

THE DARK SHAMAN



BY
DR. DOUGLAS COURTNEY

CHAPTER 1

It was a small fire in a clearing in the swamp. Just a few logs angled into a cone surrounded by a collection of river rocks. The flame within burning bright. Still, even those hard glowing embers barely made a dent in the omnipresent darkness surrounding it. The stark contrast between those flames and the black of the night drove your attention to its source.

That is if you could get past the dense smell of decaying rot, stagnant water, and leeching soil. The humidity hung heavy on you. The mosquitoes were large, black, and persistent. The heat of the sun persisted even into the depth of the night. Sweat poured into your brow and stung your eyes. Your clothing was nothing more than a wet second skin clinging tightly to every uncomfortable part of you.

Taking a moment to suppress your curses, stop the swatting, and catching your breath from walking in the sucking mud you would begin to hear it. The thump, thump, thump of a small mallet beating into the top of an animal skin covered hand drum. A chant from an ancient language long since forgotten accompanied the thumping. The figure beating the drum and chanting danced purposely around the small fire. The rise and fall of his body reflected by shadows on the ancient trees, bushes and vegetation surrounding his small theater.

Tom waited uncomfortably for the ceremony to end. He was Bill's best friend and had been invited to attend the whole ceremony within the small circle of light. But he had done that once years ago. Once was enough. An hour watching Bill dance and chant his way around and around that small flame was boring and agonizing. His ass itched from the ants. His arms and face bled from the mosquitoes. He felt like he had bathed in a river of filthy water. The stink of which was an added benefit.

Every year for the last fifteen years Tom had driven Bill to this site and let him out. An hour and a half later he would make his way back and pick up his friend. Except for the distance into the swamp and the God-awful surroundings the trip wasn't that bad. They usually made a small vacation out of it. A weekender for the guys. A random college or even high school football game. Couple of beers. An hour or two fishing. Next day a good breakfast. It all depended on the day of the week the full moon fell upon that year.

This year it was a weekend. So, no problems getting away from work or the ladies. Not that there ever was any problem getting the ladies permission. Jackie and Samantha were both tuned into this ritual well before the marriages. Tom was beginning to think the ladies liked the short break from the guys much more than they let on. At least the credit card bills seemed to reflect that opinion.

The chanting ended. Tom turned up his lantern and flicked on his flashlight. The campfire was quickly doused and scattered to ensure no random forest fire.

Suddenly a deep raspy voice from the darkness spoke out to Tom.

"Let's go." The sudden voice at his ear shocked and surprised Tom. He stood up and turned quickly ready to defend himself. Bill's hand on his shoulder calmed him.

"Jesus, Bill. Every damn year. You'd think I would be prepared for it." Tom settled himself once again. Bill was stealthy quiet even in these woods. He knew it. Always thought he was ready for it. But every year, Bill shocked him on his return from the chanting.

They had made their way back to the pickup. A hulking black monolith of a vehicle Tom used in his construction business. Since he spent 12 hours a day working in the thing it was top of the line with all the bells and whistles. Good thing too since as soon as he settled in Bill reclined the seat and began to snooze. The air conditioning providing a comfort to the dismal night. It would be an hour and a half or more back to the hotel over back dirt roads and near abandoned two lane county highways. To say this site was deep in the black swamp would be generous. Tom didn't even know if a map existed that had its location.

The drive gave Tom more than a few moments to reflect. Tom and Bill had bonded on the local high school football team. Both came in as arrogant freshmen determined to lead their team to glorious victories.

Both treaded through the learning cycles of more talented and fit upper classmen, dominating opponents, and demanding coaches. In the senior year they were the hardened veterans and finally achieved some of that glory they expected their freshmen years.

It wasn't only football that bonded them together. Bills stunning good looks derived from his native American ancestry made him a target for the ladies and the bigots. Having been an import from lesser realms where bigotry against native Americans wasn't an issue Tom had found himself defending Bill physically on more than one occasion. The bigotry against Bill and his tribe just didn't compute with Tom. Bill was a friend and that was all he cared about. The rest was bullshit.

Tom released his hand from the steering wheel and rubbed the scar on his abdomen. It itched every now and then. No bother really. But the scar was created in the event that sealed their bond. It was after a particularly difficult game in an overtly racist town. Locals didn't like losing and looked to blame anyone else for their loss. They blamed Bill and corned him under the bleachers on his way to the locker room. A knife came out. Tom moved between them and his friend. The scar was the reminder.

