



## *Palomino*

*Imagine... falling asleep in one world, and waking to find yourself in another.*

*Where would you be?*

*Where... would...you... be?*

"I'll tell you where I'd be," stated the man in a tan cowboy hat loudly, as he slapped a five dollar bill on the counter top. The bartender dutifully refilled his tumbler with three fingers of an amber liquid that looked like it might melt the glass.

The cowboy slugged down the whisky without so much as a gasp, or a facial grimace. Though his skin was weather worn, he was young and appeared to be every part of his counter part from a hundred years before.

"Tell you where I'd be... cuz I been there. I'd be in the land of horses... yes sir... that's where I'd be."

"I think you been hanging out in the barn too long Shorty," grumbled the man at the end of the bar. He too was wearing a cowboy hat, but his was a larger variety and it was black. He had just come back from the cigarette machine, and his expression said he was more than a little annoyed with the younger fellow.

The first cowboy looked at the second, squinting his eyes as if he was having a hard time seeing that far. "I'm a free range kinda guy myself... never spent much time in the barn... damn cruel thing to keep a horse all boxed up like that. Yep... went to the land of the horses, and I'll tell you what; they got it all over people. Ya ask me... people suck."

Turning to look into the mirror behind the bar, he picked up his water glass, saluted his image, and then drank the contents down, placing it back on the counter with a plastic thump.

His voice raised up a notch till it seemed his loud banter was now almost a pure shout. "Yes sirrrrrrrrrr..... the guys there all got cocks the size of fire hoses and the gals are just a wonder to behold."

"Ya wanna watch yor language pal... there's ladies present." The comment came from the back shadows of the windowless room.

The cowboy turned around, his movements just a little bit jerkier and wooden than they had been. The effects of the drink seemed to wash over him like a wave.

"Where? I seen no women when I come in. Hey! Any women in the house kindly raise your hand so I can apologize for saying cocks!"

No one raised a hand, so the young man turned back to the bar. "As I was saying..."

A blanket had been thrown over the bar's large mirror. The cowboy was just marveling at this phenomenon when a blow to his head took him by surprise. It wasn't hard enough to kill him, but it was hard enough to considerably scramble his brains. Before he even hit the floor hands were in his pockets taking what money he had, and then he was unceremoniously dumped into the back alley. Rough laughter followed those who had done this to him back into the bar. The door closed behind them with a thump, and a lock clicked into place.

"One more crazy bastard come'n off the plains, eh Charlie?" a voice half shouted. "First I ever heard that story though. What do you think it was... sun stroke maybe?... or could be he fuc'd

himself into a nut case when he found those horse people huh? What'd' ya think, he's got a fire hose in his pants too?"

There was more rough laughter. And then it became quiet again as the locals went back to drinking after splitting their sudden gain.

When the sun came up the cowboy woke with the dawning like he always did. His head was pounding. As he groaned and rolled over he never even considered that he might have been beaten; to him this was just one more hang over among the many. He had been seeking something for a long time now... long enough to begin believing he might have been chasing a dream. Like many others, he had turned to the bottle for comfort, or perhaps relief from the something he could not escape. From the moment he made his way into man's civilization it had been like this... no one would believe him. Worse still, he could not find his way back; so it really must never have happened. He was slowly going mad trying to remember where his fading memories came from.

There were no thoughts for the few possessions he had stashed in his dirty hotel room. He had come to this town on a dusty Greyhound bus, and on a spur of the moment decision, decided to stay. This was a mistake he was now paying for. Checking his pockets, he found they were empty, and so, staggered to the road and stuck out his thumb. He walked maybe ten miles before a dusty old pickup truck pulled over, and waited for him to catch up.

"Thanks.... Thanks.... I mean... really... thanks...." he babbled as he moved his body into the cab of the truck. The man behind the wheel uncorked a canteen, and handed it over without saying anything.

The cowboy took it gratefully, and tipped it back. He hadn't realized how thirsty he was, nor did he even know where he was. Direction was not something he considered when he held out his thumb. At that point it was simply 'put one foot in front of the other and keep moving'.

"Where ya heading?" asked the driver, slipping the truck back into gear. The cowboy closed his door with the tin metal sound Chevy pickup truck doors always make.

"I don't know."

"That's a dangerous thing not to know out here," the driver told him. "Next gas station isn't for another twenty miles, and the day is young. I'm not so sure ya woulda made it."

The cowboy sighed, re-corked the canteen and lay his head back as best he could. "Don't matter much," he managed, adjusting his hat to sit over his eyes. "I can walk a long long ways with out much bother..." and then he was sound asleep.

In his dreams he saw an old horse looking at him with big sad eyes. The eyes were accusing him of giving up... he had squandered his time, and his youth, and his mission. The eyes said he might fail, and if he did, he would die never knowing... never finding...

The slamming truck door woke him. The fellow driving was already moving around the front of the truck. The sun, low in the sky and coming through the dirt streaked windshield made him seem no more than a ghostly silhouette. He was headed for the cowboy's door. This was it... he

was going to get beaten again, and left alongside the road. It happened to him so many times, and yet he really had no idea why.

The door opened and the driver stood there. He too wore a western style hat, though it was rounded on the top, and floppier. It had a very tired looking feather in the band. The man's darkly tanned face showed the same tiredness.

"Come on," he said. "Get out."

The cowboy held back a bit. "Where are we?"

"Home. It's late, but Emma'll have dinner ready. You can bunk out in the barn." His voice was soft, with an accent that suggested western American Indian.

"You're not gonna..."

"Beat you up?" he finished for him. "I think you been beat up enough, don't you? By the way... you talk in your sleep. You musta had some hellish dreams."

The cowboy exited the truck, finding himself to be sore and stiff. "How long did I sleep?"

"Dam near eight hours. You never actually said where you was going, so I just let you sleep. You never even woke up when I made my stops. Means you were either comfortable with my company, or you were just flat exhausted."

"Stops?"

"Yeah... other ranches. They have problems with their horses and they call me. I'm a blacksmith by trade but I doctor on the side. Not scientific... nothing like that... but the horses respond to me, so people call. The local vet don't like me none; says I'm not licensed." He shrugged his shoulders. "Fuk'em... horses don't care if you have a piece of paper."

The cowboy nodded his head in agreement, and apparent understanding. "That's the most I slept at one stretch in a long time. Least it seems that way. You still got that canteen?"

