

Winter's Charge

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If every story must have a beginning, then mine should start on the ice. I was born on the ice. I was raised on it. I learned to hunt while running over the crisp, clear crunch of it. I am constantly captivated by the purity of its whites and the bejeweled depth of its blue hues. As a boy, I once even lost myself on it.

Losing my way on the ice happened as one of my people might expect, in a blizzard. My clan had trekked west from our summer village nestled amid fields of the tundra's fading fireweed toward the rocky hunting grounds on the coast. I was twelve years old, and this winter would be my first chance to hunt with the men of our village. I was so excited as I mushed my small dogsled alongside those of the adults. What kills would I make this year to help feed the Alawaeun Clan? Would I catch a seal or a beluga or maybe even a walrus? Surely I was brave enough and strong enough now to hunt all three.

Our hunting party left the wooden shelters of our winter village once the ice fields proved safe enough to sled across. We traveled along the snowy ground with the light of the midnight sun to guide our sleds and the waves of the Aurora to wash our dreams clean. I dreamt of many things during our journey, but the dream I remember most was the vision of Nanuq. I saw Nanuq robed in her magnificent white fur with four great stars of heaven encircling her brow like a crown. With one mighty paw, she held back the frothy waves of the green sea. The outstretched claws of her other paw kept the tremulous mountains from tumbling on top of her. And in Nanuq's lap an Alawaeun child slept the deep sleep of one at peace with the world.

I am not sure why I dreamed about the great white spirit bear. Perhaps it was a type of premonition given to me by the Father Spirit. The clan elders all say that the dreams dreamt under the Aurora are some of the holiest and most important of our lives. I am not sure if I believe that to be true, but I do know that my dreams under the multihued waves of sky lights are always highly symbolic.

The blizzard that changed my life came soon after the third recurrence of my dream about Nanuq. Our hunting party had just entered the less-sheltered part of Mukluk Pass when the winter storm unleashed its full fury. A blur of white obscured the sun, and then darkness overtook the world. We fought against the swirling cold, our quivering lips as blue as the ice deep beneath our fur-lined boots. My father yelled for the rest of the party members to huddle ourselves and the dogs together, using the sleds as windbreaks.

As the storm worsened, my father and I dug trenches in the mounting snow to further protect ourselves from the biting wind. I heard nothing but the storm's fierce roar until a sound far louder and far worse shook the frozen ground around us.

"Avalanche!" my father yelled. I saw the word form in his mouth, but never heard it resonate from his lips over the awesome shake of the earth. Even so, he shoved me out of our crude igloo toward safety. Fear fueled my legs and I ran with abandon away from the colossal sound of shifting snow. I ran blind into the swirling darkness using my ears to guide me away from the deadly waves of white. When a wall of rock appeared out of the blinding blizzard, I tightened the leather gloves around my fingers and began to climb. I scrambled up the craggy mountain while waves upon waves of snow crashed into the pass below me. The avalanche tumbled through the pass, burying anything in its way. I kept climbing, unsure of how high I

should go to be safe. I climbed up and up and only stopped when my hands began to blister from the near-constant friction of gripping stone with leather-clad skin. I was high on the mountain now and, although I finally felt safe from the avalanche, the blizzard's bite was far worse since I was so exposed to the winds. Our clan elders speak of the wind as the touch of the ancestors' spirits. If that was true, then clearly these gusts were the slaps of ancestors from a rival clan who wished me dead! I had to find shelter soon or I would indeed meet death on this slope.

I found my temporary salvation in the form of a shallow cave on the leeward side of the mountain. It was little more than a hole in the rock. It was too small for a full-grown man to use, but just large enough for me. I shoved myself into the stony darkness and used the remnant twigs of an abandoned eagle's nest to keep the howling spirits at bay. The last of my strength ebbed and I curled up inside my fur parka to sleep a dreamless sleep.

I found not blizzard, but a sullen gray sky when I awoke the next morning. The world that I greeted looked so different from the world I had left. Parts of the pass had snow piled higher than the combined height of three grown men in several places. The snowpack's now lumpy surface was strewn with rocks and debris.

I found a much easier path down the mountain than my original way up had been. A good thing, since my hands were more sore than useful. I had checked my fingers for frostbite and gratefully found none, but it would take time bound in bandages before I could use them without pain. I searched and searched along the pass for our campsite and found only the splintered remains of a few dogsleds. I found four holes where three dogs and a man had managed to dig themselves out of the snowpack, but everywhere else I met the frozen dead chaotically buried in their new white tombs.

