

Jessica Sweetshop and the Land Before Time!

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The girl is scared. Very scared. She is also very tired, her energy fading fast. She has been running for a long time now, but she is beginning to slow, she can't keep up the pace. The tangled roots and bushes of the forest make it even harder to keep moving. If she trips and falls, she knows she will die. She must keep going, don't look back. Ignore the sounds of the crashing branches, trees being forced aside, the heavy pounding of muscle and sinew closing in behind. Don't look back, don't fall, don't slow down, just run.

Through the darkness of the forest, a distant flickering light appears; the camp fire! Safety! Summoning up the last of her strength, she begins to run faster and faster, ducking under low hanging branches, nimbly leaping over thicket and root, her bare feet thrusting her forward, tousled hair flying wildly, eyes focused now on the firelight, blinking in and out of view as she weaves her way through the ever darkening, ever tangled foliage.

Her foot twists as she vaults a fallen tree trunk, her momentum carrying her, spiralling, arms flailing to maintain balance. She bounces off the side of an old gnarled tree, its old dry bark as sharp as daggers. She lets out a grunt as the air is knocked from her lungs but she does not stop, she feels the warm blood running down her left arm, she knows the sweet scent of it will be on the air. The ear-splitting roar behind her tells her that the beast has smelt it, can taste it and wants more!

She screams.

'Jessica'

'Jessica, wake up'

I opened my eyes, I was sweating, I looked at my dad who was leaning over me and pulling the damp matted hair from my face.

‘You were having a nightmare, Jessica, you screamed in your sleep’

‘Oh dad, it was so real! I dreamt about the girl in the cave picture!’

I lay back down in my bed, relieved it was just a dream.

‘I’ll be ok now, dad.’

‘Are you sure, poppet?’

He bent down and kissed my forehead and ruffled my matted hair with his hand. ‘Ok, sweetheart, see you in the morning.’

I knew I would not sleep, I kept thinking of the girl. Who was she? What was chasing her? I turned on my side and winced at a sharp pain in my arm, I sat up and turned on my lamp and stared at a large bruise which was forming on my left arm...

The caves were closed most of the time to protect them from the outside world, but dad had special permission to make sketches of the paintings for research. I had gone with him to learn how, long ago, in the time before history, before the invention of the written word, ancient people used to draw, paint and carve pictures onto stone walls. They would make paint usually by mixing water with clay pigments and draw using charcoal made from burnt wood. They would draw the animals they hunted, deer or bison, leaping across the cave walls, great bears, claws raised in attack, heavy and powerful animals that no longer existed, like the woolly rhinoceros, the woolly mammoth and the sabre toothed tiger.

‘Those images were very powerful to the people of ancient times,’ dad explained ‘they were used to educate, to encourage and inspire the

imagination of early man. Of the entire cave paintings found, there are very few that show images of humans, most are of the natural world.'

He raised his arm and I followed the direction of his finger 'This cave is very important, because it contains one such special image, can you see it, Jessica?'

I looked at the cave painting, horses were galloping amongst tall trees; bison were ahead of the horses all running in the same direction, behind them was a shape I couldn't make out, a faded part of the picture, the texture of the rock was rougher, darker in colour.

I looked in the direction where the animals were running and there she was. A girl. Like the rest of the picture, she was very simply drawn, no more than a few brush strokes, placed expertly by ancient hands. She was facing the running animals, her hands were raised.

I suddenly felt scared, the cave began to shrink around me, the painting becoming larger, I could hear the sound of hooves thundering across the ground, the loud snorts of panic, the image shimmered and I could see the wild wide eyes of hundreds of animals in full stampede, the noise had become deafening, my eyes were stinging with all the dust, and the girl – she was in full path of the rampage! She was standing there, arms raised towards the animals, no, at something behind the animals, something big, something dark, something...

'Jessica!'

The girl turned her head towards me...

'Jessica, come back, that's it, dad's here, easy now.'

Dad had me in his arms

'What happened?' I said, dazed and confused

‘It was your gift, the Entring! You had a connection with that cave painting!’

I was even more confused ‘I thought I could only feel pictures drawn by those with the gift, like your paintings?’

He looked at me, and back at the cave painting ‘That cave painting must have been painted by one who had the gift - incredible! After thousands of years the power within that picture can still be felt!’

The morning light felt good and safe as I went downstairs. Mom and dad were in the kitchen making breakfast.

‘Morning dear, have you brushed your teeth? With a name like *sweetshop* –’ she was hugging me and I finished her sentence, ‘– My teeth must gleam!’

I sat down at the table and dad was looking at me intensely.

‘We’ve been discussing your experience in the cave and your subsequent dream, Jessica. We’ve been trying to figure out what made the Entring work so strongly without the ring.’

Mom also spoke; ‘Your dad’s family has always had the gift of the Entring, but it has always been limited to the artistic ones. They had the gift to bring emotion to their work; the energy of the Entring creates a very personal, almost spiritual experience for those who look upon art created by them. All the great painters throughout history have had the gift, to varying degrees. Your dad has the gift, but you, Jessica, you are the first born girl of one who has the Entring, and that is very rare and special, for the power of the Entring is renewed within you and will be strong in your children and in generations to come.’

Dad also spoke; 'We know the Entring is an ancient gift, it is the inspiration behind all art, it was strong within that cave painting and it connected with you when you looked upon it'

I thought about the *Dragon*, the evil man who had trapped mom, dad and me in the *Trolls* house when I was thirteen, the year when my power showed itself. He had tried to take my gift, absorbing our life force into an ancient ring. We had nearly died but I connected with the ring and it defeated him. The ring was now in my possession.

'The Dragon had talked about the *Order of the Entring* which tried to rule in ancient times?'

Dad nodded. 'There was a dark time when the Entring was used for evil purposes, bringing misery and destruction upon the people of the old world. Thirteen first born females were forced to fashion a single diamond with thirteen sides. A thing of such reflective beauty was created; it glowed with the creative spirit of each first born. The diamond was set into an ivory ring. When worn, the wearer can become a powerful user of the Entring.'

Since the Entring had awakened in me, dad had been teaching me how to use it. This was mostly trying to teach me to draw and paint, allowing the Entring to guide my hand upon the canvas. I had been finding it frustrating as I simply was not a good artist! I wondered how I could have the gift and not be able to draw! Dad said it was because I was trying too hard and I should allow the creativity of the Entring to flow – easier said than done. What I did enjoy though, was when dad allowed me to wear the ring. This was a totally different experience! We would hold hands and I would stare into one of dad's paintings and the ring would glow, with the light surrounding us. The paint would swirl in a rainbow of colours and we would become part of the

image, running and laughing through fields of painted sunflowers or climbing the brushstrokes within mountains and looking out across skies of cobalt blue.

‘Can I wear the ring today, dad?’ I asked.

He thought for a moment, and then narrowed his eyes at me. ‘You can, but I think this time *you* must produce a painting worthy of its use!’

In his studio, I stared intensely at the blank canvas. ‘I don’t know what to draw! I said frustratingly.

‘Close your eyes, Jessica, and tell me what you see.’

Dad was sitting next to me, as patient as ever! I closed my eyes. Blackness. I let out a big sigh.

‘Concentrate, Jessica, what can you see?’

A grey shape was forming, becoming clearer; I could see colour, greens and yellows... ‘I see trees!’

Dad whispered ‘Good, let the image grow and then open your eyes and begin painting.’

I picked up the brush and began to apply the paint to the canvas, big bold strokes, thick with colour, I was working fast, I felt exhilarated! Finally I stopped and stood back, dad let out a long whistle.

‘Amazing, absolutely amazing!’

I looked at what I had created.

Before me was a landscape, the sky deep blue, cloudless, a range of mountains in the distance, hazed in pale blue and snow capped. A lush green land lay below them; a twisting river sparkled its way through a valley, dense tall trees covered either side, a forest! In the foreground the forest gave way to a clearing where a small fire set within a small circle crackled, its smoke

gently swirling as if played with by a light breeze. I let out a gasp. Dad broke the spell.

‘I knew you could do it!’ he said excitedly, ‘It’s beautiful!’

I looked at him in amazement ‘It was as though I was watching someone else paint, I couldn’t help myself!’