Tom's actions meant a lot to Bill. They meant a lot to his tribe. Even more to his grandfather. To Tom he was just helping a friend. He'd known it was dangerous. He'd been fighting against bigotry with Bill for a couple of years by then. To his mind it was what one did for friends. He felt Bill would have done the same for him. The elders of Bill's tribe felt more was owed. He woke in the hospital to a shaman performing rituals at his bed. Bill's grandfather was talking to his parents in the corner. Tom remembered the grandfather had on an old worn hat with a feather sticking out one side. Then he fell back to sleep.

The next year was the first year Tom was invited to the chanting. He was invited by Bill's grandfather. It was, even to Tom, an honor. One that wouldn't be ignored. But before they went Tom did ask Bill what the chanting was about. The trip was an honor, but even more so when you knew the reason. That was when Bill first heard the tale.

CHAPTER 2

Years before. Even years before Europeans came to the shore tribes had grown strong in the abundance of the land. Due to the picadilloes of the local environment, rivers at that time were deep, swamps almost impassable, and dry land remote. Since travel by foot was difficult but local life-giving nourishment was plentiful the tribes rarely engaged with other tribes. They traded irregularly and interacted only occasionally. But due to nature's abundance the tribes grew. Soon their growth required more land to sustain themselves. The tribes started to explore. At first, they claimed uninhabited lands close to theirs to grow their tribe.

Soon however, there were no uninhabited lands close by. Other tribes trying to sustain themselves were running up against each other. The wars began. At first the larger stronger tribes attacked the smaller weaker tribes. They killed most of the defeated tribes. Who they didn't kill they enslaved, reducing once proud people to nothing but beggars and filth.

One tribe, however, had always been left alone by even the strongest of the tribes. The land they set on was deep in the swamps. The land was only acres wide and there were very few in the tribe. It was considered to be less of a prize and more of a problem. The primary reason it was left alone however was not its lack of worth but because of the spirits. This tribe had an unusual bond with both the light and dark sides of the spirit worlds. They had two shamans. One always dressed in white. The other always dressed in black. Even their faces were painted white or black. Blood from many sacrifices left traces on their faces.

They each had a hut as far opposite from the other shaman as they could make on their lands. In the center of the land was a large pit. Grass had been burned away from this pit after thousands of fires flamed in its center. Dirt mixed with ash which mixed with bone in this pit. It was as barren an area as any could find in all the lands. Both white and dark forces used the pit for their rituals. It was the center of all rituals. Everyone in the tribe participated in each ritual whether it was black or white. The spirits demanded it.

Bill explained that many tribes believed this pit was the literal gateway between the spirit world to the world of man. That this tribe was condemned to guard this entrance and continually maintain balance between light and dark. Thus, the need for competing shamans. It was at once a sacred site and a site to be feared.

It was also believed that this tribe had great power. The power to command demons and make them do as you will. The power to speak to the Great Spirit and gain his blessings. Many jealous shamans and powerful chiefs felt to command that tribe, that plot of land, would allow them to command the heavens.

However, fear of the unknown, fear of the believed powers of the tribe, and fear of the actions of each of their foes kept any tribe from moving against this tribe and its small plot of land. A simple détente of fear between tribes kept this tiny village intact for many generations. Eventually, however, the old fears died with the ancients. In that moment a beautiful woman entered the encampment of one of the strongest, greatest tribes, with an equally strong and greedy leader.

No one had ever seen her equal. Even the most favored maiden turned her face in envy for her beauty. Her hair was dark as the darkest raven. Her eyes deep almond pools against a soft skin. Each feature was soft and comforting. She walked with a grace of confidence. The skins that adorned her had colors that seemed to move with the light. The feathers in her hair were few. But they seemed to glow an unearthly glow. The beads that adorned her sparkled with a strong intensity. When she looked at you and smiled it was as if the heavens had blessed you.

The chieftain had to have her as his own. His greed and arrogance demanded it. Within days she sat at his side in the councils. She hunted with him, whispered counsel to him, and took him to her bed each night. He became enamored with her. He lusted after her constantly. He could think of little else but her wants and needs. The tribe became enamored as well. They had all fallen in love with her. Whatever she

needed, wanted was hers. It was then at the height of his lust she demanded the chieftain take the small tribe and its villagers as his gift to her. He agreed and led a frothing army of warriors to secure the village.