"Fresh and cold in the house if you can wait just a minute. No booze though... we don't drink that stuff here. It's not good for you."

That was enough for the cowboy. They didn't talk again until he had finished his third big glass of water.

"My name is Run's With Horses, but you can call me Hank," said the blacksmith as he sat down to the dinner table. He removed his hat, and his wife took it from him. He had a single braid that hung down to the middle of his back. "My wife's name is Emma," he continued, nodding in her direction. "Her patience with me has given us dinner." He smiled. "I think I am in love with her still."

The cowboy carefully placed his glass on the counter top. Removing his own hat, he nodded to Hank's wife as she stood across the small kitchen from him smiling. "Ma'am," he said, "I am much obliged for the hospitality. Ain't seen much of that lately. My name is... darned.... ah.... I remember a guy at that bar call'n me Shorty, so I suppose that'd be it."

"Shorty," said Hank softly, motioning to the chair next to him. "It's time for dinner."

When they were all seated, the three of them held hands, and a blessing was said over the meal. Hank and Shorty made small talk while they ate, but Emma did not join in, though her husband did notice she was more than a little intrigued with their guest. She had a good sense for people, same as he did for horses. He always deferred to this when she decided to throw in her two cents. It worked for him, and kept him out of trouble in the past. He knew her ways were her own, so he basically left it alone.

Dinner was simple, as it always was, but that was the way he liked things. Hank was not a fancy sort of man. He also noticed that the cowboy turned down any meat that was offered. It was odd, but he had seen stranger. Emma never ate meat either, cooking it only for his benefit. She had almost gotten him away from it... but almost was not quite.

After dinner, he took a lantern, and showed Shorty out to the barn, where he might at least get a good nights rest. It was agreed without words that they would talk in depth in the morning. The house seemed in the middle of nowhere, which it was, and the night was extremely dark. There was no moon, and the sky shone with all the stars that a city person would never see.

"What do you do for a living?" asked Hank as they walked.

"Dunno... Tell you the truth I don't remember a whole lot since I woke up in that alley. I remember the bar... but that's about it. I like horses ok. Maybe I work with them?"

"Maybe," he replied. "You drink like that a lot?"

"Some... I recon... but never to the point that I couldn't remember like this."

He picked his hat up with one hand and ran his other over his hair, making a noise in his throat when the fingers brushed over a large bump. Hank stopped, and holding up the lantern, gently examined his scalp. It wasn't hard to find the egg sized lump.

"Bushwhacked. OK... now we know why you don't remember much. You don't have any money or a wallet with you... do you?"

Shorty winced at the touch of Hank's fingers. "Nothing's in my pockets cept used up dreams, and I can't even remember what those are."

"World's full of bad people Shorty. Seems you managed to find some of them."

"Yup... recon so," he replied, carefully putting his hat back on. "Again, thanks for your hospitality. In the morning I'll be on my way I guess."

"And where would you go?"

“Don’t rightly know. But I do know I was going somewhere.... look’n for something I think... or look’n for that somewhere... I’m sorry but I’m just... confused.”

Hank nodded, but said nothing. He had been there before himself; looking for a somewhere. Amazing what a man will do when he’s trying to find the reason for his existence. He sought that reason once, but that had been many many years before. After speaking his heart to a Shaman, that man had sent him alone to the desert where he had dreamed a dream...

There was something so familiar about this young man.

They arrived at the barn, and Hank lead the way in placing his lantern on a hook secured on one of the rough support beams. In a stall at the very end, a horse poked its head out and looked at them.

“That’s Boss Pony,” said Hank. “Boss,” he said a little louder, “You’re gonna have some company tonight.”

The horse snorted.

Shorty tipped his hat to the horse and said, “Thank you.”

Hank stopped what he was doing, and looked at the cowboy. “For what?”

“Oh.... I was thanking Boss Pony. She just said her stall was my stall.”

“She did?”

“Uh huh.”

“And how did you know Boss Pony was a she?”

“The way she said it I guess. It had feminine inflections.”

Hank tossed him a blanket. “You can understand horses?”

He shrugged. “It’s just something that I do.... I guess... never thought much about it.” Shorty smiled a very small smile as he tried to pass it off. “I think I have a way with them is all. It’s helped me make a few bucks here and there.”

“Got you in trouble too, I bet.”

The cowboy looked at him as if wondering over the possibility that he might have finally found someone who would understand. “I don’t know really... my memories just a little... ah... fragmented. Know what I mean? I think it probably did. Yes,” he nodded, “It did get me into trouble.”

Hank stood looking at the cowboy in a deep way, as though he was trying to discern the truth without having to ask for it to be presented. Finally he just nodded, and handed Shorty a second

blanket. "You need anything during the night you come and bang on the front door. I'll hear it, and get up. I'm good like that... I sleep light. Tomorrow we'll figure out what to do. I could use some help if you've a mind to stay a week or so. I can't pay much, but your room and board is included."

"Thank you. I think I would like that. It'll give me time to remember."

They shook hands, and Boss Pony moved her head up and down, making horse noises again. Hank nodded back to her, took the time to rub her muzzle, and then left, leaving the lantern in the barn for Shorty. As he walked through the darkness back to his house, he stopped when he thought he heard a second horse in the barn. He knew that Boss Pony was the only one there, but he knew her voice just as a father knows his child's, and the second voice was different. Taking in a lungful of air, he let it out slowly, and let the occurrence slide away into the night. A shooting star crossed the sky, and he smiled, taking it as a good omen. Emma was waiting for him, and he was very tired. Saying a soft prayer in his native Shoshone, he continued on back to the house.

The next morning, Hank took a tin mug of coffee out to the barn for Shorty. Walking in, he was amazed to find the blankets wrinkled, but hardly slept on. He didn't see Shorty. Boss Pony had her head sticking out of the stall, and she gave him a look that he could have sworn meant, 'be quiet, he's sleeping'. Walking slowly up to her, he found the cowboy sitting on her back, softly snoring.

Boss Pony moved her head up and down slightly, and it actually looked as if she was smiling, and apologizing to him. Hank was amazed. Boss liked no one except him and Emma; she never had.

"Shorty?" he said softly.

The other man's head came up, and his eyes opened. He smiled sheepishly. "Coffee smells good," he replied equally softly.

With out further comment, he slid off of the horse's back, and patted her on the neck.