Dad gave me a big hug ‘That’s the Entring, my dear! Now, shall we use the ring and enter your picture?’

I nodded with glee; I finally painted a picture that the Entring would surely work with. Dad unlocked the safe on the wall behind a portrait of my mom and opened the door, the ring was already glowing, as if eager to be put to use.

‘That’s unusual,’ said dad as he picked it up. ‘It’s as if it knows you’ve painted a special picture!’

I grinned and placed the ring on my finger, almost immediately the room filled with the bright light and I watched as a rainbow of colour swirled around and I tingled as my painting formed about me.

I looked up and blinked in the strong sunlight of the clearing. The smell of pine was in the air, tall trees rose up around, thick and wild, the forest seemed to go on forever.

‘It’s all so real, dad, it doesn’t look like paint at all!’ I spun around ‘Dad?’ I was alone! ‘Dad!’ I shouted loudly and jumped in fright as a startled flock of large black birds suddenly flapped out of the forest, squawking wildly as they flew.

I was alone. That had never happened before. Then I realised that the ring had shone brightly as soon as it went on my finger, I wasn’t holding dad’s hand and I was the only one who had entered the picture!

‘Ok, Jessica, don’t panic.’ I said to myself. ‘Just do what you normally do when you want to return.’ I took the ring off my finger to break the link with the painting and waited for the Enting to return me to the real world.

Nothing happened. I put the ring back on, and then took it off again, still nothing happened. The diamond, which usually sparkled, was strangely dull. I was scared. I looked about me, I suddenly felt very small and the forest, which swept its way around the clearing where I stood, looked very tall, thick and dark. I walked over to the fire; it sat burning away within a small ring of stones. Why did I paint a fire? I wondered. Why was everything so real? And why wasn’t the ring working?

I could feel tears welling up inside as I gazed anxiously about for a clue as to what to do. I looked directly into the eyes of a girl! The girl in my dream, and in the cave painting! She was standing at the edge of the forest, she looked about my age and was dressed in animal skin, tied around her waste was a plain rope belt, her feet were bare and through matted black hair she was staring at me, a puzzled expression played upon her face. She took a step forward, staring at me intensely, and then she started to slowly circle around me, studying me.

‘Hello.’ I said nervously. How could she be in my painting? ‘My name is Jessica, Jessica Sweetshop, what’s your name?’ The girl stopped and took one step backwards, her head tilting to one side.

‘You, girl in my head when I sleep.’ She said.

She spoke strangely!

‘My name is Jessica’ I repeated, I patted my hand on my chest to make the point.

‘You, girl in my head – I see you in sleep-time!’

She's seen me in her dreams! 'I've seen you as well!' I exclaimed. 'In my dreams! You know, at *sleep-time!*'

This was getting stranger by the second. 'Who are you?' I asked, I stepped towards her, she stepped back, keeping the same distance. 'It's ok' I said, 'Friend, me Jessica.' I patted my chest again and smiled a nervous smile. She paused, looking at me intently.

'Me Lula, girl in my head is here?'

She was obviously as puzzled as I was. How could I be in her dreams and she in mine and yet here we were, wherever 'here' is, looking and talking to each other!

Again, I took a step closer to her, this time she did not move. I held out my hand.

'Hello Lula, I'm Jessica.'

She looked at my outstretched hand and then back to me, uncertain of what I was doing. Obviously she has never shaken hands before!

'Jess-i-ca?' She said, forming the words carefully in her mouth.

I lowered my hand 'Yes!' I said 'Jessica.'

Encouraged by this, I reached out again and took her hand and shook it. 'Jessica Sweetshop, hello Lula!' I said.

Suddenly, as our hands touched, the ring on my finger flashed brightly and then faded, the sound of thunder crackled around us! Lula held my hand tightly, staring at the ring.

'Entring! Entring!' She was shouting excitedly

'You know about the Entring?!' I asked.

She was holding my hand, studying the now dull ring on my finger.

'Entring! You jess-i-ca!'

She stopped suddenly and placed her hands firmly on my shoulders, fixing me with a hard stare.

‘Jess-i-ca, you come to help, Entring send for you, bring light back to world’

Her eyes were large and pleading and full of moisture. She looked up at the sky which had suddenly turned from deep blue to crimson; the shadows of the forest were stretching across the clearing, clawing at our feet. A chill wind suddenly pushed past us and I shivered in its cold.

‘Dark soon’ said Lula ‘We stay by fire now.’

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Darkness came quickly in the clearing of that dense forest. In the glow of the small fire, Lula and I sat in silence. She was staring intensely at the flames, gently rocking backwards and forwards. Every now and then, a creaking sound would echo through the trees, as if they were moving slowly closer, shuffling root by root, branch by branch towards us. ‘Stop it!’ I told myself, ‘It’s just the wind blowing through the trees!’ I looked up into the night sky, there was no moon, but the stars shone in their millions, I had never seen so many, so clearly before. Lula was humming very gently, and was swaying more quickly now. She was still staring intently at the fire; I followed her gaze into the dancing flames which suddenly flared brightly, leaping, flickering, jumping, swirling, swirling, swirling...

‘Lula’

A woman's voice called out from within a large wooden framed tent covered in animal skins, 'Lula!' The voice repeated more loudly.

'Coming muma' called back Lula as she skipped her way through the small settlement of about twenty similar sized tents, all neatly laid out next to a clear running river.

All around, people were busying themselves, some were working on their tents, others hammering and fashioning tools or tending to small children and babies. Lula pulled back the entrance to the tent and popped her grinning head inside.

'Yes muma?'

'Lula, you know what day after night?'

Lula grinned even more and said 'Lula thirteen sun seasons old!' And she skipped a full circle before bouncing fully inside the tent. 'After night dadu will take Lula, go to deep stone hole and see Entring!' She was so excited! 'Yes Lula' said her mother 'and Entring see you!' She gave Lula a big hug and they laughed with happiness.

Swirling, dancing flames...

Lula was standing at the entrance to a cave, set at the base of a sheer cliff of red stone. Next to her stood a tall man, his smile beamed wide through his long dark beard as he looked down at Lula. His hair was long too, and tied back with a single leather cord. Through this cord stood a single tall white feather and around his animal skin clothing was draped a cloak of green ferns. Around Lula also hung a cloak of ferns, into which was sewn brightly coloured feathers; she was looking up at the man and smiling broadly.

'Come, Lula' said the man

'Yes dadu' Lula replied and took her fathers hand.

They stepped into the cave.

Inside the air was cool. They stood for a moment to let their eyes adjust to the low light. A faint glow emanated from somewhere further into the cave and they moved towards it. A single drum began to beat and they walked to its rhythm. Soon, they entered a huge cavernous space lit by flaming torches and were greeted by a great cheer. It seemed the whole settlement had gathered inside the cave and everyone was smiling and clapping and cheering as Lula and her father took their positions in front of a large stone wall. In front of them flickered a fire that danced within a circle of small stones. Lulas mother joined them and handed Lula a single white flower and kissed her cheek. Lula was grinning and jumping up and down with excitement! A large woman with bright red cheeks and hair to match stood in front of them and raised her hands to calm the cheering crowd. When she decided that order had returned she began to speak.

'This day is very happy time, this day Lula is thirteen sun seasons old!'

A great cheer went up from the crowd, the large lady was laughing and waving her hands to bring back calm.

'This day,' she continued 'Lula will meet the Entring and make colour dance on wall!'

The crowd was ecstatic, even the large lady was hopping up and down one leg at a time! When she finally composed herself, she turned to Lula

'Little Lula, you first born with Entring, now is time to make colour dance, let Entring into you, let Entring out of you!'

She led Lula over to the wall where stood various wooden containers filled with red, yellow and brown mixtures. The lady, with great ceremony, handed Lula a long stick, at the end of which was tied a tight group of animal hairs – a paintbrush! Lula took the brush and without hesitation eagerly dipped it into the nearest container and began to paint on the wall. The crowd let out yet another loud cheer as Lula worked the paint across the stone. The large lady was now sitting and swaying as she stared into the stone encircled fire. Into another container went the brush and great swathes of paint was applied to the wall.