In the stealth of the night. With only a full hunter's moon to guide them. The chieftain led his tribe against the small village. The tribe fell upon the village. They took no prisoners, gained no slaves. Children were slaughtered before their mothers. Husbands watched as wives were ravaged then burned alive. A bonfire was built into the pit and the shamans were thrown alive into the fiery hell. By direction of the chieftain's lover every villager, dead, alive, child or adult were thrown into the pit and burned. Along with every post, stick or thatch of every hut. Nothing was to be left. It was to be as if the tribe had never existed.

When the sun rose over the palms and gave sparkle to the waters surrounding this ancient tribal land the chieftain found himself and his tribe bleached with the blood of innocents. The woman was nowhere to be found. It was as if the entire tribe had fallen under a spell and then awoken. There was no honor in this victory. The warriors felt shame for their participation and slunk back home.

Word went out quickly that the tribe had been devastated and was no more. Fear tore through the land. The following day the chieftain noted black blood seeping through the eyes of his tribes' women. They cried in agony as the blood continued to seep from their eyes, ears, nose and any opening on their bodies. As he tried to provide care each of his warriors in turn were attacked by the same black death. One by one they died, every man, woman, and child until only the chieftain was left. Then he, looking over the misery, died alone. Their black blood fell upon the ground and bled into the forest. By nightfall even the trees had become black. Death and disease surrounded the tribes' lands.

Then on the next day after the chieftain's death, the first Europeans were seen coming ashore. Within a few generations what had been a heaven of abundance and plenty. What had been a paradise of strong men and great women. Was lost to those that brought disease and starvation. Their faiths in the Great Spirits were lost or stolen. They had become the savages in their own homes and stripped of all they loved. Great wars were fought with the Europeans. Many died. Many enslaved. The tribes were driven into the back waters and from their ancestors' homes. Many tribes blamed the woman and the destruction of the tribe with two shamans for their loss. It was believed the tribe had been ticked by a witch of great power.

CHAPTER 3

In the subsequent fights with Europeans that had taken their homes the story of the pit and the villagers with two shamans was forgotten. The harsh light of day placed the blame on their own ignorance, disease, or the strength of the Europeans. But not all had forgotten that their woes began with the destruction of the village with two shamans. A small tribe had survived deep in the swamps of the Great Father. They kept the stories.

When they could. When it was safe to search. The tribe sent forth warriors to find the pit and land of two shamans. Years passed. Generations lived and died. Still the story was told. Warriors were sent forth to find the pit. To make amends. To find a way to restore the native people's land and abundance. One day a couple of modern-day warriors driving an old chevy pickup found the pit.

They had driven down a dirt road on no one's map into a swamp even their fathers had avoided. No one came here, even the Europeans shunned the land. The sun set high in the sky when they saw darkness resting heavy on distant trees. The darkness seemed to live, shifting not with the wind or the movement of the trees, but with a life of its own. The warriors got out of the Chevy and walked for an hour toward the darkness. They carried with them the blessings of their shamans and the hopes of their people. The shiny bead necklaces of their tribe, blessed with the light of the Great Father, encircled their necks.

It took an hour to reach the darkness. Once there the warriors saw the pit. They saw the dark waters laying stagnant next to the shore. Nature's growth encircled the pit but would come no closer than feet from its edges. Every leaf, every bush, every blade of grass in the light of the sun and a blue sky was black. Fear pulled at the warriors. As they approached the pit itself fear, anger, pain, suffering, and evil pulled at them. The warriors began chanting ancient words for protection. They danced around the pit offering their prayers for those that had passed.

Their chants and prayers turned into a dance of the dead. A blessing for those that passed. A terrifying scream arose from the pit as their chants continued. Then a diabolical form rose as smoke from the center of the pit. It materialized into a dark demon with eyes blood red and claws dripping in filth. It roared at the warriors. It bent to do them harm. The warriors, even in their fear, kept up the chants and the dancing.

As the dark form descended on the warriors a wisp of white smoke appeared in the pit. It formed quickly and stood between the warriors and the demon. For a moment, a brief moment, green returned to the grass, life returned to the land. But death and evil held sway here. The warriors took their cue and left the pit. They offered blessings to the Great Father for their lives and headed back to the tribe. They told the tribe shaman and ancient fathers what had transpired.

