

Chapter One

“Run, Totiuq! Run!”

Totiuq turned and fled, holding his bloodied deer-horn knife tightly as he did so. Behind him the terrible sounds of his clan fighting, and dying, rang loudly in his ears. Tears blinded Totiuq as he ran. The memory of his father’s brutal murder burned in his mind as his brother’s voice echoed over the chaos.

“Run!”

Totiuq flew across the snow, fear moving his legs as swift as any deer. It was not swift enough. An arrow whistled as it flew through the air, landing in his back with a wet thud. Totiuq stumbled and fell to his knees.

“Totiuq!”

Hearing his brother scream his name, Totiuq turned. Another arrow landed, this time in his shoulder. The impact tossed the youth to the ground, pushing the first arrow all the way through his torso. He kept his dark eyes fixed on his brother.

“Inna,” he whispered.

The broad young warrior named Inna was struck down, a darkly dressed invader slicing hard into his shoulder. Inna fell to his knees, his eyes hazed with pain. They met the gaze of his younger brother.

“Run, Totiuq,” Inna whispered. “Run.”

The mighty warrior’s eyes rolled. He fell backwards into the snow. The shock of his brother’s death knocked the breath from Totiuq’s lungs. Something woke in the youth then, strong and swift. It was the spirit of the Ice Bear. Filled with fresh strength, Totiuq pulled himself upright and ran. The other clans must be warned.

“Come back here boy!” a harsh voice called after him.

Totiuq heard the twang of a bowstring. He was certain he would be hit. A strong gust of wind struck suddenly from the north, its frosted breath pushing the arrow far off target. In the howls of that gust, Totiuq perceived his dead father’s voice.

Run, Totiuq.

Totiuq grimaced through the pain and pushed on. He ran for half a day before exhaustion and blood loss had their way. Totiuq stumbled once, twice, and fell.

The snow did not feel cold against his skin. It was soft and comforting. Even the winds that blew about him were pleasant. They were the winds of the tundra, of his home. The winds spoke with the voices of the ancestors, and they were happy to meet him. Totiuq smiled.

The world went dark.

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Totiuq was the fastest of his clan. He had consistently out-stripped his older brother in every race since his ninth birthday. His father had been so proud when, at eleven years old, Totiuq won a race against all the other warriors. He had not even been made a man yet.

“He will be a fine hunter,” his father said proudly, clapping Totiuq on the back. “Perhaps even better than Inna. The Chieftain will never want with Totiuq at his side.”

Totiuq blushed at that.

Inna grinned at him. “But he still must learn to make a spear,” he jested. “And we all know he hasn’t the patience for that.”

His father laughed.

The laugh changed. It was strange; not his father’s laugh at all. Totiuq stirred. He was not at the race’s end. He was facedown in the snow, two arrows sticking from his body at odd angles.

“Help,” he whispered. Then louder, “Help!”

Someone shouted. In an instant, Totiuq found himself surrounded by hunters he did not recognise. A strong hand turned him on his side. The pain, though dull and distant, still made Totiuq wince.

“He is a child,” one hunter said.

“What happened, boy?” another hunter, who knelt by him, asked. He looked kindly down at Totiuq.

“I am Totiuq of the Ice Bear Clan. Forgive me for crossing into your lands without permission.” Totiuq’s voice was weak, his breathing heavy and strained. “I came... my clan...” Totiuq struggled to find the words.

“Easy now, boy,” the hunter said. “It is all right. Can you stand? We will get you inside and warm.”

“No!” Totiuq grabbed the furred sleeve of the hunter kneeling by him. “You must go to your chief. Tell him... tell him the Ice Bear Clan is no more. Tell him to prepare... for war.”

Totiuq could say no more. He released the man’s sleeve and slumped down into the snow. A gentle breeze ruffled the hair on his still head and Totiuq found his voice again, riding the wind with the voices of his ancestors.

“Poor boy,” the hunter said, gently closing Totiuq’s blank eyes. “Come brothers, let us bury him.”

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“Do you think they will agree, Father?” Seraphimé asked quietly. This night, the youngest princess of the Osprey Clan had chosen to sit with her father in his pavilion. In the birthing pavilion on the outermost edge of the camp, her stepmother screamed and wailed in the pangs of labour.

The Chieftain of the Osprey Clan shrugged his broad shoulders. “I do not know. Perhaps they have not heard of our horses. Once they see them, however, I am sure they shall covet them. They may find the arrangement agreeable. In any case, we must make preparations to send the messengers when the snows clear.”

Though Chuchip had more troubles than his wife’s present agony to contend with, it was precisely her pain that weighed most heavily on his heart. Earlier that day, his Marshal had come into the village carrying the body of a young boy.

