



## *Jikonsaseh*

Stars cast light where I stand, plans laid, warriors summoned, prepared to lead my people to what could only be called war.

Have I done wrong? Had I another choice that I did not perceive these long months past? Whatever the answer, it's much too late to turn back now. Our fate will be decided soon enough.

Tomorrow, we will descend upon our enemies, our ancestors at our backs and blazing the trail ahead. Tomorrow we will face the monster that captured and enslaved our leaders, the man who sought to put an end to the Haudenosaunee once and for all, and the man who in his haste to please his King by defeating the ignorant, barbarous Indians, forgot about me.

They call me the Peace Queen.

*Lies beget Lies*

There has been no end to the lies spread about us. Even now, with the battles we have fought and won, word has spread that

we war because we are anxious for furs, anxious to participate in an economy that seems to be built on little more than vanity. It is not so, but there is little time to explain such things now while we are besieged on all sides.

Yes, we know war.

But peace is our business and for many years now, we have maintained that peace amongst one another. The power I hold in trust, the power I used to raise our army stems from this covenant. And this is why for these many nights my heart feels like it has been wrenched from my chest. There has been blood and fire, both of which can cloud the mind. If it were not for my sisters, I think I would falter. If it were not for my sisters, I would not sleep.

One of them comes now.

“Jikonsaseh?” she asks, peering into my tent. “Are you well?”

I want to tell the truth. That I am not well, that I’m afraid. That when I’m not afraid I am furious. That I fear I’ve made a terrible mistake and my fury has led us to war when we should have maintained the peace. I am terrified to admit that I don’t know if we have made the right choice, that it is possible our leaders are already dead, and not, as our intelligence suggests, captives of the French.

I want to say all of these things but I say none of them. As much as I am afraid, I know the only reason I am free while others are enslaved is by the grace of the same custom that kept me from meeting with the King’s representative in Fort Frontenac. The Jikonsaseh is not to leave the territory but of course, Denonville did not know that. He didn’t know or didn’t bother to learn that it was someone’s responsibility to guard the peace, as tenable as that peace can sometimes be, and if there were no alternative, that this same woman could summon a council and go to war. This negligence on his part

speaks volumes. And so. Responsibility is all that has guided me these last few months and I dare not risk the grief that abandoning our covenant might bring with it. Not now.

“My mind is troubled,” I tell her instead. “But my spirit is strong.”

I see understanding in her eyes, shiny and dark. We all know what this feels like, I think. Women and men have been a part of this from the beginning, the war councils, the planning, and the rising death toll this campaign has demanded. We do what we must and are burdened by it. So much has changed since they arrived, with their ideas and religions and obvious desperation to claim what is ours, to shame us into submission. It seems to be the only way they know but it doesn't excuse what is happening, doesn't excuse their behaviour or what they've done. Ignorance will be their downfall, now and always, unless someone can find a way to change that. It will not be me, I don't think. Not now.

At times I cannot help but feel they have forced my hand, cornered my people until we had no choice but to fight back, but I know that thinking this way is a trap. It's a trap that would give them my power. And my power is to act.

For they've stolen from us. Stolen the very heart of our leadership and they expect us to stand by while the men and women that have been chosen to lead us are held captive, given into slavery, deceived by Denonville at the whim of his foreign King.

And I cannot allow this theft to go unanswered.

*Gaustauyee*

I am a mother. Not many people know that. My daughter is safe in Gaustauyee with my clan family. She was only beginning

to walk when news came from Frontenac that the peace conference had been a trick to ensnare our leaders.

I listened to the report but my eyes were fixed on Gya:nok, one of our elders, a woman with thick grey hair, brown skin and eyes that usually brimmed with kindness. She wore a grave expression today. Nothing reported had come as a surprise to her. She had been warned in a dream about the war leader Denonville and now her dream had come to pass.

“War is coming,” she had told me the morning our leaders left. “You must be ready.”

Had that really only been a few days ago? It felt like a warning from another lifetime. I’d put her off as an old woman, afraid of the future, spooked by dreams of snakes and silver. I was not putting her off now.

“What will I do?” I ask her later, sending our messenger to rest and recover.

“You are the Jikonsaseh,” Gya:nok replied. “You will call what remains of the Council.”

And so I did. Even then I think I knew in my heart that there was no other option than to invite the others to war, but I convinced myself I was simply sharing word of what had befallen our leaders. My messengers went out, scattered across the Island calling the others to conference three days hence. We readied ourselves for their arrival, unsure of how many would come.

Before the gathering, I stared at my little baby, asleep in our bed. I smoothed her jet-black curls away from her forehead. Her warm skin was flushed and her chest rose up and down in delicate movements that only made my love for her grow stronger.

How could I go to war with so much love in my heart? How could I leave when all I wanted to do was stay with her forever?