"Thank you Boss," he told her.

She nickered softly in reply.

Accepting the cup from Hank, he sipped at it and smiled. "Coffee is something I have come to appreciate."

"Me too," replied Hank as he lead the way out of the stall.

As they walked out of the barn, he asked the younger man, "You slept on her back all night?"

"Most of it... yup. I couldn't sleep... kept tossing and turning. She suggested it."

"She did?"

Shorty sipped the coffee again. "Um hmmm... but we didn't make love."

Hank stopped and looked at the other man. Shorty almost kept walking, but stopped, sloshing his coffee with the suddenness.

"You didn't?"

The cowboy shook his head in the negative, as he held the cup away from himself so it wouldn't drip on him. He never even seemed to consider the moral aspects of what he was suggesting, nor the bug eyed look that Hank had shot him.

"Actually, it was her idea. She offered herself to me. Said it would help me relax and all, but I told her that she was your horse. It just wouldn't seem right to me."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yep."

"And what did she tell you?"

"That she works for you, and loves you, but that you are not her mate, and that it would have been perfectly fine."

There was a pregnant moment as Hank gazed at Shorty, while that man sipped his coffee noisily, trying not to burn his lips on the tin cup.

"Do me a favor," Hank told him.

"Sure."

"Don't mention any of this to Emma. She's waiting on breakfast for us. I don't think she would understand."

"I get that a lot."

Hank smiled. "Dam sure bet you do. N'other reason you were always getting beat up right?"

The two of them began walking again. "How'd you know?" Shorty asked him.

"Educated guess."

Breakfast was quick, and quiet. Shorty chose to eat cereal; dry bran flakes... no milk. Emma gave Hank a look, and he just shrugged his shoulders. If that was what the man wanted, then so be it.

"We need to get you a horse to ride, and then we have some things to take care of. There's a herd of wild horses out on the range, and they've held up in a bad area. I found a lot of them dead where some bastard hunters have been poaching them."



“Poaching them?”

“Yeah... they like trying out their guns on something living, and then they sell what they shoot to a dog food company that’s not too picky who they buy from. I’ve been trying to get the herd to move onto my land so they’ll be protected, but the stallion has been giving me a hard time. I thought maybe between the two of us we might get a rope around his neck, and then drag him along whether he wants to come or not.”

Shorty finished the last of his coffee, and held out the tin mug for a refill. Emma smiled at him as she poured, but said nothing. He seemed of an age where he could have been the son she never had.

“I think I’d like that,” said Shorty, nodding to her when the cup was full. “Least I can do to repay your kindness.”

Hank smiled at him. “Won’t be as easy as it sounds; I been after this guy for a long time now. He keeps his scouts out and always seems to know when I’m coming.”

Shorty surprised him with a question. “Why do men kill animals like that?”

Emma looked at Hank. The look was not one of distrust, or of surprise, it was more of a look that conveyed the thought that more people should ask that question.

“I don’t know,” he responded. “If I did you can bet that I would do something about it. For right now though, about all I can do is threaten to shoot any trespassing hunters.”

“Would you do it?”

Shorty had asked the question looking over top of his coffee cup. Most of his face was hidden.

Hank rose from the table. “Time to go,” he said, avoiding the question. It was one he had asked himself over and over... would he kill to protect the horses. He hoped he never had to find out, but his old Winchester was always ready in its saddle holster.



They were half a day out on the trail, and Hank was deep in thought. His hat was down, shading his eyes from the glare of the sun. He had always refused to wear sunglasses; it was just the way he was. As he adjusted to the monotony of the ride, his mind slipped into and out of the day’s events in a series of day dreams. Interwoven with these were bits and pieces of the dream he had had all those years ago... all... those... years...

*Imagine... falling asleep in one world, and waking to find yourself in another.*

*Where would you be?*

*Where... would...you... be?*

The voice was clear enough that he sat up in his saddle, and turned to look at Shorty.

“What did you say?”

“Noth’n.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“Nope.”

Shorty looked around checking the positions of the horses he had convinced Hank to take along with them. They were out a ways and walking along keeping pace with them. They almost looked like wild tag alongs to their strange little herd.

“Horses haven’t seen or heard anything... ain’t smelled any trails either but that will change. Red here tells me that the wild ones come this way but it’s not their territory. N’other one, maybe two hours ride before we find them. He thinks it would be a good idea to ride that far, and then make camp. We can let them go out n’make contact for us.”

Hank didn’t respond, but turned and watched the trail ahead which was dry and dusty. The vegetation here looked more brown than green but it was still good land and the wild herd was able to live from it well enough. He let his mind slip back into the daydreams as he had been taught to do by the Shaman all those years ago.

He had gone to the desert in search of enlightenment, having decided to do so after hearing the whisper of The Great Spirit. His totem was the Horse and it had come to him in his dreams. It told him to go... it did not give him a reason. In following these instructions, he was gone for three years. The how and why of his survival had always been a mystery to his friends and family; he had only ever spoken about it to the Shaman.

While he was there, he had lived a dream, but like all dreams he could only ever remember the fragments. Occasionally his dreams were haunted by strange half human, half horses. He would be naked and running with them, always the last in the line as he was no match for any of them on foot.

He remembered the swiftest of them holding out her hand to him, and then letting him swing up and onto her back. She then ran the race all over again, just for him, and together they had won. Her name was.... was...

“Come on!” she yelled at him. “We’re going swimming!”

The language was not English, nor French, nor German... oddly enough it was his own native Shoshone.

He trailed behind, watching her large body splash into the water. Diving out he grabbed hold of the plain garment she wore and hung on, skimming the surface of the water as she dragged him along. Laughing the whole time, she splashed water backwards at him with her hands. When she stopped her robe had streamed out behind her and her nakedness was exposed to him. He stood too then, his body reacting as a young man's body should react. Her own body responded to his and they made love right there in the shallows... him... the human... her... the ...

Emma had more than once gone to sleep on the couch because of his tossing and turning. She was always there for him, though, when he woke, and she would always be holding out a cup of the medicinal tea that only she knew how to make... and then everything would be right again.

A motion caught his eye and he looked up. The horse Shorty told him was named Brown Spot was trotting in their direction. That wasn't the name he had used before, but when he said the words, as Shorty told him to do, the horse had come forward and nuzzled his outstretched hand. The young man had then informed him that horses were very sensitive about their names. The two of them laughed, but Hank had said a silent prayer to the totem of the horse for all that he was learning. He thought he knew horses, but with every turn of the day there was a nuance or some small fact that he had never known presented to him by the other man in a totally believable manner.

