

READ THE FIRST CHAPTER FROM BOOK ONE, *ASSAULT*

Indians

“She can’t come with us,” said Passatan, chief of the Sagawanees. “Only my warriors will be with us when we kill the White Men.”

“Father,” said Katakuk. “If only you could have seen her with the bow and arrow. She bested all of—”

Chief Passatan interrupted, holding up a palm to his son. “I know of her prowess with the bow and arrow, and I’ve seen it many times, but there is much more to a death battle with the White Men. A man who loses has an honorable end, but a woman—you know what they will do with her and to her. She is your friend, and maybe more someday when the time comes. But this is not to be.” He looked at his son meaningfully but not unkindly. “This talk is over.”

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Nununyi saw the look in Katakuk’s eyes and knew the answer before he spoke. He shook his head and looked down.

“It’s not fair,” he said.

Nununyi gazed at Katakuk—in his late teens and just coming into his full prowess as a man. He was tall and strong and lean, with muscles like the boulders carved smooth by the rushing icy streams, with a firm, flat stomach and long dark hair that he bound behind with a strip of leather. He walked with a lighthness that spoke of inner strength, too. He would develop power and eventually leadership of the tribe. When Katakuk took the mantle from his father, all would be well.

She admired that he was proficient in all weaponry, including the tomahawk, the knife, the spear,

the musket, and even the sword he took from a White Man in battle. He sometimes prevailed over even the mature men in hand-to-hand combat. She smiled a little as she thought, too, of the bow and arrow. Their people were known for that. He routinely bested others his age in marksmanship.

But he had never come close to Nununyi with the bow and arrow. No one could. Yet for some reason he had no jealousy that Nununyi outshone him in this. Instead, Katakuk carried great pride in her achievements. Katakuk recalled a recent conversation with his father, and his mother too. “Father. Mother. You should see her. Even the best of our men cannot come close to her with the bow and arrow. Nununyi with a bow and arrow is like watching a panther roam through the forest. It is beauty.”

Chief Passatan and his wife looked meaningfully at each other at the time. *Is our son in love?* the chief wondered, *and with a warrior woman at that?* He restrained himself from smiling, although this time he really wanted to. Chief Passatan almost never smiled, as he felt it inconsistent with being chief, but he had feelings, and a deep love for and pride in his son. Katatuk was quite aware of this and close-to-worshiped his father. So, despite Katatuk’s disagreement with his father’s decision, he would not go against him or undermine him; it was not his way.

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Katakuk and Nununyi had been together since even before they could remember. At first it was just play, but then as they had grown up Nununyi had over time shown reluctance to do what women were supposed to do—cut up animals, cook, take care of babies, and deal with whatever the men didn’t want to do.

Even as a baby she had been fascinated watching others with the bow and arrow. And it was one of the first things she had learned as a young child, a labor of deep love from the start. Indeed, Nununyi neglected pretty much every woman’s duty she could, to the dismay and annoyance of her mother and the other women, all so that she could have time to fashion her bow out of a young sapling of just the right timbre, with the string made of the tendons of a deer or other animal, and then keep it well oiled and clean. She joined the boys at the side of the stream, fashioning arrowheads out of stone pieces of just the right sort, and she gathered the perfect feathers that would guide the arrows in their flight. All could see that nothing transported Nununyi into joy more than when she let loose an arrow to fly to its target.

At first it was a novelty that the little girl child worked with the bow and arrow, but before she was even nine years old, she was bringing home game she had shot, and tribe members became more and more impressed. Later, she was at first decently competitive and then winning contests with adult men, and everyone began to be in awe. After her eleventh birthday, Nununyi never lost a single match. It seemed as if she never missed, and so it was.

But archery in a competition is one thing, thought Chief Passatan as he stirred the last of the embers in the community fire that evening. *Tomorrow, many of us will die in battle. I myself might not be coming back. And I will not have a woman with us, distracting my son.*

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“Good night,” said Katakuk to Nununyi, holding her slim hand between his own as they prepared to part. “I have great sorrow that you are not coming.” He hung his head.

“Thank you, Kata,” she replied, using the affectionate nickname she had given him when they were toddlers and she had been unable to say the full name. “It is of no importance,” she insisted, with staid indifference.

Katakuk tilted his head and furrowed his brow as he studied her. *What is she thinking?* It meant everything to Nununyi to join with the men in the battle. She had told him many times before that she had been born to let fly her arrows to defend her people.

Perhaps she was saving face, then. He gave her the respect she needed, saying only, “Someday, when I am chief . . .”

She nodded and then said, “good night,” gently withdrawing her hand from his.

Someday, he thought, as he walked away, *she will be my wife and she will be with me in many battles. Together we will kill the White People and drive them away. And she will also bear me sons who will be warriors.* Over the years the two had moved from being inseparable childhood companions to finding themselves a young man and a young woman, with feelings for each other that had grown in intensity over time.

Nununyi had at first not overtly revealed her feelings to him, even with his hints and encouragement. Katakuk realized that Nununyi preferred to be a puzzle to be solved—like the smooth carved

wooden knots his grandfather had made for the amusement of them all. She refused to be an obvious conclusion. He had tried to return this conceit by doing his best to be a puzzle himself and keep her guessing. So he flirted with other girls from time to time, but he felt awkward and silly doing this, suspecting that Nununyi knew full well what he was about.

Finally, they had kissed, only that one time, and only a few nights ago. But that kiss had meant everything to Katakuk. He was indeed in love and now he could keep no secret of it from her.

She's so beautiful, he thought, breaking off his musing, but then lingering on her beauty.

Her dark black hair and brown eyes framed a face that had only two expressions—impassivity and a smile so lively that it lit up those around her. She was small, so he had to bend down to kiss her, but her body had whipping power, explaining or resulting from her kinship with the bow and arrow. Although she was not at all vain, she spent a great deal of time with her hair, always braiding it and tying the braids together in back—it was anathema that her hair might get into her face and interfere with a shot. He dwelt a moment on the thought of her light, sinewy body that was yet fully that of a woman—and he squirmed with the thought of what it might be to be fully united with her.

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Yes, Katakuk was in love with Nununyi; there was no doubt about it. And Nununyi was in love with Katakuk, although sometimes she wondered if she loved him more than she loved her bow and arrows. She thought about this now and then: *I am in love with the man Katakuk, but my bow and arrows, they are me.*

Nununyi nodded when Katakuk gave her the news, knowing full well everything Katakuk was thinking. She had expected this result and was completely at peace. She knew exactly what she was going to do.