“His name is Totiuq of the Ice Bear Clan,” the Marshal had said sadly. “He came to warn us. Chieftain, they have come.”

A high-pitched scream pierced the air and the Chieftain winced. “Bride of Fire,” he whispered. “Bring her through this.”

“Fiacha is strong, Father. She will come through.”

Seraphimé had said the same about her own mother many years ago. Her conviction had been shattered when both mother and child died during the birthing. Chuchip marvelled at how Seraphimé could sound so sure now. The Chieftain nodded, but the loss of his first wife during childbirth echoed clear in his memory and he sat in silence, pale and miserable. Seraphimé took his hand.

“Ah, my little Marshal. What would I do without you, child?” he asked gently. He wrapped his thick arm around his daughter’s shoulders and pulled her in close. “I should be comforting you this evening, not the other way around.”

Seraphimé smiled and quipped, “There are some things that men are ill-equipped to deal with.”

The Chieftain laughed. Seraphimé was the second and youngest child by his first wife, and his favourite. He had no sons. Seraphimé, ever since she could walk and

talk, had filled that role. She had been taught to ride and fight. She was given all the lessons on leading men that the Chieftain could give or commission.

Now, at ten years old, she had become a beautiful, if solemn, young girl with a strange sort of wisdom and the promise of greater beauty yet to come. Thick waves of auburn hair curled down her back, if ever she was in the mood to let her hair loose. Her eyes sparkled in the most astonishing shade of green. She had a sweet smile, though it was rarely shown, and a very quick mind.

Seraphimé had never been one for dresses, preferring instead to wear the riding clothes of the men. Despite her older sister's disapproval, the Chieftain indulged Seraphimé and had riding and fighting clothes made especially for her. The ensemble included an exquisitely carved wooden training sword.

Wood enough to carve a sword was very rare in the tundra, and very expensive. Seraphimé adored that sword and had since taken to wearing it at all times, tucked into her belt as if it were made of steel.

The fighting men, most especially the Marshal, found it most amusing and included her in all their gatherings. They patiently listened to her ideas and suggestions with gravity and concealed smiles. Often, she would surprise them with a clarity of insight not often afforded to the very young.

Seraphimé's older sister, Gabija, was almost a polar opposite to her younger sister. She was everything a woman ought to be – polite, demure, but not ignorant, generous and kind. She loved dresses and fussing with hair and had often tried to turn her unruly younger sister into a lady. Seraphimé refused point blank, and even offered to settle the matter with a scruff outside. Gabija had given up, hoping against hope that things would change as Seraphimé approached womanhood.

Despite this disparity, Seraphimé and Gabija were close. Both girls were intelligent and lively, and shared a fondness for pranks and jokes. Though they would occasionally squabble, the fight never lasted long and was just as soon forgotten. The Chieftain considered himself blessed indeed to have daughters such as his.

Fiacha screamed once more, drawing both father and daughter from their silent reveries. Then the strangled squall of a newborn sounded bold and clear into the night. The Shamanka entered the Chieftain's pavilion with a smile. The Chieftain stood up abruptly, momentarily forgetting his daughter.

"A girl. You have a daughter," the Shamanka said.

"My wife?"

"Alive."

The Chieftain relaxed visibly, then a slow grin crossed his face. He turned to Seraphimé and picked her up in the air. "A daughter!" he exclaimed as he wheeled Seraphimé around to her delight. "A daughter!" He hugged Seraphimé close. "Let's go meet her! Find your sister and come to the birthing tent!"

"Yes, Father," Seraphimé said as soon as she was set down. She ran out of the pavilion and nearly crashed into her sister.

"Gab!" Seraphimé exclaimed in surprise and joy.

"I came as soon as I heard the baby. What news?"

"Alive, both of them. And it's a girl."

Gabija squealed in delight. She and Seraphimé ran to the birthing pavilion hand in hand. They arrived only moments after their father.

When they entered the pavilion, both girls were immediately struck with the scent of blood and worse. Gabija had been through all of this before with the birth of her

sister but this was an entirely new experience for Seraphimé. She had not been permitted in the birthing pavilion after her mother died.

She stared with wide, terrified eyes at the cloths and furs stained with blood as the women began to clean up.

“The first births,” Seraphimé heard one say, “are always the most difficult.”

Gabija moved forward to her father’s side, unafraid, and joined the happy circle. The Chieftain pulled Gabija onto the bed where Fiacha now rested and allowed Gabija to hold the newborn. Seraphimé could go no further. Her stomach rolled and tears streamed down her cheeks. She turned and ran.

Seraphimé could not see to where she was running. It did not matter. She just had to get away from that place, that terrible room filled with blood and pain. She ran until she was well clear of the pavilions.