When they all came together, Brown Spot stopped in front of Boss Pony and they exchanged knickers. The animal shook its head flopping its mane around and then it went right to Shorty, where it sneezed and then gave a series of soft grunts while pawing at the ground.

"He says we should camp here. He's made contact with Red Eye's scouts, and they're gonna take word to him that you want a parley."

"I want to what?"

"Parley... talk to him. That is of course if you want to save yourself a lot of time and effort. We can still try to do what you wanna do your way... ya know, get a rope around his neck and try to drag him along behind us, but what are ya gonna do with him once ya get him where you're going? Less'n you lock him up or keep him on a tether, he'll just up and jump the fence. He'll take what's his back again, and then probably more than what he came with."

"Meaning my horses?"

Shorty nodded; "Your wife too if he could get away with it."

Hank gave him a long look and then mumbled, "You're the darndest thing I ever did see." More loudly, he said, "I'm for it. Hell... I'm for anything that might work. I been tracking the bastard for four years now and best I ever got was about a hundred yards from his herd before they run off."

The cowboy just nodded to Brown Spot, and that horse galloped off, back in the direction from which it had come.

"One more thing," said the cowboy as they both dismounted.

Hank turned to him. "Now why did I know that was coming?"

Shorty smiled. "Red Eye knew we was coming. His scouts said he wants to see Boss Pony... alone."

Hank opened his mouth to say something, but Shorty beat him to it. "She's his daughter."

His mouth hung open momentarily, and then he managed, "She is?"

"Yup. The scouts told Brown Spot that the only reason he's granted you an audience is because you took her in when you found her mother shot dead."

Hank tipped his hat back, and just looked at the cowboy. He had seen strange things himself... many and many strange things... she flashed through his mind again as he stared at the young man and he saw her running like the wind, all the while laughing. The Palomino... that's what she was, and that had been her name too... Palomino. For a split second he was back with her, and his heart leapt. When his eyes refocused, he was still looking at Shorty, and this man's expression suggested that he had seen the same thing... for what ever reason... he had seen her too.

Deciding to play along with what was happening was an easy choice. What the cowboy had told him was the truth. Boss Pony's mother was killed by the dog food poachers. He found her lying in a pool of blood, her colt still poking at her utter. The gangly legged baby was still trying to feed, even though her mother was now as cold as the ground on which she lay.

"How'd he know?" he almost whispered.

"He was watching. He lead the killers away from them. Their truck run into a ravine and got stuck... but it was too late. She was shot trying to protect their foal."

Hank turned to his horse, unbuckled his saddle, and then pulled both it and the blanket off of her. Dropping it to the ground, he slapped her on her flank, and watched her trot off in the same direction as Brown Spot. Turning to Shorty, he said, "We'll camp right here, but if that bastard runs off with the horses, you're going to carry my saddle back."

The cowboy nodded, and then did the same; dragging his saddle off of his horse's back, then dropping it to the ground. Hank noticed the horse moved out only a short distance, and was then joined by the other two which had been walking their flanks. They did not wander off. Looking at the sun, he figured it to be three hours till sundown. He also figured it was going to be a pretty one. It'd be a damn shame if he lost Boss Pony. She was real special to him; almost like a daughter since he had finished weaning her himself. Most people would not understand that.

He sighed. Maybe it was time to have some of Emma's tea. After they set up camp, he would boil up the water. The three hours would pass quickly enough... and then they would watch the sun set. Hank found he suddenly had a true craving for Emma's tea. He missed her badly. Pulling his saddle bags open, he was disappointed to only find coffee.

About an hour after dark, Hank was gently woken by a twinge in his nose. Even in his dreams he recognized the smell. He lay on the ground, using his saddle as a pillow, and had his hat down over his eyes. At first he thought it was part of the dream... in fact, the dream he was having breached over into real life. Palomino was serving him... something... and then she faded, and he knew he was awake. The hot tea was being held just close enough and the steam it produced was being blown towards his head. He tipped his hat back expecting to find Shorty there doing something strange again. The cowboy had surprised him at every turn of the trail; until he thought he could no longer be surprised at anything... and then, there was Emma kneeling next to him smiling.

“Hello my husband,” she said in Shoshone.

“Hello my wife,” he said sitting up. “What are you doing here?”

“My totem came, and told me I should be with you at this time.”

“Bungu (*horse*)?”

She nodded, as he accepted the tea she had brought him in a thermos.

“Who brung ya?” he asked, sipping at the thermos cup.

“A strange horse... not one of ours. It came by the kitchen door, and waited for me.”

Hank nodded, and sipped his tea. His wife was good with horses too; actually better than he was himself, so he knew she would not have ridden this horse had she felt a danger.

“Male or female?”

“Male. It was painted like the desert.”

“Where is it now?”

“Dropped me close, and then just left. I didn’t bring anything with me ‘cept my cloak, and your tea. Bungu told me not to.”

He knew better than to ask her if she ever questioned the totem who was her spirit guide. Emma was a good Christian lady, and went to church every Sunday, which was more than he would do, but still she clung to the old beliefs. It was her way... it was their way. She’d only seen her totem a handful of times, but each and every time, Hank firmly believed her when she told him she had. He had been down that road himself... except now; about all he had left of it were the infrequent dreams. His own totem was also a horse... a female; but one that only visited in his dreams, and left no message except that she was with him.

“Her name was Palomino,” he told her softly, his mind drifting back to his dream.

“Who was she?” asked Emma equally as soft, recognizing what was happening. She knew that when the subconscious blended with the conscience there was a reason, and within the quiet could be found many answers... if one were to listen.

“Someone I knew once,” he almost whispered. “An animal... and yet... human.”

“I think ya want to be up now,” said Shorty from the darkness outside of the light thrown by their small campfire. His voice had a hushed quality to it that fit into their conversation perfectly. “Red Eye is coming.”

Hank looked in the direction of the voice, but saw no one. “He is? And how do you know this?”

“Listen,” whispered Emma, placing a hand on her husband's shoulder. In the distance was the soft rumble of horse's hooves.

Hank got to his feet without drinking any of his tea. Handing the cup back to Emma, she deftly poured the contents back into the thermos, and placed it into a saddle bag.

