

It was almost over. From nothing, from empty, unknown, un-lived time, Jessie's consciousness returned; a torrent of memories, thoughts and pain. The cave, Grandfather, the stones and Tip. She knew the end was approaching, it had been the same last time, the other time, she had travelled with the stone. The reawakening of awareness before the blackness tore apart, and they would be tossed out into the world.

"Hold them together," Jessie thought, "for a few seconds more."

Kes was there. She could sense him, his still, determined face was fixed clearly in her mind. He couldn't see her, she couldn't see him, but he was there. Tip was there. But her image blurred. It flickered and shifted, as Tip struggled to be free of Jessie's mind. Her fierce, resolute face, blinked back clearly once more, faltered and then it was gone, the connection broken. Tip had freed herself, and their journey came to an abrupt end. Jessie felt again the weight of legs and arms, the heat outside and the cold within. Sight returned. The surrounding void filled with dimmed light from the tear before her, and she was thrust out. With a lurch in her stomach, she briefly wondered how far they would fall, and belatedly thought, "Where the hell is Abe?"

"Ummpff!"

She landed on her side with a force to made her bounce. An explosion of tiny lights flashed before her eyes as her head thudded dully on the hard ground for a second time, and the stale air of the cave left her lungs with a grunted exhalation. Another body hit the ground beside her with a crackling, snapping crunch, and something rough slapped Jessie across her face. Instinctively she raised her arms.

"Get off!" she snapped, pawing to clear her face.

"Jessie?" Kes' whisper came from the direction of her feet.

"Yes," she replied brusquely. "What's this on me?"

There was a rustle beside her. She heard Kes tentatively pat the ground until his hand found her stomach. He withdrew it quickly, and a moment later her face was free again. There was more scraping, then a hand grabbed her arm and lifted Jessie to her feet.

"Why is it so dark?" Jessie said, and then, quietly, "Oh," feeling foolish.

She looked up at Kes, his broad chest, shoulders and head outlined against a bright, full moon in a navy blue, starry sky. Behind him, tall rows of corn nodded gracefully in the gentle breeze. Jessie had landed neatly on the hard earth between two rows. Kes had managed to flatten a whole section of plants.

He tossed away the broken stem and stiff leaves which had fallen across Jessie's face, looked over her head, then turned slowly around in a circle.

"Where are Tip and Abe?"

"I felt you with me," Jessie murmured, ignoring Kes' question. "Were you thinking about me the whole time?"

"Yes," he paused. "I...imagined your face...remembered your voice," he answered haltingly. "Back in the cave, as we circled in the air, I ignored everything else, and just watched you. Then, when everything went...strange, like the walls were turning in on themselves, and we were all stretched out, I closed my eyes, but I kept you in my mind."

"And then? Did you...wake up...in blackness, with no body?"

Kes nodded. "You were the first thing, the only thing, which came to my mind."

That admission seemed to make him squirm, and he breathed deeply, twice and rubbed his chest. "I feel sick."

"Me too," Jessie assured him, "but it soon passes." She felt the same queasiness as well, and had done after her first journey.

A brief, spirited wind passed through the corn, stirring the leaves to a whisper as it passed, and raising a chill on Jessie's arms.

"What about Tip and Abe?" Kes asked once more.

"Perhaps they're close-by?" She replied without conviction. "Abe!" Jessie called out to the surrounding field.

She was about to call Tip, but a large, dusty hand clamped over her mouth, and Kes glowered at her. She tugged the hand from her mouth and scowled back.

"Keep quiet!" he hissed urgently. "We have no idea where we are or who may be nearby. Have you learned nothing yet?"

"Alright, alright," she hissed back, then testily mouthed "Sorry!"

But her annoyance was with herself as much as Kes. He, ever the warrior, the hunter, knew to keep quiet, to remain hidden; she shouldn't need reminding to do the same. They stood listening for some minutes, but there was no response, no movement. Neither friend nor anyone else appeared to have heard Jessie's call.

"Perhaps they got hurt in the fall...or are just keeping quiet," he said pointedly. "We can make a silent search if we travel along these rows between the corn..."

"No...stop...please."

Jessie looked at the floor and tried to swallow. The inside of her mouth was dry, filmed in the grainy dust from the cave, and tasted oily.

"I...I couldn't keep hold of Tip. She was with us, with me, I sensed her...just like I knew you were with me. But she fought it, she fought me, and broke away just before the darkness opened up."

"Why? Do you think she was frightened?"

That made some sense, Jessie thought. It would work for now. She opened her mouth to agree, but stopped. It would be a lie.

"What?" he asked, staring at Jessie's open mouth.

A tight lump in her chest suddenly erupted and in one breath it all came tumbling out.

