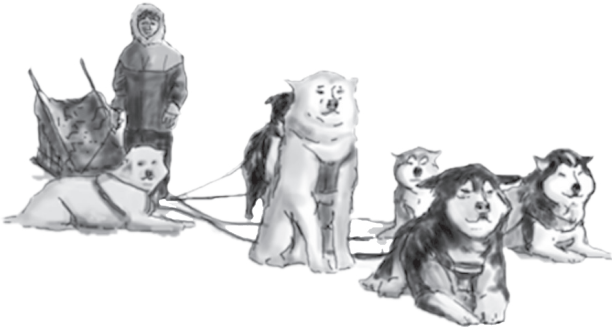


# The Seal Hunters

Paul Sullivan



Royal Fireworks Press  
Unionville, New York

“We are as much as we see.” —Henry David Thoreau

This book is a novel. It is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locations, and events are either products of the author’s imagination or they are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or places or events is entirely coincidental.

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Royal Fireworks Press  
PO Box 399  
41 First Avenue  
Unionville, NY 10988-0399  
(845) 726-4444  
fax: (845) 726-3824  
email: [mail@rfwp.com](mailto:mail@rfwp.com)  
website: [rfwp.com](http://rfwp.com)



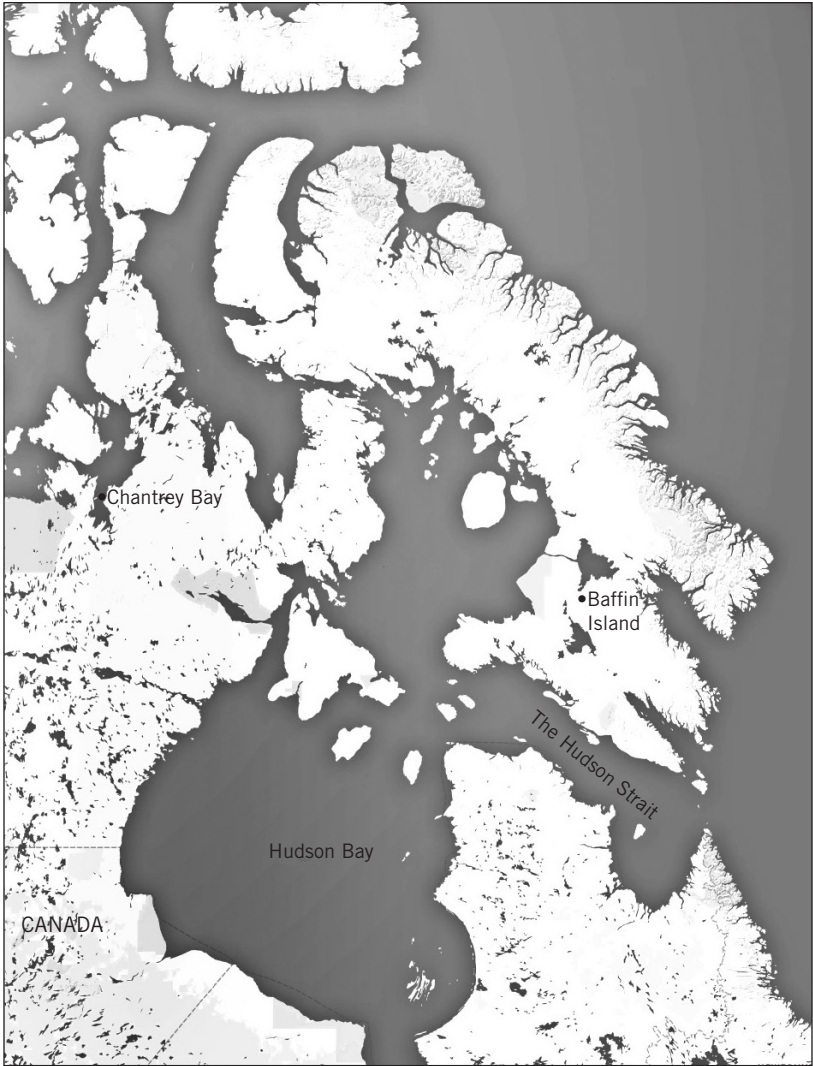
ISBN: 978-0-89824-388-8

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.

*Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kemnitz*  
*Editors: Rachel Semlyen and Dr. T.M. Kemnitz*  
*Cover and book designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl*  
*Cover art: Chris Dodge*

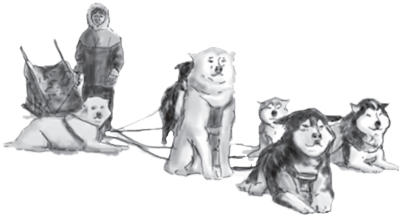
*For Kelly and Connor with love*

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## Chapter One

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In the thin light of dawn, Eetuk shook his son awake. When Inuluk opened his eyes the wind was still blowing, spinning the snow like white devils across the open tundra. The shelter they had built from blocks of ice was covered now, and outside the shelter the dogs were dug in so deep only their noses were showing.

Without speaking, the man and the boy put the dogs into harness and fixed them to the traces. Then, with a snap of his long whip, Eetuk got the team running. They ran hard until the morning had given way to the afternoon. And still they ran along the earth's frozen edge, eight dogs pulling the heavy sled with the hunter and the boy far into the north, to the distant horizon from where the wind came. For Eetuk was keeping a promise to his son. The promise was made as far back as the boy could remember, and Inuluk had nine full winters to think back on. It was Inuluk's first hunt. For many seasons he had watched and followed his father, but never had the hunt become his responsibility alone.

At the end of the second day of running, they again slept in the snow, building a shelter from blocks of ice against the Arctic wind and huddling under caribou skin blankets. They had eaten nothing since they left the village, and in the beginning for the boy, the hunger had become very annoying. Now, with two days of no food, it was a real thing. For a time he expected his father to make note of it. But Eetuk, skilled hunter and respected shaman, said nothing of food.



On the morning of the third day, they continued north on toward the top of the world with Eetuk's whip cutting the air and the dogs pulling on the traces. The dogs were into their third day with no food and looked half the creatures they had been at the start. Their bones showed under their fur, and their harnesses hung on them. But to the dogs, hunger was not new. Far back in their canine minds, they knew that at the end there would be food, but if they stopped running, there would be the whip and continued hunger. So in this way the *komatik* was pulled on, always north, solidly north as if Eetuk had one set direction and place in mind.

On the fourth day they entered a wide *fiord*. The walls were high and steep and cut off the wind. Barrier ice, sea ice piled near shore by winds and tides, sheltered it on the far end. Beyond the ice ridges lay the ocean, solidly covered with thick ice for as far as the eye could see. Eetuk brought his team to a halt. "We will hunt here," he told Inuluk. "We will hunt seal. This is a good place for seal. I have known this place for many years. We will find the *agloos*. I will teach you. And when you have taken a seal, we will eat, and the dogs will eat."

Inuluk studied the hunter's weathered face, hesitated, then asked, "But what if I don't get a seal?"

"We will not eat," Eetuk said easily. He had already started to take the dogs from the traces. He looked at Inuluk, his strong hand gripping the harness of one big husky. "Put out the gang-line," he said, just as easily.

Inuluk put out the line, and one by one the dogs were separated from the team and secured to the line, each a safe distance from the next. Hungry dogs running in a team would run for the promise of food. Hungry dogs not running would tear each other apart if anyone annoyed the others. The last

dog, Eetuk left free. That husky lay in the snow watching the hunter, waiting for what he knew would come next.

From the sled Eetuk took his harpoon. He also took his snow knife and a long, narrow sliver of wood with a bright ribbon attached to the end of it. He started down toward the frozen sea. The dog was up off the snow and trailing behind him. Inuluk followed his father.

They made their way through the barrier ice and onto the frozen surface of the ocean. A cold wind hit them when they left the shelter of the ice ridges. After they had walked some distance, the dog moved off on his own. He started working over the surface of the ice, moving from one spot to another. “He is a good dog,” said Eetuk. “He will find the *agloos* for us. If you do not have a good dog, it is more difficult.”

In a short time the dog located four breathing holes. The *agloos*, the breathing holes, were almost impossible to see with the snow that blew over the surface. The boy knew that the seal who came to these holes needed them to breathe. A seal had to come up for air, so he had to keep an open place on the frozen surface that he could trust. The seal tended these holes, breaking away the new ice as it formed. Eetuk ordered the dog away. The husky found a place on the ice to lie and wait.

Eetuk worked at three of the *agloos* with his snow knife, chopping away the edges, changing them. Disturbing these three would make the seal cautious. He would hesitate and go to the fourth hole.