Shortly following the warriors encounter the white man's government in Washington D.C. closed the dreaded boarding schools. They sent the people's children home to be taught allowing them to learn the ways of their forefathers. This was considered a sign by the elders. The warriors dance at the pit had granted some small relief for the people of the land. The tribe's council agreed further offerings had to be given to the tribe of two shamans. Many offerings would be needed to repay the pain and suffering of the villagers. So began a ritual of dancing at the pit on the full moon of the harvest of the tenth month.

That was the tale as Tom had heard it from Bill. Yeah, there were a lot of questions about why only dance once. Why only at the Halloween moon. Bill explained each as best he could. From what Tom could understand was that it had become nothing more than a custom after a few generations. The fortunes of the tribe and the people had increased with the offerings, so they continued. But the young ones didn't believe in the ancient ways. They had families and lives to lead. Only the true believers such as Bill, his father, and grandfather continued to perform the dance after a while. It didn't hurt and might have helped. At the least the villagers that suffered were remembered. And that was alright with Bill.

Tom though had a more literal belief of why the tradition died. It was the lingering evil. Over the years more than one warrior or maiden that made the trip didn't anoint themselves properly. Or made foolish reference in the presence of the pit. Each had met horrible fates. Terrible lingering sickness, excruciating pain, even death awaited those that didn't bring the proper respect. It wasn't something any generation wished upon itself willingly. But Tom had witnessed the evil firsthand and it terrified him.

Bill had taken Tom to the pit to witness the dance after the incident with the bigots. His grandfather came and so did his father. He was not of the people or any tribe so it was thought the evil couldn't or wouldn't affect him. Almost immediately upon exiting the pickup Tom got a severe sense of evil. He never felt such hate or anger before in his life. Dread filled his soul. As best he could he hid the sensation. Quite aware of the honor he was bestowed he didn't want to cause a fuss.

They walked to the pit. It was in the dark of the night with nothing but a few flashlights, a camping lantern, and the full of the moon. But Tom could see shadows moving in the dark. Each turned and seemed to look at him. He made it to the pit and watched as the wood was stacked and the fire lit. He listened as the chants began and the dance commenced. But his eyes and his thoughts saw dark spirits walking in the woods. He heard death screams, silent at first, then louder. He looked past the flames and saw a woman lying on the ground pleading for her life. He saw an axe silence her screams.

Tom wanted to run in fear. He remained seated, however, his face impassive as the terrors unfolded as a motion picture around him. It was the height of the chanting and dancing when he saw her. The maiden. She was beautiful. Long raven hair. Dark almond eyes. She laughed as the dark shaman was brought to her. With glee she pierced his heart with a spear and watched him burn in the pit. Then she morphed into the darkest flames. Becoming the true evil witch she was. Her screams of laughter haunting the misery she created as she flew off into the night.

The chanting and dancing ended. It was only then that Bill's father saw the horror in Tom's eyes. Tom had almost become paralyzed with fear. Bill's grandfather grabbed Tom by the arms and hoisted him on his shoulders. He carried him to the pickup all the while chanting ancient charms. He was taken to the council hall. The shaman was called. The elders chanted and danced. As morning passed, he regained his senses. Evil did not follow him after that encounter as best he knew. But it was enough for Tom to know evil existed. From then on, he would only take Bill to the pit. But he would never stay.

Bill's grandfather eventually passed. His father died a few years later. But Bill kept up the ritual in their honor if not for the tribe. Tom asked what would happen after he passed. Bill had no answer. He hoped the dark shaman would be found and a seal could be put on the evil of the pit before he died. But there had not been a dark shaman, a true dark shaman for generations. There had been shamans that practiced the dark arts. But they were not dark shamans.

The comment startled Tom. He didn't know there could be an ending or a solution to the evil at the pit. He had asked Bill to explain. Turned out Bill's tribe hadn't only been looking for the pit. But they explored the story of the pit, the evil, and the two shamans. There was no written history of the people, but there were oral traditions, stories passed down generation to generation. Some passed from tribe to tribe.

