with a fond smile, recalling memories that Leona felt she could relate to, particularly a horse bridal made of moose-hide and horsehair. "I remember riding my horse to work when the weather was good."

"And snowshoeing when the weather was bad," Leona said as her eye was captured by the artistry and history of a pair of snowshoes besides the bridle.

"Buying and selling firewater was illegal on the Rez then," he continued. "Most people followed that law at the store. Some even honored it at home."

“Yeah, ‘honor’,” Leona commented through a hushed sigh. Seeing that Stevenson was lost in the world of the past, she pushed the ledger and associated notes back into his hands so he could deal with the present.

Stevenson looked at them again, still seeming very casual about it all. One of the photos within the notes featured Boris in full Native head-dress receiving an award at a Powwow with his entourage.

“So, Boris Petrovitch,” Stevenson noted. “And all the others around him in .”

“‘Uncle Boris’ to his under-aged female employees. ‘Chief Boris’ to everyone else, in his multicultural family,” Leona noted regarding what she had seen, and Stevenson had to know about. “Who has connections to many other families elsewhere. On both sides of the legality line.”

“And you want me to do what, specifically?” Stevenson inquired, without breaking a sweat or even an eyebrow at the findings she had entrusted to him, as a result of trusting her father Tom.

Leona grabbed Stevenson by the collar, wishing she could electrify him around the neck instead, noting that one of the cameras tied to the wall had paper covering its lens and the other a lens that had been ripped off. “I want me to give me what I need!!!”

“If you give me what I need,” Stevenson replied, struggling to regain his breath but not too disturbed at losing it.

“I’ll give you whatever you need or want to do your job!” she grunted at him while still keeping him at bay. “Money? Dope? A Ukrainian bitch you can call a squaw? A roll in the fucking hay with me?”

“Air,” Stevenson forced out of his mouth with whatever breath he could grab hold of. “Air, please,” he asked, but did not beg for.

Leona let go of Stevenson’s collar. Seeing her reflection in a mirror, which she hoped was not a window on the other side, she regained her composure, not sure of the reason why she had lost it. Maybe it was PTSD left over from the Leon days in the Army or the Police force. Or maybe it was righteous indignation from seeing too much here as Leona. In any case, she felt the need to take care of her own biological needs before tending the the survival needs of others. She rummaged through her purse looking for the right medication to steady her shaking arms and bring circulation back to her cold, most probably whitening body.

“You okay?” Stevenson asked her.

“I’m fine,” Leona shot back as she took one blue pill, one red one and dropped the white one on the floor, recovering it before the mice, rats any IAB-connected Janitor could get hold of it. “I’m just your ordinary, everyday necessary evil,” she said by way of explanation as she did the breathing exercises the Doctor in Boston said would help bring her blood pressure back, and

moved her finger back and forth in front of her eyes so that the left and right brain could reconnect, as was suggested by her shrink in New Hampshire. “And you, Sheriff Stevenson, are a necessary, whatever.”

“Hormones?” Stevenson inquired regarding the large pills Leona in her bag, with a calm, collected composure of the psychiatrist who knew everything about brain but nothing about soul.

“What these are is my business,” Leona replied regarding the collection of medications which were partially prescribed by legal docs, and partially formulated by Leona as a result of her own knowledge of biology, and her appreciation for the needs she had which were not in the physiology textbooks. “I’m risking everything here,” she asserted as she closed up her handbag, then zipped it shut with a firm and determined stroke.

“I know,” Stevenson said as he heard footsteps coming towards the door, then someone opening it without asking permission to do so. “Meeting in ten in the conference room, just wanted to let you know in case you forgot,” a secretary with legs almost as pretty as Leona’s said with a warm smile.

“I didn’t forget,” Stevenson said. “I just have to finish up with this young lady here first.”

”Sure, no problem,” the secretary said, going on her way, and leaving the door open. From that open door, Leona and Stevenson could see the whole squad, as they could no doubt see them as well.

“They’re all apples,” Leona said regarding the Indian on the outside and White on the inside Cops. Some who she didn’t trust because of hard observation of her own and hard facts put on paper by Granny. Some because there was something about them that just didn’t feel right. “I wish I was making this up,” she shared with Stevenson, sensing that if anyone here could be trusted, it was him. And knowing that without an inside man on the Cop shop, the plan she was brewing in her head would fall ‘flatfoot’ on his ass. But thankfully she had more to go on with regard to Stevenson than merely a gut feel. Something Tom had talked around, and discretely inferred. And things Tom said, and didn’t say which led Leona to seeing what had motivated Stevenson to do what he did, and become who he now was. By the way Stevenson looked at a picture of a young woman whose face looked prematurely old, the data Leona has dug up was real and her hypothesis correct.

“I know the difficulty of your position,” Leona said. “Your wife died from cancer that you couldn’t pay enough to stop five years ago. Today, you still drive an old beater to work. Still buy your food in bargain stores. And you watch ‘Money Matters’ and ‘The Apprentice’ on a non-flat screen used tv that has rabbit ears rather than satellite feed. And your kids are the only two Injuns on the Rez who don’t walk around in two hundred dollar runners.”

“Hmm....You do your homework,” Stevenson noted.

“OM work,” Leona replied with a Buddhist bow and a gentle, forgiving smile.

“Huh?” Stevenson replied, not having gotten the joke and as a result of such not trusting the smile behind it.

“Intellectually and scientifically based humor,” Leona explained, once again realizing how alone she was with regard to affairs and the heart and passions between the ears. “Suppose that Einstein and Buddha would have gotten the joke, but as for this realm of reality...” Leona appended her discourse with a sealed envelope delivered to Stevenson, the corner of which was open enough to reveal a stack of fresh, and legal, bills in it.

“No one on the Rez or any town within twenty miles of it gets their REAL money through paychecks,” she noted. “But rest assured, this money is from me. Hard earned. Was going to use it for my own medical purposes, but there are a whole bunch of girls here and innocent people elsewhere who won’t grow up to be anything if I don’t--“

Stevenson examined the bills under a lamp with a marker retrieved from his half-broken upper left hand drawer. “It’s real alright,” he said. “I had to check that it was. Nothing personal.”

“It shows you’re doing your job,” Leona replied, in a complimentary manner.

“I miss your brother Paul,” he said, while still holding on to the envelope, and the reasons why he knew about Leona’s relationship to him. “Horrible that he died so young.”

“And terrible that assholes and idiots in this building, and maybe in this room, let it happen,” Leona asserted. “But as we are both necessary evils, for each other, and the world,” she continued as she handed him another envelope. “Instructions,” she said by way of explanation. “From your boss in this employment proposition. For you to follow as long as you work for me.”

“Which I will honor, as long as we are working for each other, and Paul,” Stevenson said as he put the instruction envelope into his breast pocket, and put the cash-containing envelope into Leona’s ‘birthday grab bag’.

Leona quickly removed it and rammed it back into Stevenson’s hands.

“What I’m asking for is going to be expensive. One strike is all I need, and we’ll get a chance to do. With whoever has the balls to do the right thing, or is buy-able to change sides,” Leona pleaded with as much assertiveness as she dared.

A moment of truce emerged between Leona and Stevenson, that merged into trust, then into something which a female Officer lower in rank than Stevenson but higher in attitude gave not-so-inaccurate label to. “Dating again, Deputy Sheriff Stevenson?” Karlata Svenson noted with a jealous, and watchful eye.

Stevenson tightened his lip, his body tensing up as Karlata entered the room and ‘inspected’ her boss’ new romantic prospect. “That’s great,” she said as Leona felt ‘approved of’, for the moment anyway. “It looks like you have a lot in common with each other. And it’s time for you

to get involved with someone again,” she said to Stevenson. She then spoke to Leona. “And if I am any judge of character, it seems like it’s time for you to get involved with someone too.”

‘Officer Karlata’ seemed to know a lot about Leona, but then again, as a Cop, it was her job to give such an impression. Just as Leona’s job was to give the impression to her new partner that she knew what she was doing with regard to a plan that would require another layer of trust, and cooperation from someone she had just met, for the first real time in thirty years. That individual sent a text to her phone. An Apocalyptic event not only because it was only the second time in his life that he texted, but also what is said. “Another birthday package. Red and Black Barn. Bring what you have, I bring what I kept.”

CHAPTER 12

The Red and Black Barn, was no more than a small cabin build deep into the brush, unseeable by air, surrounded by grass-covered dirt walls on all sides, and findable only by those who were supposed to know what it was. A smaller version of a Shuswap roundhouse but built in a rectangular design for purposes of contemporary practicality. It was supposed to have been destroyed along with everyone and everything in it nearly three decades ago. Leona arrived and discovered that Tom had been restoring it for years, and decided finally to put it back into active business. “These historical artifacts might be useful to you,” he said as Leona gawked at the weapons inside the recently opened boxes that had been initially printed to be used for transporting bulk supplies of hospital supplies, groceries and asswipe. “Mostly old, some new,” Tom said, clad in the faded, blood-stained fringed leather coat which he had not worn since he gave up being a Traditional Hunter and Native American activist nearly two decades ago. “That can be used to kill anyone who they are pointing at if aimed right. Or...be modified with a Great Uncle Henry adjustment to---.”

“---backfire and kill the sadistic Paleface prick who wants to buy them to murder unarmed Redskin women, children and old men,” Leona interjected recalling how her Great Grandfather, a horrible hunter and archer, whose only skill was fixing broken down White Man’s machinery sold to his tribe, defeated the Blue Coats in two mop up skirmishes that weren’t publicized at the time because there was more interest in the Civil War back East at the time, and that the wrong side won those battles.

“Which I’m sure you have done to some of your own bang bangs that you have hidden somewhere on the Rez, or someplace else you shouldn’t tell me about,” Tom replied. By his eyes he seemed to know a lot about Leona, and was determined not to give voice to. “I can’t give you an Army of Warrior Indians willing to stand up for what is ours. That you’ll have to get on your own. And if you can’t raise an Army, maybe you can use these as currency for whatever you are planning, or proof that you are who you’re pretending to be.”

Leona had so many questions to ask Tom after he read her mind so accurately. Like what he REALLY did when he was an AIM Activist back in the 60s and 70s. And why he went dormant. And why he ‘mellowed out’ when she and her brother were old enough to carry that torch for Indian, and by inference, global human rights. One of the answers was in front of her face, the picture of Tom, Emily and their two happy, carefree 5 and six year old kids surrounded by cats, dogs and horses in a canvas bordered by trees and sunshine. A very non-political snapshot. “What about her?” Leona asked.

