

CHAPTER ONE

Intro

It was mid afternoon when Tiguaak decided that Ikiaq had died. The sound of her ragged breath still filled the small iglu they shared. At times it would stop, as if Ikiaq's body had finally used the last of what strength it had left. Tiguaak dreaded these periods the most, since she had not yet been prepared to travel to the ones above, and that was his fault. But, after a short eternity, another breath always managed to claw its way out, and he was thankful that there was still time.

Aside from their bedding of hides, the iglu only contained a qulliq, a stone oil lamp, that cast flickering shadows on the snowy walls. He stared into the flame, searching for some kind of sign from the ancestors that they would welcome her, at last. However, the ancestors chose silence.

Decision made, Tiguaak squatted next to Ikiaq and gingerly lifted her up in his arm, like one would hold a baby. She had

been ill for so long, she weighed no more than a newborn doe at this point. Two large caribou hides were wrapped around her to keep out the cold, though he doubted she was aware of such earthly concerns anymore.

Ikiaq's body spasmed in his arms as he moved her and a weak cry left her lips as her head rolled back, long black hair spilling out of the hides. Hearing the sound, Kallik lifted the entrance flap and looked inside. Seeing Tiguaak standing with his life partner in his arms, Kallik nodded. It was time.

Tiguaak ducked under the flap, held open by Kallik, and emerged into the cold darkness outside. The land would not see the sun again for many months yet. The chill wind forced him to squint as he looked out at the small village. It consisted of a number of other iglu, both large and small, and one long building built from hides stretched over whale bones.

A few of the others stood nearby in a solemn line, though many stayed focused on their assigned tasks. Cleaning the days catch, preparing spears and tending to the boats. There was little time to squander for The People, especially in the winter periods. To see that this many of the others took the time to honour Ikiaq was a welcome sight to Tiguaak.

Ikiaq was much loved in the tribe. She had been a good wife and friend to Tiguaak, and had bore them three sons, two with Tiguaak. She had been a strong member of the women's circle, unafraid to speak her mind and worked for the good of all. The

illness had taken one of the best from them, and it time to ensure that she succeed in her journey to the ones above. It was the only thing left that they could do for her.

Tiguaak carried her past the on-lookers, snow crunching under foot, to where a sled was already prepared. The dogs were restless, sensing the coming journey, they were eager to run. Though the people had to move frequently to follow the herds of whales on which they relied, they were never very far from the sacred place. The place that Tekkeitsertok told them about about, and where he now waited for Ikiaq to make her second to last trip.

Tiguaak laid his small burden down on the sled and got the dogs moving. At this time of year, the place wasn't very far and he hoped to be back in time for the evening meal. He pointed the dogs towards the mountains that loomed in the distance, to an opening in the jagged cliff face that lead into the sacred place. He had never been inside the chamber within before this day, but he knew where to find it. They all knew.

Before long, the sled arrived at the entrance. It was a wide cave entrance that lead down into the mountains. The people had discovered it in his great-father's time, and the shaman of the tribe had been used as a resting place for the dead to make their final journey for generations. Tekkeitsertok was one of the current shaman. He was the one that had unlocked the full

sacred purpose of the place, showing the rest of them the power it held, for with Tekkeitsertok's wisdom it had become a grand shrine to Anguta, the god of the dead, the Father, and creator of all. Called by some who dare to whisper it, the man who cuts.

Tiguaak stopped outside the entrance and stuck a stake in the snow to tie the dogs to. They were already lying down in the powdery snow, happily panting and wagging their tails.

He knelt beside the frail form laid on the sled. If she had already been sent on her way, it would all be for nothing. He placed his head down next to hers and listened. Ikiaq still breathed.

The cave tunnel was lined with oil lamps. Where the shaman had gotten the oil, Tiguaak couldn't say. The old man had not been seen at the village for over a week, which was not uncommon. Perhaps Anguta himself had come and provided the oil and food, blessing his most devoted priest. Perhaps Anguta still knew how to hunt. Tiguaak scolded himself. It wasn't the time for one's mind to wander.

Gingerly, he lifted Ikiaq one more time and began walking into the cave entrance, casting long shadows that danced on the wall in the flickering light. The ever present wind that chilled him outside lessened and he found the tunnel to be quite pleasant. The tunnel was at least ten spans wide and tall enough that he could see at least three inuksuit standing guard along one wall. They were statues of stone, as tall as a man and built

in the shape of a human figure. The inuksuk had long been a marker to remember the people that had been here, but now were on their journey to the ones above.