Since then I've learned there is no other way to go to war save with love in your heart. Nothing else can see you through the madness, nothing else can teach you restraint, nothing else can hold your spirit together when you dance so close to the dark.

*Seeking Counsel*

Our guests came from all across the Island, by air and boat and forest. Mohawk. Seneca. Onondaga, all of the nations were there. They crowded around the fires of our house and I asked Kara to tell the story of what had happened when they arrived at Frontenac. She spoke well, explaining how they had been surrounded, the Chiefs and Clanmothers clasped in chains and hauled away towards the water. There had been a struggle, she said. No one went willingly into captivity, but the numbers were simply too great for their resistance to succeed.

Kara did not wait to see more before she ran, making for Gaustauyea, not stopping until she had gained the village and reported to me. And now I had called us all here. When she finished her story, a great quiet fell upon us.

We had a shared understanding, of course. Before we had ever set eyes upon them we had known that the French and British could not be trusted. Our ancestors had told us how we must treat with them. They had brought us the Treaty Spirit, and shown us what it would take for us to guard our way of life and sustain our peace. We were warned there would be hard times and now—it appeared that those times had come.

Quiet space. Loud thoughts. Few of us relished the idea of war. It is not a natural state, conflict and unhappiness.

I do not remember standing. I remember asking their forgiveness for interpreting their silence, for any thoughts I might unwittingly put into their head. I remember telling them

that I understood and shared their hesitation.

“There is peace in my heart.” I told them. “And there it will remain. The Marquis has taken our leadership, the very heart of our Confederacy. I must respond. And I am ready to hear your counsel.”

For a long moment, no one spoke. Neighbours looked at one another, shifting uncomfortably, no one wanting to be the first to speak.

“He won’t stop there,” another man said finally, a Cayuga man with a green shirt and long black hair. I recognized him but did not know his name. I would learn as we campaigned that it was Honihdonyohsgo:. “For months he has been pecking at us, testing us. No doubt he thinks he’s weakened us.”

“He has weakened us,” another man said. His worry was plain. It drifted out in front of us, threatening to catch like dry leaves and tinder.

“But we still have strength.” Gya:nok got to her feet and stared around at us all, her gaze finally settling on me. “I am a woman, Jikonsaseh. My duty is to the land and to our future. I give you my support in your bid. And my aid.”

“So do I,” a Seneca warrior said.

Of course, my people are intelligent. They had all ascertained how I intended to respond before they came and knew what they were willing to do to help—though I daresay Gya:nok shamed them into even more with her refusal to be cowed by fear. By the time our meeting ended, more than a thousand men and women had committed to liberate our leaders and move against Denonville. By the time we reached Ganondagan, several hundred more had joined us.

*The Offering*

With the support of our lodge keepers, I sought the advice of our ancestors. This is where our strategy came from and upon it our plans were set. I made my offerings of tobacco and cloth. I asked for help and reached out to our sisters, the foods, having received word that Denonville had burned fields upon fields of Seneca corn and understanding the great loss that those present must have felt to see our sisters treated with such cruelty and malice.

That offering was the first step that I took in seeing to the return of our leaders. I admit it troubled me to see the depth of damage that had already been inflicted. There was anger and grief underlying our actions—which frightened me. I knew that every action we took in war would be balanced out somehow or another. Not knowing how that balance would manifest itself unnerved me. I did not want our actions to be driven by anger and grief alone.

It is no small thing to take a life. The act alone can unhinge a woman, or a man.

I wanted a plan where we would be able to accomplish our goals with as little bloodshed as possible. I knew one way, the simplest way. I took it.

I asked him to give them back. He refused.

There are no kind ways to put what we did then. We captured. We coerced. We disrupted their business, their precious economy.

I spoke to his spirit every day over those months and as we edged closer and closer to him, I could feel him becoming more agitated. No doubt he thought he was haunted, as the spiritually bereft often do.

The longest day had passed a month or more before a dream showed me the time and place where I would face him and this knowledge in hand, it was there that we moved, swiftly



and surely across the land. Truly, we were fortunate that it was summertime. We fished along the way, moving carefully, leaving little imprint upon the land. Nowhere did we did not make camp for long. People call this strategy. We called it respect.

I did not do anything different with the offering I made the night the dream came. Most likely, it was just time for me to hear what the ancestors had to say. The dream was powerful and explicit, needing no interpretation. It was clear. If we battled Denonville in the light of day, blood would flow like a river. Denonville was rash but seasoned. He would fight us. He would risk every man he had. It would be a massacre on both sides.

There was only one way to avoid it.

We would take them by night and I would wear him down.