The rumble grew in volume, as the horse phantoms ran a circle around their small camp. They kept well out of sight in the darkness. Hank could taste the dust they kicked up, and yet he was not afraid. He estimated the herd to be well better than two hundred head, even though his previous estimate had been no more than thirty to sixty tops.

“What's missing?” he asked no one, and realized the answer at the same time. The only sound was the hooves. There were no whinnies... nothing at all in the way of the animal's language that he was so used to.

Twice the herd circled them, and then the thunder subsided as the horses slowed their pace to a walk. As deftly as a well trained cavalry unit they turned, and then lining up shoulder to shoulder faced the people still standing near their small campfire. At a walk, they came forward, until, as a wall of horses, they were standing within clear sight of the people they had come to greet. As one, they stopped, and stood quietly.

Shorty had come in from outside of the light, and stood with Emma and Hank. He offered no words on what was happening, and somehow Hank knew that this was totally about himself. He was the focus of the horses' attention. Emma and Shorty were there for him, but this strange behavior of the horses was all about him.

Slowly walking towards them, he stopped some twenty feet from the line. Calling out loudly in his native Shoshone he said, “I am Runs With Horses. I seek the horse known as Red Eye.”

It was quiet for a moment. Except for what had just transpired, Hank might have felt silly, but he had been instructed to wait. He had waited; and the horses came. He was smart enough to know he was in the presence of something more than himself. His mind went to the image of the half horse, half human girl, and he focused on this. Her deep brown eyes were looking at him. Her robe was flowing off and behind her in the running stream. He felt warm breath on his face, and he forced his eyes to focus, bringing his mind back to the present. A large stallion was standing in front of him. It snorted softly, and pawed the ground lightly with one hoof.

“My name is Red Eye,” said Shorty from just behind where Hank stood. He did not turn to look at the cowboy.

The horse shook his head, making his mane whip through the air. He did not look at Shorty, but directly at Hank.

“I have met with my daughter, the one whom you named Boss Pony. She says she is happy, and that you treat her well. I have given her the choice of joining us, or staying with you. She has chosen to stay with you.”

Hank nodded. “This makes me happy,” he said, again in his native Shoshone. He did not question the thought that the horse might not understand. “I have also come to offer you and your herd sanctuary on my land. You will be safe there from the dogs who hunt you.”

Red Eye nodded his head up and down, and his body spoke its language. This time Hank did not need Shorty to translate; he understood every word as clearly as if it had been spoken in the quiet of a church.

“Only man would divide the land, and hold it for their own. Only man would deny what has been given by The Great Spirit for all to share. Tonight the dogs that hunt us will become the hunted, and they will know the very fear they have given. You will be our witness.”

“They have guns,” said Hank.

“And we have the weapons given to us from the beginning... intelligence, hooves, and heart,” countered Red Eye.

“They are many and many, and many,” said Hank.

“They are but three,” replied Red Eye, “And tonight we are the many.”

“Their deaths will bring more hunters.”

“Then we will kill those also.”

“And where will it end?”

“It will only end when they leave us in peace. Will you be our witness?”

Hank removed his hat letting his long ponytail fall down to the middle of his back. He looked at Red Eye through the darkness. The horse appeared shadowy and phantom like.

“Yes.”

“Undress and follow.”

Red Eye turned and moved back to his line of horses. As he made the line, they turned one at a time from his space outward and followed him slowly back into the darkness. Their hooves stirred up the dust, but they hardly made a sound.

Hank went back to Emma, who stood waiting for him. Shorty was no where to be seen.

“He wants me to follow. I am to go with them, but naked.”

She nodded and smiled a sad smile. “It is a strange night this night my husband.”

She embraced him and then helped him disrobe, carefully folding his clothes and laying them over his saddle. Hank put his boots next to them, and placed his hat on top of the pair. He didn’t smile as he looked at them. It was as if the man in the boots and hat had disappeared, and left them behind right where they fell. He felt a shiver up his backbone and realized that it was an omen. Turning to his wife, he straightened his posture as he stood before her. Emma, feeling the same emotions, began to hum a tuneless song. Bending, she scooped up a handful of ashes from the small campfire. Standing again, she held the ashes in her left palm, and spit into them. Grinding her right thumb and fore finger into the mixture, she worked it around, spitting several more times until the consistency was right. With her thumb, she painted lines above Hank’s eyes, and down the side of his face near his ears. With her forefinger, she painted a star on one cheek, and a crescent moon on the other. Finally she rubbed her hands together, and placed both of them on his chest leaving perfect hand marks where they had touched. When she was done, he smiled.

“Reminds me of the old times,” he told her, and then kissed her lips lightly.

“I love you my husband,” she told him.

“I love you too,” he replied. He wanted to say more... needed to say more... but the time was not right. It was life... and not life. The night had taken on a substance of its own and he knew that his wife was aware of this. It was like meeting your death and knowing that it was inevitable. That’s why you sang when the time came... move into what cannot be avoided with every ounce of the spirit you’ve been given to live.

Straightening his posture, he turned and walked off into the night. Though the rocks on the ground hurt his naked feet, he made no noise to indicate that it was so. Runs With Horses had not gone more than a hundred yards in the darkness when he was met by Boss Pony. She snorted, and shook her mane. “My father has sent me to fetch you.”

Though her words were not verbal, the man had no problem understanding them. He in turn replied to her in Shoshone. “It is indeed a strange night when I can understand what you are saying Boss Pony.”

“And it is a strange night indeed when I see you standing naked before me.”

“Does it affect you?” he asked chuckling.

“Horses are ever naked. It would take much more than what you are showing to affect me,” and she too laughed in her own fashion.

Frank mounted her back, man and horse becoming as one creature. Without command, she turned and ran off in the direction of the herd. They rode for what seemed a very long time into the inky blackness that was the land around them. Though there was no moon, the stars were bright enough that seeing was not hard for the horse. Hank simply hung on and trusted that she knew where they were supposed to go. When she slowed, his senses began to kick in as they had for his ancestors before him. He was a hunter... he was a warrior... he was, like his forebears, at one



with the land. He smelled smoke. It was not an Indian's fire, but one belonging to the poachers; started by gasoline, it was far too big, and stunk badly. In the absence of light, he could see its flicker on the rocks that Boss pony was now climbing. His head cleared the summit before hers, and he saw them. It was the same pickup truck he had seen before... the one that had left the bloody tracks leading away from Boss Pony's mother. The men were drunk from the look of how they tottered about the fire. All three were armed with rifles. He could not tell what the rifles were but he was willing to bet they were fully automatic and had very large magazines.