Tom told Leona everything that was needed to be known about the weapons dating from 1898 Winchesters to Vietnam War surplus semi-automatic rifles, and a few more modern pieces that found their way to him as ‘collector’s items’ at gun and knife shows. He put a small yellow mark on the ones that were intended to backfire on their buyers. Green ones on the ones that would be dysfunctional after several trials at the firing range. White ones for those that Leona could use if she could find an army of ‘Leons’ willing to carry on the fight that Tom could only support from behind. “A group of 300 Spartans armed with the right position held back an Army

of 10,000 Persians. With these, and an Army of two, you could hold back Chief Boris' Army of thugs and goons."

"I was thinking an Army of three," Leona said, pushing Tom for an answer as he looked at the photo of 'I see nothing and want to stay out of everything' Emily. "But I understand that you have to do what you have to do, and have to honor pledges you made to people you are responsible for. And, at one time, even loved."

Leona's remark hit Tom straight between the eyes. He replied with an all knowing smile, then that look in his face that said it was time for another Tall Tale about his ancestors, and Leona's. "Sitting Bull was too old to fight at Little Big Horn, but he was a master at getting Intel, from the world you could see, and the world most people couldn't see. It was his job to keep getting Intel while Crazy Horse and the others rode into the Little Big Horn valley and finally gave Custer what he deserved. With rifles that were not that much different than these here, Leona," Tom related.

"Yes, I know," Leona said proudly. "But there's one problem with that story."

"That Intel is different than Vision?" Tom asked.

"That the blue coats were a lot harder on us after we whooped Custer than beforehand. And that all of your blood is Indian, and only half of mine is," Leona replied. "And that Mom's great grandfather, as I found out when I looked into it just recently, was a Paleface Bluecoat Cavalry Officer who enjoyed killing a lot of Indians after Little Big Horn before he went back East and became respectable. I'm not sure if Mom knows about that. Should I tell her?"

"Ignorance is bliss," Tom answered, having re-examined the issue yet again. "And a lot safer."

CHAPTER 13

The sign over the casino door that day read ‘Closed for Religious Holiday’ in English and Cree, but inside everything was open for business, and business was booming. Finally, Leona was given access to the large supply room in the building that she remembered as always being empty. It was hardly empty now. With her escort and new business partner she walked up and down the rows of wares for sale, spread out on tables and displayed in the same manner as the top quality pharmaceutical companies and research supply corporations did at the Neuroscience meetings Leona had attended. Everything supplied by Boris or Leona was clean and spotless. From the guns and bio-toxins for top dollar, to the displayers and refreshment servers, who could be purchased or loaned out for a dollar a poke. Yolanda 2 and Amanda 4 were amongst them, their faces revealing their broken spirits to anyone who cared to really look at them. They, as well as the other ‘nieces’ on display to the perspective Uncles from all corners of the globe had one thing in common aside from un-removable metallic jewelry from their necks...A despondent ‘what the fuck, I don’t care anymore’ attitude towards everything. But if Leona’s plan was to work, they had to be made to care again about SOMETHing.

She pondered the matter from an equine perspective, thinking about the case of Nemo, a horse that was broken into subservience then blind obedience by a Hank Ralston. supermacho bubba-bellied rancher who fancied himself to be Clint Eastwood. Anyone human could get on Nemo’s back and make him do anything. And when it came to feeding time, any horse that wanted his ration of grain always got it. It was only after Granny had worked with him from the inside that Nemo gained some of his dignity back. Enough to bite toss Hank Ralston on his ass when he returned to take him for a spin to impress his new Injun Princess girlfriend. From that day onward, Nemo belonged to Granny, and himself.

But for every Nemo the horse, there was a Rodney the rodent. A rat that Leona’s thesis adviser had trained as a model for human depression, aka learned helplessness. The procedure was easy. Take a rodent who if put into a tank of water can find a submerged platform, swim to it, and save itself, and put him in a mildly electrified maze where he is offered the chance to get a chunk of cheese if he can figure his way out. And whenever the rat figures the way out of the pain and into the pleasure, close the door on the latter. When such was done to Rodney and his pals long enough, and they are put into a water tank an inch away from a submerged platform which they know about, they choose to not even try to swim, sinking to the bottom in an attempt to drowned themselves.

Yes, there were more Rodneys than Nemos, but Leona hoped that there was at least one Rodney amongst the ‘nieces’ so that her plan today would work. It felt like the Great Spirit, or perhaps merely the ghost of Granny, was with her, as she saw the first participant in that plan enter the door, with his entourage.

Though General Timolto was built like and walked like Black Ghetto trash. A fat pig whose face looked like a bulldog with sloped forehead typical of a ‘born-to-be-dumb’ beer drinking slob. But when dressed in his Military Uniform, he looked powerful, smart and even handsome. He eyed the guns from Boris’ collection, Leona’s secret supplier and Tom’s underground stash with

equal interest. But he had a special affinity for Amanda 4 and Yolanda 2, primo white meat that would please his very Black African palate.

“Impressive merchandise, Boris,” the fat Black African General commented to his thin White Russian host regarding it all. “That is not smiling.”

“Apologies, General,” Colonel Petrovitch said with a courtly bow. He discretely motioned for his thugs to do the appropriate adjustments. The two thugs behind Boris pressed the remote control devices hidden in their pockets, causing a jolt to awaken Yolanda and Amanda out of their glazed, despondent modes. Boris gave them an angry stare, motioning with his lips for them to smile. They didn’t do so, until Leona discretely showed them keys to their locks, then went up to them to loosening the top buttons on their low cut dresses, sneaking a master key she had prepared into Yolanda’s fist and a note just under Amanda’s left breast.

Yolanda smiled, wanting to trust Leona somehow. The woman who was present the afternoon when they were finally fed a full meal, for the first time in weeks. She nudged Amanda to follow suit, which she did. Boris seemed satisfied. Timolto seemed pleased.

“As you can see, General, everything you need for your Revival Revolution is here to arm your men, and to keep them entertained between victories,” he said. “Without any medical or psychological complications.”

“Yes, I see they are healthy specimens, well fed and in good non-disease carrying conditions,” Timolto conceded, as Leona gave Boris a discrete ‘I told you that you could get more money for these gals if you feed them well and give them special medications from my special stash’ look. “But,” Timolto continued, turning around quickly to Boris. “You said that there would be weapons for sale here that did not require bullets as well.”

“Which are right this way,” Leona smiled, bowing even deeper than Boris did, as women were an inferior species relative to men in Timolto’s world, even if those women were smarter than the men who owned them.

With a seductive wiggle of her ass, Leona led the General and his entourage across the room around and through the less affluent and less dangerous buyers attending the fair who were more concerned with metallic killing devices that looked macho than ones that were most deadly. The final destination was a table where she had displayed her special mass population ‘inactivating’ compounds, along with antidotes, each coded with a number and color. Boris stayed in the background as she displayed the wares at the only table hosted by no nieces and manned by none of Boris’ uncles.

“It is my pleasure, and honor, General, to bring to you, with my new associate Colonel Petrovitch, the newest biological tools to treat the political and social diseases you are endeavoring to eradicate,” she said.

“Toxins and microbes that can inactivate specific targets at specific intervals” Boris added.

“Indeed,” Leona continued as if it was a guy/gal used car commercial aimed at keeping the buyer bedazzled till he signed the check and broke down in the parking lot after driving out the ‘deal of the year’. “And antidotes to protect those who are entrusted to inactivate those targets. As well as, most importantly, you and your most entrusted family members.”

Leona offered Timilto a sniff of the ‘antidotes’, after pretending to take a whiff in herself. While Timilto inhaled the protective agents into his very large nostrils, Leona noticed other buyers at the indoor shooting range, sampling the wares they wanted to buy, preparing to aim at dummy targets that were being set up which were all likenesses of civilian women, children and old men, all according to Boris’ timetable.

“Yes,” Timilto said again regarding the aroma of the antidotes as he felt not only safe, but unexpectedly happy and carefree. “Have a sniff, Boris. This is quite an enjoyable aroma! Good medicine that tastes good too.” He laughed with unbridled passion and bliss. All according to Leona’s time table.

Yolanda attempted to use the key Leona had given her, and unlocked her collar, then Amanda’s. One key did fit all of the locks. Both of them started to circulate around the other nieces. All according to Leona’s time table.

“You have to try this antidote!” Timilto said to Boris as he gave him a sample of his favorite powdered antidote to sample. “Every painful part of my body and mind is feeling so good now!”

Leona nodded for Boris to accept the General’s offer. He hesitated....very much not according to Leona’s timetable. “I have to hold on to my pain,” he told the General by way of explanation.

“But I insist,” the General said. “Your associate feels good, doesn’t she?”

Timilto snapped his fingers, commanding every gun carried by an African to be aimed at Boris’ goons, then after those guns were lowered, at Boris himself.

“Oh yeah,” Leona said, faking being an ecstatic stoner and happy drunk. “My associate Boris knows that sharing a good drink with an old friend such as you is part of doing business.”

“Like sharing a good looking woman after the business is over?” Timilto said with a bellowing laugh, pulling Leona in with his humongous left arm, and then Boris in with his large, apelike left. “The three of us party after this is over, yes?” he smiled while holding both Boris and Leona hostage in the happy place he was in. Boris shared the happy with him.

The Black and White Armies lowered their weapons, then their guard, joining in with the festivities. But it didn’t last long.

But Boris wasn’t happy when he saw the worried look he saw in Leona’s eyes. Then not when he saw the two guards assigned the duty of looking after the West and South exit doors who were being distracted by ‘nieces’ who coming on to them in a game that THEY seemed to be controlling. Not at the police sirens everywhere around the building that sent the buyers into fear

for their lives, and accusations for them being there directed at their host. Not at three overarmed bikers thinly disguised as an army of Cops who came storming into the room after Amanda and one of the newer nieces opened the door for them. Not at the backfiring weapons at the shooting range which were blowing the heads off the foreign buyers and his own goons who were shooting them, the ones from her arsenal rather than Tom's overrated sabotaged weapons anyway. And not at the coughing spasm General Timilto went into as he reached for his own firearm, which desolated into a full blown epileptic seizure, landing him on the floor.

Leona didn't stick around Boris long enough for him to ask her what was going on, nor to explain that he saved his life out of an honor obligation for his saving Leon's, but only for that one last time. Ducking for cover to see what was happening according to plan and accident, she looked around for Stevenson. Thankfully he was by the North exit door, along with Amanda and Yolanda, ushering out twelve liberated nieces towards the door before more dummy sirens were set off outside the Black Africans fighting White Russians, each thinking they were set up by the other, gangs and cartels in between trying to save their own asses by aligning with whoever was closest.