The flames of the torches which lit the ceremony grew bright and danced wildly, filling the cavern with energy. The fire into which the large lady was staring also flared brightly and sparks jumped around the high cave ceiling, thunder rolled through the cavern as Lula created her painting. Then the crowd let out an ‘Ooooh’ as Lula stopped and stood back from the wall.

The painting was similar to the one I saw in the cave with my dad, simple brush strokes, expertly placed, showing buffalo and deer by a river surrounded by trees. It glowed and pulsed on the cave wall and then, in a shimmering exhibition of light and colour, the animals leapt from the painting and skipped and flew around the cave, the crowd clapped their hands in glee and in a final show of energy, the animals burst into a shower of stars which gently floated down onto happy faces and disappeared with a ‘pop’.

Swirling, dancing flames...

It is dark inside the tent. Lula rolls over in her sleep, still smiling, dreaming of her day in the cave. Beside her, her mother and father are silent, content in

their slumber. Although it is dark, blackness suddenly falls upon the sleeping family. There is a rush of air so cold, their sleeping breath condenses invisibly against it and all at once, the tent explodes, exposing them to the night. Lula wakes first, bleary eyed and confused as she tries to focus on the apparition before her. The blackness that was darker than night rises tall above her, its shape covered in rippling black robes, a face without ears, without eyes, covered in scales and grinning with a wide, teeth filled mouth which I recognise instantly. It is the Dragon! How can he be here? I trapped him in a fairytale painting over a year ago! The apparition raises its arms, and Lula is engulfed within those dark undulating robes and in an instant, they are both gone. Lulas mother and father wake, but it is too late and their cries of despair are drowned out by the screams of terror from their neighbours, as dark hideous long-legged creatures swoop down upon the settlement, upon their tents, their children and themselves.

Swirling, dancing flames...

Lula is crying. It is dark and all around her; invisible, black things are creeping. A torch suddenly flares to life and the darkness slithers away to the recesses of the cave where Lula now finds herself.

‘Muma!’ she shouts through her tears.

‘Muma won’t help now child’ The Dragon spoke in his guttural low tone.

‘Now Entring awake in you, you do as I say or you will not see day after night’

He held out a misshapen claw, which held a diamond.

‘You last of thirteen, you finish stone of fire – tonight Entring is mine!’

He placed the jewel into an egg shaped wooden cup and laid it on a small

stone table, upon which sat a grinding wheel. He turned his grotesque teeth ridden face towards Lula.

‘You finish stone of fire now – or you die in dark with shadow crawlers.’ Lula sat down at the table and began to grind the diamond against the sparkling edge of the wheel. As she did this the diamond began to glow and colourful flares of light span around the cave. The Dragon was laughing, a cruel cold laugh that was full of menace.

Swirling, dancing flames...

A scream shatters the still night. A girl falls to the ground, her hand wiping the blood oozing from a swelling lip.

‘You will do as told, girl’ The Dragon reaches down a claw and drags the girl back on to her feet by her hair. He walks away, leaving her sobbing. Around her are other girls and women, including the large lady from the cave, formed in a large circle. Thirteen in all, Lula is also amongst them. They are outside, standing on an outcrop of rock, high above the forested valley below. Sweeping around them are dark shadowy things, silent and menacing. The Dragon is standing in the middle of the circle, arms raised; the ring is on his finger. A wind begins to blow and the starry night is suddenly hidden by black clouds. He begins to chant, words barely audible above the now howling wind.

‘Entring light within stone of flames with power of thirteen, enter to me from them, through their light, darkness I will bring to this land’

The younger girls are crying, the black slithering shadows keep them in the circle, lightning flashes from the dark clouds above and a deafening

thunder crashes against the night. It begins to rain, heavy dark rain. The Dragon's mouth has opened wide, teeth stretching where there should be eyes and he lets out a deep evil scream. The frightened circle flinches as each of them explodes in a burst of light which shafts out to touch the Dragon; their feet are off the ground, suspended in the energy of the beams. Thirteen shafts of white light are now entering the Dragon, he thrusts the ring towards the storm laden skies and it too bursts into a beam of pure energy directly into the dark clouds above, sucking them down towards him, into his wide open mouth. He begins to grow dark; the light within him turning black and then the black light bursts out along the white beams emanating from the thirteen. One by one they began to fall limp and crash to the ground, disappearing under a frenzy of silent writhing shadows, their weak struggles flailing under the black mass. Lula slams into the wet earth and she too is covered by those black evil things, I watch in horror as she writhes and rolls under their vicious attacks and then she is gone.

'That was last sun season; I rolled off edge of tall rock, fell onto trees below'

I jolted as I realised the spell was over, I was back by the campfire, Lula was looking at me. 'What just happened?' I asked stunned.

'I show you Lula's story, in dancing light, you have Entring, like me.'

She looked tired and her eyes were red.

'Lula woke up from long darkness at bottom of tall rock, look for mamu and dadu. All gone. All gone, all Lula's peoples gone'

She spoke through a quivering mouth 'Lula hide for long time, keep by dancing light when night'

She was rubbing a scabbed wound on her left arm; I touched the bruise on my arm.

‘Then Lula see you in head in sleep time, you come help Lula?’

‘Yes’ I replied ‘Jessica help Lula, but how?’

‘We go back, over tall rocks to home, Lula run no more’

She smiled and lay down by the fire and slept. I sat there looking at her, I felt alone, I wanted to go home.

A cold breeze blew across the clearing, the fire flared against it and in the deep darkness of the surrounding forest I imagined slithering shadows waiting, watching.

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I blinked and then squinted in the bright morning sun. I didn’t remember falling asleep but I was glad it was no longer night.

‘We go back now, we get Entring’

Lula was standing over me, silhouetted against the sun which flared defiantly over her shoulder. She sounded determined. I rose to my feet and stretched the stiffness from my limbs.

‘No brushing my teeth this morning!’

Lula gave me a quizzical look ‘Doesn’t matter’ I said with a grin, and then wondered what I had to smile about.

Lula was standing at the edge of the clearing, looking into the dense forest; I joined her and stared into the twisting gloom of gnarled branches and creeping vines.

‘Lula’ I asked ‘How did you hurt your arm?’

She stiffened and brought her hand up protectively over the wound,

'Lula stupid, went too far from fire, dark time came fast, dark man with teeth send big beast to kill Lula, Lula run and run, hurt arm'

I held out my left arm 'Lula, I saw you do that in my dream, you hurt your arm on a tree and when I woke up, I had this bruise, look, it's in the same place as your cut!'

She touched my bruised arm and said 'Entring do this, Lula and Jess-ica, one, together we bring light back to world.'

She looked back towards the green expanse. 'No talk in here.' she said, 'We move quiet.' and she stepped from the clearing into the forest.

We walked in silence for some time, picking our way through the undergrowth littering the forest floor. Above us the sky was replaced by dark green leaves and thick dense branches, which hung from the huge trees that thrust endlessly upwards around us. Birds 'cawed' invisibly above us and small forest animals could be heard foraging around in the undergrowth. Occasionally the sun would force its way through a small gap of foliage and send a sharp shaft of yellow light beaming into the green hued world in which Lula strode and I carefully followed. Every now and again she would stop, and listen, her back hunched and her head tilting from side to side, listening for sounds unnatural to the forest and my heart would pound.

Gradually, the forest began to thin and the light from above brightened into full daylight as we emerged into wide open grassland. In the distance, snow capped mountains gazed down onto even more forested lowlands, behind the mountains, dark clouds hung heavy and silent. Lula suddenly grabbed my arm and pulled me down to the ground.

‘Stay’ she whispered, and she was gone, slipping through the long grass like a dart. Moments later my heart froze as I heard the sound of a single high pitched squeal.

‘Jess-i-ca!’

I meekly looked up over the grass and saw Lula, running towards me, she was holding up a dead rabbit.

‘We eat now!’ she said triumphantly.

My disgust at how Lula could kill such a cute thing as a rabbit soon faded as the smell of the meat roasting over the open fire drifted down my nostrils and rumbled into my empty belly. I was starving! As we ate, Lula told me more about how she had survived over the past year, by moving further away from her home, away from the expanding darkness which was destroying every village it touched. The Dragon was determined to find her; she was the last of the thirteen first born females. While she still lived, she would be a threat to him and his power, no one else had the Entring in them as strong as Lula, no one that is until I showed up...

