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CHAPTER 1

A white silence blanketed the land. Newly fallen snow, hushed. Pure, crystalline ice hardening against the pale bark of the trees. The chilled air that swelled with the slow, sleeping breaths of a world that had yet to wake.

And a girl cloaked in heavy furs, waiting.

Apaay studied the breathing hole in the ice. Her joints ached with cold and the hours she'd crouched, alone save her dog Nakaluq, who lay quietly curled by her side. It was the third time this week she had come to the frozen plain that was Naga, the Eastern Sea, and she vowed it to be the last. Above, the sky was a spill of black ink. The long night was only in its first month, which left five months of darkness to endure. The moon, a shard of pale light, cast a watery sheen upon the ground. It was not enough.

Keeping her attention on the breathing hole, Apaay slowly removed the harpoon slung across the bulk of her fur parka. She supposed there were worse things in life than lack of sunlight. Here on the frozen sea, she knew true peace. The sea was sleeping beneath the ice. And the seals were, too.

Her gaze slid to Nakaluq's still form. Unsurprisingly, he was sleeping as well. She nudged his flank with one of her sealskin boots. "Wake up." A white cloud streamed from her lips.

His eyebrows twitched, and he curled his body tighter, bushy tail draped across his nose. A clear dismissal that he should not be disturbed.

Apaay rolled her eyes, for this was his absolute favorite game: feed me, and I will awaken. "You're supposed to be my lookout. You know, to alert me when danger is near?"

One of his large, triangular ears flicked west, toward the direction of her village. No sound, no danger. He grumbled, burrowing further into his warmth. The wind had begun to pick up, and it was cutting.

"I guess you don't want your treat then," she crooned.

Immediately, Nakaluq sprang to his feet, prancing around as if to say, *Look at me, I'm awake!*

Apaay snorted at the ridiculous display before wrapping an arm around his neck, pulling him close, and pressing a brief kiss to his snout. His pelt was a perfect reflection of the tundra—white flecked with gray. Snow on stone. "Sit still. You're making me tired."

Nakaluq side-eyed her.

"Don't look at me that way." The look that implied maybe she wouldn't be so tired if she were dreaming with Mama, Papa, and Eska in their ice house, warm and safe in slumber.

Dreaming. What a lovely notion.

It was simple, really. They needed to eat. They needed clothes, tools, oil for their lamps. Over the last few years, the seal population had dwindled, and she wondered if someone had disrespected the old rules. The Sea Mother did not take offense lightly. Without her favor, the marine life would travel elsewhere for the remainder of the season, proving for a difficult hunt. Decades had passed since anyone had sighted the Sea Mother beyond her watery silence. The sea grew restless.

Apaay did as much as she could, but often it was not enough. Her earlier attempts at harpooning a seal had ended in failure. The first time, she had struck too soon. The second, too late. *Like this*, Eska would say. *Try again*. And Apaay loved Eska. She did. But she could love her sister with the whole of her heart while also wishing things did not come so easy for her.

When she thought deeper on the issue, it was actually quite ironic. Her parents would be displeased to know she was out here alone, and yet who would come, if not her?

As if sensing her sadness, Nakaluq sidled closer.

“You know how Papa is,” she told her friend. “How can he expect to hunt with a broken leg? Or Mama, already busy with sewing and cooking and cleaning?”

A heavy paw settled on top of Apaay’s hand, the rough pads scraping against her mittens. She squeezed it. “Or Eska, too busy drooling over Lusa?” Her sister scowled whenever Apaay teased her about it, though admittedly she *did* drool over the girl. A lot.

Leaning close, Apaay whispered to Nakaluq, “Though not as much as you.”

The dog huffed as if offended.

Her smile fell as she again examined the breathing hole, huddling only a few feet beyond its slick edge. Black water struck the hard, icy rim. She did not have to worry. Even when her breathing shallowed out, she did not have to worry. This time of year, the ice was frozen four feet solid. There would be no cracks.

Still, she shuffled back to put another foot of distance between herself and the ledge. Her fingers tightened on the harpoon, the head a glint of carved ivory, the line curling along the ground. Drifting snowflakes clung to the ruff of wolverine fur encircling her hood.

Movement in the water.

Apaay held herself absolutely still. She was night, and snow, and hard, glinting ice.

The seal’s slick head breached the dark liquid, whiskers twitching, its skin a mottled blue-gray. Its pupils were wet and black, no white to see.