A perfect set up and liberation, until Yolanda has a change of heart after seeing the sun for the first time since her abduction. And she yearned for the security of confinement again, grabbing Stevenson's gun and pointing it at him. "I came back for you, Chief Boris," she said in her best English. "And give you present of this officer," she said of Stevenson. "And that woman who you think you know," she continued, aiming the gun at Leona and firing it. Stevenson grabbed hold of the gun, grasping it back firmly in his hand, and Amanda pulled Yolanda back outside, punching her in the stomach and working with the other girls to get her into the escape vehicle before she could reveal anything more. But not before the bullet Yolanda shot off inactivated Leona's left leg, disabling her from joining the escape team. Then a second stray bullet from the mob war wound up hit Leona's right arm, making her lose all abilities to hold onto anything. She was unable to move, but that didn't matter. Boris wasn't moving either, hit by one of the Black Africans' bullets in his leg. He was resolved to his fate, drinking vodka from his flask, singing one of his 'it's a good day to die' songs, in Russian.

"By another bullet, or after a lifetime wearing a dog collar around YOUR neck in jail," Leona said to herself, satisfied that her life had been worth all of the agonies, all of the hardships. She motioned for Stevenson to move the girls out quickly, and that she would join them soon. It would be in the afterlife, which was ok with Leona now.

As if on schedule, a third shot came from somewhere unidentifiable that grazed her head, causing her to fall on the floor, seeing black in front of her face, then a bright light. Her ears heard the escalating gunfire dissolved into deafening Silence, then the gentle sound of a summer's day, then the even gentler sound of Granny's voice, calling out to her in Cree words she did not understand but felt to be assuring.

The 'transition' acquired a deeper dimension as Leona entered the Spirit World, the huya aniya according to the Yaqui Indians in Northwest Mexico. A realm that affected the 'real' world, and vice versa.

Leona felt herself being Leon, riding a horse next to his brother Paul, in an event that happened in the real world, but still had to be played out in the huya aniya. Both of them had recently sprouted pubic hair on their genitals and respectable non-peachfuzz mustaches on their lips. But their hair was long, their shirtless bodies wrapped in leather fringed leggings that complimented their moccasins. In their minds' eye the cattle they were herding across the ranch they were hired to look after while the owner was away turned into buffalo. Until something real, or perhaps very metaphysically intense, in the bush spooked the horses, the herd of cattle scattering. For the moment, the riders stayed on top of them

“What’s happening, man?” Leon asked Paul.

“I don’t know,” Paul replied. “These horses see something we don’t?”

“A fucking bear, maybe,” Leon speculated.

“A goddamn ghost,” Paul affirmed as he opened his eyes wider and let the light come into them. It came into the horse’s ocular portholes as well, the proud-cut gelding turning tail and taking himself and his rider to a safer, non-ghost-inhabited region of the meadow. Leon’s horse remained looking at whatever was moving in the bush, knowing it was something other than wind, but not wanting to investigate any further. It reared up on its back legs.

“I can’t hold on!” Leon screamed out.

“Then let go,” Leon heard from Granny in Cree, then English. She strolled up next to Leon as he struggled to stay atop the frightened mare. “Or give her a swift kick in the belly,” she calmly suggested as she adjusted the strap on her herb collecting bag, tasting the berries she put in before being assured that they were ready for extractions.

Leon did what he could to calm the horse down, but he was anxious about the movement in low lying bushes as much as the horse was. Anxiety led to terror when the wind moving across the branches on the windless day seemed to turn into a Light.

“Astum,” Granny said from the other side of the whirling, Light infused trees. “Come forward into it,” she commanded Leon.

“I can’t!” Leon said.

“You can,” Granny assured him, becoming a beacon of Light herself. “But it’s your choice, nobody else’s,” she assured him. She whisked her hand in front of the horse, then said some words that Leon did not understand. But apparently the frightened mare understood what she said and obeyed her.

The horse laid her front feet firmly on the ground, eased her back muscles and calmly waited for Leon to command her to move forward, or backward.

Just then, Leon heard something from the Bush. Music that the ears attached to his head heard faintly, then the ears inside his head heard even louder. “The finale to Wagner’s Gotterdamurung. The Twilight of the gods.”

The music did something to Leon. He recalled the legend of Brunhilde, who at the end of the 12 hour opera decides that she and the rest of humanity had been given enough shit from the gods, and it was time for her to ride her horse, Grain, into the fires of Valhalla and give them the third finger salute. A move that would cost her own life, but give Life back to humanity.

“I’m ready,” Leon asserted as he nudged ‘Grain’ onward with his feet, prepared to charge into the flames to destroy Darkness and become Light.

“Not yet,” Granny said, doing something with her hands.

“Grain” reared up and tossed Leon onto the ground. He rolled down a hill leading to a cliff, his fall stopped by a body lying in the grass. Leon was shocked when he saw what and who it was.

“Yes, she is you, and you are her, and you are each other,” Granny smiled as she casually walked over, limping a bit on her walking stick. “Leon, meet Leona. Leona, meet Leon,” she said to the body of the male and female expressions of the Soul who was named ‘Leon’ at birth because he bore a penis at in his present incarnation.

The very naked and beautiful Leona woke out of her slumber and invited Leon to embrace him with a warm, welcoming smile.

“Who is that? What is that?” Leon said, terrified.

“An opportunity,” Granny explained. “For you to be the most effective person you can be.”

“But, I’m not a pervert,” Leon asserted.

“No,” Granny assured him. “You’re something even more dangerous. You are special. Gifted.”

“A necessary evil,” Leon said. “Who will take on the Revolution for human rights that my father abandoned, or can’t fight anymore.”

“Who will do more good with, or as, her, than as you,” Granny said. “But if you don’t believe me, ask your horse.”

On cue, the mare walked over to Leon, nudged him, then turned to its side, positioning herself in front of Leon’s mounting leg.

“Or ask... The Light in the bush,” Granny said as the Fire in the bush turned from being a hellish wall to a Heavenly beacon. “Ask Him,” Granny continued regarding the expression of the Great Spirit.”

A realization hit Leon, something he could not ignore. “That’s not a Him or a Her. That Spirit is..”

“Beyond and within both of us,” Leona said. She got up, approaching Leon, giving him the reins.

“Yes, indeed,” Leon smiled as he gave Leona a leg up onto the horse. Then got up on the mare himself, behind Leona. Leon allowed his body to merge into Leona’s. Together they nudged “Grain” onward. Horse and the merged riders galloped into the Light, merging into Infinity. The merged Soul felt light and heavy, both at the same time. But, with Leona’s voice, it asked one question. “So, where am I?”

CHAPTER 14

Leona opened her eyes and saw exactly where she was, and where the music was really coming from. “Wagner played on the radio in THIS town?” she said as she noticed the small transistor radio on the table next to her hospital bed, and the person sitting beside it, trying to make the NPR station from Bismark come across stronger than the Top Forty broadcasts from local outlets on either side of the band.

“What happened?” Leona slurred out of mouth as she felt a sudden winter-like breeze filter through the partially opened window, blowing over then through her hospital gown. “And where’s my...?” she continued, looking downward at the intersection between her legs, not giving voice to the word describing that organ which defined men as men if they had them, and women as women if they didn’t with regard to the man sitting at her bedside, the newspaper he was reading next to him.

“Welcome back,” Stevenson said with a warm smile. “We missed you.”

“Maybe some of you did,” Leona said, wanting to get a closer look at the headlines on the newspaper and the picture under it. “What happened when I was...away?”

Stevenson moved the paper out of Leona’s field of vision, but not the grasp of her uninjured left hand and very well-repaired right arm. Indeed the blurry image she saw of it was very real, in crystal-clear black and white. “Chief Boris elected Honorary Elder Inter-tribal Leader,” it read, Boris’ smiling face under a full head-dress War bonnet while he accepted the esteemed award which had not been given to a White man since Kevin Kostner did ‘Dances with Wolves’.

Leona turned her angry eyes at Stevenson’s gentle ones. “I thought you were supposed to---“

“---Arrest me?” Boris said, walking into the room with a bandage around his injured leg, walking on it as if it really was just a flesh wound, or a limb repaired better than new by the best docs human trafficking profits could buy off. “It was Deputy Sheriff Stevenson’s job to arrest me. Just as it was mine to stand up for legal rights. And it was the job of my Indian lawyers to do their job to defend me. You know, you people make better lawyers than buffalo hunters.”

Boris whipped out a bouquet of flowers from behind his coat and presented them to Leona with a kind, inviting smile. Cautiously, she took them. Then with a grimace snap of his fingers, he dismissed Stevenson. After Stevenson left the room with a humbly bowed head, Boris took his post next to Leona’s bed. He turned the radio to one of the Country stations, on which there was a song that Leona hated because of its simplistic ‘church going’ lyrics, made demonic by Boris singing them in Russian.

“What happened in the Casino at the trade show---“ Leona said.

“---To the Black General?” Boris interjected. “You eliminated a problem for me. I can always get more generals who want to be gods.”

“And the girls who?” Leona inquired.

“I don’t know how they got out, but you don’t either, do you?” he asked, turning off the radio.

“No, I don’t,” she said, not really knowing the answer, as Stevenson probably fucked up that part of the plan as well.

“In any case, if you were trying to ‘burrow’ them from me, or they found their own way out, I, no we, will find them,” Boris assured her as he opened the paper to the Funny’s section. “And besides, who is going to believe their stories they say about me, or you? No one of any importance.”

“Yeah,” Leona replied, looking out into space, to a place where she hoped Boris could not find her. But he was looking to do so.

“But you are still of very importance to me,” he said, inspecting her body through the hospital gown with his X-ray vision.

“Even though I can’t, ya know...?” Leona replied.

“Have children?”

“I have...problems in that area.”

“This is...good,” Boris concluded.

“And about my female parts...” Leona hoped and prayed that the universe would answer that question, but Boris did so first.

“An incurable virus that you contracted when you were with one of your biochemical warfare buyers perhaps you kept never talked about?” Boris surmised, putting together pieces of what she had told him over several dinner tables.

Leona felt relieved, until Boris edged his way closer to the bed and wanted to get a closer look. She pulled away from him, covering herself up with the beds-sheet from neck to toe. “I don’t want you to catch what I have,” she warned him.

“I will get the best doctors in the world to cure that infection and any other problems that stand between you and me doing business, and passion, for a long, long time.” Boris pledged. “Yes?” he asked.

“Yes,” Leona replied, knowing that the business and passions between Boris were far from over.