As I stared at the tips of one man's frozen fingers shoved above the blanketing white, I realized that I had fled in the opposite direction from the rest of our hunting party. That decision had saved my life yesterday, but now I faced the world without supplies, transportation, or the older men's protection. I doubted I would last the night.

I kicked snow away from a half-buried dogsled in the hope that I would find food for my stomach and medicine for my hands in the wreckage. I found a bit of dried salmon, but little else of use. I hunkered down amongst the shattered remains of my fellow hunters and slowly ate the smoky salmon spiced with the saltiness of my own quiet tears.

Darkness soon found me, but I no longer cared. I had tried to follow the surviving man's and dogs' tracks, but the night's winds had already erased them. Then I decided to wait out the day to see if the surviving man and dogs would return. They did not. I tried to remember the way home, but could not. With no place to go, I huddled next to the strewn supplies of my wrecked dogsled and tried to build a fire from its splintered wood to help me keep warm.

I stayed next to the graves of my clan members long after the fire died, the temperature dropped, and the winds rose again. I was trembling so violently that I was sure I would break my chattering teeth before the end, but if I must die, then at least I would die alongside my kin.

A shuffling sound roused me from my fevered thoughts and I looked up to see a miracle materialize out of the starry darkness. The miracle came in the form of one of the most dangerous creatures an Alawaeun hunter can encounter: a polar bear.

I wish I could tell you that I behaved in a manner befitting my new status as an Alawaeun warrior, but I am ashamed to say that I did not. When I first saw the bear, I screamed like a woman. Meeting death was about to be far more painful for me than it had been even for my frozen clansmen.

As the bear moved closer, I shut my eyes and waited for the strong swipe of a paw to permanently tear my spirit free of my body. I waited and waited, but death did not come. Finally, I cautiously peeked with one eye at the world around me. My eyes widened when I found the bear simply sitting in the snow and watching me. Although I am no judge of emotions in animals, I remember thinking that she seemed quite sad.

“What are you doing here, young one?” the polar bear asked.

I mouth fell open in surprise. Surely I was dreaming. Surely the Aurora had given me some last wild vision of peace before death finally claimed me.

She repeated the question and I quickly sat up against the cold stone wall behind me. “How can you speak? What are you?”

The polar bear slowly shifted her head, studying me with an expression far different from any other predator’s that I had ever seen. “I am your guardian...for now at least,” she said.

“My father once told me the story of how the Father Spirit sent an orca to save a warrior from drowning,” I replied. “The orca used the warrior’s fishing net to drag his leaking boat back to shore. I have heard the same sorts of stories about belugas and ravens, but never a polar bear.”

“Never a polar bear...” The sadness seemed to deepen in her dark eyes. “It is true that my kind and yours are often enemies, but not even I will thwart the Father Spirit when he decides to favor one of man.”

I said nothing.

“Come,” she said as she rolled her massive body back onto her four large paws, “You need warmth and food and you will find neither here.”

I crossed my arms in stubbornness and stayed firmly seated on the tumbled ice and snow. If it was even possible, she laughed when she saw my resoluteness. “Come, young one,” she said to me. “Death has no purpose for you yet.”

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Ukiuq,” she said the Alawaeun name for winter. “You may call me Ukiuq.”

I tapped my hand against my fur-clad chest in a traditional tribal salute. “I am honored to know your name,” I said. “I am Ataniq, son of Tuvaurat who is chief of the Alawaeun Clan.”

She bowed so deeply toward me that her black nose almost touched the snow beneath her white-furred paws. “I am honored as well. Ataniq...yours is a strong name. Now come before you further drain it of its power.”

I took a step toward her and then stopped again in uncertainty. “Where are you taking me?”

“Home to your village, of course.”

Reluctantly, I moved my shivering form to stand beside her. Ukiuq lowered her massive shoulders within my reach and I heaved my sore, hungry body into a riding position atop her back.

Together we trekked through the pass and out into the white ice fields toward the distant Aputyaq Mountains. We stopped once on our journey that day so that she could dive for food through a large seal’s breathing hole. I ate the raw fish that she brought me before she caught and killed on a young seal. We rested after her fishing expedition to let her pick the seal’s fatty remnants from around her teeth and then wash the meal’s gore from her fur. While we waited for her coat to dry, I used my small stone knife to salvage some seal fur for use as extra lining in my clothes. The result of my labor was hardly nice smelling since I had no time or tools to tan the skin, but the extra layering did help keep more of the winter chill at bay.