It hadn’t yet spotted her. As he’d been trained to do, Nakaluq remained motionless beside her, little more than a boulder among the ice as she lifted her harpoon in an unhurried motion so the animal wouldn’t startle. It would only take a few breaths before submerging again.

Her harpoon came down.

The seal vanished in a splash of water.

Apaay swore and lurched to her feet. Two hours of waiting and what did she have to show for it? Nothing. Her stomach hollowed out from the sense of failure, the anxiety of her family’s diminishing food stores, which would not last another week.

She waited another thirty minutes despite the unlikelihood of the seal returning. It would instead travel to another breathing hole, one without a sharp stick aimed at its head. The nearest one lay a half-mile north and wasn’t frequented as often as this one. It would be so nice to return home and slip beneath her furs. Rest, refuel, maybe even dream.

But they needed to eat.

Apaay whistled for Nakaluq as she approached the sled parked some yards away. Grabbing the harness, she looped it around his body and front legs so it hit him high on the chest. He was of stocky build, with powerful haunches built for endurance and a dense, double coat.

“My sweet, sweet boy,” she murmured, rubbing behind his ears. He nuzzled his nose against her chest like he used to do as a pup. The memory softened her hunting frustrations, and she buried her face in his neck before mounting the sled.

Two short whistles sent him north, the sled’s walrus-bone runners cutting lines through the thin layer of powder dusting the frozen sea. The runners’ smoothness pleased her, as they had only been recently completed after she had run the last sled, quite literally, into the ground. An accident, she’d claimed, but Papa had been furious nonetheless. Never one to waste anything, she had recycled the old material to build a swifter, lighter sled body, large enough to lash multiple seals to its base.

Above, the stars were hard pinpricks of light. The wind was a brutal, shredding force, stinging her cheeks and eyes, scouring her rough, chapped lips. There was nothing that was not hardened or chiseled in the North. It was a land of contrasts, white and black and gray, uncolored, inhospitable to all except those who had been born here. This was why Apaay admired the land. And this was also why she feared it.

With the temperature far below freezing, the second breathing hole had already iced over when she arrived. Using the tip of her harpoon, Apaay chipped away the thin film, the splintering sound causing her to flinch. She had just settled down to wait when a whistle carried high upon the wind. Three short bursts, followed by a longer note—the signal for friend.

“Apaay!”

Uh-pai.

Two figures approached, their silhouettes bulked in thick layers. Nakaluq perked up, and his tail, curled over his back in alertness, began to wag back and forth.

Apaay waved to Eska and her good friend, Chena. “Over here!”

They joined her at the breathing hole, her younger sister ruffling Nakaluq’s fur in greeting. “You know most people are asleep right now,” Eska said with amusement. “Right?”

Her mouth widened, more smirk than smile. The world was cold, but in her heart, she felt warm. “You know I’m not most people.”

“Trust me, I’m aware.”

Her attention slid to Chena, who was unusually silent, her small mouth grim. Silver limned the soft line of her friend’s jaw.

Apaay said to her sister, “You speak as if that’s a bad thing.”

“Not everyone is so sure of themselves.”

A snort sprang free at how untrue that statement was. What was more, that Eska would think such a thing. Apaay was stumbling along in life, chasing at the heels of those ahead. She shrugged. “Maybe. But let’s talk about what’s *really* important: my new joke.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“What did the shark say to the whale?”

Eska made a show of thinking deep thoughts, even though she probably already knew the answer. It was a game they sometimes played. Who could think of the most cringe-worthy joke? “I give up.”

“What are you blubbering about!” She snorted out a laugh. “Get it? Blubbering? Because—because the whale has blubber—”

Eska sighed, her face softening with affection. “That was terrible, you know.”

Apaay had always thought her sister beautiful, even as a child, and for the longest time, Apaay hadn’t the words to describe why that beauty was admired. People would mention how bright her eyes were, how smooth and round her cheeks were, how precious was her dimpled chin, her mouth like a rosy bud.

But now she understood what had eluded her for years. In a land that knew no warmth, Eska exuded what people craved: light, and a feeling of comfort, and peace.

“Anyway,” Apaay said, lifting her eyebrows, “you’re one to talk. Why are you out now, except to annoy me? You should be in bed.”

“Oh.” Her sister ran a mitten over Nakaluq’s back and sent Chena an unreadable look. “No reason.” She glanced at the sled, its empty base. “Any luck?”

Apaay offered a brief, close-mouthed smile, trying to ignore the sudden tension she felt at so few words. “Not yet.” Her sister didn’t know how truly dire their situation was, and she would like to keep it that way.