‘We walk in daytime’ explained Lula ‘Dark man with teeth you call *Dragon* he not like light, he make day dark, become strong’

I took a juicy bite of meat. ‘What was that beast chasing you, when you hurt your arm?’

‘Lula not look back, run very fast, beast is big, looking for Lula when night, beast not see when near light, Jess-i-ca and Lula must stay by fire when night’

Her eyes had drifted and she was rubbing her arm in thought and I guessed that that night had scared her more than she would admit. I looked

up toward the mountains. 'We're heading over those mountains aren't we, into the dark clouds, it's where the Dragon is, where your home is?'

Lula looked too, 'Yes, my home...' She looked up at the sun which was high above us. 'We go now, get to tall rock before dark time.'

We packed the remaining portions of rabbit in leaves to eat later, and with the fire carefully doused, we set off, towards another expanse of dark forest which would lead us to the foot of the tall mountains ahead.

'No talk in forest.' Lula repeated and once again, I was filled with dread as we left the comfort of the bright daylight and stepped into the half light of the giant dense mass of trees.

Lula picked her way silently through the undergrowth with ease, and looked very much at home amongst the trees. Myself, on the other hand stumbled awkwardly after her and I received some very harsh looks after stepping on numerous fallen branches which cracked loudly, sending startled woodland creatures scuttling off in all directions! After some time, Lula stopped and crouched down looking in front of her. I stood behind trying to see what had caught her attention but all I could see was a small clearing of soft green moss and leaves directly ahead and I went to walk across it. Lula suddenly grabbed me and pulled me down to her

'Look.' she whispered and tossed a branch onto the green clearing. As it landed it disappeared through the moss, followed by a thud. Lula stood up and quickly looked around her, she looked panicked, and she grabbed my arm

'We leave here – now...'

We both froze as a loud crack rang out behind us; a fallen branch had been stood on, stood on by something bigger and heavier than Lula and I.

We turned slowly, it was staring at us through the trees, its fur was grey, its snarling mouth exposed long, sharp teeth and at the end of its huge paws were long sharp claws. It was bigger than any bear I had seen before. It suddenly reared upright, towering on two feet, and opened its giant mouth letting out an enormous bellow.

‘RUN!’ Lula shouted, but I could not move, I was fixed to the spot, terrified, staring at the enormous animal roaring on its hind legs and then the ground trembled as it crashed its huge weight down and began to charge. I could not move, I was going to die.

The forest floor shook under the huge mass of the giant beast thundering its way towards me. I could see nothing else; its grey powerful bulk filled my vision, the snarling, drool dripping teeth, the wild angry red eyes, closing in on me fast. I started to scream.

My scream was cut short as I was hit hard, knocking the wind from my lungs, and I flew into the air. I hit the ground and lay there stunned, pinned to the forest floor, sounds of thrashing and roaring shook the forest and then all was quiet.

‘Am I dead?’ I thought. I could still feel a weight holding me down, I opened my eyes ‘Lula?’

‘Why you not run, Jess-i-ca?’

Lula was lying on top of me; she had pushed me out of the way of the charging bear at the last second.

‘Where’s the bear?’ I asked fearfully.

‘Bear fall in hole with spikes – bear not chase Jess-i-ca again’.

We stood up and looked into the large pit that was covered with moss and leaves before the bear crashed through it, impaling itself on the wooden spikes fixed upright at the pit bottom. I turned away, feeling sick.

‘Lula, was that the beast the Dragon sent after you?’

Lula shook her head, ‘No, big beast much, much worse, bear is of this land, live in stone hole, someone chase bear, dig hole with spikes.’

Big beast is much worse? I shuddered at the thought.

‘Who do you think dug the hole?’ I asked, Lula was looking over my shoulder and I guessed that I was about to find out.

The man was quite short, but muscular in build and was draped in grey fur skins – not unlike the fur of the impaled creature lying still at the bottom of the pit. His hair was long and unkempt and dark eyes peered out at us from under his large brow, his face protruded forward and was covered with dark wisps of hair and around his neck hung a string of bones. In his hands he held a large wooden spear, tipped with a sharp stone, which he pointed towards us.

‘You not live here.’

He spoke with a harsh high voice; Lula held out her hand, palm forward, fingers spread wide ‘We walk through forest, to tall rocks, no harm to you.’

He moved towards us and stopped at the edge of the pit and looked down onto the blood matted carcass of the great bear and nodded his head approvingly. He then turned and looked at Lula.

‘Now is good, you bring gift of bear, you come, I take you to tall rocks.’

He gave us both a big grin, exposing large yellow teeth.

'Come.' he said, and let out a loud howl, 'Come, come.' he gestured as he walked into the forest.

Lula and I looked at each other, she held my hand and we followed the small hairy man. Behind us, other similar people had suddenly appeared, they began to gather around the pit and chatter to each other excitedly, pointing at Lula and me as we made our way deeper into the forest.

'Who are those people?' I whispered to Lula as we walked, keeping a distance between ourselves and the man, who strode with a lumbering stealth ahead of us through the thick forest undergrowth.

'Bear People. Lula try to walk through forest so they not see us, Lula not like Bear People.'

'They seem friendly enough.' I said, optimistically.

'They happy, big bear is killed. They dance by fire, eat bears flesh, use skin and bones.'

We walked on in silence for some time, I sensed Lula was uneasy about being led through the forest by this strange man and I too had a growing feeling of uneasiness about our situation. Was he really showing his gratitude for the death of the bear? Our killing of the big bear was an accident. If the bear hadn't fallen into the pit, I would surely be dead. Lula saved my life and I felt a determination to help her in any way I could. I also knew that somehow, helping Lula was the only way for me to return home.

Lula began to speak in quiet tones. 'Lula hear stories of Bear People, they from old times when Entring very young. Bear People were many, then cold came for long stay and land went white under hard water. Entring grew strong in Lula's people who came to live in this land and when land went

warm, Bear People not many. They try copy Lula's people but they not learn, they have no Entring. Like big bear they get less and less each sun season.'

'That's quite sad.' I said.

Lula looked at me with concern in her eyes 'They not just eat bears...'

And I stopped in my tracks as I thought about the necklace of bones which hung around his neck and the realisation of her sentence sunk in – cannibals!

'Come, Come, you follow, not much further now.'

The man was beckoning us ahead.

'Is he taking us through the forest? Can we trust him?' I asked Lula, my fear growing steadily.

'I not know, Jess-i-ca. Bear People know forest well, better than Lula, they know quickest ways.'

She looked up into the mass of tall leaves above, catching glimpses of the sky. 'Dark soon' she said, 'very bad in forest when dark'

We marched on. We seemed to be making fast progress as we no longer had to quietly pick our way through the twisting roots and vegetation. We no longer had to avoid the Bear People because they knew we were here and one of them was ably leading us through the forest. I hoped.

It had become noticeably darker now; the green filtered light seemed to hang above us, as if unwilling to fall to the ground. The forest was in dusk and closing slowly around us.

'Are we there yet?' I asked, almost foolishly.

Lula looked worried 'Dark coming quicker than Lula thought, we hurry.'

The man turned to us, aware of our unease.

'You not worry, safe, forest good!'

'You not understand' Lula replied 'bad thing seek Lula when dark, *you* not safe. Must find open land, make fire.'

He looked at Lula, his ape-like face contorted in an exaggerated expression of puzzlement. Lula continued, 'Big beast, bigger than big bear come in dark, kill Lula, Kill you if here!'

His look of puzzlement turned to one of interest as he tried to understand what she was telling him.

'Beast bigger than big bear?'

He was puffing out his chest, his head raised high.

'Beast bigger than big bear!'

He held up his spear to the darkening forest and howled. Moments later we suddenly became aware of movement amongst the trees and I let out a gasp as about twenty small, heavily built men with spears appeared like ghosts out of the gloom.

'They must have been with us all the time, following us!' I exclaimed. A shiver ran down my spine.

'This not good.' Lula said quietly.

The men had formed a silent circle around us, Lula tried to walk past them but they blocked our exit with their spears. The man who had been our guide joined us in the centre of the ring and he spoke to the gathering.

'Our forest, we live with big bear. Big bear gives warm skin to wear, bones to use and flesh to eat.'

