

The chamber had emptied but for the four of them. Nishkamich made his way to the door, shooing Kes and Abe out ahead of him. Jessie fumed for a minute, then, seeing no benefit of staying behind alone, followed.

Nishkamich was waiting on the other side of the door. Without asking, he took her arm as they walked. She welcomed the breeze on her face after the suffocating heat of the council chamber, and lifted her head to meet the cool air. Above, the heavens stretched unbroken, an uninterrupted vast expanse of black purple above them. Countless millions of stars turned a flat canvas into an immense picture, which had no frame, no beginning, no end. Jessie stopped and turned where she stood, in awe at the size of the sky, until, halfway through, she caught her breath. A fabulous brushstroke, full of subtle pinks and oranges, greens and purples, brilliant white light and dark sepia clouds, the Milky Way was a beautiful, brooding, magnificent flaw in the masterpiece.

“Such wonder,” Nishkamich broke the spell.

Her anger returned.

“Who were those people? And where have they taken Tip?” Her voice was sharp.

The old man looked to where Abe and Kes were now out of earshot in the shadows of a nearby longhouse.

“Those are the false faces. Were you impressed?”

Jessie grunted. “What’s this ceremony?”

With a squeeze of her arm, he directed her off towards some logs arranged around an empty fire pit, eased himself on to one, and invited her to join him.

“Tiponi has been disturbed since she arrived here, you know this. The village believe she is battling a spirit...”

“Not that rubbish again!” Jessie retorted. “I’ve explained...”

The hard stare and narrowed eyes held her tongue.

“You are a guest in this village Jessie, and you must respect the traditions and beliefs of my people.” He softened his voice. “I think you appreciate how that worked to our advantage tonight,” he smiled with satisfaction. “We see things differently from you. Our traditions, our stories, explain life and death and the world we live in. My people do not have the advantage, or the curse, of the knowledge available in your world.”

She felt sufficiently chastened to keep quiet for a few seconds.

“Hold on...,” Jessie frowned. She had missed something. “Wait a minute...” She held up a hand as she cast her mind back.

Nishkamich remained silent as she collected her thoughts.

“You were quite sure on our first morning that I would find nothing of my world here. And you talk of how knowledge has changed the world. How could you know? How could you possibly know what I expected to see, unless you had seen it yourself? You’ve been there.” Her statement sounded like a challenge. Instead of answering, Nishkamich scanned the stars, while Jessie waited impatiently. Then, having given his answer sufficient consideration, he turned to Jessie.

“You may find it hard to imagine me an impetuous young man, but I assure you I was once.” He smiled at his own light heartedness.

Jessie kept her features blank, wanting him to get to the point.

“Many summers gone, when the stone first came into my possession, I took it upon myself to explore and learn. I told myself I was curious, but I was arrogant; reckless and dazzled with the power I had been given.”

“White people were already changing our world, so I decided to go and see who they were. A different world, just beyond the forest, was mine to explore. I visited New York when it was a small town on a large island. I went further, to Boston and Charleston. The whites were hard and cruel. More than once I had to flee from beatings and capture. So, I started travelling further. Not just to other

places but, as I soon discovered, other times. The further I went the more I wanted to see. I got myself into some situations...”

Nishkamich chuckled quietly, then the smile slipped from his face.

“But luck runs out, Jessie. Never forget that. When you surrender your fate to luck, when you stop considering the consequences of your actions, that is when luck fails. I arrived, by accident, in a time for which I was unprepared; where I had less understanding of my surroundings than a young child. So many people, and so much noise. I recognized nothing but the cruelty of people. The air smelled burned, the rivers were poisoned and sick. I longed for the forests, but they had vanished.”

“I was lost and alone and the Haudenosaunee gone. That world was truly frightening, Jessie. I am sure you think the same way about this village.” He smiled again, and this time Jessie returned his grin.

“I returned here like a frightened dog and never dared explore again.”

An avalanche of questions battled to be first out of Jessie’s mouth, but she was too slow. Nishkamich slapped both thighs loudly to lighten his mood.

“You impressed the council. You spoke bravely, with heart and feeling, and they believed, in their best interests.”

Again, his attention drifted. Jessie could see an agile mind working behind his bright eyes.

“It would not surprise you that I could not find my people? What you said to the council, of the white people and their hunger for land, it will overwhelm us. You know this for certain...because for you it has already happened?”

Jessie could think of nothing to ease the pain. What could she say? Yes, he could find the Haudenosaunee if he knew where to look: stripped of their lands; their culture and customs repressed by centuries of white rule; limited to a few, inadequate reservations, where opportunity was scarce. Yes, they were still to be found. But he wouldn’t recognize what he saw. She fixed on a point above his

head, so she didn't have to see the anguish in his eyes and nodded her affirmation.

They sat together for what felt like an age. But eventually, having digested the news, Nishkamich reached out and patted her arm briskly.

“We have things to discuss and plans to make. The Haudenosaunee still have a part to play in this world; a large part I believe. Help me up please.”

Jessie frowned, not at all sure what that meant, but he gave her an encouraging smile as she pulled him to his feet.

“I have spent time thinking about you,” he opened, as they stepped away from the fire pit.

There seemed no expectation for her to reply, and once again, she could think of none to give. So, she waited for Nishkamich to continue.

“Abe pointed out at our first meeting that your stone is different from the others.”

“Yes,” she replied quickly. A neutral subject on which she could speak without caution. “I wondered that as well. Mine is smaller than the others...and it has lots of different colours. I thought perhaps it was...inferior in some way, not as strong as the others...or...” she shrugged.

The Shaman stopped and scrutinized her, then carried on his shuffle.

“Quality determines greatness Jessie, not size.”

“Quality?” she frowned.

“Your first response was to compare the sizes; finding your own to be lacking. I, however, think the many colours within your stone is a most important quality.”

He stopped again to watch her. Jessie knotted her forehead, assuming his silence meant she was expected to continue with the explanation. But she had nothing.

“Imagine each stone displays the essence of itself,” he continued patiently,

“a...presence, a power, by the colour.”

Jessie frowned and shook her head.

“Abe’s stone is green, but only green. Tiponi’s is clear, like water. Yours is both green and clear, but as well purple, like the stone Kesejowaase has. What does that tell you?”

“That my stone contains something of each of theirs?” she asked cautiously.

“Yes. Yes,” he smiled. “It is connected to theirs and in a way each of theirs is not to the others. What else do you think we know from this?”

Jessie had used up her only guess.

“The presence of so many colours within your stone...?” he helped.

“There must be other stones!” she exclaimed, and then paused. “Where do they come from? What are they?”

“That I cannot answer you,” he shrugged. “I do not know where they come from, but what they are...” Nishkamich paused as Kes emerged from the darkness.

“I thought you were behind us.” His tone was polite, but Jessie could see he was annoyed.