“If you need a break soon, let me know.”

And risk Eska taking the kill? “I’m fine, but thank you.” She turned to Chena. A definite paleness washed out the warmer undertones of her skin. It was concerning, but not uncommon. It was easy to catch a cold at this time of year. “How is Muktuk doing?” Apaay asked, speaking of Chena’s brother. “Has he learned the name of his new baby yet?” She tucked her braid back inside her hood.

“Not yet. My father is supposed to arrive sometime this week.”

Apaay nodded and returned to studying the breathing hole. Chena’s father had traveled to one of the neighboring villages, where his mother—Chena’s grandmother—currently lived. She and the elders would assemble to discuss the baby’s name-soul. This was the Analak way.

Someday when she was old enough, Apaay hoped for the opportunity in choosing a baby’s name-soul too. Names did not simply continue individual lives. They continued the life of the community. When the village celebrated a birth, they both celebrated a new person as well as the return of the namesake, or the deceased person from whom the name-soul was taken. These names, these kinship ties, were the threads that bound their community together.

After a few minutes, Eska said, with an absurd amount of nonchalance, “Pana was asking for you last night.”

She very nearly gagged. “Ugh. Spare me.”

“Apaay!”

“What? The man is softer than whale intestines. And anyway—” She slid her harpoon free as the water rippled, lowering her voice. “—he doesn’t actually like me. He just wants to . . . you know.”

Chena murmured, “You won’t even give him a chance?”

Apaay shot her friend a cutting look. The only reason she’d spent time with him was because he sometimes gave her the smaller of the seals if he killed two. But they didn’t need to know that. She had no patience for softness like Pana. It was a hard, jagged world out there. The North would carve you up, spit you out if you let it. There was no place for vulnerability on the ice. “Not all of us have someone like Silla in our lives. And can you both please lower your voices? You’ll scare the seals away.”

At the young man’s name, a flush deepened the bronze of Chena’s cheeks. “Right. Silla.” Strained laughter bubbled up, and she clamped her lips together.

Apaay looked at her friend. *Really* looked at her. She was about to ask what was wrong when Eska stated loudly, “It’s probably for the best. No doubt you’d chew Pana up if given the chance.”

It was not untrue. “Yes, he’d sob into his bear skins and then where would we be? Now hush. A seal’s coming.”

“Apaay—”

The ripple flattened into calmness, and Apaay waited, hoping a seal would breach its warm, liquid safety for the chance to take a breath of air, but their voices must have chased it back into the water’s deep. Apaay sat back on her heels, glaring at her sister.

At least Eska had the grace to look apologetic. “Sorry.”

Apaay took a breath to quell her frustration. Since the animal would probably not return, she’d have to come back tomorrow. Tonight, she would go home empty-handed. Again.

Eska reached for the harpoon. “I can get a seal for you. I know of another place—”

“I can manage on my own,” Apaay said, snatching it away. “I’ll come back tomorrow.”

“But the breathing hole isn’t far.”

“I said I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Something about Eska shrank, became small. “I’m just trying to help.”

Apaay hated herself for saying it, because it had been an accident, and Eska was kind, and her sister, whom she loved more than anything, but she said, “You’ve helped enough, don’t you think?”

Chena glanced between them, clearly uncomfortable. “Apaay—”

“What?” If she had come all this way, done all this work, it was not so Eska could take the kill from her. Call it selfishness, but for once, just *once*, Apaay wanted to prove she was as equally capable a hunter as Eska. The seal would be hers. Hers to kill, hers to claim. “Every day that passes is a day closer to starvation. So I’m sorry if I want to make sure we have something to eat next week. If it had been quiet as I had asked, maybe our problem would be solved.” It was hurtful, what she said. Disappointment in her performance made her cruel when she should be kind. “But I guess we’ll never know.”

Eska's eyes swam with unshed tears. Saltwater lapped against the ice, gently. "I'm going to go home then," she whispered.

Apaay nodded, looking to the tops of her boots. "I think that would be best."

"I am sorry," she whispered. "I didn't know about—I didn't know." With one last look to Chena, she left. Darkness soon swallowed her.

A few minutes passed before Chena spoke. Her face was grave. "That was a bit harsh, don't you think? She's only fourteen."

"I know that, but everything comes so *easy* to her." The last word she choked off. Apaay blinked rapidly against the sting in her eyes. Truly, it wasn't Eska's fault. All Apaay asked for was a chance. "Every time I fail to bring in a seal, or forget to replenish the oil stores, or ruin some other task, it's another mark against me. You know I want to lead the hunt this summer."