Frank's right hand went back to where his saddle rifle would have been, but it came up against Boss Pony's naked flank.

"My father said you were to watch and not interfere," she whispered to him.

In response, he moved his hand back to her neck, and curled his fingers in her mane, but he said nothing... there was no need.

Motion drew his attention, and he saw Red Eye striding calmly towards the men. Shorty sat on his back, as naked as Hank was himself with the exception of his big cowboy hat. The men didn't even notice him until he was almost right on them. The apparent leader stood shakily, picking up what looked like an AK-47 as he rose. Hank cupped his ear to hear what was said but in the quiet of the night he heard every word without trouble.

"I know you!" exclaimed the man who had stood. He held the rifle across his chest in a ready position. "You're still fucking nuts... what the hell you think you're doing out here riding a horse naked like that?"

Shorty nodded to him, but did not tip his hat. "I know you too," he replied. "You're the fella that was sitting at the end of the bar the other day." He nodded towards the other two men. "And that's the Bar Keep... but I don't recognize the other... don't matter none. I'm not here to chit chat."

The third man raised his hand, and giggled. "I'm Sam. I'm the one what hit you on the head."

"Shut up Sam!" said the first man harshly, giving him a look.

Turning back to Shorty, he regained his composure and laughed harshly to cover the slip.

"Ya ask me, I'd say you was out taking a moon bath." He looked around, his eyes rolling in his head. "Cept there ain't no moon tonight is there boys?"

"I have a message for you from the horses," said Shorty matter of factly.

Red Eye inched closer, skipping his legs in little hops. The man with the rifle didn't seem to notice, but Hank did. The big horse was now well within kicking distance.

"Is that right?" the man asked sarcastically. He staggered just a slight bit but caught himself and stood straighter. Pulling the rifle's bolt back, he let it snap forward with a loud mechanical noise.

By now the other two men had risen and taken up their own weapons as well. They did not seem as drunk as the first man. Hank noticed they were looking around the area as if seeking out whoever might be waiting to bushwhack them. He also knew that having sat there staring at the fire, their eyes would not be able to see much of anything. He was tempted to ride down and join Shorty, but his instructions had been specifically not to move. He was to be the witness, and it was his duty to do just that.

“And what would that message be?” snarled the poacher.

Shorty looked at the man, seemingly fearless. It was a different face the man with the rifle was looking into this night, and yet he did not seem to notice. The whisky and his rifle made him more confident than he should have been; there was no living soul within forty miles of where they were... what was one dead cowboy out on the trail? They wouldn't even have to bury him.

“Leave and don't come back... or die.” Shorty told him flatly.

“Is that a fact?!” said the man with the gun loudly. “Well, ya know what I say?!!”

He began to raise his rifle. Red Eye whirled, his movement almost a blur. His double legged kick caught the man in the chest with a force that seemed impossible. His body was thrown clear back into the other two men who were now struggling to get their own rifles up. The man's body knocked them over as if they were no more than pins in a game and then Red Eye was racing back in the direction from which he had come. It took them a moment, but the two men managed to gain their feet, and both rattled off long bursts of fire into the night. They were both oblivious to the rising noise behind them... but Hank heard it. It began as a low rumble, rolling in on the camp like a wave in a flash flood. It suddenly became loud to the point that the night was filled with nothing but the noise of hooves... and all this in just seconds. The herd did not hesitate to carry out the death sentence on those who had hunted and killed them for the pure pleasure of 'just' killing. They could not have been but just around the bend and out of sight. They had been waiting for this moment, and all of that time had remained totally silent. At the same moment the two men ran out of ammunition they heard and turned; but it was too late. The only thing they were able to do before they were run down and trampled to death was to throw their arms up and scream. From within that scream, Hank saw their souls shoot into the dark night, disappearing into an eternity of darkness from which they would never escape.

Runs With Horses let out a war whoop in the same fashion his ancestors had and then he and Boss Pony were moving down the rocky outcrop at a run in pursuit of the herd which had circled around and was heading back in their direction.

Boss Pony, on her own, ran directly into the mass of oncoming horses. They passed through, and the dust of the herd engulfed them. Hank clung to her back, trusting she would not collide with another horse. Choking, he filled his lungs and let out as loud a whoop as he could. It seemed mindless... this ballet of horses in the night, amidst the darkness and the stars and the dust. Within the shadows of the dance he saw the horses changing in form and shape. No longer were they running on all fours, but now were up on their back legs, running and dancing... matching the war whoop he had sung to the sky with their own.

He saw Shorty, astride of Red Eye's back, waving his hat around his head like a bronco rider. The young cowboy grinned at Hank. Giving a long and drawn out cry of life he threw his hat

away into the night sky. Leaping off of the lead horse's back, his feet hit the dusty earth and his body began to change as had the horses. His hair flowed back, forming into a wind like the mane as he joined his brethren in the dance; disappearing within and among their shadowy ranks.

Runs With Horses felt arms slipping behind and under his buttocks, giving him support as Boss Pony stood on her rear legs. He slid his arms down from holding on to her mane to holding on around her neck. The effect reminded him of the many piggy back rides he had been given by his mother when just a child... and as in those days of his mother's dancing rides, his hands touched upon the flesh of soft breasts. His mind raced, flipping between the forgotten memories of his vision in the desert to this place in the darkness where the horses danced among the dust and the stars. Reality became a non-reality... as tears of joy ran down his face. It was the piece of his life's puzzle that had been missing... and for which he had searched such a long long time.

He heard a shouted command, and all of the horses responded, giving up the dance to run in a direction that was incomprehensible to his senses. There were hills and rocky outcrops... tumble weeds, and the ever present dust brought forth by all of the hooves. Never once did Boss Pony let him slide off of her back, and never once did he question where they were going. One by one... and all during their ride through the night, the horses came up next to him whinnying encouragement as if he were an old friend. Boss Pony was spelled the burden of her rider, and then began the exchanges between the horses as he was passed along like a child. Each in turn would take him onto their backs, and then do a small dance. Each dance was different than the last; unique to that member of the tribe, and he knew that each and every horse carrying him was a warrior.