He looked at me when he said that last part and I shuddered and took a step closer to Lula. He continued to speak, chest puffed out, full of pride and self importance.

‘When dark, bigger bear come, look for two from tall rocks. Bear bigger than biggest bear in forest.’

His hands were raised high above his head in imitation of something huge, the circle let out a murmur of appreciation.

‘We make great kill of bigger bear, feed from flesh for long time!’

The men started to raise their spears and shake them at the trees above, making ape like noises.

Lula spoke out loudly ‘NO!’

Everyone stopped and looked, even the forest seemed to stop, and bend itself closer to listen.

‘Big beast is NOT bigger bear, big beast much worse! You not kill big beast! Must go, find space, make fire before dark come – before too late. You not let Lula do this, Lula die, Jess-i-ca die - you all die’

Everyone was looking at Lula and a silence followed that screamed to be broken.

‘Ha ha ha’ It was the man. ‘Little Lula not know, we very strong, we kill bigger bear, you not be afraid!’

Lula looked around at the circle, searching for a spark of understanding, but they just grinned inanely back, certain in the fact that the huge bear will be killed and they will return to their settlement as heroes.

She turned to me, ‘They not listen, they not learn!’

A tear had appeared and I watched it trickle down her cheek and I too felt her despair. We must be close to the edge of the forest; we could have made it, why wouldn’t they listen?

Thunder boomed in the distance, far away, it was raining. It was becoming difficult to see more than a short distance into the trees now as the

light was fading fast, escaping out of the forest, away from danger. Thunder again, louder this time, Lula grabbed my hand tightly.

‘It’s coming’ she whispered, her breath condensing on the cooling air.

Boom. Louder still.

The men suddenly split into two groups; one group positioned themselves in front of Lula and me, the other group disappeared into the darkness behind the trees. They were going to try and trap the beast.

Boom! Still louder.

Lula was openly crying now, she had been chased by this nightmare for the past year and now there would be no escape. These foolish people would get us all killed. I felt angry.

The distant sound of cracking wood now reached our ears and I knew that the beast was crashing its way through the forest. Even the tallest, strongest trees would fall in its relentless charge. Above our heads, the night was filled by the sound of screeching birds, fleeing the carnage that was getting ever closer.

The line of men in front of us held out their spears in readiness for the battle. BOOM!! The thunderous stomp of heavy clawed feet echoed all around us followed by the splitting screams of wood and bark. The ground shook and I held onto Lula.

The man suddenly grabbed us, his steel-like grip crushing my arm. His face was wild with excitement, eyes wide and full of fire.

‘Bigger bear nearly here – not need you anymore, go – now. Beyond trees not far, you find your land’

Lula looked at him, her eyes as wide as his.

‘You not learn!’ She screamed ‘Not bigger bear, you all die!’

‘Lula lets go – now!’ I pleaded and pulled her away from the man who was shouting and waving his spear at the forest and the ever nearing beast. And we ran.

This was now my nightmare. The dream I had after the visiting the caves with dad, the girl being chased through the forest by a monster. Only now I’m with the girl and this time there is no fire to run to, no safe bright light to ward off the beast. Those men will be killed; they won’t even slow it down.

Run Jessica, RUN!

We ran as fast as we could. I held onto Lula’s hand as we weaved our way through the ever darkening night and thick undergrowth, using her lead as a guide through the maze of obstacles. One trip, one wrong step would send us crashing down and I knew we would never get up again. Behind us the beast continued its thunderous charge and I thought I could hear the shocked and desperate screams of men as they battled and died under an unstoppable onslaught of teeth and claws. Still we ran on, don’t look back, don’t fall, don’t slow down, just run.

It took me a second or two to realise we had left the forest. There was no gradual thinning of trees or undergrowth, one second we were running through thick foliage, leaping roots and branches, the next, nothing but open grassland, heading down to a small stream which gurgled away at the foot of a large range of mountains - Lula’s *tall rocks*. Through bursting lungs I breathed a sigh of relief and started to slow down. Lula felt my slowing and pulled on my hand.

‘Jess-i-ca not slow down! We not safe! RUN!’

The forest behind me shook as the night was filled with an ear splitting roar. I glanced around to see trees shaking and falling near to where we had just emerged. The grassland sloped down quite steeply and my exhausted legs buckled underneath, sending me tumbling forwards, taking Lula with me, who yelped as she went down and we bounced, rolled and gambolled down the slope and splashed heavily into the stream. The shallow water was cold and took what little breath I had left. Lula was already climbing to her feet.

‘This way!’ she shouted and I followed her to the other side of the stream and again we were running. I could not go on much further, my sides were aching and my head was pounding, I wanted to sit down, I wanted to give up, let the beast come, kill me and let me rest in peace for ever!

It was almost totally dark now, we were running towards a sheer wall of jagged stone thrusting upwards and disappearing into the night sky. I imagined snow capped peaks rising majestically out of white fluffy clouds, oblivious and uncaring to the drama at their feet.

‘Lula, it’s a dead-end! There’s no way out!’

The forest exploded behind us and a dark hulking shape burst from it in a roaring frenzy of violence.

‘Lula it’s here! We’re going to die!’ I fell to my knees, exhausted, terrified, gasping for air.

The ground began to shake as the beast drew nearer, thundering its way across the stream towards the cliff face of jagged rock and no way out, where I knelt in hopeless despair and Lula paced up and down, seemingly oblivious to the mass of teeth and claw baring down on us. I looked towards the beast, a mass of muscle; it slowed and stopped, its four giant claws resting flat on the ground and in the starlight, I could see its huge head, the

sharp points of its ears and the deep brow where two glowing orbs looked down on us, pulsating with hatred. The beast snorted out a cloud of white mist in a satisfied flick of its huge head and slowly opened its jaws to let out a low rumbling growl. It then snapped its jaws shut with a sickeningly loud 'clomp' and then hissed through sharp gritted teeth that glinted like steel and dripped with saliva. It slowly lowered its great bulk to the ground in a crouching position and readied itself for the final blow, relishing the victory, no longer chasing, the quarry had finally been cornered and it was a moment to be savoured.

'I've found it!' Lula shouted and grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. The beast let out an ear-splitting howl and leapt into the air.

The gap in the rocks was small and narrow, almost invisible to the eye unless one was directly in front of it. Lula dived into it dragging me head first behind her. Outside, the mountain shook as the beast hit the rock face, a giant claw smashed desperately at the gap we had just entered, sending shards of stone and rubble down around us.

'We go deeper' Lula said and stumbled off into the dark of the mountain. I followed, leaving the bellowing monster hacking away at the mountain in frustration at our miraculous escape.

After a few minutes walking in pitch blackness Lula stopped and said: 'We rest here now.' Her voice echoed and I guessed we were in a larger space within the cave. I heard her rummaging about and then a spark suddenly flashed into a flame as Lula struck her flint amongst the dry debris gathered from the cave floor. I squinted against the sudden light and collapsed beside it, grateful for its warmth and safety.

I looked at Lula, her eyes were red and there was a scratch above her right eyebrow, her damp hair lay flat against her head and her arms and legs looked bruised and muddied.

‘You keep saving my life’ I said.

‘Lula save own life, we are one with Entring.’ And she pointed at my face. I reached up and touched my right eyebrow; it had a scratch the same as Lula’s!

I let my bruised arms and legs warm by the fire as Lula produced the leaf containing the remains of the rabbit we’d cooked earlier.

‘Entring in Jess-i-ca, Entring in Lula.’

She was speaking softly into the fire and I listened, half dozing.

‘Long way between lands is short for Entring, Jess-i-ca’s mamu, Jess-i-ca’s dadu and before, and before, many times, to Lula’s land and Lula’s Mamu and Lula’s dadu and to Lula. Entring know this, see you and bring you from Lula’s head to here, help bring light back to Lula’s land’

As she spoke, the fire glowed brightly and I cast my eyes around the cave and gasped at the bright red and brown painted hues of horses, leaping majestically through the air, a giant mammoth, its large tusks thrusting upwards towards two large brown birds, circling overhead. The cave painting began to pulse and glow on the cave wall and then burst into a rainbow of swirling light and colour, out of which leapt the painted animals, galloping and flying around the cave roof and I stared in sheer joy and amazement, as they spun faster and faster, until they exploded into a shower of stars, just like in Lula’s vision and the stars drifted down onto my face and disappeared with a ‘pop’ and I fell asleep.