The men had long ago told her no, and yet she was a burr they could not remove, clinging to their clothes, blowing back in with the force of a blizzard whenever one of the younger men puffed out his chest, claiming this was not her place.

Apaay knew why they told her no. She was too flighty, some claimed. Too lost, others said. A leader commanded respect, exuded confidence, and built trust, acting as a beacon in the dark. Why would they ever choose someone like her, unreliable and drifting, to lead? To which Apaay would counter, how could she prove herself if not given the chance?

"You are under a lot of pressure," Chena agreed. "It would make anyone's patience short."

But. She heard a *but* in there.

Apaay rubbed a palm over her face, dislodging the ice that had condensed around her nose and mouth and eyes. Guilt swam through her. "I'll apologize." Chena was right. She had acted unnecessarily harsh toward Eska out of her own insecurity.

With the hunt a failure, they decided to return home. Nakaluq hauled the sled while she and Chena traveled on foot until they reached the shore. A cairn, as tall and wide as a man, the stones in browns and grays and stacked atop one another, signified the break between sea and unsea, as well as marked the direction to their community.

Snow crunched and caved beneath their boots. This was a still, silent land. Its hush sank deep into the earth, rooting down with those of the bracken and the trees. Their village was located two miles southwest. Boreal forest, thick and lush and evergreen, lay to the south. Open tundra lay to the north.

Chena, normally doing everything she could to fill the silence, was unusually quiet. A slight furrowing of her brow had Apaay resting a palm on her friend's arm. "Is everything all right? You don't look well."

Chena shook her head, gaze elsewhere.

Apaay pulled her friend to a stop and turned the shorter girl to face her. "There is something wrong." The realization was bright.

"Apaay—"

"Tell me."

Chena's glare cut through the gloom. Apaay noticed her fingers digging into her friend's shoulders, and she loosened her grip. "Sorry." There was something between them she couldn't see, filling up the space, pressing out her certainty and ease. The regret she felt for snapping at Eska didn't help.

A shuddering sigh slipped through the chill air. Chena rubbed her mittens over her face, cheeks red and chapped from the wind. "It's about Silla. We slept together last month."

"So?"

"As in we *slept* together."

Oh. *Oh*.

"Was it—I mean—"

Chena cupped her elbows in her palms. "He was good to me." Her throat worked, as if she wished to hide these words by swallowing them down. "But I realized afterward I wasn't wearing my pregnancy charm."

Her mouth parted in understanding as her stomach dropped. And dropped. She glanced at Chena's belly, its softness shielded behind layers of fur. Life swelled beneath it and would one day open its eyes to the world.

Clearing her throat, she looked away, unsure of what to say.

"Eska told me to come to you," Chena whispered. "I need help. I don't know what to do." The words wavered, a touch desperate. "We're not even married. I'm not sure if he'll be able to support me and the child. I mean, he's a capable hunter, a hard worker, and while he's excited to be a father, I can't—I mean—" Her eyes glittered, so dark, so very wide. "I'm not ready for this."

Apaay pulled her friend along, wanting to keep their blood flowing. Chena, pregnant. She could hardly wrap her mind around it.

They walked for perhaps half a mile in silence before Apaay asked, "Have you told your mother?"

"No. I'm afraid to."

The hill they climbed steepened, but once they reached the top they'd be able to see their village. Apaay glanced over her shoulder to check on Nakaluq and was not surprised to find him only a few feet behind, the sled's runners having carved deep tracks into the snow.

Apaay said, through shallow huffs, "I think you should tell her."

"What if she hates me?"

"She won't hate you. She *loves* you. You're her daughter."

"Yes, and now a pregnant one."

Reaching down, Apaay squeezed Chena's hand. So delicate, so small. "I know it doesn't feel like a joyous occasion, but it will. You're going to be a mother." Not even the worthiest of hunters could overshadow the act of raising and caring for another. "You also have me. If there's anything you need, I will do whatever I can to help."

Chena nodded, the lines bracketing her mouth easing into smoothness. A moment later, her nose crinkled in distaste. She lifted it to the wind. "Do you smell that?"

The scent hit as they crested the hill: sharp and acrid, unclean. Nestled in between clumps of frozen trees, sixty ice houses lay like small mounds of snow upon the ground. Except they were not greeted by glittering white domes. Gray streaks sullied the ice—a spattering of filth. The world rained ash as black smoke hissed from down below, pouring into the sky like blood from an open wound.