

Chapter 1

Near a Haudenosaunee Village, early winter

One hundred seventy-five leagues southeast of the Naskapi village of Sachem, two Naskapi warriors lay concealed in the thick brush near the top of a knoll overlooking a lake and heavily forested river valley. Travel to this place at night by canoe had minimized the chance of detection. During the fourth night of travel they concealed their canoe well back from the river and crept overland through the familiar countryside to their destination. They carefully checked their immediate area for security before selecting a spot in the thickest forest that offered concealment from all directions. Satisfied, they covered themselves with leaves and fell into exhausted sleep.

A drizzly mist had cloaked the river valley for much of the night. The leaden skies promised more of the same. At first light a slight breeze rose out of the valley, stirring the damp air. The light of the rising sun filtering through the cloud cover elongated the shadows of each tree in the thick forest as the darkness receded west. A perception of weak warmth came with the sun. A smell of smoke borne on the morning breeze awakened one of the sleeping warriors. He unfolded silently from the deep bed of leaves and crawled slowly forward to get a better view of the village below. The other man joined him a moment later. In the increasing light of dawn they watched the sprawling village of their arch enemies. The light of day began to bring definition to the shadows that cloaked the village. Familiar details remembered from previous raids, for both had been here before, began to sharpen.

“We must get closer, Manshipit,” Atkaa whispered. “We will not be able to see him from here.” “It is too risky. If their sentries see us we are dead.” Manshipit beckoned toward the two guards they had identified. “The boy’s hair is the same color as Ingerd’s hair and his skin is pale. He should be easy to see if he is in this village. We will wait here to see what happens.”

His companion did not comment.

In the silence, Manshipit’s mind wandered to the recent past, to the canoe journey back home from the village of Chisasi with the Northmen, Ingerd and Lothar. Sachem, the supreme chieftain of all the Naskapi bands had decreed that the two be brought to visit Nipishish, their former prisoner and Ingerd’s husband, during the Time of Falling Leaves. On the final day of the journey, Manshipit and his three companions had talked over the capture of Ivar and what they could do to find out what happened to him. Ingerd and Lothar had been able to follow much of the conversation as the day wore on. Kejo, the man in nominal command of the party, felt that a war party of Haudeno warriors under the infamous war chief, Sakohkea, had probably been the ones to capture Ivar given that his was the closest Haudeno band to Sachem’s village. It had been decided by mutual consent that Manshipit and Atkaa would trek overland to a lake where canoes were kept hidden and then journey south to scout the Haudenosaunee village for the presence of the boy, as Kejo had promised Ingerd. Kejo, Ingerd, Lothar, and Miknap would continue to the village of Sachem. The boy Lothar had made his mother understand what the men planned to do and Ingerd’s effusive appreciation had made the four Naskapi warriors uncomfortable. They muttered among themselves good-naturedly, taking her reaction as typical of what they understood about the Northmen, who seemed more prone to expressions of their feelings than the Naskapi, where stoicism was more the norm. Manshipit smiled to himself over how complicated the story had become. *I was there for all of it and I cannot keep the details straight in my mind,*

he thought, shaking his head at the twists of life.

His companion looked at him quizzically. Manshipit shook his head at his friend's questioning look.

They continued to watch the village in silence. Smoke rose lazily into the still, damp air from the longhouse smoke holes as overnight embers were stirred to life and the fires rekindled.

Both men were soaked to the skin and although they wore leggings and hip length pullovers, they were chilled. Their pullovers became a shapeless, sodden mass as water penetrated the oily leather. In spite of that, their clothing afforded insulation from the creeping cold. The misery that came with being cold had little effect on them. Lethargy from inactivity accompanied their discomfort in differing degrees, causing them to doze off occasionally only to jerk awake a moment later as their innate situational awareness came to the fore, for their lives depended on it. The upslope breeze carried the curling wisps of smoke toward their place of concealment. Soon, a whiff of cooking came to them as the Haudenosaunee village awakened and the people began their day's activities.

The smell of food borne on the heavy air made the two men salivate. They ignored their grumbling stomachs for a time, but the smell gradually overcame self-control. Manshipit rolled onto his back to gain access to the contents of the pouch at his belt. He tore a chunk of pemmican in two and passed a piece to his companion. Atkaa supplied two strips of jerky from his pouch. They chewed slowly, savoring the rich taste that flooded their mouths as the pemmican and tough jerky mixed with their saliva.