In ancient lore there were always two sides. The light and the dark. Neither was good or evil. They just were. Light could be just as evil as dark. Dark could be just as true as light. It was how their nature was used. Most if all gravitated toward the light. It was the easy path. The people could see in the light. They could confront their fears. The light became the epitome of good.

Dark, however, required more thought, more passion to be used effectively. Because those that sought the dark often used it as a quick remedy the uses they made of it often failed and caused great harm. As a result, dark was considered the epitome of evil.

The village of two shamans knew the truth. They knew dark balanced light. They knew light balanced dark. They knew that in this balance abundance and good fortune flourished. That is why they had two shamans. One dark. One light. They didn't contend with each other. They worked in harmony. That is why the villagers attended both the dark and the light ceremonies.

Because of the stigma, dark shamans faded from the practice. Only shamans of light or shamans that practiced the dark arts could be found. If both a dark shaman and a light shaman could be found, they could perform the chants and dance together. It would give peace to those that had been consumed by the dark art of the witch. It would provide balance to the land. A dance together as one would force evil to recede and give good more than a moment. The chants and dance would give true dark and light a chance to bind once again and forever seal the pit.

CHAPTER 4

Tom asked Bill how they could find a dark shaman. Would any exist. Bill told him they had been looking for centuries. But when the Europeans came, they had scattered the tribes. Many oral traditions had fallen by the wayside. Their only hope was to find some small tribe like their own that had kept the traditions alive. At tribe whose ways existed past the colonization of the Europeans. It was a faint hope. The Europeans had been thorough in their savagery. But then that is what they expected from Chekolta.

The name had taken Tom by surprise. He asked about Chekolta. Who was he or she? Bill explained that to the best of their knowledge it was the witch that had enchanted the chieftain. She had a hatred for the village of two shamans. She knew the combination of the dark shaman and light shaman were limiting her powers. She wanted to become the most powerful witch and needed them destroyed to reach her desire. But at the height of her victory, she had condemned herself. She was one of the first killed by the Europeans. She had released evil and chaos only to be consumed by it. Only her spirit remained. That spirit is imprisoned at the pit. When it is sealed her powers will be sealed also.

Those were the thoughts running through Tom's head as he drove Bill back to the hotel. Tomorrow would be a good breakfast. A nice ride back to the homesteads. Their wives would be waiting with chores to do. Halloween needed to be cleared and Thanksgiving given its moment before Christmas. It would be normal. It would be fun. But another year would pass. There was no one to take Bill's place in the chanting.

Tom didn't believe in the ritual, really. But he couldn't help questioning its effectiveness. Could one small dance be affecting the lives of so many? Was Bill's dance the finger in the dike holding back the well of evil? It often seemed to him the world was out of balance. Just waiting to burst. So much hatred, greed and self-interest. He shook his head. It was ridiculous. Still the thought haunted him. He began to look. He began a quest.

Slowly, doggedly, with patience and determination over the next few months Bill looked through records of the government. He searched records of Indian tribes current and lost. He sought ancestries. Called random people. Became acquainted with oral histories. A thread would appear here. A suggestion would appear there. It took a lot of time. It became more than a hobby. But eventually he peeled back ancient histories far enough to find a tribe. It had been small when the Europeans came. They had fled into the mother mountains and remained hidden. Eventually time caught up with them. But their tribe had remained tied to the land. They even had a small reservation as their own deep in the Appalachian Mountains far from most any who would observe them.

Tom picked up the phone and called their chieftain. Another hope sitting on the distant line. He asked the unknow individual if he knew of dark shamans. There was silence then he heard a shuffling as the phone was passed to someone else. A voice came on the line. It was an older raspy voice. It had to be an elder. The voice asked his name.

"Tom. My name is Tom." A confused Tom was apprehensive but yet hopeful with the odd turn of events.

Tom heard the old man briefly draw in his breath. He likened it to a release of some serious tension. The voice gave him an address, a location actually, deep in the northern Appalachian wilderness. Then with a calm finality he continued the conversation. "Tom, it's time to come home."

With those words the line then went dead. It was strange. Odd. But clarity filled Tom's mind. He felt compelled to go, well, home. It was the best way he could describe it.

Tom called Bill. He relayed what had transpired. They discussed it at length. Bill was more attune to the vagaries of the spiritual world. Tom had to admit he was at best a skeptic in such things. But Tom couldn't let the incident rest. It felt as if he had been summoned. He had to go and wanted to know if Bill would join him.