Boris bent over and kissed Leona, on the lips. He kept his eyes closed, Leona keeping hers open. She saw his hand motion for Stevenson to come back into the room.

“Come in, please,” Boris said after getting what seemed to be his first taste of REAL Injun Red meat, the kind worthy of his worldly palate. “Deputy Stevenson. You take good care of her. Or I will have your job,” he instructed the lawman who Leona’s father had said was too caring to be corruptible. “And Leona,” Boris continued, putting his big bear-like paws proudly on the sheepish deputy’s slumped shoulders. “This is a good man.”

“Yes, a good man,” Leona repeated, as Boris always liked it when people did so, and getting Boris to like her again was essential to stopping him.

“A man who knows his place!” Boris boasted regarding his new protegee, whose eyes continued to look to the floor. “His responsibilities and limitations.”

”Yes, he does,” Leona concluded, and conceded.

“But, SHERIFF Stevenson, perhaps Police Commissioner Stevenson,” Boris said, commanding his new student to look him in the eye, man to man. “Remember that this woman is mine to love, yours to protect? Yes?”

“Da,” Stevenson nodded.

Boris seemed pleased with it all, appending the conference with a hearty ‘there ya go, partner’ slap on Stevenson’s back, which he somehow managed to keep upright. Chief Boris took his coat, the newspaper and walked out of the room, having said all that he needed to.

Stevenson remained, looking at Leona and needing to say a lot more. He did so, after hearing that Boris had reached the elevator, and seeing that he had entered it and the door closed on him. “Explanations, Leona. Which you are entitled too.”

Stevenson walked around the room, somehow back in control of himself as he searched for any hidden microphones that Boris may have left behind. For the moment, he didn’t find any. Still, he talked in a hushed voice to the background of the most obnoxious happy song he could find on the radio. “As for what is still between your legs, only one doc here and two nurses know about it. The doc’s official file at the Cop Shop says he’s a cross dresser. He wants to have a consult with you after about fitting high fashion around fat bodies and how to deal with his wife who knows nothing about he other life. The two nurses I had to pay off with some, actually a lot, of the spending money you gave me. One of them will pray for your Soul at Church this Sunday. And as for Boris—“

“---You want more money to not tell him what and who I really am, ‘Commissioner’ Stevenson?” Leona interjected.

“No,” Stevenson replied, finally convinced that they were alone, not being watched, or listened to. He turned off the radio, as irritated with the ‘Dancing Blackfoot Princess’ Redneck top forty hit as Leona was.

“So, tell me for Christ and Buddha’s sake what went wrong in there with the plan that you were supposed to put in place, and my father Tom did his best to...”

The mention of Tom’s name turned Stevenson’s probing eyes into sorrowful ones.

“What happened to my father?!!!” Leona demanded to know.

“Gone,” Stevenson replied, staring intensely out the window. “To where, I don’t know. Along with your mother.”

“And the last place anyone saw either of them was where?” Leona pressed.

“Home,” Stevenson said. He turned to Leona, sincerity oozing out of his eyes in a way she had never seen in him, or for that matter, any other man she had encountered since she decided to become a woman. “A place where you and me can never go back to unless we both get solidly cooperative, really smart and very very lucky.”

CHAPTER 15

Tom and Emily's house was a model home, even by Arrowhead Casino standards. Emily had not aged as well in appearance as Tom did, and Tom did what he could to see that the dwelling they lived in was as beautiful as she once had been. Emily's arthritis and other afflictions in the last decade limited her wilderness activity to walks in the woods with a can rather than gallops across the mountains on horseback, prompting Tom to be sure that the house was easy to get around in and climate controlled no matter what the weather was doing outside. But now it looked like a tornado had hit it, whirling up its most fierce winds from the inside. Nothing that was on the walls remained there, every drawer opened, not a single piece of glass un-shattered.

"This is what we found after the call came in," Stevenson said to Leona when he took her into what had been a living room where the plush carpet was impregnated with valuables which were now nothing but debris.

"The call from who?" Leona inquired.

"Tina Bear," Stevenson said. "Who was entertaining someone other than her husband at the time, who required that the call be anonymous."

"To protect herself or her husband?" Leona pressed.

"Both," Stevenson replied.

It was the correct answer with regard to Tina's libido and the misplaced love she still had for a husband who thought that she was the only one, who would have killed himself if he found out he wasn't.

Convinced that he gave the right answer to Leona, Stevenson went on. "According to what Tina saw there were some guys in black ski masks who came in, some through the front door, some through the back. Another two through the window. Then there was some arguing. Some screaming. And some shooting. Then two bodies wrapped in blankets were outside and put into back seat of Tom's truck by three guys wearing ski hats and sunglasses. That the truck pulled away in a quiet cloud of exhaust. Outside of that, she didn't see very much. And she said less."

"Well, what do YOU say?" Leona pressed.

"That maybe we're the only two people left here who can trust each other?" he proposed. "And that the newspaper story about that car crash on the only real cliff on Thunder Mountain where they were chased by Cops for reckless driving is both inaccurate and fabricated?"

"Is that a question or an answer?"

"Both. But can I ask you one question first, Leona?"

"Why the fuck not!!!"

Stevenson pondered the matter, then turned to Leona, facing her straight into the Soul. “How well did you really know your brother Paul?” he asked.

Leona found herself bold enough to consider the depth and terror of that question as she looked down at the debris on the floor. At the photos of her and Paul, arm in arm, as best buds, from the time they were knee high to Tom’s stuffed bear, to the time when they went out hunting for bear on their own two feet. Leona found herself recalling that Granny inquired as to how much Leona really knew about Paul the day that her voice was silenced, before Leona could answer her.

“Well,” Stevenson challenged. “You and Paul. How well did you really know him?”

“Not as well as you seem to think you do,” Leona challenged.

Stevenson answered the challenge by leading Leona what was left of the door leading down to the basement. The stairs were still intact, but nothing downstairs was. The computer and all of the equipment and drives associated with it were gone, everything around it in disarray. But the table upon which the computer sat was intact, the layers of the surface now separated. Stevenson lifted up one of them, revealing a series of photos that were still intact, and still not confiscated by the CSI team. He showed them to Leona.

“I don’t believe it!” Leona said as her jaw dropped to the floor.

“It’s just a picture, but it’s very suggestive,” Stevenson offered.

“My brother Paul on a fishing trip with Boris? Both of them smiling like they’re best buds!!!” Leona said regarding the photo of the two men with a fish in the middle of them that was taller than them both. “This proves nothing!”

“But this does,” Stevenson replied, turning over the picture to the back, pointing to the date it was taken.

“Two years before Boris was seen here with anyone else?” Leona said.

“I found other photos with both of them together, doing things a lot more illegal and cooperative than fishing without a license during the off season,” Stevenson said. “I found some of them in the boxes in the garage, and a few others at the evidence room that I took before they---“

“---I want to see them,” Leona said as her mind was forced to consider that the most beloved and trusted dude she knew had become someone she never knew, and never would want to..

“No, I NEED to see them.”

“I know you do, but not here,” Stevenson said with an assuring voice. He pointed Leona’s attention to a Police Car cruised the street outside, on ‘routine’ rounds.

Leona led Stevenson out one of the secret exits from the house to the heavily wooded backyard outside, from which he led her to where he had parked his truck, three blocks away.

CHAPTER 16

Leona could not get the pictures of Paul and Boris out of her head. Logic told her that she should concern herself with why those pictures were still in existence, and why they were found in Tom and Emily's house ten years after Paul had left home to live in a series of cabins, teepees and apartments that he could afford to live in, and chose to call home. If indeed Paul had converted over to the dark side, why did he do so? And did he do it willingly, or was this all a plot to figure out what Boris was really up to? Though Paul was known as 'honest Injun' in town who never could get away with telling a lie, he fancies himself to be a First Nations James Bond, and was an avid fan of any espionage flick on the tube. He even tried his hand writing a series of novels about "Injun Joe", an Uncle Tom sellout to his tribe back in the 19th century who headed East to Washington in 1860, working behind the scenes to sabotage any attempt of the North and South to not go to War with each other. Then after the Civil War, Injun Joe secretly brought Custer 'intel' about how he could whoop the Souix at Little Big Horn in one, swift blow. No one took Paul seriously, perhaps because he was a worse writer than a liar, or perhaps because he thought too big and bold in a world where people who thought small and obediently were the ones who got ahead.

But all of that would be dealt with later, and logic now took a back seat to physical survival, as she could not go back to her hotel room, and emotional survival, as she was being pulled into a black hole, from a precarious perch on someone else's turf.

Stevenson's mobile bachelor cave was significantly affluent than any of the citizens he was hired to protect or serve, and was more trash than trailer-park trash. Leona sat on the only spot not taken up by clutter in the trailer poorly-insulated trailer, sipping coffee that tasted more like the No-Name cardboard box it came from than real java. "You don't have anything stronger? Or deadly? You HAVE to!" she grunted out seeking to numb all of the pain inside of her. The pain of knowing she had been a 'Boris' while being Leon back in the good old mercenary days. Dark days where they liberated ten oppressed victims of one sort of another from bad guys, but at the same time were working for higher ups who were oppressing hundreds and thousands behind the scenes. And dark nights that followed, made celebratory with the best dope and booze that was steal-able, or unofficially 'lost' before it went into the evidence room or the incinerator.

As for the darkened day she was having now, Stevenson didn't make it any brighter with his slow-poke, procedural way of doing everything. And his non-response to the mood swings that were about to push her off the edge. Edges from which she now sought to JUMP off of. "I said, Deputy Dawg Stevenson," trying to stay awake, alert and in need of rocket fuel which 'good girls and boys' never put into their engines. "Don't you have anything stronger than this fucking, lame, plain-Jane black coffee?"

Stevenson abruptly stopped filing papers and putting other things in order within the framework of the dump which he called 'personally-designed non-linear filing systems'. Finally, Leona got his attention. "Something stronger, let's see," he replied, with his back turned. When he turned to Leona, he continued with sarcasm, a mode of communication and self-awakening Leona thought he was not capable of as he looked for the various items Leona seemed to be requesting,

opening every cabinet within his reach. “I ran out of whiskey. My kids snorted the last of the cocaine. I sold my last vials of hemlock and arsenic to a buddy who’s right now slipping them into his nagging ex-wife’s drinks. I fed all my weed to a wild horse I just caught so he could mellow out before I put a saddle on him. And as for Special K, all I have is what’s in this box,” he he ranted, unleashing years of pent up frustrations as he shook up the box of cereal with the name which meant ‘ketamine’ to those in the know, letting it all fall onto the floor. “Gee, no ketamine left. Guess you and me will have to face the day without---“

“----I need a fucking drink!” Leona screamed out, pushing Stevenson aside and checking the cabinets herself for anything containing ethyl alcohol in it. “Or a toke. A snort. A fucking SOMETHING!”