At the fourth *agloo*, Eetuk strung out the long line that was attached to his harpoon. Then he handed the harpoon to Inuluk. Next he strung out the long line that was attached to the *idlak*, the narrow piece of wood with the bright ribbon. Inuluk watched as Eetuk put the *idlak* in the water. It bobbed



about for a moment, then settled down to float evenly with the colored ribbon clearly seen on the surface.

Eetuk turned to Inuluk. “Here you will take your first seal,” he said. “You have seen me take seals many times. Now you shall do the same, or we shall be very hungry.”

“But Father, I am hungry now,” said Inuluk.

“Good. Hunger makes a better hunter,” said Eetuk.

Inuluk nodded in understanding. He stepped up to the *agloo*, fixed the harpoon in his hand as if ready to strike a blow, then leaned forward over the water. With his body fixed in that position he said, “I am ready.”

“So, all you must do is wait. Wait and aim well,” said Eetuk. “And if the Sea Goddess, Sedna, thinks you are worthy, we will eat. But remember, you do not strike until you are sure. Only when you see the *idlak* move in the water. Strike then when you see the shadow of the seal. Do you know your first weapon? The one that will bring home food?”

“The harpoon,” said Inuluk.

“The harpoon is not the first. The first is patience. You must not move, Inuluk. If you move, the seal will know, and you will wait for nothing.” And with that Eetuk turned and started off. The dog got up to follow him.

For a moment Inuluk could hear Eetuk going away. He dare not move, to turn his head, or even shift his eyes needlessly. His eyes were fixed on the pool of dark water and the *idlak* showing on the surface. The harpoon was heavy in his hand but not enough to bother him. The wind swept over the sea ice and against his bare face. But he was dressed warmly and could stand a long time in the cold, even the bitter cold. And he would wait a long time if *oodjuk*, the seal, demanded it.



A long time did pass away, and the Arctic sun, hidden in a gray sky, had moved closer to the sea ice. Still the boy held his place. His body was fixed, the harpoon ready to strike. But now he felt the weight of the harpoon, and the hand that held it was cold and cramped. Still his eyes were fixed on the *idlak*. Still he waited for the shadow of the seal to cut the water.

Time passed so slowly that he learned the wind makes many different sounds crossing the sea ice. He had listened before. But never so carefully as now. At times it would come up to him softly and whisper. Or it might race over the surface, picking up loose snow and howling like a wolf far away. At other times it played with the surface of the water, causing the *idlak* to drift off rapidly. But Inuluk held firm.

The sun had touched the sea, and a thin golden light covered the water. Still Inuluk waited. The loose snow lifted by the wind coated his parka. He had been waiting a long time for *oodjuk*. But, except for the tricks played by the wind, the *idlak* had not moved. He began to doubt, to think perhaps he was waiting for nothing.

All of an Arctic afternoon had faded into evening, and still the boy waited. He waited in a half gray light now, but still he could see the *idlak*. He could see it, but it appeared his eyes were deceiving him. Twice he thought the *idlak* had moved, and not by the wind. Twice his hand had tightened on the harpoon, but no seal had broken the surface of the water. It was nothing but his tired mind.

A layer of ice had formed on his upper lip from his breathing. A throbbing pain moved through his arm as it supported the harpoon. After such a long time on the ice, the cold had worked through his boots. With evening the wind had grown stronger, and now it put its heavy force against his small body.



Eventually the Arctic evening faded away. In the west the sun slipped below the sea, taking the gold from the horizon. The moon appeared, silver-white and offered a night of soft shadows.

A long time later, when the moon was much higher, the boy was still in the same position. He had spent many hours on the ice. It was a long time, but he had seen his father and other hunters wait even longer to take one seal. He had seen some wait much longer and take nothing. Sedna, the Sea Goddess, did not give her gifts up easily. A hunter had to earn them. He had to show himself worthy of them.

His mind was tired. From time to time he would find his eyes closing. At one point he realized that the arm that held the harpoon had fallen. He lifted it back and tightened his grip on the shaft.

The *idlak* moved. Or had it? It moved again. Swiftly. *Oodjuk!*

No. Time passed. There was nothing.

Inuluk bit the tip of his tongue between his teeth. He could feel the ice thick above his lips.