A few days after the phone call found both of them driving down a two-lane winding road in the northern mountains. It was cold. Winter had not yet left. But small buds were beginning to form on the barren branches promising a new spring. They slowed to turn onto a gravel road blocked by an old gate made of cattle fencing. As they turned into the lane leading to the gate, a native American man appeared and pulled the gate open to let them pass. It was as if they were expected. The man closed the gate and climbed into the back of the pickup. They followed a gravel road to a small group of buildings set on the edge an overlook. The site was cold, barren, beautiful, and remote.

Tom stopped the truck. He took in his surroundings. A vague familiarity filled his mind. He knew he had never been here. Still, it was familiar. People moved toward the truck. They were quiet, curious and a bit reverent. Ritual chants began. Small dances were begun by a few in attendance.

“You sure you don’t know these people? They seem to know you.” Bill was more than confused as the crowd grew. A door opened on a far building. A group of elderly men exited wearing various ceremonial attire.

“Looks like the elders are coming to greet you, including a shaman. Impressive.” Bill was soaking it in. This was obviously the center of this tribe’s community. Tom and Bill exited the truck and moved to the front. The elders stood before them. The shaman moved forward towards Tom and looked at him directly.

“Welcome home, Tom. We have been waiting for you.” He put out his hand and as Tom reached over to shake it the shaman pulled him in for a bear hug. There were actual tears in the shaman’s eyes as he hugged Tom. The shaman then turned to Bill. His eyes met Bill’s and a surprised recognition filled them.

“A shaman of light. We are honored.” Bill started to protest but a large cry rose from the gathering in celebration. Anything he might have said was lost in the noise and warm greeting he received.

Tom and Bill’s confusion multiplied as they were led forward to the tribe’s council chambers. There half-hearted attempts at clarity were dampened by their reception and a need for information. They looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders in acceptance as they followed the crowd to the chambers. They would look for answers inside

They were bade to sit at a table set in the front of the chamber. Across from them sat the village shaman and the chief. Next to them were more elders. It became evident not everyone was from the same tribe. Behind Tom and Bill, many dressed in ceremonial garb and some in every day shirts and jeans sat the villagers, guests and others. The chanting grew quiet as the shaman stood up.

“You are confused, unsure and suspicious. You do not know us. But you feel you must. What you see is familiar, comfortable even though you have never been physically here. Your companion is comfortable here as well, even though he has never met our tribe. Yet we, all of the tribes represented here, are confident, secure, and knowing. Let us tell you a story so that you may understand and freely join with your brothers and sisters.”

The room was still as the shaman began his tale. Lights seemed to dim, and the air grew close.

“In the beginning we knew of dark and light shamans. We were taught of the powers passed down from fathers to sons. We learned both must exist to bring balance to nature. The Great Father blessed our small tribe by granting us a dark shaman. Others had been blessed with shamans of light. Our dark shaman had taken to the forests and sought light shamans from other tribes. When the two met they danced the dances and chanted the chants that had brought peace, prosperity, and abundance to the land.

The tribes kept the rituals and teachings of the light and dark shamans through many generations. Then the Europeans came. The invaders forced many to abandon their teachings. They imposed the faiths of the Christians upon us. They sought out the dark shaman to kill him and keep us from our rituals and beliefs.

The dark shaman in an effort to save himself, the tribe, and our beliefs left the village to return when it was safe. When the times needed him. Over the years the dark shaman hid. He married and bore more children. Eventually, his teachings fell out of favor as did his beliefs. He and his family and his sons’ families became more and more assimilated with the Europeans. Blood mixed with blood until nothing, but a thread of the original dark shaman’s heritage existed. But although blood can be diluted dark powers cannot. They

are passed down from one heir to the next always strong, always deep. Dark powers ensure their own survival.”

The shaman stopped and took a drink of water, then continued. “The tribe always followed the heirs of the dark shaman. Their names became the histories of the tribe. They were known even though they didn’t know themselves. The tribe knew that when the shaman called them it was time for him to come home. He was needed.”

The tribe’s shaman turned to Tom. “You called. It was time for you to come home. The dark powers have guided you back to us.”