“I’m trying to help you,” Stevenson offered, returning back to his kind self. Though probably a naïve self which, according to Leona’s best perceptions and data, had never experienced the buzz of firewater or the trips to more handlable dimensions of the abyss made possible only with pharmaceutical subway tokens.

“I can help myself!” Leona blasted back with grunted teeth while staring at the pain behind her eyes, while her hands blindly trashed whatever were in their reach.

“So you said the first, second and third time you were found behind the wheel, hammered out of your mind,” he replied, grabbing hold of her wrists, then letting them go once the fist above them loosened up. “According to my research on YOU anyway.”

Putting aside the issue of why and how a simpleton like Stevenson could have extracted that classified intel on her, Leona defended her position. “I was stoned, drunk and tanked in my glory days. Never fucking hammered.”

“What do you want?” Stevenson inquired, getting to the meat of the matter as he began the process of cleaning up the mess of broken glass, scattered pictures, and previously filed papers from the floor. “What do you REALLY want?”

“For people and life to stop fucking me around,” she found herself saying, and realizing. “And for the pain to all be over, which is...still very possible,” she continued, bending down to the floor. Under a layer of broken glass lay a picture of Paul. One of the good ones, in which he and Leona were connected with regard to mind and spirit. Or so Leona thought they were anyway. “Paul’s gone,” she said.

“Yes, he is,” Stevenson said, being as kind a messenger for the truth as he could be.

“He could answer a lot of both of our questions,” Leona mused.

“He probably could,” Stevenson conceded.

“Then maybe, it’s my sacred duty, honor and pleasure to join him on the other side and...” Leona said as she lay down the picture and picked up a piece of broken glass, edging it over the

old scars on her left wrist and the new scratches which she inadvertently made in them a few moments ago. Moving the sharp edge closer to where the arteries could be severed cleanly and quickly.

The hand of fate intervened, in the form of Stevenson's paw grabbing hold of Leona's right arm. "Do what you have to do, but please, help me clean up this mess first. Please?" As to what mess Stevenson was referring to, he directed Leona's attention to something very specific, both with regard to task and location. "Over there, by the shower door and the clothing closet," he said.

"Sure, why the fuck not," Leona conceded as she did her last compliment, perhaps good, deed on the planet. Certainly one that she could complete. Cleaning up Stevenson's trailer was easy, and doable. Cleaning up the world outside of it was hard, and impossible. And in the end, futile. Boris would undoubtedly find the escaped girls, and re-enslave them. Or kill them and find other girls. Timilto would be replaced by another two-bit African dictator who would pay even higher money for weapons of limited or mass destruction, all in the Holy Cause of money, as it IS money that makes the world go round after all. But as for the not-so-merry-go-round of life, Leona as through with it and required a ticket for elsewhere, all logically planned. "It's bad karma to leave this live with a fucking mess behind," she said as she sorted the savable clutter from the disposable trash. "If I don't clean up the messes that I CAN clean up, I'll have to come back as a ghost, damned by something or someone to---" Leona's mouth froze in mid rant as her eyes spotting a picture of Stevenson which she hardly expected in her worst nightmares or most speculative dreams. "This is you?" she asked after taking it all in.

"It is," Stevenson said as he walked over and glanced at the picture he had apparently 'directed' and intended Leona to see. "With my wife."

"It wasn't Halloween or anything?" Leona asked. "Or you didn't lose a bet with the guys you play poker with at the Cop shop, barber shop or hardware store."

"No," Stevenson said calmly, and introspectively, with a voice that went up an octave in pitch, maybe two. "That was me, then. Before I..."

Leona looked at the picture of the woman next to Stevenson's wife and then back at Stevenson. They were indeed the same person.

"Who else knows?" Leona asked.

"Nobody here," Stevenson replied, regaining his masculine baritone voice. "My kids," he continued, pointing to a picture of two young men at a skidoo party with happy smiles who were still enjoying the joys of being boys. "They still think I was born with a penis."

"But they look like you," Leona noted.

"They look like my brother," Stevenson sighed. "Who got my wife pregnant by artificial insemination. She wouldn't let him do it the natural way, even though I said it was okay to date him and marry him, after she and I split up and---"

“---When were you going to tell me?” Leona interjected.

Stevenson let the answer incubate in his head for a few intensely reflective seconds, choosing the words that came out with the utmost of care, and discretion. “When we were both far away from here. Even if that ‘where’ was in different places. As we both know, telling people you used to be a murderer, thief, embezzler, rapist, extortionist, or any other kind of ‘ist’ is more socially acceptable than having lived as two different genders...Or wanting to.”

Leona relived all of the truth of that reality yet again, reflecting on the ironies of it all. And the moral inefficiencies of it. But the clock on Stevenson’s wall and the one outside of the trailer in the world as it is ticked loudly enough for Leona to come back to the most practical of all questions after intel has been gathered and ideas have been discoursed. “So, what do we do about it?” she proposed. “And everything and everyone else it’s become connected to?”

“What we can, righting one wrong at a time, I suppose?” Stevenson offered, retreating back into his own head.

“This time YOU’RE answering a question with another question,” Leona asserted.

“And your fucking plan is to do what?” Stevenson pressed.

“For you to continue finding fucking power!” Leona shot back as a smiling, maternal lioness pleased as punch with the courage rediscovered by her lion cub, or more accurately, lion mate. “That’s the first fucking time I heard ‘fuck’ come out of your self-inhibited mouth. And you have no fucking problem with that!”

“Fucking right,” Stevenson asserted, feeling well suited for the new verbal suit of empowerment which would allow his G-rated brain more access to the fire in his gut, and therefore deal with the very R and X-rated world it had to contend with.

While Stevenson was adjusting his Instrument for more octane, Leona moved towards the arena of strategy, starting with the first sort-of logical question. “Who wrote the official report that Tom was drunk and Emily was stoned highway bypass after that high-speed chase with the State Troopers?”

“Most of the people I know, or used to know anyway,” Stevenson said.

“And who signed it?” Leona inquired.

“Someone who I used to know all too well, if everything was done according to procedure,” Stevenson postulated. “Officer Svenson now. Karlata, then, till I had to tell her that it would never work out between us romantically. Unless she was very open minded.”

“Open minded” said it all to Leona as she packed up her bags and picked up the keys to Stevenson’s truck that he had laid on the counter next to the stove. “There has to be something left at the scene of the accident after the truck blew up.”

“Or someone who got out alive before it did,” Stevenson said.

“Or several someone’s maybe?” Leona added, the third brain between them resurrected, activated and firing on all circuits.

CHAPTER 17

The tire treads at the site of the fatal drive off the cliff overlooking the hundred-foot deep, rapidly moving waters of the Dakota River were very real, and indeed from Tom's truck. But there were two sets of tracks. One stopped three feet before the three-hundred foot drop off from which there was no return. The other clearly went over the side. And next to the former, were several sets of footprints, bearing military treads. The wreckage of Tom's truck was clearly at the bottom of the gorge, scattered amongst the rapids which belted against the rocks which pulverized everything not made of hard metal that came into its path.

"So, this is where my father and his Sequoia accidentally ran off the road," Leona mused.

"Your father's what?" Stevenson inquired.

"Sequoia", Mastress Leona replied. "The name he gave the truck swore he would keep alive as long as he was," she continued, holding back the tears in her eyes as best as she could. "Sequoia was a Cherokee Linguist who invented a written language his people could use to talk to each other in print. Impressed the hell out of the Palefaces, till Old Hickory decided to relocate them involuntarily to Missouri in 1835."

"It was Oklahoma," Stevenson replied. "And the trail of tears Andy Jackson put them on was in the 1820s, not thirties. I still know Indians who won't take or spend a twenty dollar bill because his face is on it."

"Apparently not the Indians in THIS town," Leona shot back.

"Money is something you get used to real quick when you got it. Then when you do get used to it---"

"---Shhh!" Leona grunted at Stevenson as she heard something in the bush on the other side of the gorge. Then confirmed it with her eyes, as a raven flying out onto an exposed, precariously swaying branch of one of the pines burnt in the 'accident'. The bird cawed again, looking towards Leona.

Meanwhile, Stevenson investigated the tracks of another vehicle which had swerved a bit off the road, but not enough to be demolished. "These tracks from a pursuit, or perhaps accompanying vehicle, they go South."

The bird cawed something to Leona. She smiled, translating the rest of the message from her long lost avian companion. "Then we go North, and trace them from there."

"And you intuit this because..."

Leona pointed to the bird, who seemed to motion with its beak the course by which to follow, and something on the other side of the gorge reachable only by heading first in the illogical direction. The bird then nudged to the ground. Leona knelt down and smelt the dirt. "Human

tracks,” she said, regarding a set of tracks that appeared to be otherwise, at least according to Stevenson’s eyes.

“Moose tracks,” he said.

“Or shoes that make them look like moose tracks,” Leona continued, trusting her nose rather than her eyes.

“All forensic evidence says whoever was here, went South.”

“And my assistant, OUR assistant, says we go North,” Leona replied. Sensing an ugly confrontation ahead, she came up with a putative solution. “You go South, following the evidence. I’ll go South, following my gut.”

“Which is maybe just your rumbling stomach because you haven’t eaten anything and you’re light headed now, and...”

Normally in cases of differing decisions regarding strategy in the field, Leon would give a salute to an officer who outranked him, the third finger extended as he pulled away and went his own way. But this time, a more gentle approach was required, and one that was more contemporary.

“Fine,” Stevenson said as Leona showed him her cell phone, indicating with her fingers that she would text him if anything went wrong, or if she found anything. “But be careful!” he commanded. “A woman out here alone, particularly one that looks as good as you, and dressed so invitingly, is very vulnerable to being---“

Leona offered Stevenson a third finger greeting behind her back, reminding her new investigative, and perhaps romantic partner that she could take care of herself.

But Leona felt taken care of by another male companion, the Raven, for reasons both mystical and logical. With regard to for former, listening to that Spirit Animal always told her what she needed to know, even though it wasn’t always what she wanted to hear. With regard to the logic of the situation, logic being an entity that ruled ‘hard reality’, the Raven would most likely know where remains of dead human bodies were. Or perhaps dying ones.