Sinking to her knees, she emptied her stomach in the snow. She struggled hard to breathe through wracking sobs. Dizzy from the effort, Seraphimé reeled backwards and the world became suddenly dark. No one was there to see her faint.

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The Marshal found her during his brief patrol of the campground. She lay out in the snow beside the now frozen puddle of her own sick.

“Dear, dear,” he said gently, lifting the child in his arms. “That scared you did it?”

Seraphimé did not reply. She shivered silently and unconsciously in his arms.

“I cannot blame you, child,” he muttered as he walked quickly back to the camp. “It scares the ghost out of me. Bride of Fire, but that you women survive such a feat is beyond me.”

Two days later, Seraphimé awoke from her fever to find her worried father sitting by her bed.

“Papa!” she cried as the man wrapped her tightly in a firm embrace. She burst into tears as he rocked her.

“Oh, my little marshal!” he whispered over and over, pulling Seraphimé ever closer to him.

“Is that how mamma died?” Seraphimé asked after her tears subsided.

The Chieftain sighed and nodded. “Your brother was too big for her. She couldn’t push him out.”

“I’m never having children,” Seraphimé whispered, horrified. Not knowing what to say, the Chieftain held his favourite daughter to him and rocked her until she fell once more into fevered sleep.

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With the careful attention of the Shamanka and her older sister, Seraphimé recovered from her fever in a little over a week.

“You are strong,” the Shamanka said gently when Seraphimé’s green eyes fluttered open.

“Sera!” Gabija gasped. She threw herself on her sister in a rough embrace.

“Ow,” Seraphimé complained.

“I was so afraid! I thought you were dying.”

“Water.”

“Here, love,” the Shamanka said to Gabija as she handed the girl a water-skin.

“Can you sit up?” Gabija asked her sister.

Seraphimé grunted and pushed herself upright. She felt dizzy from the effort.

“Food.”

“There is soup coming,” Gabija said. “Here, drink.”

Seraphimé took the skin and drank down the warm, honeyed water thirstily. "Papa?" she asked.

Gabija took back the water-skin. "With Fiacha. He was so worried. I've never seen him cry like that. Not since Mamma died."

Seraphimé sighed. "I'm sorry." She spoke in little more than a whisper. "I didn't mean to upset anyone. I just... I just couldn't stay in there."

"It's all right child," the Shamanka said. She knelt by Seraphimé's bed and pressed her palm against Seraphimé's forehead. "Seeing the pain a woman must bear to give life to her child is not an easy thing." The Shamanka smiled at Seraphimé. "Your fever has broken. I'll let you out of bed in two more days. For now, though, rest."

Seraphimé nodded and lay back on the bed. Gabija arranged the furs around Seraphimé.

"Stop fussing." Seraphimé fell asleep before her sister could respond.

True to her word, the Shamanka permitted Seraphimé out of bed two days later. Knowing that Fiacha was back safely in her father's pavilion, Seraphimé mustered up the courage to visit her and her new half-sister. Despite her trembling legs, she marched into the pavilion. Her determination was such that anyone could have mistaken her stride as a march to war.

Fiacha greeted Seraphimé's pale face with a bright smile as she held the bundle that was the newborn in her arms. "Hello, Sera," she said gently.

Seraphimé barely managed to nod. She looked ill again.

"Don't worry, tender-heart," Fiacha said encouragingly. "As you can see, the baby and I are quite well."

"Can I see her?" Seraphimé asked, curiosity finally overcoming her fear.

"Of course you can. Come here."

Seraphimé walked forward and climbed up onto the bed. Fiacha sat up and moved the furs that obscured the baby's face. Seraphimé wrinkled her nose.

"Her face is all squished."

Fiacha laughed brightly. "It won't stay like that! Don't you think she looks like your father?"

Seraphimé looked long and hard. Though she found it difficult to distinguish anything about the pink, squashed features that resembled anybody, she nodded.

"Do you want to hold her?"

Seraphimé gasped in surprise. She did want to hold her, but was terrified that she might drop the newborn or hold it the wrong way so that its neck broke. She had heard of such things happening.

"Hold out your arms like this," Fiacha instructed, demonstrating.

Seraphimé did as she was told and Fiacha gently placed the child in her arms. Seraphimé's heart was immediately stolen as the baby yawned and stretched. She opened one pale eye to gaze at Seraphimé and cooed before falling asleep once more.

"She's beautiful," Seraphimé breathed, stroking the little face with her finger.

"Yes," Fiacha said with a smile. "Just like you."

Seraphimé looked up at Fiacha and felt suddenly like crying. Fiacha noticed and opened her arms wide. Seraphimé walked forward on her knees and curled against Fiacha, the baby still in her arms. Fiacha hugged them both close and all three soon fell to sleep.

The Chieftain found them that evening, still in each other's arms.