Below their vantage point there was little to observe. A trickle of people moved back and forth between the wigwams, but most had not ventured outside in the intermittent drizzle.

Midday came and went; the drizzle finally stopped and the skies opened. The warmth of the sun started the droplets of water clinging to every surface to begin to evaporate; a mist swirled out over the valley, periodically cloaking the village from the two watchers.

Shadows lengthened as the day wore on. The mist finally cleared in a freshening breeze, bringing the village back into sharp focus. The men took turns napping. The village guards were changed. Later, two women carrying baskets walked from one of the wigwams and out the gate, turning up the slope. They followed a well-worn path in the general direction of the men's hiding place. The Haudeno women, one young and the other somewhat older, walked slowly through the tall grass and low-growing bushes, obviously looking for something in the mast of the forest floor.

Fully alert now, the men remained still as the women passed out of sight under the brow of the hill. The only way they could have kept them in sight would be to stand and they could not do that. The men made eye contact, but nothing was said as they waited for the women to reappear. A moment later the sound of voices and occasional laughter came to the men as the women topped the knoll and continued into the forest. They alternately appeared and disappeared through the dense brush as their position shifted relative to the watcher's place of concealment. Manshipit whispered urgently to his companion. "They will tell us if the boy is in the village." Atkaa grunted in agreement. The two rose from the ground, and quickly secured their bows in quiver scabbards. For this task they preferred to use the belt axe that each wore. They stole silently after their oblivious quarry. Separating slightly, each man focused on one of the women as they crept rapidly forward in a crouch.

Conditions could not have been better for stealth as the two warriors closed the distance to their prey. The forest floor and its thick mat of dry leaves were still wet from the recent drizzle. The men's buckskin clothing was also damp, making the scrape of a twig or branch soundless.

Manshipit signed suddenly to Atkaa that the older of the two had a knife in her right hand as she stooped to cut something loose at her feet.

A single bob of Atkaa's chin indicated his understanding.

The women's low-voiced conversation served to cloak any slight sound coming from the approach and simultaneous attack of the Naskapi warriors.

The older of the two women, hearing or sensing the attack, wheeled on Atkaa at the moment before contact, snarling like a cornered animal as recognition dawned. As quick as the beat of a humming bird's wing, her knife hand swept forward in a vicious backhand slice.

Atkaa tried to leap back. He almost made it, narrowly avoiding being disemboweled. She struck so quickly that her keen knifepoint opened the leather of his pullover like a grinning mouth and scribed a red line across his stomach. The knife entangled in the wet buckskin as he grabbed her wrist. At the same moment, the flat of his belt axe thudded into her forehead and she collapsed unconscious at his feet.

Manshipit had clubbed the younger of the two unconscious before she could even turn to face him. He grinned at Atkaa.

The man stood over his target, examining his pullover and the shallow cut across his stomach.

"That was close. She almost got me," Atkaa looked down at his erstwhile attacker. He stooped to remove the knife clutched in her hand.

"It looks like she did get you." Manshipit bent forward to poke a finger at the long cut. Atkaa pushed his hand away. Manshipit chuckled. "I think you will live." He poked the inert form at their feet with the toe of his moccasin. "She is something. If her arm or knife blade were a little longer, you would be trying to keep your guts from falling on the ground right now. How would you like to live with a woman like that?"

"I would not want to live with her." He stooped and picked her head up by the hair. "Her forehead is split open. I may have hit her too hard."

"No matter, we will kill them anyway."

"Of course we will." He looked up at his companion. "Now she needs to be alive. She cannot answer questions if she is dead." Atkaa dropped her head back on the ground.

"I do not think this one will tell us anything anyway," Manshipit looked down at her. "She is a tough woman." He looked around. "Find a pole to carry her. Dead or alive we cannot leave her to spread the alarm. I will tie the young one up before she awakens. We must get out of here before someone comes looking for these two."

Atkaa quickly cut and limbed a pole long enough to carry the woman between them. The two men trussed her hands and feet securely over the pole. Atkaa pulled the now conscious young woman to her feet. He gripped her chin in his hand. "Do not make a sound. Do not try to escape or we will cut your throat. Do you understand?"

She turned frightened eyes on him and bobbed her head.