### *Ganondagan*

We steal across the lake, our paddles gliding through the water. As we move closer, my heart is pounding so loud I think that Denonville's sentries will hear it. I am afraid he will know that we are coming and I say so. One of the older men tells me to ask the ancestors to lend us their aid and I do. My hand hangs out over the water, leaving tobacco as the dark water passes beneath us, asking them to cloak us and begging them to understand that we fight now to prevent the squandering of life, ours and theirs.

It is nearing dawn when I realize that our prayers have been answered. Clouds have come and with them, rain. It is all the cover that we need.

Still, the rain does not wash away the pain I have, the fear I feel. I hold my face up to the sky and beg the stars to understand what I have committed to.

The moment we take the land, our warriors move into the village, silent and careful. They know to wait for my signal. I can feel Denonville.

I hang back by the water, the rain falling onto my face and with every effort I have, I reach out to him one last time. He knows why I've come but it doesn't change what he thinks or how he sees us.

My daughter. My mother. My father. In his mind we are all of us savages. Heathens. Liabilities. I know what he would do to us, if he had the means. I know what he intends without them.

My heart is breaking, tears mingling with the water pouring down my face.

I give the signal.

*La Chine*

I make myself watch. I make myself see. There are losses on both sides. There is fire. There is blood.

It is ugly and it feels like it lasts so much longer than it does. We have subdued many of his company and assured the rest of them in their broken language that we mean them no harm. We come for one man and one man only. It doesn't matter. They are terrified of us—as anyone would be when outnumbered by an angry force.

At last, Denonville emerges from his tent, his lieutenants at his side. The moment I see him, I realize that if he had been prepared for us, so many more would have died. This man is arrogant and callous.

Our eyes meet. I have no words. Neither does he.

Despite his arrogance, he is still a man. A man who believes in something—a heaven, a spirit, a God. A man who fears

these things.

I'm holding a weapon in my right hand but I've already seen that I won't have to use it.

"You know who I am, I think," I tell him in his own tongue. His eyes widen and I can hear the surprise ripple through the his ranks. Truly they know so little about us, about our diplomacy. For of course the Jikonsaseh studies the languages of the nations she serves as well as their Treaty partners.

His lieutenants are not impressed. They want him to give the order. They will fight if he asks them to—have only withheld themselves on account of their leader. Hatred burns in their eyes. How not? We've just burned parts of their village to the ground. But there will be no winner here. They want to believe they can defeat us but in truth, we will both suffer losses greater than I hope either of us is willing to live with.

"My name is Jikonsaseh. I am the Queen of Peace. I have come for our leaders that you have taken."

I gesture to the warriors standing around me and take a step closer to him.

"Look at my army. We are ready to go to war against you. It does not have to be that way. Return them to me. Respect the peace of our lands."

"Be reasonable." I tell him. "And we will all walk away from here, save those that we've already lost."

What does he see when he looks at us? He is not without spirit and although it is not the same as my own, I can see that months of appealing to his has affected him. Once, he would have disregarded my request without hesitation. Now, he is not so sure.

One of his lieutenants senses his weakness and calls out to the Marquis, telling him that they can still call for reinforcements, that they will be there within a day. Denonville stares into my

eyes, struggling with question after question. Is it possible for him to defeat me? What will happen if he tries? I dare not look away. Let him see what I have seen, let him know what I know.

I see it—the exact moment that he makes his decision, his shoulders dropping ever so slightly. He shakes his head sharply.

“Si nous avons une guerre, rien ne peut nous mais un miracle de Dieu sauver,” he says at last.

It’s over. We have won.

### *Homecomings*

I am not the first Jikonsaseh and I will not be the last.

I do not know that I have done right or well.

If the reports are true than few of our leaders are returning to us, many having died in captivity and slavery. It fills me with doubt and sadness. No doubt they will bring their own sadness home with them. And so we make ready, make ready to greet and condole them.

A wiser woman than me might have found a better way to secure the return of our Chiefs and Clanmothers. A smarter woman might have counselled the leaders to meet at a neutral location, to send scouts ahead, to be more vigilant with our uneasy allies in the first place. Who’s to say?

It is not an easy thing to guard our peace.

I hope that my story will reach others that come after me. That they will see that I don’t guard it alone, but with others, strengthening always our responsibility to the Treaty, to the Creator. That we travel the path that was set out for us when we came to this world; finding our way upon it, again and again.

This is a story I leave for you, daughter. To make of it what you will. To let it guide you at times when you question yourself, when you want to judge yourself.

I leave it so you know that I am not without blame or responsibility. That I have not always known the right thing to do when faced with hard choices. That I have done what I can in times of trouble and that I have acted with love in my heart. Peace, friendship, yes. Those things I value, those things I pursue.

But without love, I would not have had the pure fury or the immense courage that it took to stay in the light when darkness threatened my spirit. That, daughter, I owe entirely to you. You will know this when you have children of your own, when the full meaning of the Treaty reveals itself to you. And when you do, remember this.

Remember me.