- 4 -

Brush your teeth Jessica, for with a name like *Sweetshop* – ‘My teeth must gleam, mom’ I opened my eyes; I knew I had been dreaming, about home, about mom and dad. I wondered how they were coping; I had just disappeared in front of dad’s eyes, leaving him there helpless, with no idea of what had happened, where I had gone. I had to get back to them, somehow, and Lula was the key.

I lay there in the dim light of a red ember fire, looking up at the wall painting, watching the diffused flickering glow play upon the rock surface and those neat suggestive brush strokes. Lula stirred and sat up, her face glowed orange in the firelight, her nose was black with soot from the fire, and her hair stuck out wildly in all directions.

‘You look like a wild lion.’ I said with a grin. She looked at me and said:

‘You look like Bear People – on bad day!’ And we laughed.

I felt refreshed. I didn’t know how long we had slept, but the dancing cave painting and the Entring magic had rejuvenated me, the pain and aches from the chase hardly bothered me at all and my head felt clear. We were preparing to move deeper into the cave system, which weaved its way right through the mountain and would eventually bring us out into Lula’s land and to the end of our journey.

Lula lit two torches which she produced from a recess near to where we slept.

‘Old fire sticks’ she announced. ‘Many sun seasons ago, Lula’s people used path through tall rocks to teach Bear People, but they not learn, get

angry and kill like big bear. They not like Entring and run when see paint on stone wall, they not use path now, keep Lula's people safe.'

'So the cave paintings scare away the Bear People which stops them from using the path and entering your land – doesn't the Dragon know about this path?'

'All Lula's people know about path. Path not used, not want to meet Bear People'

I thought of Lula's desperation to escape from her home entering the Bear People's land, alone and afraid and pursued by the big beast.

'Lula are you sure they're cannibals? Eat people I mean? They didn't really harm us, they just seemed a bit, well, stupid I suppose.'

'Lula not know. When light brought back to land, Lula learn more about Bear People'

We made our way through the dark mountain passageways, sometimes having to crawl on our hands and knees through narrow openings and crevasses. Part of our route grew narrower and narrower and then suddenly opened out into a huge cavern, our flaming torches lighting up the stalactites on the high ceiling which gently dripped water into clear mirrored pools, sending ripples of reflected light onto the smooth glistening walls.

'It's beautiful!' I exclaimed.

'Shhss!' Lula shushed, her finger on her lip, the torch held high as she scanned around the cavern.

I thought I heard a faint rustling sound and out of the corner of my eye something dark moved across a shadow above us. I brought my torch up to light the dark space, I saw nothing but rock.

'We move quietly now, not far to go. Keep stick fires lit, no let go out'

The hairs on the back of my neck bristled – were the shadow creatures in the cave with us?

I suddenly felt claustrophobic, every shadow now held a hidden menace, and the caves were full of shadows. Shadows that moved and I could not tell if it was our passing flickering lights making them move or something darker, something silent and black and evil. Every echo, every drip and plop and slither sent me into shivers and my skin crawled in a cold sweat and I could feel a panic growing within me, an unstoppable panic. I had to run, to get out, go back, I could not go any further, any second I would be covered in those black horrid silent slithers of death.

And then my torch went out. I froze, I could not move and the slithering darkness grew around me.

‘No! Go away!’ Lula’s torch flashed in my face, the flame singeing my hair. She was waving it violently around me and the shadows retreated screaming in silent protest against the harmful light.

I looked up and recoiled in horror as the roof of the passageway seethed in black squirming shapes, I screamed and ran, dragging Lula with me, she didn’t resist, she was screaming also. I could feel a rush of air, the cave entrance was near and we charged towards it!

We emerged into a dull rain soaked world, it was daylight but the dark storm clouds hung low and heavy over the colourless land. Dead and broken trees lay rotting in the waterlogged earth, thunder rolled continuously and black lightning crackled at the ground below, making everything dark, like night for just a second.

We stood there in shock, the scene was of hell.

Lula threw her rain doused torch back into the cave mouth and shouted above the storm. 'We bring light back to land before dark time, if not, we no hope – dark time we die.'

Then this was it. No going back, I looked at Lula, we were both soaked to the skin. 'I can't do it.'

She looked at me.

'I can't do it, Lula.' I repeated. 'I can't go on, I can't help you. It's useless.'

I was crying, I fell to the ground and sat there, in the mud and rain and looked out over the bleak and dying land.

'Don't you see? It's too late, we can't win!'

Lula stood over me, her hands on her hips.

'You go back in dark hole? With shadow creatures?'

She knelt down beside me, 'No go back Jess-i-ca, only forward.' and I followed her pointing finger.

'Oh no.' I said. 'Not there.'

The black lightning was striking in one particular place, and each time it struck, it sucked all light into it and for an instant, the world would be black, like the flicking off and on of a light switch at night. The raging storm clouds above were spiralling over the land, and through the torrents of rain I could see the central plume, and I realised it was thundering upwards, feeding the storm, twisting and powering the whirling dark mass above us, which drenched the land with its poisonous black rain. That was where the Dragon was, where we were going to go.

The black lightning struck again, more sustained. It was growing stronger, spreading out across the land, across the world and I knew it had to

be stopped. The lightning struck and the land went dark, I felt a disturbance around me and heard Lula gasp. The lightning stopped and I was alone. Lula was gone. I jumped up, feet slipping in the mud.

‘Lula!’ I shouted. My voice seemed small and pointless against the pounding rain and crashing thunder. I stared into the cave opening and shuddered at the thought of what could be creeping just inside, waiting for me to step out of the rain. I had no choice; I had to go to where the black lightning struck. I stood looking at it, at the billowing plume, pumping out the contents of hell into Lula’s world. I took a deep breath, allowing the black rain to wash away my tears.

‘For you, Lula.’ I said, and headed towards where the Dragon must surely be.

I walked in a daze, half stumbling; the very earth seemed to be trying to suck me down, to stop my progress. The mud clung heavily to my trainers and I winced with the pain in my exhausted limbs. There was no sign of life, the world around me was grey and colourless, the trees lay bent and dying, the animals, the birds, Lula’s people, Lula, they were all gone. The black rain was washing away their very existence.

The land shuddered as I neared the giant plume, constant ripples of vibrating mud emanated towards me and the black lightning roared down to strike violently into the spewing mass. With each lightning blackout I held my breath and tensed as dark slithering things shot passed me towards the plume. Each time I was left wondering when they would come for me, to take me screaming into eternal darkness.

The land was rising now, and it was broken and twisted, ripped apart by the thrust of the plume forcing its way out of the earth. I scrambled up it,

slipping and sliding as I went, the noise was deafening and I felt like an ant, small and insignificant against the shear power pumping out of the ground into the ever darkening skies. I had no idea what I was doing, I just knew there was no where else to go, there was no safe way back through the caves and no refuge in this land and like a moth to a flame I drew closer, unable to stop. I had to get to the top, Lula was gone but I still might be able to do something, if only I wasn't so scared.

The air grew hot and the ground was warm and dry as I approached the jagged edge of the rise and the black rain evaporated before it hit the ground creating a dirty mist which was constantly sucked back up into the thundering plume, which glowed inwardly with a red pulsating heat. I clung onto one of the many sharp jutting rocks and looked out across the summit.

The thrusting plume had created a huge crater around itself and was lined with the same sharp jutting rocks upon which I fearfully clung, and to my horror I realised I had seen this before, in Lula's vision when the Dragon had drew down the storm above him into his gaping teeth-filled mouth. Only this huge teeth-filled crater was ejecting the storm outwards, polluting the world with its filth.

I peered over the edge and was surprised to see a wide spiralling pathway running around the inside wall of the crater. I climbed over the edge and dropped down onto it and into a world of total silence. For a second I thought I had lost my hearing, the plume was mere feet away from me, driving upwards with tremendous force, but not a sound or a ripple of disturbed air could be felt.

