



Chapter Two

The circle of naked children tightened about the ancient zombie. At the center of the tight circle, a frail old man shook uncontrollably. The zombie rolled his eyes. He waved his walking stick in the air and reached blindly toward the shrieking children as they danced away from him, laughing each time he missed catching a hold.

Eventually one of the children got too close and did not move fast enough. The old zombie grabbed the screaming child and pulled him tight to his chest. Then the old man smiled and kissed the young boy on the cheek.

The game circle loosened and the frail old man at the center, the Okanoan tribe's eldest healer, stood up straight and shook a gnarled finger at the children.

"If you see a sick man, you will have to move much quicker or the zombies will get you."

His name was Piritapuy, the ancient healer of the Okanoan tribe, and though he did not invent the "zombie game", he loved to play it with the local children.

The game was a pale imitation of the suffering and death suffered by so many worldwide from the *Cordyceps unilateralis*

fungus, also known as the zombie ant fungus. In the game, the zombie would pretend to become more and more decrepit the longer the game went on. At first the zombie in the circle would begin to shake, as if catching a flu. Then the infected person would reach for the back of their neck as if they were itching uncontrollably. They would look about wildly and then try to grab for any person within arm's reach.

While the crazed zombie lurched around, the other players would dare each other to get as close as possible to the zombie without being caught. If you were the first one caught, you would become the next zombie.

The ancient healer hugged the children and made them smile with his maniacal, gap-toothed cackle. He taught them. Every game, contest, or quiz that he posed to the naked children was a lesson meant to be learned. Survival was the key.

The Okanoan village was a collection of twenty three-sided huts with their largest opening facing the central clearing and communal firepit. It was nearly midday and the village was alive. Dense smoke curled up from the small firepits in front of the huts.

Women were cleaning and drying fish. Two were hard at the insides, slitting bellies and scooping the innards into a wooden trough. They would toss their cleaned fish into a tightly woven basket sloshing over with fresh water. Two other women would grab the cleaned, wet fish from the basket and set them out on leaves to dry. Bright spices were being ground in wooden bowls and applied liberally to the fish as they were attached to large reed mats and suspended next to the smoky fires to cure.

Once desiccated through the smoking process the fish would last for months, but not nearly as long as the legendary *joti* bird wings that the village was famous for. The bird wings were coated with the hottest spices and left for days in clay ovens to cure. Once thoroughly dried, the *joti* wings would last for up to a year. The bird wings were a staple for hunting groups or war parties on extended patrols.

Several of the Okanoan men were busy painting each other in bright reds and blacks. Most of the tribesmen had a few tattoos, with the higher ranking members of the village receiving more elaborate tattoos and embedded shell or rock accents. Loincloths and sandals were the same for both men and women, with the climate such that women never covered their breasts.

The only additional clothing they wore were ceremonial headdresses during religious holidays or the ubiquitous woven penis sheaths the men wore when swimming or travelling through dense jungle. Until the age of puberty or their tribal initiation rites, most children were naked.

Three hunters were bending over a bloody carcass by the fire. They'd brought home a two-hundred pound *capybara* and were just finishing butchering and dividing the meat. There were twenty large leaves laid out with equal portions of meat. Three of the leaves held delicacies such as the liver, the heart, or the brains along with the meat. These were the special portions for the village's two healers and their popular young chieftain, Seduku. The remaining portions were parsed out equally to go to each hut.

A giant skeleton strode across the central clearing with a jaguar skull on his head. He looked seven feet tall with the mounted skull, and he was armed with a ceremonial spear in one hand and a loud and deadly medicine rattle in the other.

He was Warakeena, a charismatic warrior, *bon vivant*, and the Okanoan village's other healer. Their village had once been two different sites. In the nineties they had joined together for defense from gold miners and the slash and burn farmers. When the two villages joined, they kept both their healers, the wise and venerated Piratapuy, and the hot-headed giant, Warakeena.