Ukiuq and I moved on with her walking and me riding astride her shoulders most of the way. I was asleep during much of the journey, but I do recall being pleasantly surprised by the

soft warmth of the polar bear's pale fur. I needed that source of comfort more than anything else at the time.

We must have walked for two or three days after the ice fishing event, but I cannot be certain. When I slept, I dreamed that the spirit bear Nanuq was herding my clan members together using me as her shepherd's staff. When I awoke, Ukiuq and I stopped again so that she could find me food. I ate leftover fish along the rest of our journey inland, while Ukiuq ate nothing. That worried me, but when I tried to share some of my fish with her, Ukiuq refused it and told me, "It is more important that you build and keep your strength than I, young one. I'll be well enough not to need food until the end of our journey together."

I shuddered when I considered the implications of that. Already I had become so accustomed to Ukiuq's presence that I could not imagine life without her. She was my guardian and I was her charge. She seemed a second mother to me and she talked to me like I was her cub. That thought sparked a question.

"Do you have cubs?" I asked, both excited and yet somehow afraid of her answer.

"Once," she whispered, her warm black eyes staring unseeing at the ice fields around us. "Once, a long time ago, I was just another bear... a mother with two cubs to care for. I cared nothing for the world of men until one of them killed my cubs, then I sought my revenge."

I stared at her old broken tooth and shivered. "What happened?"

Ukiuq closed her eyes and sighed. "I killed the youth who had killed my young and then destroyed his father when he tried to avenge his son's death. I left an Alawaeun woman a widow and childless mother that day, just as I had become." She shook her head. "My sorrow spawned hatred and my hatred only birthed more grief. My retribution against men displeased the Spirit Creator because, as much as He loves His animals, He loves His people more. He punished me. He gave me the gift of men's speech, prolonged my life, and then set me as guardian and guide to lost Alawaeun children until my time in this world is spent."

"So you came to save me?"

She bowed her head. "And so I came to save you."

We walked on in silence then while I considered what she had told me. We spoke little during the next few days, but when we rested I always found myself drawn to the soft fur of her side to huddle in sleep. Later I would often awake cuddled beneath her paws against the firmness of her stomach. The fierceness of her protection unnerved me a little, but it saved my life once the wolves came prowling.

The wolves appeared on the sixth day of our journey. We had crossed from the ice fields of the frozen sea and onto the shallow snow banks along the shore when the pack found us. We heard them before we saw them and the viciousness in their howls raised the hair on the back of my neck.

"We just passed into the pack's territory and they are not happy with our presence," Ukiuq said. She kept the tone of her voice calm, but I sensed her unease through the sudden tightness of her shoulder muscles.

I frowned. "Don't wolves usually leave white bears alone?" I asked.

She nodded. "I think there is more afoot here than what meets the eye. Whatever happens, promise me that you'll stay close to me and do just as I say, Ataniq."

"I will. I promise."

I slid down from her back as Ukiuq stood on her hind legs, stiffing the air and pawing at the whipping wind. The pack loped along the snow drifts toward us. They ran spread apart with their heads down and their eyes narrowed. I frowned. Not one of them stopped to check the scents of

the wind or even to mark their territory on a boulder. Instead they encircled us and halted in unison well outside of Ukiuq's striking range.

The pack's leader stepped forward and growled. "What purpose brings you to our territory, Nanuq spawn?" the alpha male demanded.

If Ukiuq was surprised at the wolf's gift of speech, she did not show it. "The Spirit Creator commissioned me to deliver this one safely back to his village under the protection of the Alawaeun ancestors. I dare not thwart the Creator's will or ignore the ancestors' guidance and neither should you, pack leader."

The alpha growled. "We care not for your spirits, bear. We have our own to contend with."

"And it is they that sent you to block our path," Ukiuq surmised.

The big white wolf nodded. "Your presence here has angered the Juk Clan ancestors. We have come to ensure that you leave their sacred hunting grounds at once."

The polar bear's lips pulled back from her sharp teeth in a silent snarl. "The Juk Clan members have always followed their dark shamans, who are enslaved to the will of the Spirit Trickster. Surely you don't follow his leadership as well."

The alpha puffed out his chest to make himself seem bigger. "Take care what you say of the first and true Morning Star. It was he who gave us speech. It was he who gave us this territory. We are his allies even until death."

"Then we are at war, wolf." A long low roar issued from Ukiuq's throat.

The alpha's lips pulled back from his long fangs in a cold smile. "And so we are."