While Stevenson followed the tracks of the cars and trucks, Leona kept moving forward on the paths tread upon by people with ‘Moose shoes’. Or perhaps no shoes. At least not those with soles on on them that laid clear tracks into the dirt. But even moccasins make tracks. Those tracks and the Raven kept leading Leona further and further into the bush, into places where she herself had trouble walking. Her wounds from the shootout at the ‘Very-Much-Not-OK Coral’ during the gunshow has still not healed enough to allow her to run, but she tried running anyway. As predicted, she fell on her face twice, and her ass three times. The final fall dislocated converted her into a one and a half-legged lioness determined to figure out what was going on.

Previous to that fall, and the tension-filled hushes of expletives voicing her discontent with them, Stevenson had been sending ‘U ok?’ texts to check up on her, ominously occurring every time the torso above her knees had a collision with muddy dirt of slimy rock. Three times she

answered with a simple. 'Yes'. The fourth time it was with an 'Will be if U leave Me alone.' This fifth time, there was no text message to annoy her. Then when she checked to see what was going on with Stevenson, to ask HIM if he was ok, her phone registered 'no signal'. An odd situation, as there were no dead zones in the area she knew about as she pulled herself up out of the muck and pressed on in a Westerly direction in which the Raven, now joined by two buds, seemed to be going.

For reasons she could not determine, nor control, Leona felt afraid in the woods. Maybe it was because there was more bush to them than 'open'. Or that there was a mild buzz in the air which was NOT the sound of Silence. Or that the 'woman' inside of her had somehow shut down the 'male' sense of where North, South, East and West was, the sun disappearing behind thick, gray clouds refusing to give her any clues as to such. Or that she spotted leather tassles stained with blood on the branches of secondary growth bush, and, conveniently, spots of blood on the ground. They led what looked like an ancient hiking trail that ended abruptly in a collection of thicker bush that surrounded on all three sides. The Ravens looked at what was on the other side of the arborous wall, swooped down, then headed straight up into the sky, each high-tailing it in its own direction.

Something on the other side of the thick brush moved. The sky became dark, almost like night. A set of innocent, terror-infused green eyes stared back at her from the bush. She froze, whipping out her hunting knife as she approached it, slowly, then heard an arrow whiz by her. She ducked, then heard screams coming from the bearer of those eyes. Then saw whoever it was tracking a trail of blood, scurrying around the bush on its legs and arms, till a second arrow ended the life inside the body with a decisive blow, directed straight between the eyes.

"Sorry about having to do that," Lorena heard from a bow-carrying hunter on the other side of the bush as he got up and approached the dead prey he was now addressing as a friend. "I had to do it," he continued, his voice being none other than Tom, wearing that vintage, blood and mud-stained buckskin coat that he refused to retire, now missing several tassles on his left hand, that paw of his wrapped up with a fresh, blood-stained bandage.

Upon closer examination, Leona saw that the prey was something far more innocent than an escaped sex slave trying to hide out from her owners and find her way back home. "A coyote, with a very human face," she said traditionally 18th Century-looking Tom removed a pair of 21st Century examining gloves, putting them on his hands. He removed his hunting knife and proceeded to skin the animal.

"You had rabies, my friend. You nearly bit my hand off when I tried to offer you some of my jerky, after everything you and me have been through over the years," Tom said to the animal. "Your brains were mush. You weren't yourself. And what you have, or had, is contagious."

"Maybe with something less natural and more contagious than rabies?" Leona offered, saving the real concern she had for last. "Dad! I thought you were..ya know..."

"Dead?" Tom replied as he continued to skin the animal. "If I convinced you, I probably convinced everybody else. Being dead sometimes helps you stay alive."

“Why?” Leona pressed.

“Because you can be alive somewhere else,” he explained.

“No,” Leona replied, moving to a more practical matter about events that didn’t go as planned. “Why did the guns that I set to kill the buyers blow their hands and face off, and the ones you sabotaged blew up that targets and people they shot at?”

“Orders,” Tom explained, without a breath of hesitation. Keeping his mind on skinning the fox. And his eyes away from Leona.

“Orders from Chief Boris?” Leona pressed as she hobbled forward, standing over him.

“You’re a smart girl, Leona. Smart enough to know...Hmmm.” Finally he looked up at Leona, having exposed what was under the hide, his stomach grumbling with hunger loud enough for even her to hear it. “How do you disinfect a hide from a coyote with rabies?”

“You don’t!” she insisted. “Rabies gets spread through the saliva.”

”What about the meat?” Tom inquired as he carved off a large chunk of muscle from the animal’s forearm. “If you cook it well enough, is it safe? Boiling met kills bacteria. It should kill viruses too, right?”

Leona was in no mood to do a private biology lecture to a mature student. “Where’s Mom?” she pressed.

Tom turned his eyes back to the coyote, the direction of that stare into the eternities. “Safe, protected and sheltered,” he said prophetically. “Safe, protected and sheltered,” he repeated to the dead coyote, in a whisper. He then turned to Leona and repeated the words, begging her to understand the inner meaning and feeling within the carefully chosen words.

“Safe, protected and sheltered from bastards like Boris, or little shithead traitors like you,” Leona advanced, hoping that the theory emerging behind her awakened eyes about Tom was wrong. It wasn’t.

“It’s like this, Leona,” he said, inviting her to sit down in front of him for one of those crucial life talks. Like the time he told ‘Leon’ that there was no Santa Clause. And that the sticky material coming out of his penis when he rubbed it was not urine. And that letting that ‘sticky piss’ go into the wrong woman would lead him into a very wrong life. But this time the talk was political as well as person. “To beat the American Palefaces, we make deals with the Russian Palefaces. We can guy back America with Russian money. And will. No more living on Whitie’s welfare. Getting hooked on his dope. Having to send our kids to second rate high schools taught by old farts that hate us, or young ones who think they give a shit about us.”

Leona didn't give a crap about the politics of the speech, and Tom knew it. He continued anyway.

"If the Great White father in Washington won't give us back our land and rights to what's under it legally, we'll make some calls to our friends in Moscow, or maybe some other 'enemy country', to convince them that it's in their best interest to cooperate with us or," he explained, taking a deep breath. He lifted up the skin of the virally-infected coyote with his knife and continued. "We sell rugs, blankets, medicine wheels and 'Injun authentic' leather fringed coats to the American Palefaces in this century that have shit in them that's a lot more toxic than the smallpox that was in the blankets they gave to us last centuries."

"There's something wrong in all of that plan, technically and ethically ya know," Leona pointed out.

"No!" Tom blasted back, his emotions holding his reason hostage. "There's something RIGHT in it!"

"That got my brother Paul killed," Leona said. "Your son."

Tom retreated back into himself, trying to lose himself further in the process and art of removing useful from unusable material from the slain coyote. "Jack should have stayed greedy," he said. "But he had to get 'spiritual'. Then he turned ethical. Then stupid."

"Then dead," Leona reminded her father, who perhaps was still inside of the deluded turncoat in front of her disbelieving eyes.

"I tried to keep him from getting killed," Tom explained. "And I've been doing everything I could to keep you safe. And alive."

"Safe and alive are seldom the same thing," Leona reminded Tom, hoping that he would recall that he was the one who planted that seed of practical wisdom into her head. "But getting to matters more immediate...What does Boris know about me?"

"Nothing about your past and present anatomy, if that's what you're asking. My hand to God on that," Tom replied, putting up his right hand in a pledge to the Great Spirit who he loved and the Christian Heavenly Father who he feared.

"The God of money, greed or cruelty?" Leona pressed.

"The God that rule ALL of us!" Tom replied, blasting that affirmation into Leona's face.

"No, not anymore," her retort. Leona dismissed herself from 'Professor Tom's' lecture, got up and hobbled away, turning her back on the only old fart other than Granny who she ever liked, respected and loved.

“Where are you going, Leona?” Tom inquired, insisting that the lesson, and possibly the conversion, continue. “Come back!” he pleaded as she felt the hard ground on her feet more painfully than ever. “You’re my only son, I mean...daughter,” Tom said, reaching out with as much love as he could. “I did all of this for you!” he finally blasted out, from an angry place inside of him that was hurting himself as much as Leona. “For you, our people and your mother!”

“Who is ‘protected and sheltered’”, Leona shot back, her back turned to him. “By shitheads I’ll ‘inactivate’ no matter what I have to do to them, or you.”

Leona turned to Tom, facing him for the last time. He threw her his bow, and two arrows. “Go ahead, finish me off,” he screamed at Leona as she pondered taking him up on his offer. But she hesitated, yet again. “If you have the balls to. But, no, you don’t any balls. You freak! Self-righteous bastard! Freak! Self deluded witch, bitch and...”

While Tom ranted on, Leona didn’t. She calmly walked down the path out of the bush, giving her once-trusted father her answer with one finger, the third digit on her right hand raised upward at him. While she held the left close to her belly, inserting the thumb into her belt so he would not see how badly is was now shaking.

CHAPTER 18

Leona somehow found Stevenson after emerging from the woods, or maybe it was he who found her. They were now parked in a rest area off the highway, close enough to get on the road quickly but far enough from it to not be spotted. While the linear-sequential trained and conditioned lawman looked over the satchel filled with evidence he had been secretly collecting on Boris for the last year and trying to make some logical sense of it, Leona used a different methodology as she looked out her rolled down window at the vastness of the Rez, her eyes, literally wide open, letting whatever the trees, wind and animals had to say come into her brain so that perhaps there would be some universe left on the Rez for future generations to listen to and Merge with.

“Universal perspective”, she remembered calling it when Rachel asked about the best way to find out a biological truth that was more than just another chunk of data. Or more accurately how to channel an Epiphany from the Ideal realm into the Real one, so it could do some GOOD in the world. Something that Granny had taught her. A process by which one literally opens the eyes wider than normal, allowing whatever comes in and ‘set fire the brain so it converts darkness into Light, that you become merged into.’ A process in which you let all of the data fall into and find its Natural, big N, slot in the brain, mind and Soul, allowing it to ‘talk’ with every other piece of data inside your head, so that connects can be made between them and you could come up with the Solution, big S, that solves any and all problems in the universe that emerge. The kind of methodology that allowed Leona when she was teaching and on hyper-warp intellectual improv to come up with three new ideas every half hour while at the lectern, minimum, and share them with any Rachel who cared to listen to them. Or the Rachels who were not even alive yet.

There was one piece of data that Leona felt to be channeled to her most intensely. Perhaps because of who gave it to her. Finally, when she least expected it, that piece of intel converted into the glue that would bring together all of the lose pieces in the puzzle as to how to save the innocent and inactivate the guilty. “My mother is in a place that’s ‘protected and sheltered’,” Leona heard in her head in Tom’s voice, then with her own mouth, then with a voice that spoke through the Silence that connected it all.