Most of the Okanoan men were less than five-foot tall. If a man was five-foot-six, he was a feared warrior. Warakeena stood at least six-feet-three inches, and with the imposing jaguar skull on his head and his body painted with white clay to represent bones then covered with a jumble of brightly colored feathers and totems, he looked like a demon from the mouth of hell.

The villagers around the central clearing watched Warakeena carefully. He was known to be excitable and had convinced twenty members of the tribe to swear a fealty oath to him. Warakeena used the twenty warriors as his personal militia, enforcing his own brand of justice and raiding rival villages. Normally, with his men, he was in complete control of every situation. Today, even though a dozen of his personal guard were with him, he was sweating.

Warakeena was also shaking. His wicked medicine rattle was vibrating at a low percussion while the feathered headdress atop the jaguar skull was quivering like his lower lip. As he moved across the clearing he slammed the base of his ceremonial spear against the ground with every long stride.

Piritapuy watched his rival lead the procession of warriors across the village and he shook his ancient head. He motioned for the children around him to go away.

“Ok little zombies. Run home or go catch me a monkey. I need a pet.”

The children were terrified of Warakeena and his spooky brand of medicine. The white clay he used to paint his face as a skull and his body as a skeleton was the stuff of nightmares.

Piritapuy smiled his gap-toothed smile and bowed low before Warakeena. Several of the tribal elders walked over in front of the ancient healer’s hut and stood behind him in support with their firstborn sons shoulder to shoulder between them. The old healer was much more popular than his terrifying colleague, and the Okanoan villagers weren’t going to allow anything to happen to their beloved doctor.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, healer?”

Piritapuy beamed a wide smile at his colleague, which infuriated Warakeena all the more.

“Old man! Why do you insist on playing children’s games when so much is at stake?” Warakeena shook his medicine rattle at the sky three times for dramatic effect. His warriors stood behind him and shook their heads in assent.

Piritapuy merely shrugged his shoulders and began tracing patterns in the dirt with his walking stick. Warakeena had to lean in close to hear what the old man was saying.

“Children’s games lead to adult games. They are all part of the great cycle.”

Warakeena looked down on the old man with contempt.

“We’ve heard more rumors from Belem. It’s time to get your head out of the dust and be the leader these villagers need you to be.”

“Oh?” Piritapuy opened his eyes wide in mock astonishment. “Would that leader take his village to war on rumors?”

Warakeena shook his rattle and raised his voice.

“There are too many stories of this new city in the middle of Marajo Island. People say it was built by outsiders and that they’ve been raiding Carib and Arawak villages, burning them to the ground, and taking their women. We’ve heard there are no more villages within miles of their city. Our people need you to rise up, old man, and show some backbone.”

“My backbone is just fine,” chuckled the old healer. “But I never make important decisions on secondhand news. When I have a clearer picture of what is really happening, I’ll make my decision.”

“How many reports do you need, old man? If you just stay here in the village playing with the children you’ll never find out what is happening. At least approve a small hunting party to travel to Marajo Island and see if this is true.”

The warriors behind Warakeena puffed their chests out and nodded at one another. They were ready for a journey and any violence that it may entail. The old healer smiled and bowed his head.

“No need to worry so many on hearsay. Seduku and I have already dispatched Kakwa and a few of the boys on a reconnaissance mission. Until he returns with firsthand information, or until these outsiders raid a village closer to us, we will wait.”

Warakeena was stunned.

“You sent men from the village without consulting me? My men would have been the best for such a task.”

The old healer shook his bald head and drew another design in the dust with his walking stick.

“That is why Seduku and I decided not to tell you. This is a mission to gather information, not kill outsiders. It may well come to war if what I fear is really happening. When that happens, we will have need of you and all your men more than ever before.”

Warakeena turned to his men, encouraged, and shook the rattle fiercely.

“There you have it. There will be war, and we will lead the people against the outsiders.”

His sycophants jumped and howled. They shook their spears at the sky and beat their chests, all the while crowing about how many outsiders each would kill.