The attack came swiftly from all sides. The six howling wolves charged us at once. I had readied my small knife, but it never tasted wolf's blood. Instead Ukiuq grabbed the back of my coat with her teeth and flung me into the air toward the nearest up-thrust of snow-covered rock. My sudden flight confused the wolves, some of whom broke off their attack of her to chase after me. I sailed between the stout snow piles flanking either side of the rock and jammed my knife into the packed ice clinging to the rock's peak. Using the knife's leverage, I hauled myself away from the three snapping, howling wolf jowls below me. My feet scrambled onto a narrow platform of stone. I could feel the rock tremble as the wolves jumped toward me. They were abysmal climbers though, so I knew I would be safe as long as I could keep my precarious balance atop the icy perch.

With me away from direct danger, Ukiuq turned her attention to her own fight on the ground. Her claws flashed and her jaws snapped as she bounded toward the alpha male, kicking snow into the eyes of his allies as she lunged for him. The alpha dodged the first swipe of her massive paw and circled low to avoid the second. Ukiuq growled. She viciously bit and then flung a wolf which had crept a little too close to her. The female wolf slammed into my boulder, causing tremors to run through the stone under my feet. I desperately held on to my perch as the snow suddenly shivered off the rock and onto the three wolves below me.

While the young female died and my attackers busily dug themselves out of the shallow snow drift, a powerful swipe of Ukiuq's left paw made short work of a second wolf. When the three wolves guarding my rock finally joined the fray, Ukiuq bared her teeth at the snarling newcomers and then fended off another attack from the alpha male.

He jumped back as the other three rushed in to assault her simultaneously from the front and sides. She sprang forward and bit the head of one of her attackers—crushing his skull—before another managed to bite her left paw. She roared and batted the attacker away, but he had caused enough injury that she could not put weight on her mangled paw. Even with only three useful limbs, she kept fighting.

For a while the bear and the remaining wolves seemed at a deadlock. Then, as two wolves distracted her, the alpha male finally managed to circle behind her. He dashed forward as she fended off his allies and caught hold of her rump with his sharp teeth. She roared again and threw him off. The alpha male's mate circled close. She lunged for Ukiuq's shoulder just above the injured paw, but was not fast enough to avoid inadvertently colliding with the alpha male as the bear flung him off of her. Together the wolf pair tumbled across the hard-packed snow. With the two wolves momentarily stunned, Ukiuq closed in on the last. She cornered him as he stood snarling and trying to scramble up the base of my temporary refuge. I watched the two of them fight—circling, snapping, and lunging at each other—until I heard the sliding of small pebbles behind me. I turned to look behind me and screamed. The alpha male had climbed up the shallow backside of the boulder while Ukiuq was fighting the other remaining male.

“Ukiuq!” I yelled as I brandished my small knife. The alpha's bloody lips parted in a silent laugh as he saw the terror in my face. My guardian saw it, too.

“Jump, Ataniq,” she roared. She turned, lunged, and finally caught her foe with a fatal bite to his neck. “Jump to me now!”

I did not jump so much as simply fall away from those wretched canine teeth. I summersaulted through the cold air and found myself suddenly sliding down the angle of Ukiuq's back to the ground.

“Are you all right?” Ukiuq asked me.

I nodded. The impact winded me, but I was otherwise unhurt. Before I could get up; however, the alpha female was there. She charged us and Ukiuq shoved me behind her with her good paw before rearing and pouncing toward the attacker. The two met and their blood mingled as the wolf bit the bear's neck while the bear broke the wolf's forepaw. They separated and snarled at each other. Ukiuq charged her again and she backed off.

I leapt for cover as the alpha male sprang from the boulder into Ukiuq's back. My scream matched her roar of agony as he bit down hard on the back of her neck. Ukiuq collapsed onto the bloody snow under the weight of the wolf, but regained her footing.

The alpha howled his hard fought triumph as he bounded from her back. Then I saw the polar bear raise her uninjured paw behind him. She brought it down across the middle of his back and his howl turned into a cry of pain. She dragged his struggling body toward her and bit down through his neck. The alpha convulsed a moment and then went limp as his blood mingled with that of his fellow wolves.

With her mate and the rest of her pack destroyed, the alpha female retreated. She loped on three legs off into the snow beyond our sight, leaving Ukiuq and me alone among the dead members of her pack. While the last threat ran from us with her tail tucked between her legs, I began to clean my guardian's wounds with fresh snow. As I tried to bandage the polar bear's injuries; however, she gently pushed me away. “No, Ataniq, you must seek refuge with your clan while the danger is less. Quickly go before darkness comes and the rest of the Spirit Trickster's allies find me. Go!”