“I know where they are!” Leona finally proclaimed after the inner Sage inside of her allowed her to do so. “Where everyone is, and where we will...yes, yes yes!!!”

“After we’ll do what?” Stevenson asked.

Leona opened the glove compartment, rummaging through the collection of donut coupons, still uneaten jelly glazed scones, toothpaste tubes, toothbrushes and mismatched gloves. She pulled out the collection of maps of the Rez and surrounding communities that kept Stevenson from getting lost en route to the routine calls to routine places to which he was expected know the directions. “‘Protected and Sheltered’ is here!” she said, pointing to a large blue area on one of the least chocolate-cream stained maps.

“Which is in the middle of a lake,” Stevenson pointed out.

“According to this munios map,” Leona asserted, assuming that Stevenson knew that ‘munios’ meant ‘White’, its literal translation being ‘those who have gone mad in the pursuit of money’, a condition which now seemed to infect lots of Indians as well. “It’s a Pitcarin Island thing,” she continued, assuming that Stevenson knew as much about history as she did.

“Huh?” Stevenson replied.

“Pitcarin Island’s real location is different than all of the maps the English Navy had. And when the mutineers of the Bounty ‘accidentally’ found it, they knew they could hang out there for generations without being found by the prosecutors Captain Blye sent out to find them,” she explained. “Fletcher Christian’s kids, and grandkids grew up on the island without ever being found by anyone. ‘Protected and Sheltered’”.

Stevenson still didn’t get it, but then again he wasn’t supposed to. NO one except Tom and his once very radical American Indian Movement armed radicals and the Elders who were most connected to the innermost Spiritual secrets of their culture were supposed to know about the island that existed in the middle of a swamp that was unseeable by air, and under-reachable by land unless you knew the way in, and out. Quicksand and rusty bear-traps had swallowed up many generations Army of Palefaces in pursuit of renegade Redskins, and if they didn’t keep the secret of ‘P and S’ private, passes into the place could be easily manned, or womaned, by a handful of shooters with Winchesters who could give true meaning to the promise that, as the signs sold in the humor section of the hardware stores said, ‘Trespassers will be shot, survivors will be shot again’.

Leona explained the legendary history of P and S, after which Stevenson related the contemporary reality of the place. “It’s a well protected place, if it’s the place I’m thinking of, if it exists at all,” he said. “And armed now with more than bear-traps and quicksand.”

“Is that a fact or speculation?” Leona inquired, sensing that Stevenson knew a lot about a place that he said, with the other side of his mouth, probably didn’t exist.”

Stevenson seemed to be calculating the odds as Leona attempted to intuit what was in his head. Yes, he was probably right about the odds against two outcast, misfit, ‘freaks’ standing up to a community of mobsters who had organized themselves into an Army, or perhaps their own nation, dedicated to the pursuit of greed, and the proposition that grubby old men were created free and innocent young women were created to be slaves. But that nation had to be dissolved. Leona proposed the first strategy for such, with a motto that was so hoaky that she was embarrassed to say it. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained, RD Stevenson,” she offered.

‘RD’ replied with an ‘it’s a good day to die’ smile, appended by insertion of the keys into the ignition, and an assertive screech of the tires onto the highway for the first ‘looksee’ at the enemy at hand.

‘Pitcarin Island West’ was once a quiet community of recluses, cabins built only with wood, hidden within the woods, as Leona remembered it from her youth anyway. Indeed, if you walked past it, you could miss it entirely. So much so that even the most cautious of deer and rabbit migrated freely so close to the cabins that hunters inside could easily pick them off with a short-range bow and hastily-constructed arrow from ten feet away.

To anyone who passed by and stopped long enough to look at it peripherally, ‘Pitcarin West’ had all the appearances of a fishing camp for eccentric rich hunters who wanted to play at being ‘rustic’. Such was its appearance from the outside anyway. Leona and Stevenson looked it over from the side of the old logging ‘road’ which was more washboard and crater than flat surface, made so more by man-made than natural hands of late, as evidenced by the symmetry of those engineering defects and the fact that it was the only road on the Rez that had road warning signs that lacked rust or bee-bee holes. The design of the cabins was still the same, but there were many more of them now, all of them with bolt-locked windows and civilian guards with regulation jar head military haircuts outside of them armed with semi-automatic weapons which emitted bullets, laser beams and/or flames from their tips. And the ‘animals not permitted beyond this line’ was a quarter of a mile away, protected by electrical barbed wire and surveillance Telsa coils that could detect any unauthorized movement and spit out a bolt of manufactured lightening with deadly precision. One of those coils found a rabbit as it inadvertently hopped over the fence, only to land on ground heated up by its own flaming hot, pulverized bones, leaving behind ‘rabbit stew’ which was more ash than flesh.

“So, why are they so afraid of rabbits?” Stevenson mused Leona as they perused the rest of what looked like a very intricate compound, most of the buildings having their walls under the recently bulldozed up ground. Sacred ground that Granny said belonged to the Great Spirit which, if disturbed, would cause It to stop protecting the two legged creatures on top of it. “And what are they protecting?” he continued.

“Right now I’m more concerned with ‘who’ they’re protecting from us, or any kind of life worth a shit,” Leona said, as the sites of her high powered binoculars ran across a building with an open window. Revealing a woman inside wearing an electric Chief Boris brand canine shock collar. A plain looking ‘niece’ who seemed too old and used up to be very sellable, but seemed to be especially-well guarded. Except perhaps for two people.

“Your mother?” Stevenson said, reading Leona’s mind, or perhaps just noting the especially worried expression on her face.

“Wearing a collar like the rest of the girls,” Leona said as she noticed the old, homophobic bag looking across the small brook. A closer look with the binoculars revealed that it was a larger building, more basement than house. Bars on the house. And on the other side of the bars, Amanda and Yolanda, along with the other ten women who had effected their escape. A punishment house by the tortured looks on their battered faces. And next to it, a new prefab house being inserted into a hole made in the ground. A cattle truck pulled in, unloading its cargo. The pieces of fresh meat walked on two legs, both of which were hobbled. The girls were fresh, confused and naked. Those that were slow in move quickened their pace as soon as their collars were zapped. And faster when guards jovially shot bullets at their feet. A limo

drove in, the driver stopping the car and letting Boris out to inspect the goods. He approved, then waved them on to their new “country cottage”, promising them all the pleasures of any mansion if they behaved themselves, and enjoyed doing so.

“Do they look beaten or helpless?” Stevenson asked. “If we give them the weapons you have and I have, will they use them?”

“I don’t know,” Leona said. “But there’s one thing I do know. Besides the fact that there’s more than just human cargo here.” Leona referred Stevenson to another wing of the compound, trucks coming in with metallic weaponry on one end, cars leaving with happy customers at the other. “By the looks of it, Boris’ bargain basement is back in full unofficial business, with a lot of the people you’re in official business with,” she added, referring Stevenson to the new leader of the security squad, no other than Officer Karlata Svenson.

“But they’re not selling bio-weapons at least,” Stevenson noted, putting issues of what in front of who, for the moment. “Unless he got a hold of...” Stevenson remained silent, his open jaw frozen in place.

Leona grabbed hold of the binoculars in his hands and took a look for herself. “So, Boris maybe did get hold of my notes,” she said, noting another semi-underground building opening up for business. A biological laboratory by the looks of the lab-coated nerds milling in and around it. And one junior member of that team being dragged out of it in a blood stained lab coat, an electric collar around her neck, being dragged to the ‘holiday cottage’ which now housed her new roommates. “Rachel!” she said. “How and why did she come out here! I never told her where I was!”

“Maybe Chief Boris did,” Stevenson proposed.

Never did Leona need Carlos’ services than now. Perhaps the self-taught, self-made inventor of anything that needed to be invented could come up with a machine that would neutralize the electronic surveillance equipment, and the weapons carried by the Red AND White-skinned goons. Maybe Carlos’ laser gun could be set to a frequency where it detected and shocked anyone bearing the ‘asshole gene’, a chromosomal abnormality which Leona was sure existed. But Carlos was not here...the only GOOD news of the day. She recalled that he and Granny claimed that life never gives you a problem without a solution. As for that solution, now, this very day, it would require Leona and Stevenson diving deep into themselves and using all of the resources at their disposal. Leona opened up her eyes very wide. An idea came through, one which was so off the charts that it had to work.

CHAPTER 19

Stevenson gathered all of the firearms at his disposal while Leona drew out the battle plan on a large piece of paper, which he was reviewing. The command center for the two-person Commando team was the Cactus Flower hotel, an establishment on the White Trash side of town where the more money you paid the clerk, the less questions he asked of the guests, and their intentions. Both with regard to what they did, and who they chose to present themselves as. As for presentation, Leona remained in the bathroom a bit longer than Stevenson was comfortable with. Perhaps she was stuck, perhaps drugged, or perhaps neutralized by an assailant who found out who they were and worked his way into the motel bathroom window undetected.

“You okay in there, Leona!” Stevenson barked out, concerned not only with how she was doing, but by his own biological needs, as he was about to take an unexpected dump onto his undergarments unless he could find a porcelain receptacle first. He knocked for the fifth time, then decided to work on the doorknob. It was not locked. He entered, then lost all concern for his own bodily functions as he noted what Leona’s corporal situation was now.

“Leon?” he asked as he gazed at Leona in her new presentation. Redneck macho jeans complete with a Rodeo Belt over her shapely hips and legs. A beard attached to the soft skin on her hairless face. And around that face, blackish brown hair with no strand more than 2 inches long, chopped up with equal imprecision on both sides.

“Well what do you think?” Leona said, as Leon.

“Well, look at you,” Stevenson replied in a high pitched female voice he hadn’t used for years, impressed with the transformation that made Leona look almost exactly like Leon back in the ‘good ole boy’ daze.

“Well look at you too, RJ,” Leona commented, equally impressed with the convincingness of Stevenson’s transformation. The only hair on his body being a brownish-blond wig on top of his head, except for the narrow slits which were now his newly shaped eyebrows. A beige ‘hiking’ sweater and sort of matching skirt. Book-ended on his nail-polished feet by leather boots designed for being looked at than for walking.

They looked at each other in the mirror, next to each other. Leona asked the critical question. “So, can we pass as a couple of urban hikers out for a stroll in the woods who got lost?”

“I hope so,” Stevenson said, taking note of Leona’s chopped hair.

“Relax,” she assured him. “It’s a wig. Just like yours. I would have cut off all my hair to a buzz cut except for a promise I made to someone a long time ago to never cut my hair off.”