'Hello?' I said, and I heard myself clearly. I nervously began to descend down the winding path, listening to my heavy breath and shuffling

feet as I circled downwards around the silent thrust of the plume, my shadow stretched and distorted against its reddening glow.

As the black lightning struck I pushed my back against the wall of the crater and looked up into the plume to see black slithering things disappearing into the whirling mass. I felt a shiver of fear run through me and I forced myself on, following the wall around and down.

My fear was gradually building, a dread growing within me, my skin creeping as if something was crawling around me. I looked around in a panic, no-one, nothing was there, I stood still with my back against the wall, listening in the perfect silence and it was then that I noticed what was on the wall.

The paintings dripped menace and death, they were scrawled faintly onto the crater rock and in the low red light of the plume I had not given them any thought. They pulsed and moved slowly, as if testing the rock, waiting for a weakness that will free their hatred. The shadow creatures with their long sharp legs, the slashing of limbs, the screaming faces of their victims, the destruction of homes and hopes painted by evil for evil. I backed away from the wall and shuddered violently; shaking my head to break the link with the paintings. The Entring was never meant for such a purpose and I suddenly felt angry.

I walked on, not looking at the wall and what other horrors it might contain. I wiped the cold sweat from my brow and felt the scratch above my right eye, and a glimmer of hope started to kindle inside of me. Lula had said that we were connected somehow by the Entring, that her pain was my pain. If that was true, then why have I not been hurt? If she was killed or injured, surely I would have known about it, I might even have died with her. But I had not died, nor received any extra bruising or cuts – was Lula alive and unhurt?

These questions were playing on my mind as I came to the end of the spiralling path and stood in front of a huge stone arch, beyond which a great cavern opened out before me. I quickly stepped to one side of the arch as I heard a low guttural voice speak from within.

‘Last of first borns, you come back from land of Bear People, you think you stop dark, bring light back to world? Ha ha ha you not stop this little girl.’

I nearly cried out! Lula was alive – I knew it! I had to get closer, to see what was happening. I edged my way along the stone wall and peeked slowly around the rugged arch column. The cavern walls were lined in the same rough columns, curving upwards to the roof where they merged into a central stone line that ran the length of the hall. The cavern was bathed in the same pulsating red light as the crater; the dim glow seemed to emanate from the very air itself.

The Dragon continued his talking: ‘Big beast not bring body back, you not eaten by Bear People, you not hurt by shadow creatures...Entring strongest in you, last of first borns, how is so?’

The Dragon had his back to me and was standing in the middle of the cavern, his large scaly, earless head moved back and forth above the black undulating robes which rippled and squirmed around him, repulsive and evil. He was standing in front of Lula blocking my view, I had to get closer.

‘Not matter’ he growled, ‘You join others in dark skies, make new Order of Entring complete, darkness grow faster over all lands.’

I had crept behind one of the central columns and I could now see Lula; she was kneeling in front of the Dragon, her head was lowered and her long matted hair hung in tangled clumps in front of her face. Her shoulders were jerking and I guessed she was crying. The Dragon reached out a large

clawed hand and grabbed her head, upon his finger I could see the glow of a ring, a red glow, the source of the light - it was my ring!

I looked down at my finger, the same ring from my world, sat dull and lifeless on my hand. The Dragon had picked up Lula by the head and I watched in horror as she dangled, legs kicking wildly in the air, her hands frantically holding onto the Dragon's clenched hand and I gasped and fell to the ground holding my neck.

I was suffocating, I could not breath and my neck felt as though it was being pulled form my body. The Dragon began to walk from the cavern towards the plume; he was going to throw Lula into it. We were both going to die. I struggled to my feet and lurched from behind the columns towards the Dragon. I tried to scream at him but my mouth felt squashed and I was gasping for air. I jumped with the last of my strength and grabbed his out stretched hand from which Lula helplessly hung.

The Dragon let out a guttural howl of surprise at my sudden appearance and released his grip on Lula. We both fell to the ground gasping for breath. Lula stared at me in astonishment and before I could say a word I was yanked onto my feet by clawed fingers.

'Who are you little one?'

He bent down towards me and opened his gigantic mouth of teeth and I started to gag under the stench of his hot breath.

'You are a first born? How can this be? SPEAK' he bellowed.

'My name is Jessica Sweetshop' I said, suddenly feeling angry at this beast that hurt us. 'I am from England and you leave my friend alone!' and I waved my fist at him which he grabbed in his massive hand.

'Fourteen first born better than thirteen, you both go to dark skies!'

I screamed as his hand tightened over mine, and he started to cackle his evil twisted laugh. And then his laugh changed, it almost sounded painful and I could see the hand clenched around mine had the ring and the ring was no longer glowing red but had turned white, a brilliant white which burst forth, lighting up the whole cavern and the Dragon let out a scream and flung me to the cavern floor.

I lay there cradling my sore hand and I looked at my ring which was now glowing like a star on my red finger. Lula jumped to her feet and pulled me on to mine.

‘Quick Jess-i-ca, we run into dark skies, you hold Lula’s hand!’

‘What?’ I stammered ‘Lula, the Dragon was trying to throw us into there! We must get out at the top of the crater!’

‘No Jess-i-ca’

Lula held my good hand tight. ‘We go to dark skies, bring light back to land’ and she held up my bruised hand and looked at the ring.

‘Light fading, you took Entring from dra-gon, not last long, must go now!’

She was pleading and I could see the Dragon was regaining his senses; the ring was not as bright as it was a moment ago. Were we to sacrifice ourselves to bring the light back to he world? Had Lula known this all along? I took a deep breath.

‘Let’s do it’ I said and we both ran towards the plume and leapt into its thundering depths as I heard the Dragon screaming behind us.

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Silence.

Grey. Nothing but dark endless grey, suffocating silent grey, clogging my throat, my nose, my ears. I close my eyes, grey. The same grey. I cannot tell if my eyes are open or closed, I feel nothing but sadness. A sadness that is deep and endless and grey. A sadness of life, of what was, what could have been and what never will be. I wait for an eternity. Is this what death is like? A black shadow swoops past. A break in the grey. Another one, from nowhere, circling like a shark. It begins to mean something and now amongst the sadness, I feel fear. My mind swims with fearful images, of a giant gaping teeth-filled mouth spewing out poison, of travelling into the mouth and down into the very centre of the beast where I see a girl trapped within the bones of his ribcage which tower above her and around her slithers the shadow creatures and I begin to remember again. I am in the dark skies.

Yet another shadow swoops in from the deep grey and joins the others, swooping and circling, darting closer and then away again. I remember the girls name is Lula and my body begins to sense again and I feel her grip on my hand.

‘Lula!’

I can speak!

‘Don’t let go, Jess-i-ca.’

Lula calls out and she sounds far away. Another dark shadow had now joined the circle.

‘Lula, the shadow creatures are coming!’

I look down at my hand and Lula is there, rising up to me from out of the grey.

‘Hold ring up Jess-i-ca, let them see!’

I did as she asked and held my hand out towards them and it glowed against the grey. Yet still another shadow creature appeared.

‘It’s not working!’ I said in horror, ‘There’re more of them coming!’

And through the grey nothingness several more black swooping shapes appeared, darting around us.

‘They’re getting closer!’ I shouted ‘Lula, they’re going to get us!’

‘Keep ring up, no let down!’ urged Lula

Behind me I sensed something big moving. I turned my head to see the Dragon mouth wide open, the teeth bared and evil, his black rippling cloak alive with the shadow creatures.

‘Keep ring up, Jess-i-ca!’ Lula yelled as she let go of my hand and pushed herself in the direction of the Dragon.

‘Lula NO!’

I tried to grab her but the black shadows suddenly swarmed around me, faster and faster. I began to spin with them and I was aware of a light, growing brighter and brighter with every spin and I could hear faint whispers, reassuring, calming me - and I knew that light would soon be returning to Lula’s land.

The light was everywhere, and the shadows were transforming into colours and shapes, solid forms and they were all holding my ringed hand. Twelve first born females of the Entring and now Lula was gone I, Jessica Sweetshop was the thirteenth! The circle was complete and the balance was being

restored. Around us I became aware of other movement, of things, running, jumping and flying. They were like the cave paintings, created from simple brush strokes, being formed before my eyes into living animals! I was watching the Entring as a power of creation and not destruction!