“No, I won't leave you!” I cried. For the first time in my life I did not care when hot tears filled my dark eyes. I let my sorrow spill openly down my chapped cheeks. “I promised you!”

Ukiuq smiled wistfully then. “I was never meant to live by your side forever. But you...you must live long and well. You must live so that you may tell the story of the Father Spirit's favor shown toward you and your family through my rescue of you. Go. Go and do not forget how much you are loved, young one.”

Tears were freezing against my exposed skin. “I won't forget you. I promise.”

“I know. Be strong for me, Ataniq; show me the power of your name. Your clan’s camp is just beyond that hill. Find your family and tell them all that has happened.”

I gave her one last fierce hug and then I ran. I ran swiftly over the crunching ice and drifting snow until my feet were numb and my chilled breath burned in my throat. But, as I saw the flickering campfires of the village, I heard a single wolf’s growl. I glanced behind me and my heart nearly froze with fear. The alpha female was loping on her three good legs, trying to catch up to me. I tried to push through my fear and fatigue to run even faster, but I knew there was little hope I could make it to the protection of my clan before the wolf caught me. Injured as she was, she was still much swifter than I.

I gazed at the village in regret and was startled by a strange sight. I saw my father standing beside our family tent talking to a clan elder. Father wore bandages on his head, but he seemed otherwise well. I blinked and looked again. Yes, he really was there! He must have been the other survivor of the avalanche!

“Father! Father!” I cried desperately.

He looked in the direction of my voice. “Ataniq?”

The wolf was snapping at my heels. “Father, help me!”

“Ataniq!”

My father grabbed his bow and arrows and then sprinted faster than I had ever seen him move. He bellowed orders as he ran toward me. Several men from our village yelled and readied arrows as the wolf and I drew closer to the first row of hide and wood homes. I saw the red-painted ptarmigan feather fletching of my father’s arrow as it shot past my face and imbedded itself in the alpha female’s shoulder. She yowled in pain, but kept moving. I pushed myself as fast as I could.

“Ataniq!”

I felt a sharp pain as the wolf’s paw caught my ankle. I tumbled forward in the snow as two more arrows flew through the air above me. They struck the wolf and she fell over dead at my feet. Then my father was there. He pulled me out of the snow and threw his arms around my slender shoulders in a fierce embrace. “Are you hurt?”

I shook my head as we examined my leg. The wolf’s claws had barely grazed the skin beneath my fur pants.

“Ataniq!” my mother called. She half-pulled me from my father’s grasp to hug me. “How is this possible? How have you come back to us alive from the avalanche?” she gasped.

“A polar bear,” I answered. “She brought me home to you.” I then told them the story of my escape from the avalanche and of Ukiuq finding me in the freezing snow among the dead remains of our kin. I explained our journey across the ice together and the wolf pack’s attack and finally my last run alone to our village.

My mother, who has a far more practical soul than my father, laughed heartily at my tale. “Oh, Ataniq, you make up such wonderful stories.”

“It’s true, Mother. The bear found me after the thundering snow killed all of those around me.”

“We had given up all hope,” said my mother. “However you came to us, I thank the Spirit Creator for this gift of second hope.”

“You should, Mother, for he is the one who sent the polar bear as my guardian and guide.”

My father just continued to stare at me. Finally he spoke, “What was the polar bear’s name, Ataniq?”

“Tuvaurat, you can’t seriously believe our son’s story?”

He silenced her with a severe look and turned back to me.

“Ukiuq,” I answered, “She called herself Ukiuq.”

“The winter bear...” My father stared off into the swirling snow as tears crept into his usually stern eyes. “She saved you?”

I frowned at his sudden display of emotion. “Yes, Father. She battled wolves to protect me and killed all but the one chasing me.”

My father was speechless.

“Tuvaurat, what is it?” my mother asked.

He frowned. “Ukiuq was name of the white bear that killed my grandfather and his father, but then she rescued me from the sea when I was a youth. She was old when I knew her, so it could not be the same bear that rescued my son...it couldn't be.”

Mother and I both frowned. “I thought it was an orca that saved you,” she said.

“I lied,” Father said quietly. “My father hated polar bears and forbade me from ever telling the truth.” He shook his head. “Even after he died, I never wanted to. The memory of my rescue is...too painful.”