“Which you made to who?” Stevenson said.

“My father,” Leona said. “The man he used to be anyway.”

The plan was simple, and complicated. The first few stages of it went off without complications. 'RJ', aka Regina Jane, argued with her hubby 'Jason' after their van ran out of gas, forcing them to hike off the road to look for someone who could offer automotive assistance. Jason told RJ to go back to the van, but RJ insisted on coming along to be sure moonshine-toting, bubba-bellied 'Daniel Boone Jason' didn't fuck up getting gas and getting someone to fix the two tires he managed to break by showing off his driving skills on a bad road, like he screwed up the directions that were supposed to get them from Bismark to Great Falls for her sister's wedding. The argument was convincing to Karlata, and amusing to the guards as it continued in front of the 'luxury' cabin housing Emily, Leona's Mom, and the 'holiday bungalows' in which the rest of the girls were being maintained. Jason's large jug of homemade moonshine tasted 'mighty fine' to the palate of whatever yahoo decided to try it. And due to the elating effect of the brew on even the most sour-pussed Slavic guards, everyone bearing a penis decided it was worth a swig.

The argument ended with Jason asking the guards for gas, and a wrench, insisting that he can and would go back to the car and get it going himself. RJ vented her marital greivances to any of the guards who would listen, and some of them who didn't. They were one way conversations, which were ended with each of the guards being thankful they weren't married themselves. Meanwhile, the wife-cursing, woman-hating, now very drunk Jason discretely dropped explosive devises at key places between the buildings and at key points in the electronic surveillance and voltage delivery systems. Jason allowed himself to be seen by no one except for Emily.

"Leon?" she whispered from behind the window she was allowed to have open, in the kitchen she was allowed to cook in. By the looks of it, allowed such privileges as long as she kept her dog collar on, didn't leave the kitchen, and kept the guards with the remote devises that would zap her into obedience, convulsions or death with freshly-baked chocolate chip brownies and other assorted goodies that were ultimately bad for their long term health.

From the other side of the window, Leon 'shhed' Emily, giving her a key to liberate herself, along with a set of instructions. She crossed herself with thanks to the Lord, then acknowledged her gratitude to her finally-returned SON with large brownie and recently-cooked buffalo-burger sausages. "Your favorite," she smiled at him. "For my returned son who---"

Leon 'shhhed' her then, as he was being noticed by Karlata, with a 'you look familiar stare', ranted at RJ as a really pissed off Jason. She seemed convinced that the couple were indeed lost souls who were better off not knowing what was really going on there. And more easily dealt with by letting them go on their way than by killing them now, burying the bodies tomorrow, then all the paperwork of hiding their existence the day after. It gave a now totally sloshed on imaginary beer Jason enough of an excuse to stumble around, barfing and belching close enough to the windows holding Yolanda, Amanda and now Rachel so that he could drop off newly made master-collar releasing keys to both of them, instructions in Latin, in which ex-Catholic now-Pagan-Buddhist Rachel was still very fluent.

‘Jason’, forgetting the gas can and wrench that Karlata authorized him to take, stumbled off into the woods, working on his third beer, singing his favorite drinking song, Beethoven’s Ode to Joy, sung in German. The signal for everything to happen would be the third stanza, the exact verbiage on the notes given to the girls in the bungalow as well as to Emily, and related verbally to ‘RJ’.

RJ, disgusted with her husband, refused to join him. She insisted on someone from the ‘fishing camp’, as it presented itself to be, to go back into the woods to fetch him and put ‘hooking into his mouth’ and ‘an electric fishing rod up his ass’. It was a great amusement that lasted for three minutes. Long enough for Leon to set up whatever guns Stevenson and Leona could gather at short notice, lining them up in rows with strings attached so they could all fire at once. By the time Jason got to the third drunken stanza of the tune, Leon counted down the signal.

The Apocalypse came on time, and on schedule. Bullets from Beethovian ghosts in the woods showered the compound, pinning the unsuspecting guards to the ground, wondering how anyone could have gotten past the perimeter, as well as why the moonshine that tasted so good to the tongue was doing so many not-so-good things to the shaking muscles in their legs.

Karlata organized whoever could still stand, given them a weapon and pointing them to the woods, ordering them to shoot at whatever moved. She radioed what had happened in to headquarters but by the time she could dial the number, she was punched into unconsciousness by the most helpless woman in camp. “That’s for what you did to Tom,” Emily said after using her fist in anger at another human being, for the first time in her life. She then grabbed Officer Karlata’s gun, aiming it at her head. “And this is for what you did to Paul.”

Leona came by, just in time to see that her mother finally believed the truth about her son’s death. And just in time to address her surviving son by a name appropriate to who he really was. “Leona. How do I pull the trigger on this thing.”

“You don’t,” Leona replied, taking the gun from Emily into her now masculine-looking hand, shooting one round into Officer Karlata’s left foot, and one in her right arm. The blood splattered back into Emily’s terrified face. “I’m the necessary evil, not you, Mom,” she explained.

“And liberator?” Emily said, pointing Leona’s attention to the cattle truck being driven by ‘RJ’, every one of the girls in the compound being led into the back of it by Rachel, Yolanda and Amanda. THIS time, armed with weapons they had stolen from their captors after they had taken back their dignity.

“We gotta go,” Stevenson said to Leona. “Now!”

But Leona heard something at the other end of the compound. Trucks emerging from the woods behind the explosions that had taken every one of the buildings and all of the stationary vehicles around them.

“Go, get them out of here!” Leona commanded Stevenson. “While you still can.”

“Leona!” Emily screamed, reaching out to grab hold of her re-found daughter, and son. While spraying machine gun fire at the oncoming trucks, Leona pushed Emily back into the truck. She closed the door, knocked on the hood, and motioned for Stevenson to drive it forward, in a direction that Leona and Stevenson knew would lead to freedom. Safety anyway, in the meantime.

The rest of the day became black as night, as Leona and Leon merged into one entity. One beast which was both lion and lioness, taking out every other predator in the jungle. Somehow, the lone beast was winning, but not on its own. Someone behind Leona had come into the game, shooting from behind the trees at everything and anyone with the capability of killing her. Every piece of machinery advancing its way blew up, and every pursuer on two feet fell to the ground or used said appendages to run into the woods saying “I didn’t sign up for five hundred bucks a day for this bullshit”, or variations of such.

The assailants and deserters all fled, as did the mystical helper from the beyond realm. Stevenson and the girls were worlds away by now. Leona could hear nothing but the quiet. Then Silence. Then the voice of someone who he never expected to hear from someone who died a long time ago. “So, how many of them did we neutralize? How many minions of evil did we eliminate?” Tom asked, a smoking gun in his hand, several other weapons of individual destruction strapped around his shoulder.

“Enough of them, I hope, for now,” Leona replied, satisfied. Until she turned around and saw a face that made her think otherwise. “Except one.”

Leona quickly drew her gun at Boris, aiming it at his head.

“I am impressed,” he boasted, swigging a jug of vodka just like the good old days in that Afgan village when he and Leon were the only survivors of massacre in which both sides were decimated. “I am impressed with all of you,” he went on. “You, Tom, for standing up for yourself. You, Leon for finally standing up to me. And you, Leona, who I still hope is in there, and for whom I will gladly accept as a lover, after you allow me to complete your transition to being the woman I always knew you were.”

Leona looked at Tom, who now had his gun aimed at Boris as well. “Please, both of you, do what you want to do. A short term gain which would cost you long term profits,” he continued, prancing around the battlefield collecting trophies from the dead like it was an Easter egg hunt. “This operation here...I got what I wanted from it. And who,” he continued. With just enough bravado to throw Tom’s mind and eyeline off balance. And just enough time to do a ‘quick draw’ from the pistol in his belt cowboy style, shooting Tom in the chest, landing him on his back. Then shooting the weapon out of Leona’s hand, stepping on the weapon with one hand, on Leona’s wounded arm with the other.

“Cowboys always beat the Indians,” Boris informed Tom. “You should have known that.” He then turned to Leona. “And you, my Leona. Who I suspected was Leon for...well, longer than you thought I did. What do you have to say about all of this?”

Tom replied with mumbled words in his Native tongue, emerging from his mouth in a flood of blood and angry volcanic defiance.

“What did he say?” Boris asked Leona.

“It’s a good day to die,” Leona translated as she saw in slow motion pull out his traditional hunting knife, throwing it squarely into Boris’ back. Causing the giant to finally fall crashing onto the Sacred ground he had so sadistically desecrated, his legs shaking like dried fall leaves in a brisk winter wind.

Leona rushed over to Tom, assuring him that he was alright and would make it. The usual lies that you told a dying man who didn’t want to die. But Tom was ready. “No,” he said as he took in his last breaths which became rattles. “It is a good day for me to die. And a good day for you to live.”

With that, Tom died, with a satisfied smile on his face. Leaving Leona with an uncertain one on hers. Particularly with regard to Boris.

“Kill me,” he asked, finally experiencing the pain of dying and the confusion of soul that comes with it to those who have not lived well. “It’s the honorable thing to do, and God help your pathetic, morally-obedient soul, it’s the only thing you can do.”

“But I can’t kill you,” Leona smiled at him, lovingly stroking his cheeks. “You saved my life, let’s see, five times, and I only saved yours four. I owe you.” Leona went into medic mode, stripping off patches of Leon’s clothing for bandages to stop the bleeding in Boris’ open wounds so that his legs could experience the full agony of spastic paralysis. “I must save your life, so you can spend the rest of it wearing, lets’ see...” Leona pondered, removing a special item she stole a few days earlier from Boris’ special collection of goods. “This!” she exclaimed, showing Boris an electric dog collar upon which she engraved his name, with an appropriate number. “Zero, zero, zero,” she smiled with delight.

“So, you have become a necessary evil,” Boris said proudly. “What would you say if I said I was proud of you for finally growing a set of balls along with those breasts?”

“I don’t give a shit about what you say to me,” Leona said, pulling Boris around by the dog collar, dragging him into one of the only vehicles still operating in the Pitcarin Fishing Camp. “As long as you tell everything about what you’ve done, and who you’ve done it with, to, well, people on MY side of the morality line.”

“And if I don’t consent to---“ Boris protested, his arrogant last rant stopped by Leona buzzing a remote control in her pocket, sending a jolt of pain down his paralyzed spine.

Leona didn’t laugh when Boris felt pain, unable to do anything about it. It was a brief jolt that she did to teach him a lesson. As she reviewed many lessons about what the world was, and what it could be. And how perhaps she and Stevenson, as the woman and man they were to the Core, could transform it into. Yes, it was a good day to Live!