My feet felt the touch of the earth again and I looked down to see lush green grass around my tattered trainers and as I looked up, the land was swept with a wash of colour that reformed into a lush landscape of wooded forest, rolling meadows and clear running springs that was Lula's land.

'Thank you, Jess-i-ca.'

Behind me, at the foot of the tall mountains were the twelve first born girls and ladies of the Entring. It was the large lady from Lula's Entring ceremony that had spoken.

'You bring light back to land, make land happy!'

I just looked at her and began to cry. She hugged me to her large frame.

'Jess-i-ca not cry, she save first borns from dark skies, Lula call you friend!'

I looked up at her, 'But Lula's gone! The Dragon got her!'

'Lula not gone, Jess-i-ca.'

I spun around towards Lula's voice; she was dragging something down the lush green hill towards us.

'Here is dra-gon!' She declared triumphantly. She then took my hand and looked at the glowing ring on my finger. 'Dra-gon ring no more – this is only Entring ring now!' she declared.

I looked down at the small man dressed in a small black fur gown; he was holding a bloody nose and weeping loudly. That wasn't the Dragon of my

world, he must still be trapped in the painting at the Trolls underground room – perhaps all who try to use the ring for evil appear in that form. Perhaps that *is* the form of pure evil?

‘Please, not hit anymore, me sorry!’ he whimpered.

‘You quiet!’ demanded Lula, and she gave him a kick in the sides.

‘Lula jump at Dra-gon, give Jess-i-ca chance for making Entring’ she explained: ‘Jess-i-ca make thirteen first borns for stone of fire to bring light back to land!’

‘So!’ I said, ‘You knew that there had to be thirteen first borns touching the ring to create the power that would restore the light back to the world and defeat the Dragon?’

‘Lula, not just say that?’

We laughed and gave each other a big hug.

‘Thank you, Jess-i-ca’ said Lula and around us grew cheers and applause and to my great surprise and happiness I saw hundreds of smiling people gratefully clapping and jumping up and down. The dark skies must have been holding all Lula’s people, feeding off their creative energies and turning it into a dark evil.

The crowd hushed and began to part and Lula’s face lit up.

‘Dadu, Mamu!’ she cried, and she ran to meet her parents where she disappeared under a mountain of hugs and kisses!

I smiled, and grew sad as I remembered my parents. I had lost complete track of time and I wondered how long I had been in this strange world. Would I be able to return now that the Dragon had been defeated?

Suddenly a scream came from the crowd; I spun around to see the Dragon running for the cave entrance that led to the path through the mountains.

'Lula!' I shouted, 'He's escaping into the Bear Peoples land!'

Lula's father picked up a long thin spear.

'Come Lula, come Jess-i-ca, we catch Dra-gon!' and we followed him into the caves.

'Not be scared, Jess-i-ca, shadow creatures not here now' said Lula as I looked nervously about. I still couldn't help shuddering at the thought!

My ring was glowing brightly as we made our way through the caves. Our progress was quick and soon we were emerging once again into the land of the Bear People.

We continued our way across the stream and up the sloping meadow to the dense forest. The trees were scarred and broken by the rampage of the big beast and we avoided its route for fear of finding any dead Bear People.

'Big beast is gone now, isn't it Lula?' I asked shakily.

'Lula think so, part of dark Entring, light now, so no more big beast' she replied.

Lula's father was looking at some ferns on the forest floor 'This leaf new broken, Dra-gon go this way' and we set off again through the green half-light of the forest.

'Where are all the Bear people?' I asked Lula's father.

'They not here, or they everywhere, me not know.' he said.

Lula said: 'They died by big beast. They not learn!'

Some hours later, we eventually reached the end of the big forest and entered the large wide open grasslands where Lula and I had cooked and ate the rabbit.

Lula's father looked up into the reddening sky. 'Dark soon, we stay here, make fire.' he said

He stopped and sniffed the air, then bent down and placed an ear to the ground. 'Something coming.' he said, and stood up. 'Not good.'

We stood there for some minutes, waiting, the light fading around us. I could hear something as well now. A low rumbling, like a distant earthquake, in fact the ground was beginning to shake.

'What's happening?' I screamed.

'Look!' Lula shouted above the increasing noise.

Through the distant trees a cloud of dust appeared and through the dust came black shapes and my heart sank.

'It's the shadow creatures! They're back!'

'No' shouted Lula 'Bi-son, running very scared!'

I could make them out now, hundreds of them, panic stricken and all stampeding this way and behind them came taller animals, horses galloping, kicking up dust and earth as they charged across the grasslands.

'Why are they running?' I said, taking one step back.

Lula turned and looked at me. The look on her face told me what I didn't want to hear. Behind the rampaging bison and stampeding horses, the distant forest exploded under the onslaught of something big, something huge and dark and evil.

'Big beast!' I yelled, 'We have to run!'

Lula's father shouted: 'Go! Quick! Me stay, use spear!'

'Lula grabbed hold of him 'You not stupid Bear People! You get killed! You run with Lula and Jess-i-ca!'

'Wait' I said, and they both looked at me. I was holding the ring. 'I know this time. I've seen it, the Entring showed it to me. Lula, take the ring, you'll know what to do.'

She hesitated and then took the ring and placed it on to her finger. At once the ring glowed alive with a powerful brightness. She stepped forwards towards the stampeding animals and raised her arms. The light spread through the open land and as it touched each panic crazed bison and horse they slowed to a trot and began to calmly feed on the grass beneath their hooves. The light hit the big beast and it reared up in pain. Upon the beasts back rode the Dragon, small and dishevelled; he clung to the huge monster as it writhed against the glare. Suddenly, a spear flew into the side of the howling creature, and then another and it rolled in agony as a great cry rang out and the Bear People appeared from the shadows of the dusk and descended upon the dying beast.

The noises were horrific, triumphant howls and roars of pain as the Bear People dealt the big beast its final blows and it let out one last unearthly death rattle and all was silent.

We stood in the light of the ring, watching as they ripped the big beast apart. One of the Bear People approached us. It was our guide who led Lula and me through the forest. He was covered in blood and grinning with his big yellow teeth.

'Told you we kill big bear!' he said.

'Help me! No leave me with Bear People!'

We all turned to see the Dragon, he was being held by the Bear People and they were poking him with their spears.

Our guide twisted his face and raised a large eyebrow towards us.

'You safe here always – we take little man, make good snack!' he said slyly.

And they dragged him screaming into the night.

'Jess-i-ca go home now'

I looked at Lula. 'What did you say?'

She gave me back the ring.

'We go to first time, where we meet, you go home'

I was lost for words. I just looked at her and began to cry.

We walked into the night, the ring lighting our way. We no longer feared the darkness. The evil had been destroyed and the Bear People would not harm us. We made our way through the forest and out into the clearing where I first saw Lula so very long ago. At last I was in my painting. The first rays of morning light were filtering softly through the surrounding trees and it was going to be a beautiful day.

'Goodbye Jess-i-ca, our people give great thanks' said Lula's father and he bent down and kissed my forehead.

Lula gave me a big hug and I said: 'Goodbye Lula, I will miss you'

'Lula and Jess-i-ca are one' she said 'you not know that yet?' and she smiled at me through her tears.

I took one more look at them and then removed the ring from my finger and held my breath.

The world swirled around me in a rainbow of colour and bright lights and my skin tingled all over and suddenly I was home, standing in front of my painting, in my dad's studio with my dad standing next to me.

'Mmm' he said, 'nothing happened – what did you do wrong?'

I ran to him and hugged him as hard as I could 'Dad I missed you!'

'Hey, what's this all about?' he said.

'But dad, I've been gone so long, Lula and I had to defeat the Dragon and we got chased by the shadow creatures and the big beast, but the Bear People...'

'Slow down, Jessica, you haven't been anywhere' he said smiling at me. 'You put on the ring and it was glowing and that was it, nothing happened!'

'But dad I've been gone forever! I'll tell you all about it but first, I want a hug from you and mom and then something nice to eat!'

And the next day, I made dad take me to the cave where the painting was and as I stared at the scene of stampeding bison and horses and at the girl with her arms raised against the big beast.

Dad said: 'Well I never noticed that before, look, there's a painting of another girl...'

THE END