Tom sat quietly in the hall. Bill turned to look at him. All he saw was Tom staring at the shaman. Tom’s reality knew this wasn’t, couldn’t be true. It was an old wife’s tale. But his soul was telling him different. His mind was at peace. As if by instinct Tom’s fingers began tapping on the table as he thought, as he took in what had been said. The tapping was deliberate. It was methodical. It focused Tom’s thoughts.

A hand drum in the back of the hall picked up the beat. Then without prompting Tom began a small chant. It was under his breath, but Bill heard it. Bill looked deeply in Tom’s eyes. Tom was entranced. He was deep within himself. Bill had often been inside himself as well when he got deep into the dance and the chants at the pit. This knowledge guided him as he looked at Tom.

Tom’s chant became louder. The shaman heard them and began chanting as well. Others began chanting, the drums continued beating. The lights dimmed until the room became dark. There wasn’t just an absence of light. The room became dark. Reality became dark. As the dark became increasing and more consuming Bill could no longer sit in silence.

Bill’s mind emptied. He was compelled to chant. A guttural chant that became light and easy. It filled his mind and drove his hand to beat its own tune on the table. Another hand drum took up his beat. A few more tribal members chanted his chant. The chants picked up in volume and intensity.

Then without notice, without preparation, a fire roared to life in the fire pit. The spell was broken. Tom and Bill were standing, looking at each other. Bewildered yes. But also knowing. They fell into their seats exhausted. The shaman cried. The elders held each other in celebration. The tribal members and other sat in awe unsure of what had happened and what to do now.

The next morning found Tom and Bill in a small cabin. Furs and gifts had been left for them by the tribes. The shaman waited for them on the porch. When they came out each had draped a ceremonial blanket around themselves. It was still cold outside after all. They looked at the shaman.

“Any chance for some coffee and breakfast?” Tom asked. The shaman gave a hearty laugh, stood up and led them back to the council chambers.

In a matter of hours, they had become minor celebrities in this tribe and surrounding tribes. Many tents and campers had created a small village within the village as each member wanted to witness the return of the dark shaman. They also wanted to see the light shaman as well. The tribal shaman impressed upon both Tom and Bill how important this was to the tribal culture. Their arrival was not only a blessing, but a confirmation of tribal beliefs that had been under attack for centuries.

As they ate Tom looked at the tribal shaman. “What’s next? I don’t really know anything about being a shaman, light, dark or in between.”

“The caves will guide you.” The shaman replied and continued eating without much care.

The caves, Tom found out, were a sacred site guarded by the tribe. All dark shamans had used the caves to guide them and teach them. No one went into the caves except the dark shaman. No one wanted to go in. The tribal shaman took Tom to the caves after breakfast. Bill turned away as soon as he saw the caves. Tom immediately felt compelled to go in and he did.

Tom spent two days and two nights in the caves. He took neither drink, food, or any form of light. For two days and nights tribal members sat outside the entrance. They built small fires, chanted ancient chants, and danced ancient rites. Bill turned his attentions to the other tribal members. He walked among

them in the village. He spoke with them, prayed with them, and laughed with them. He seemed to have no concern for his friend Tom. He never spoke of him or fretted about him.

But on the morning after the second night the elders, the tribe, and the tribe shaman found Bill standing just outside the entrance to the caves as if called by some inner command. Tom came out of the caves, saw Bill immediately and embraced him. Tom was changed. Bill knew it. But Bill had expected it.

“Time to go home. The wives will be worried. Plus, we have to get ready to seal the pit.” Tom hugged Bill. They walked together to the council hall. Plans were going to be made.

CHAPTER 5

Tom never really explained to anyone what happened in the cave. He didn't know if he had the words. And even if he had the words he didn't know if they would be understood. He had embraced his heritage though. As did others. His emergence as a dark shaman had made the rounds of many of the tribes before he even returned home.

Tom and Bill spent most of their free time in the following months honing their skills. Time passed quickly and soon the full moon on the tenth month was on them. It was once again on Halloween. Timely if nothing else. This time though Tom would not leave Bill to the dance by himself.

Tom drove the pickup down the backroad to the dirt road cutoff. It was the same trip he had taken many times before, but yet it wasn't. He was different. So was Bill. What they were going to do was seal a rift between life and death. It was a deep wound that had seethed over time. It was fed by the violent deaths of innocents and those of their kind taken in horrible tragedy. A witch of evil, born of evil had opened the rift to feed the misery of the tribes and her souls need of sorrow.