I stared at my father in confusion during the awkward silence. Could Ukiuq's story of revenge and recompense really deal with our family? If so, why was my father so unwilling to talk about it? I frowned at the bear-tooth talisman hanging from Father's neck and suddenly gasped in recognition.

“Father,” I said as I held up his talisman. “Ukiuq has a tooth that is missing half of its tip. It's the same shape as this one you wear.”

My father stared from me to the tooth and shook his head again. “Now she rescues my son from the snow and saves our family line once again. Ataniq, where is she?” his voice sounded somehow wistful and sad.

“She was too hurt by the wolves to come with me for the last of the journey here. She is dying, Father.”

He stared silently at me a while, his face unreadable. “Come, Ataniq, show me where the bear has fallen,” he said finally.

Father grabbed his bow and an extra quiver of arrows. Together we trekked out of the village with five other hunters on dog sleds to the place where the Juk Clan's wolf allies had done their worst. We found Ukiuq lying in a wheezing heap where I had left her.

My father motioned to the others to stay back while he approached the downed bear alone, an arrow nocked in his bow as he moved.

Ukiuq moved her head toward him when she heard him approach. “Tuvaurat, is that you? You have grown since I last saw you,” she said between wheezing breaths.

Father's eyes narrowed as he drew the bowstring taut.

“Father! No!” I cried, not sure what was happening or why. I fought against the strength of the Alawaeun hunter holding me, but could not escape his grasp.

My father watched the bear a moment and then commanded, “Show me your teeth, Winter Bear.”

Ukiuq pulled her bloody lips back in a snarl although there was no malice in her eyes. She only stared at my father sadly as he counted her teeth.

His fierce gaze stopped at her broken tooth. “It is you...”

She stared at him forlornly. “Did you really doubt it, young one?” she whispered.

“Why?” he shouted. “Why did you kill them, but save me? I broke that tooth and you wouldn’t even fight back. You should have fought back! You knew that I got stranded while on the hunt to kill you. Why save me and then save my son? You should have killed us both!”

“My revenge for my murdered cubs cost your family much, Tuvaurat, but it took everything from me. I swore to the Spirit Creator that I would make right by your family even if you did not do the same for me. If you kill me now or even if you leave me to die on my own, my task is complete. In forgiving and protected your family, I have rid myself of the hatred that entrapped me for so long. Either way you choose, Tuvaurat, I will die happy and free.”

My father frowned at the polar bear over the tip of his drawn arrow as she closed her eyes in resignation and waited for death. After a long sigh, he finally let down the arrow and dropped his bow in the snow at his feet. Then my father did a truly strange thing. He actually sprinted to the bear’s side and encircled her injured neck in his arms. Ukiuq gently returned his fierce embrace with her uninjured paw.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I’m sorry, too,” she replied.

On my father’s orders, the men of our village lashed three sleds together and lay the massive white bear on top of them. The sleds creaked under her weight, but their framework held. We used all five teams of dogs to haul Ukiuq while the rest of the hunters jogged alongside their dogs or took turns pulling the other two sleds.

Our eventual arrival back at the village caused quite an uproar. My mother was one of many who protested the bear being brought into the camp.

“If we treat her wounds, she’ll eat the dogs and kill the lot of us once she’s recovered!” Mother yelled and many others shouted their agreement with her.

My father held up his hand for silence and the crowd immediately quieted. “I am chief of this clan,” Father said. “If I decide that the snow guardian stays, then she stays and no one may dispute me. I will tell you all that twice my family line has come near to extinction and twice has this bear been our savior. First she saved me during the hunting accident of my youth when my boat overturned and now she has saved my son from avalanche and wolves. She has more than earned the right of protection and aid from this clan. Would you abandon her in her deepest need?”

Not one person spoke.

“Good, then treat her wounds and find her food. As for shelter, she shall share my family’s home until she is fit to find her own den.”

“As the chief commands,” one of the hunters said, “Let us honor and care for this blessing of the Spirit Creator.”

Together the hunters helped move Ukiuq into my family’s own dwelling and there she stayed while the village’s shaman oversaw her healing. It took many weeks, but the polar bear eventually found the strength to hunt once again. Once healed, she often accompanied the clansmen for their hunts across the crystalline ice.

As winter passed that year, I watched with a smile on my lips and a song in my soul as my clan members opened their lives to my family’s bear guardian. Ukiuq became so beloved by our people that we renamed our clan Nanuqraqtaaq, which means “people of the white bear”, in her honor. The miracle that had saved my father in the sea and had rescued me on the ice now became the proud protector of all of my people for all the remaining days of her long life.