As the sun crept above the hills exposing their reddish and brown colors, he was transferred one last time. In the growing light he could tell that the horse was brown and had a long flowing mane. As he held on, his hands again found breasts where the others with the exception of Boss Pony had none. His fingers explored the softness and the breasts were yielded up to him in a way that showed favor. He buried his tired face into her mane and her scent made his heart skip... he knew this scent... it called to him from somewhere deep within a forgotten time... and her image... the robe flowing down and around her in the stream... her look of desire.... it hit him like the kick Red Eye had delivered to the poacher.

She was Palomino... his Palomino.

He locked his tired legs around her middle, and even more so than on the other horses who had carried him, he felt his testicles and penis pressing into her back; it too was a feeling he remembered well. He was not embarrassed by this... nor was she.

They ran like this for another hour before the herd slowed. Red Eye came to Hank where he clung to the female. He smiled like a father and held out his arms to him. The man easily swung over to this horse's back, and clung to him... the feeling was so different. Where the female had been soft and yielding, Red Eye was rock hard and his muscles rippled under the rider's embrace.

Once again the horse leader moved to the front of the herd. In the first light of day they began moving down an almost hidden trail between two rocky ridges. Hank vaguely remembered this place, but the memory was different somehow... something... and then he realized it was the view. Where this time he was riding in an upright position, the last time he had been carried in a

litter, staring almost sightless at the sky. This was the reason that in all of the time he had been looking for Red Eye's herd he had never found this place.

Coming out on the other side of the trail, the herd moved into the canyon that unfolded before them. To Hank, it was like coming home. The sun was now fully awake in its morning sky, and its light illuminated a place where there was green and ample grass. In the distance was a village with lodges in the same manner his ancestors would have built. There were more of the horse people there, and he could see that most of these were women, children... and old people. It was the herd's home.

The horses thundered down the valley whinnying in victory, and happiness. In the morning light Hank began to see their individual features... the colors of their coats... their war paint.

The whole village came out and met the warriors in the central place. There they formed a circle. Drums began, and the celebration flowed over into the morning. Runs With Horses was dropped from Red Eye's back, and given a place of honor among the returning warriors who were ducking in and out of the center of the circle as The Great Spirit moved them.

Hank danced too, putting his heart and soul into it. It was a victory... it was coming home... it was... Palomino...

The drums stopped and Hank found himself standing in the middle of the circle all alone. His dance continued for a few beats past where the drums stopped. Sensing that things were now different, he stopped, and stood panting. The dust still rose from where his naked feet had been moving. Standing as straight as he could, he slowly turned, looking at the horse people who were gathered around him in a circle.

A very old horse came forward. He wore the trappings of a Shaman and walked with the assistance of a walking stick. Taking the blanket from his shoulders, he placed it upon Hank's, and then took a step backwards.

"You do not remember me, do you?" he said in clear words.

"No," began the man, but a picture memory flashed across his mind, and he did remember... another horse... another time... "You were much younger."

The horse smiled a genuine smile. "You are not so young as you once were either my friend."

The old horse signaled to another, and a cup of something was brought forward. The Shaman held it up, offering it to the sun, and to the sky, saying a prayer as he did so. Stooping, he took a pinch of the dust they had been dancing in, and added it to the mixture, and then said another prayer to the earth. When he finished, he held it out to Hank.

"The Spirits said they did not want this drink, but told me it was for you."

Runs With Horses took the cup and drank the liquid without hesitation. It had a terrible taste to it. For a moment he was afraid he might dishonor the moment by being sick. Swallowing hard, he kept it down. Within moments the day began to stand out in stark relief and the blanket on his shoulders felt as though it were made from lead.

The Shaman's voice took on a dream like quality. Things became larger than life and it was as if the Sun, itself, was talking to him.

"Many years ago I found you in the desert almost dead from lack of water. You were so very young to be sent forth on a quest like that, even for a human. I cursed the person who might have sent you forth... but I was also grateful to him as he actually did me a service. I had no son of my own, and going against the wishes of the Chief I nursed you back to health."

Hank saw the old horse's face, close to his own; looking into his eyes. He next felt the horse's breath on his cheek as he gently kissed him as a father might kiss the cheek of a long lost child.

"You stayed with us for better than a dozen changes of the seasons. In that time I taught you all I was able. Though I also tried to keep you pure... you fell in love with the Chief's daughter."

"Palomino," whispered Hank.

The colors of the day blended into one large swirl of color, as his mind departed the physical part of him, and stood within the watching ranks of the horses. As he observed himself, he heard the Shaman's voice in his ear, and knew that he was still standing where he had been... but he was watching... and watching... and watching.... Palomino...

"The dispute between myself and the Chief became heated. His was the love of his daughter, and mine was the love for my adopted son. He had seen the attraction between the two of you, and believed it could not possibly be a good thing. You were not a horse, and he believed that man and horse were not meant to have a relationship. I was ordered to send you back to your people. I had no choice my son... he would have had you put to death."

The entire village now watched in silence as the story unfolded for them. They knew the legend; a few had seen it... but most had only grown up with it.

*There was a man... and that man had bridged over into their own... and he was not so different from 'The People'.*

A drum began to beat a slow rhythm. To Hank, it sounded like a heart beat... his own heart beat. He was in the grips of a vision induced by whatever it was the Shaman had given him to drink. He felt/saw the changes taking place in his body. The Shaman began to sing, his voice quavering in its song and yet it kept perfect time with the drum beat. Hank began to shiver and the physical him pulled the blanket he had been given around himself.

As the song continued, the words the Shaman sang echoed in his ears.

"I sent you back into the land from where you came, as naked as I had found you. You were allowed only some of the memories of our people. These were to keep you company; as ghosts of the past always accompany the living. I knew I would never see you again, and this saddened me."

Hank saw himself walking back into the desert and the astonished looks of his people as he returned to his village. He had truly been naked. His feet were bleeding; his body hungry looking,

and dirty. He was taken to the Shaman who had sent him forth upon his journey better than three years before... all except this man had presumed him to be dead.

*"There was a child."*

The words now echoed around his head, their importance almost lost, as Hank watched his past. The Shaman from his village smiled at him from within this dream and tapped his cheek lightly with his right hand. His lips formed the words again, and Hank's thoughts were directed back to the Horse Shaman's words...

"There was a child."