"Good, we go now." He tied a tether around her neck and looped the other end through his belt.

"Follow right behind me." He pointed to his companion. "He will be watching you." She nodded again. He stooped and picked up one end of the pole, while Manshipit picked up the other.

The men moved off at a trot, with Atkaa in the lead and the girl following behind him. The unconscious woman hung from the pole, swinging back and forth as they made the best possible time overland toward the river and their hidden canoe.

Just after sundown, they came to the place where they had hidden the canoe. Dropping the unconscious prisoner on the ground at the river's edge they launched the canoe. Intent only on putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the Haudeno village, they quickly boarded with their prisoners and set off upriver, staying in midstream to avoid the rocks and snags along the shore.

Visibility on the river was terrible, a matter a few canoe lengths. Low clouds rolled in with the

darkness, and the drizzle returned. The rattle and sigh of the droplets against the canoe and river's surface were almost hypnotic.

"Paddle!" Manshipit handed the prisoner the extra paddle.

She complied without comment.

Atkaa turned and tossed the bark scoop used to bail accumulated water out of the canoe's bilge in her lap. His intent needed no explanation. He rode in front, guiding the canoe by instinct and the low sound of the slow-moving river. The girl rode in the middle with her still unconscious companion, and Manshipit had the stern position. There was no conversation, the grueling pace saw to that. They stopped for nothing.

This stretch of river was deep and slow. There would be no portages to slow them down. Later that first night, they stopped at a mid-river island to take a short rest and question the girl. Atkaa tied her securely to a tree. He and Manshipit dumped the unconscious woman out of the canoe on the ground and then carried the canoe back in the brush a ways so it could not be seen from the river.

Manshipit crouched down to examine the other prisoner as best he could in the darkness. "She is barely breathing. You hit her too hard. I do not think she is going to awaken."

"She is of no use to us, then. Pick her up, we will give her to the river." Without further comment, they picked up the woman and threw her in the river.

Manshipit chuckled. "Maybe she can swim."

"Not with her hands and feet tied." Atkaa showed his white teeth. "They will never find her body. It will catch under a snag and the fish and other creatures of the water will eat the flesh."

The other prisoner had watched the men, her expression a mixture of disbelief and terror, as they threw her friend in the river and then turned toward her.

"Now it is your turn to tell us what we want to know." Atkaa untied her from the tree and jerked her to her feet. "We will ask you only once. If you do not answer truthfully you will join the other one in the river after we have finished with you."

Manshipit leered at her; a knowing smile curved the corners of his cruel mouth.

She looked from one to the other, knowing these men would show her no mercy. The grinning one looked especially cruel. It was he who asked the first question.

Manshipit pulled her close to his face. "We came to your village to find a pale-skin boy with hair the color of ripe corn. Have you seen such a one?" His sour breath assaulted her.

She nodded quickly.

The two men made eye contact, a look of satisfaction passed between them.

"Tell us about him," Manshipit said, releasing his grip on her shift.

She gathered herself, steeling her mind for the end she felt would follow. "A war party captured him. He is adopted into our band to replace the lost son of Odatshede."

"So, the boy is well?" Atkaa watched her closely.

She nodded again.

"How is this boy called?" Manshipit asked.

"Ivar, he is called Ivar."

The men again made eye contact at this final confirmation. They said nothing.

The girl watched the silent exchange. Glancing from man-to-man she averted her eyes, waiting for one of them to strike.

Manshipit grinned at his companion. "She waits to die. We will not kill you. A good slave is always welcome in our village. You have saved your life by answering our questions." He pulled her forward and untied her bonds and tether. "Do not try to escape, you would fail."

Atkaa laughed aloud at the look on the girl's face. "If you try to escape you will be caught. We

will not kill you, then. Both ankle tendons will be cut and we will leave you for the wolves.” He watched the effect of his words on her. “We go now.”

As the trio paddled away from the island the young prisoner fought to still her trembling body. She gripped the paddle tightly to suppress the terror that threatened to boil to the surface of her mind. With an effort of will she calmed her thudding heart. As calm settled over her, she grappled with thoughts of her dead friend, her family, her village, and her people. For the moment she felt alive, regardless of what the future had in store for her. She resolved to face captivity with her head held high, proud of what and who she was. Her people would expect no less of her.