At the end of the tunnel, the cave system opened up into a grand cavern. Also lit by flickering oil lamp light, the cavern ceiling and far side were still hidden in darkness. Many more inuksuit stood in groups in the cavern, proud testament to the ancestors that had already left them. That already resided now with the gods, through Anguta's blessing.

Near the center of the cavern a man stood next to a stone block that served as a work table. The man wore the same caribou hides sewn in the style of the village crafters, but Tiguaak didn't need to rely on the clothing to know who it was. It was Tekkeitsertok, it could be no other.

"Come, friend," Tekkeitsertok called to him, "It is time"

Tiguaak slowly continued carrying his wife through the chamber. It seemed wrong to rush, as if moving too fast would shake the life from her bones and everything would be ruined.

The inuksuk he passed by now had bundles of cloth and hides at their feet. Strands of rope and bones could be seen under the material as he got closer and passed by. It was his first time coming face to face with the tribe's ancestors. Even knowing what to expect, it was still unsettling. No, the ancestors guide them and this was a place of honour and joy. He settled himself.

Beside the stone table, Tekkeitsertok waited patiently, and

smiled on the small procession. Closer to the center now, the inuksuk here still played host to the more recent ancestors, their journeys surely complete, or nearly complete. Dry, desiccated bodies remain lashed to the large stone figured with ropes. Their skin turned to leather by the cold and the wind. Their underclothes barely able to cling to the bony bodies they covered. Tiguaak forced himself to look them in their eyeless faces, silently thanking them for their guidance.

His father was in here, somewhere. And his mother. He was only a boy at the time, and didn't come to the sacred place then. Maybe the one he gazed at now was her. There was no way to know.

Approaching the table now, Tiguaak saw Aput lashed to his inuksuk. The cuts were still fresh and blood had run down the stone figure, pooling at the bottom. Aput had been injured in the hunt some weeks ago, and now went with Anguta.

"Aput journeys well," Tekkeitsertok said, noticing Tiguaak's gaze, "Do not fear for him."

Tiguaak nodded.

On the center worktable, Tekkeitsertok had prepared the drink. Water that ran through the cavern was sacred and held much of the power of this place. It was part of the reason why the tribe never ventured too far from the sacred place. Tiguaak accepted the cup of water and together, they drank deeply, relishing the earthy taste it bore.

Tekkeitsertok gestured to a waiting inuksuk nearby. It was new and clean. Tiguaak gently held Ikiaq up against the stone figure while the old priest wrapped lashings around her and bound her to the stone. When he let go, her head lolled forward and caused her breath to become more raspy. Tiguaak stood back and looked with affection and pride at his wife, standing tall one last time, preparing their place with the ones above for when he would eventually join her. It would be a happy reunion.

The old priest took his place in front of Ikiaq. From the worktable, he had retrieved a long bladed knife. Cut from a whale bone, it was one of their finest, shapest knives.

"Anguta, hear us!", he began, his voice booming off the walls of the cavern. "This one's time has come and she needs your help on the journey ahead. Usher her in to sit with the ones above, as you taught us, as through your daughter Sedna, as through the cutting of the flesh."

Tekkeitsertok raised the knife in his hand and slashed down across Ikiaq's chest. Blood poured down and dripped off her feet, staining the stones. Tiguaak collapsed onto his knees.

"We join above, we cut the flesh," Tekkeitsertok intoned, again slashing the figure tied to the inuksuk, across the arm this time. More blood. Ikiaq's head twitched but no sound came forth.

Tiguaak collapsed lower, resting his head on the ground. It was too much to bear. His head was pounding. No one told him it

was like this.

"We join above, we cut the flesh," Tekkeitsertok intoned again, his monotone voice echoing through Tiguaak's head, making it spin. Another slash sounded, but Tiguaak couldn't look, though he felt the shame of it. A rivulet of blood trickled across the floor and wet his forearms. He looked up.

Before him, Tiguaak saw Tekkeitsertok surrounded in a hazy purple glow which spread and engulfed the inuksuk holding his wife. Every time the knife fell, with every slash, the purple glow grew more into the shape of a man. The glow caressed the dying woman and faded.

She was on her way.

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