Runs With Horses saw this Shaman stop his song and readjust the blanket that covered the shoulders of the man in front of him. The man's ears had become long and pointed. The old horse continued with the story/song.

"The Chief was very angry and vowed to kill this child, and then to go forth into the land of men, and find you. He would kill you too... you had violated his only daughter... and the war dance was begun... I was able to stop it, but only 'just' able. It cost me the friendship I had cherished my entire life."

The Shaman put his hands on the long ears and felt them. Brushing them back, he bent and examined them closely. Hank saw this from his place in the circle and also from where he was standing in front of the Shaman.

"The Chief's daughter brought the child to me and gave him into my protection. When the time came... I sent him into your world to find you."

The song stopped as a cup of clear water was brought by a younger horse, and offered to him. He took it, drinking it down; trying to rid his mouth of the terrible taste that lingered there... and still he watched himself from the outskirts of the circle.

"In this; *Gusivite Bungu* (Gray Horse) is my grandfather," said the horse who had brought the water. "As was the Chief."

Hank looked at him from both places and then he felt himself being pulled back into his physical body. His mind began to clear, and he felt better... refreshed... his mind sharper than it had been in years.

"You're..."

"Shorty," the horse finished for him as he accepted the cup back. It was the tin cup in which Hank had served Shorty his coffee.

"When the old Chief was dieing," said the Shaman softly, placing a hand on Hank's shoulder. "I was summoned to him, to help him prepare. As I performed the ceremony we talked and I asked that he forgive my son this thing he had done."

Hank turned to look at him, and as he did, he felt a sharp pain in his legs.

“The Chief was my brother,” said the Shaman. “He was a good horse... he was always a good horse... but you had stolen the heart of someone very precious to him; it was this which angered him. He had suffered many encounters with ‘man’, and none of them were good. Because of this, our Chief was always distrustful of you at best.”

The Shaman raised his arms in the air and his crooked body straightened with a crackling pop of his backbone. “Let it be known among us,” he cried out loudly, “That Runs With Horses was forgiven by Chief Red Eye’s father Blue Horse. He is again welcome among us... and is now one with us... horse... not man.”

Hank doubled over as waves of pain racked his body. His vision blurred, and he closed his eyes as hard as he could, fighting the pain as a man will fight a physical enemy. In his mind he saw Emma and he remembered that she was waiting for him in the desert.

“Emma,” he gasped, but his voice was flat sounding, and he sucked the word back into his body with the air he had used to speak it. His legs gave out and he dropped to his knees.

His mind tried to reason out what was happening to him. He must have been shot by the poachers and was dying. His brain was not functioning as it should... that surely must be it. As in all creatures; a person will accept their own fate, but they will fight beyond death to save the life of a loved one. He envisioned the poachers creeping up on his wife in the dark of the night as she sat next to the small campfire, boiling water to make her tea... and his heart reached out to her.

He heard the Shaman’s voice in his ear again, as he felt his left leg growing longer. He sat in the dirt, clutching at it with both hands.

“When I sent your son into the land of men, I told him not to look for you... but that when the time was right, you would find him... and you did.”

He felt strong hands on his shoulders; they massaged him... and yet the pain did not cease.

“EMMAAAAA!!!!” he cried out, as his other leg also changed size and shape.

More hands were placed upon him as all of the villagers came close. Their touch was warm and soothing to his spirit; but they did nothing to stop the pain of the changes. In his mind, he again saw his wife, and there was danger there... he had to do something... anything... as hard as he could, he pushed his spirit towards her image. When he was close enough to touch her cheek, she turned and smiled at him.

“I am here my husband,” her voice said in his ear.

The image held a cup out to him, and he smelled the smell of her special tea. It was then that he knew it would be all right. With the smell of the tea, the pain began to subside

A cup was carefully placed to his lips, and he was allowed to sip the contents. The taste of it was unmistakable. With it, he opened his eyes and looked towards the person holding the cup out for him.

She was everything he remembered her to be. Her hair was brown... and she had the deepest of brown eyes to match the rest of her. Around her was a white flowing robe, yet under it he saw her soft and very feminine bosoms.

“I have always been with you my husband.”

“Emma?” he whispered. He hardly had a voice... the changes in him had been dramatic, and complete.

She nodded. After you were banished, I found I could live no longer without you. After our son was born I was going to kill myself. Gray Horse saw this and prayed to The Great Sprit for guidance. The Spirit answered, and gave Gray Horse the ability so I might change. I was able to follow you, but I was forbidden to speak the truth. Had we not married...” She lowered her eyes. “I don’t know what I would have done. I could not have come back. I was so afraid you would not love me as a human.”

Runs With Horses reached out his hand, and she responded, reaching out her own. As they touched, he noticed that his arm, like hers, was covered in close brown hair.

“Emma...” he told her in a gravelly whisper. “You are my Palomino?”

She nodded.

“I love you,” he told her. “I have always loved you... always...”

There was a shout of joy from all of the villagers at his words. The drums sang out, and this time there were also flutes. The dust rose, as the dancing began again, engulfing all who were there in that mass of moving horses. In the middle of the gyrating bodies, with hands clasped, and arms locked, forming a bridge above the lovers were a very old horse, and a very young horse... grandfather, and grandson... bracing themselves as the inner walls of a room containing the rarest of things in the whole world; a love that, in its depth and truth, reached beyond a world of reality and into a world that could not possibly exist.

*Imagine... falling asleep in one world, and waking to find yourself in another.*

*Where would you be?*

*Where... would...you... be?*

“I’ll tell you where I’d be,” stated the man in the cowboy hat loudly as he slapped a five dollar bill on the counter top. The bartender dutifully refilled his tumbler with three fingers of an amber liquid that looked like it might melt the glass.

The cowboy slugged down the whisky without so much as a gasp, or a facial grimace.

“Tell you where I’d be... cuz I been there. I’d be in the land of horses... yes sir... that’s where I’d be. Yes sirrrrrrrrr..... the guys there all got cocks the size of fire hoses and the gals are just a wonder to behold.”



As the bartender wiped his bar down with a dirty rag, the cowboy picked up his tumbler of water, and turned to look out of the large picture window at the Painted Desert. The sun was just setting, and the colors of the hills were beautiful beyond description.

He smiled to himself, and then said softly, “Yup... I been there... and it weren’t no dream. Noooo sirrrrrr eeee.”