The *idlak* bobbed. A figure slipped up through the water. Inuluk drew the harpoon high into the air just as the nose of the seal broke the surface. He could see the large sad eyes as he plunged the harpoon down with all the strength that was in him. Then the seal slipped away under the ice. The harpoon plunged deep into the water, but it hit nothing.

Inuluk fell to his knees. He looked into the dark water of the *agloo*. He had missed his mark, and he had missed badly. All his long hours of waiting were for nothing. He had been patient. But he knew he had been much too slow when the time came to make the kill. His mind was not ready. Perhaps the cold had worked on it too long. Perhaps

he had thought too much about the pain in his body, or about his hunger. Perhaps he had paid too much attention to the wind. It could have been all those things. But he had missed his mark. And he knew full well that seal would not return to this *agloo*.

He pulled in the harpoon and collected the *idlak*. He started back over the sea ice toward the ridges that were now deep in shadows. His muscles ached. His legs pained him. Even the marrow in his bones felt the cold. It seemed to take a long time to reach the barrier ice. He made his way back to the waiting team and Eetuk. He was very hungry. He had never known hunger such as this. His stomach told him he was not a good hunter.

Eetuk had built a snow house closer to the ice ridges, out of the wind. The dogs were sleeping in the snow on the gang line. As Inuluk neared, the dogs came to life. First one and then the entire team lifted up out of the snow that covered them. They howled and barked hungrily. He ignored them. He could not look them in the eyes. He was still approaching when Eetuk crawled out of the snow house to greet him. Just as with the team, Inuluk could not look at the hunter evenly.

“Have you given up?” Eetuk asked.

Inuluk hesitated. “There was a seal.”

“And where is this seal now?”

“I don’t know,” Inuluk said. “He was there. But I missed him.”

Eetuk nodded. “That happens with the best.” He cleared his throat. “But of course, you haven’t given up. I am hungry. The dogs are hungry.” Eetuk waited. Inuluk looked up at him. Eetuk studied the boy’s tired face: the soft, dark eyes, the lips crusted with ice. The dark shaggy hair that stuck out from the hood of the parka was also covered with ice. Eetuk



said, "Take the dog. He will find new *agloos*." Then he turned and crawled back into the shelter of the snow house.

After his father had gone, Inuluk stood silently. He was so tired and so cold he didn't want to think of finding another *agloo*. Even the thought of doing it all over again was painful.

Slowly, reluctantly, Inuluk started off again. With the harpoon over his shoulder and the *idlak* swinging under his arm, he started back to the sea ice. But he moved slowly, as if there were little life left in him. He moved so slowly that the dog had to stop and wait for him.

A hard wind had come up with the sun, and it hit him as soon as he cleared the ice ridges. It was lifting snow off the surface and blowing it with such force the boy could hardly see where he was going. At times he couldn't see the husky, and he would spend moments searching for him. He had to work his way against the wind. He thought enviously of Eetuk back in the snow house, sheltered from the wind but quickly put the thought out of his mind. He found the dog, and the dog had found a new *agloo*. In a short time the dog had found two others close by. Then the dog found a place to lie, and soon the blowing snow was covering him.

Inuluk chopped away at two of the *agloos* just as Eetuk had done and then settled himself at the third. He placed the *idlak* in the water, raised his harpoon into position, and waited. He tried not to think about time now, and he tried not to listen to the wind, though it screamed in his ears and bit at his raw skin. He tried only to think of the seal. He directed all of his thoughts into the dark water. And he stood this way for a very long time.

The sun lifted and the shadows were gone. The wind had piled snow over his boots and far up his bearskin pants, and it coated his parka. Ice hung long from his hair, and snow

coated his face where the wind blasted it. Still his mind was locked on the dark water. He pressed his lips to keep the ice from them. He bit the tip of his tongue to feel the pain. In a way the pain was almost warm. It was better than nothing. He would accept the warmth that small pain offered, but he would not take his mind from the black water.

The first time the *idlak* moved, Inuluk was uncertain. Ice had formed on his eyelashes, and his vision was blurred. But the second time he was sure it moved. The seal had just broken the water when the harpoon came down. Inuluk put all of the power of his body into the thrust, leaning over and sending the force out of his shoulder and into his arm, sending all of the long waiting and the pain through the wooden shaft. When it struck, it struck deep, and it held. Then the harpoon's detachable point slipped free. Inuluk fell to his knees on the ice and grabbed the line that was fixed to the point. He got hold of it and wrapped it about his arm, determined not to lose it. He pulled again and again. Once the line seemed to jerk back. Inuluk pulled again, this time so hard that he fell on the ice. He pulled until he finally saw the seal above the surface. The point had held. The seal was dead. He had died quickly, and his blood was floating in the black water. Inuluk pulled the seal up out of the *agloo* and onto the ice, not even thinking of the effort it took. He pulled him a long way across the ice, away from the *agloo*, as if in his mind the creature would hurry back to the water and escape.