"I don't know what happened. It wasn't me. Not really. She was crying, you know, because Grandfather was dead, and because we were trapped, and you and Abe were fighting," tears pricked her dry eyes, as the words flowed and she remembered Nishkamich's broken body slumped against the wall, "and it made me angry, and..." What had happened exactly? "And...it felt like I flung all my anger at her. But it was real, something...solid, something physical. Like my thoughts were a weapon, and...and...somehow, she felt it. Tip flinched, as if she had been struck." Jessie brushed the tears away with the back of her hand. "I saw her thoughts...no, I saw her memories, her village being attacked...and she did too. We were seeing the same things; like I was forcing her to see them with me..."

"How?" Kes looked disbelievingly at her.

"I didn't...it wasn't me!" she pleaded with him for understanding.

Jessie raised a closed palm and opened it between them. Even in the darkness of night, the little gem in her hand twinkled.

"It was this..." They both stared, without speaking, at the stone. Jessie felt the despair of failure. "And now we've lost Tip. She will hate me, for sure, and she won't understand what happened, or why...and neither do I..."

Jessie sobbed quietly now. Tears for Tip, for herself, for failure, and, belatedly, for the old shaman they had left behind. He had told her to lead the group, but not where to or what for. He had said her stone commanded the other three, but not how or why. It had not made sense, she had been confused, which made her angry. But now he was dead, his friendship gone, and she finally felt the pain. Kes stepped forward and wrapped her in his arms.

This was what she wanted, needed, to be close, to be intimate. She had been alone for so long. Since Auntie had disappeared no one had held her, and she was so tired. Jessie made to wrap her arms around Kes' waist, but stopped

herself. He had consoled Tip in the cave; it had been the trigger for her stupidity, her selfish jealous anger. Jessie had desired this consolation for herself.

She stepped back, sniffed her running nose, and wiped away the tears. Her jealousy had placed all of them in danger. There was no way of knowing where, or when, Tip would reappear, but Jessie now promised herself they would find each other again. Nishkamich had told her to lead, and that was what she intended to do. Starting now.

“What?” Kes asked at the sudden change in her features.

“We need to rest, at least until sunrise. Then we need to decide where we are, and go about trying to find Tip...”

“And Abe?”

Yes, what about Abe? Jessie thought back, trying to remember what she had felt when she awoke on their journey.

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly. “He wasn’t there.” She saw the question form on Kes’ face. “I mean,” she clarified, “I didn’t sense he was there, not like you, not like Tip. But maybe it doesn’t mean he didn’t come with us.”

“So where is he then?”

“Kes!” she held her frustration and lowered her voice. “You know as much about this as I do. We all heard what little Grandfather taught us. I’ve made one more trip with these stones than you, and I had no control, no idea that first time either. I can only tell you what I know, what I felt, and Abe wasn’t there...at least, I couldn’t feel him,” she added, because the thought of losing Abe was almost as bad as separation from Tip. Annoying, yes, selfish, perhaps, lazy, at times, but Abe’s heart was good and he had dragged them out of some dire situations. She remembered him smiling at them, with the keys to the Fort Niagara gaol dangling from his finger.

Nishkamich had told her something, in the cave. Her forehead creased as she recalled his words. Something like, don’t trust him until you see who he really is. Jessie shook her head. She was sure Abe was a true friend.

“Jessie?”

She looked up. Kes was waiting for an answer.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, we should get out of this field and find somewhere less open to sleep.”

“Yes. But first,” she thrust her hand deep inside her winter boot, “hide your stone. I hid it inside my shoe last time. Put it below your ankle...no, your inside ankle.”

Kes straightened up, lifted his leg and revolved his foot. Satisfied it was comfortable, he put his foot down.

“Ready? Stay behind me and listen out...and be quiet.”

He set off along the space between the corn, gently turning the limp leaves aside, to make as little noise as possible, with Jessie following behind. It wasn't far to the edge of the field, and, after deliberating for some seconds, Kes turned right and continued along the border, peering to his left into the darkness, looking for a place he considered safe.

“Jessie, get down in there, under those branches. Wait here while I see if there is anywhere better.”

Jessie considered arguing, but her leaden legs trembled after just that short distance. She was exhausted. The panic and fears and efforts of the last days, tramping through snow, the fight in the forest, re-capture by the French and the explosion in the cave, had finally caught up with her. Now all she wanted was to close her sore, heavy eyes. Without a word she slid into the depression which Kes had found, crouched down and ducked under the wide, leafy branches of a tree which hid her from above.

“I will go once around the field and then find you again.”

Jessie grunted an acknowledgement and lay back against the bank. She sat up again quickly when it crossed her mind that something might live down here. She listened, made a timid sweep of her arms around the bank beside her, and when nothing squawked, grunted or hissed, she lay back down and let sleep take her.