Tom parked the truck at the side of the road. He saw the dark as he stepped from the truck. Under the full moon, in the depth of night he could still see it shift and move. The lack of sunlight could not hide darks form from him. He and Bill were covered in streaks of black coal and white ash. A leather band circled their heads. In the bands were two feathers. One from the white dove. The other a black feather from an eagle.

They made their way along the overgrown path to the pit. Dark screamed at them in agony. Evil drenched darks form in the trees, bushes, and land. It burned, tortured and tore at the dark driving the dark to madness. Tom no longer noticed the stench as he walked. The mosquitos found their substance in more forgiving animals. Nature itself was aware the light and the dark had returned to this land and quaked in fear and hope.

Bill gathered the wood while Tom lay the river stones. The fire was built in the center of the pit where no life had lived for centuries. With a small prayer to the Great Father and a quick chant Bill lit the flame to burn the wood. Bill stood opposite of Tom and began his chant. Tom began his chant as well. The flames burned brighter as the chants rose in volume. Then Bill and Tom began the ritual dance. Using hand drums to keep time they danced around and around the fire. The danced within the pit. They chanted ancient chants as they danced.

It was only moments before the evil arose from the pit. It ascended close to the flame that had risen hard against the night sky. Evil cloaked itself in the dark, but Tom could see it for what it was. Tom changed his chant and beat his drum. He called the Great Father. Evil screamed at him. It tore towards him seeking to end him. But as its tongue of death shot out white smoke erupted from the pit. It shielded Tom from Evil and refused its position.

The earth began to move as evil called upon more forces. Screams of the dead arose from the pit. The agony that had been served upon the innocent cried for release and peace in their death. Evil refused and called even more to its purpose. Tom and Bill increased their chants and pounded out their dance. They tired in the fight. Evil seemed to resist too much. Its hold on the land too long to be removed easily. Tom and Bill began to fear they too may be taken.

The called one last call out for help from their forefathers. In a moment two forms appeared from the pit and stood by their sides. An ancient ancestor dressed in black, another in white. They joined Bill and Tom and danced the dance and sang the chants. The fire in the center roared and began to burn at the heart of evils darkness. One final scream emanated from the fire. A black form screamed at them from above and chanted its own chants. It was the dark soul of Chekolta protecting the evil she had created.

The four shamans increased their volume and pace. They fed the fire. But Tom and Bills mortal forms were at their end. Chekolta screamed with glee at their impending failure. As Tom and Bill struggled once more around the fire. A warm breeze filled the land. They saw hundreds of souls that had been trapped rise. Chekolta's efforts to defeat the shamans had loosened her binds on the innocents. The souls screamed their vengeance on the soul of Chekolta. As one they tore at her soul until nothing was left.

The fire began to die as evil withdrew. Tom and Bill stopped their chanting and drumming and stood motionless in the fading flames. But the chanting didn't seem to stop. The two ancient shamans stood next to their descendants continuing the ritual. When they ceased their chanting, their ghostly hands marked Tom and Bill's brows and blessed their lives.

Tom and Bill could do no more stand with their ancestors and watch quietly as the other ghosts who rose against Chekolta disappeared from the land. Now they were all free to rest with their ancestors. The two ancient shamans were the last to leave ensuring all that could be done had been done. As they left Bill and Tom fell down exhausted where they stood.

The sun rose over the still waters and warmed Tom and Bill to wake. They sat up and watched fish jump in the waters. Deer wandered into the field to feed on the bush. Dragonflies hopped from branch to branch. Tom could see the land no longer had dark trapped inside evil. The trees, brush and meadows waved freely with the wind.

The pit they had danced around only had the remains of their fire and the river rocks. There were no remnants of the great battle just fought between evil, dark, and light. Bill fetched some water and poured it onto the remains of the fire as precaution. As the water washed away the burnt wood it revealed the sand underneath. Sand that had been turned to a dark mass of solid glass. The pit had been sealed.

Tom stood and looked at the seal. Then he put an arm around Bill. They turned toward each other and smiled. It was then that both saw the simple mark of light and dark embedded in their foreheads. The only evidence of their trial and a blessing from ancient shamans.

Tom and Bill gathered their things and headed back to the pickup. It was an hour and a half to the motel. Then a big breakfast. Next year they would celebrate Halloween at home.