Then Inuluk stepped back, jumped high in the air, and let out such a yell that it was louder even than the wind over the sea. The husky got up out of the snow and started barking and carrying on. Inuluk let out one more yell, then he turned and started running toward the ice ridges. He fell twice but got up as if he had never gone down.

“Father!”



The hunter had heard and started down to meet him. All of the dogs had broken out of the snow and were howling and pulling on the line.

“Father!”

Eetuk was running, loading his rifle as he came through the ridges.

“Father! Hurry!”

“Is it a bear?” Eetuk asked, as he neared.

The two met and Inuluk took hold of the hunter’s parka. He was pulling him by the sleeve. “I got him! I got him!” He let go of the hunter’s parka and raced across the ice to his seal.

The dog was licking the blood that flowed from the warm body steaming on the ice. Inuluk pushed the dog away. The husky set himself solidly and snarled back at the boy, showing his teeth in his hunger. When Eetuk appeared out of the wind and snow, the husky backed off carefully.

Again Inuluk was jumping up and down. He was running around the seal, round and round. “You see, Father! You see how big he is?”

“He is big,” Eetuk agreed proudly. “You have taken a fine seal, Inuluk.”

“Is he fine? Is he really a fine seal?”

“Yes,” the hunter said. “I have seen few better than this *oodjuk*. He will feed us and the dogs for days to come.”

The hunter took his knife and fell to his knees. He knelt on the ice by the seal and looked up at the boy. “Here,” he said, holding the knife out. “This is for you to do.”

Inuluk knelt by the seal and took the long knife from Eetuk. When he was almost ready to make the first cut, the

hunter held his hand out to stop him. “First you must thank Sedna. And you must thank the *Ina*, the spirit of the seal.”

Inuluk hesitated. Then quietly, to himself, he whispered words of thanks to the *Ina* of *oodjuk*, and to Sedna, Goddess of the Sea.

Then Eetuk said, “At times it is a wise thing to offer one last drink of water to *oodjuk*. In doing this, his *Ino* may speak well of you in the spirit world.”

Inuluk looked into the dark eyes of the hunter, and nodded. He lay the knife on the ice, got up and went back to the *agloo*. The dog, waiting hungrily, growled as he passed. At the *agloo* Inuluk put his hands together, locking his fingers to form a cup. He dipped his hands into the icy water, then returned to the seal. Kneeling by the head with the opened, glazed eyes, he poured the water slowly over the mouth and whiskers. “So you will not travel with thirst,” he said.

Eetuk said, “That is good. And now it is done properly. And I think it is proper that we should eat.” He looked at Inuluk with a large smile that showed old teeth against a leathery face. “You have done well, my son.”

The pride that swelled in the boy forced a smile he could not control. He took up the knife and made the first cut into the seal’s stomach. And just as he had often seen Eetuk do, he cut away a large piece of meat and pulled it free. He offered this, steaming in the cold air, to Eetuk. He was thanking his father, and showing his respect, and the hunter knew it and took it graciously.

Eetuk put the meat into his mouth and taking the knife, cut off the remainder. He chewed for a long moment, the boy watching, and then he said, “It is the most delicious I have ever tasted.” With that he smiled and then laughed, and then Inuluk was laughing. “We will make a feast of your



first seal,” Eetuk said. He took another piece of meat, again using the knife to cut away the remainder.

Inuluk looked on happily. Then Inuluk took the knife, cut away a large piece of fat and skin, and this he tossed to the dog. The husky caught it while it still arced through the air and tore into it.

Next Inuluk fed himself, cutting away a good piece of oily fat from under the skin. He passed the knife back to Eetuk, who also took a piece of fat. Together they chewed and laughed easily. The juices ran off Eetuk’s chin-whiskers, and he wiped them away.

They feasted, the hunter and his son, sharing their laughter, and linking themselves to the spirit of the seal, the sea, the wind, and the land.