

LEGEND
of the
NORTH

A Novel

Paul Sullivan



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*For Lou Johnson,
a father every boy should have*



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



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Chapter 1

The First Lesson

His first problem in life was his brother and sisters. Though his mother's milk was plentiful, none wanted to share. He learned his first lessons of survival in a dark sandstone cave among bundles of fur and snapping teeth. He needed the warm, nourishing liquid of his mother's body, but so did five other hungry pups.

He was the last born of the white wolf family; of his brother and four sisters, he was the smallest. He was the last to open his eyes and the last to stand on shaky legs. Always, he was the last to feed. The old she-wolf, Linluk, gave no special care to him. Once, in those early weeks, when he had been pushed from the feeding, she nuzzled him gently and whispered, "You have been born into a harsh land, Amitok. Here the weak do not survive. If you do not have the strength to fight your way to my body, you do not have the strength to survive the winters. You must call the spirits that know you to give you strength. The weak fall from the pack quickly."

Linluk was not cruel. She loved the small white pup as she loved all of her litter. She had learned from years and litters past that the strength of each pup had to come from within. Those who found it lived; those who did not died. It

was the pack that was important, not the pup, and only the strong could support it.

Amitok did survive the first weeks. He was half the size of his brother Skal and not as large as any one of his sisters, but he survived, and there was a persistence in him that pleased the she-wolf. He showed that persistence when Skal nipped his ears or tail, and Amitok snapped back until the two were tangled in a ball of fur rolling on the den floor. Amitok got the worst of it, but always he came driving back. Often one or all of his sisters weighed into the scrap, and little Amitok found himself caught on the bottom of a pile of five snarling pups. But this was play.

When old Tuluk, the hunter and father, came with their first meat, it was no longer play, and again Amitok was pushed from the feeding. Even with his driving spirit, he was crowded out. He moved back into a corner of the den and growled menacingly at his littermates whenever this happened, but seldom did he get more than enough food to keep himself alive. Linluk worried about the small pup, but she did nothing to help him.

Skal always ate his fill, taking even from his sisters. Often, while his brother slept contentedly, Amitok lay awake with hunger gnawing at his stomach. Once, Tuluk brought back a small piece of caribou hide with the meat, and in his struggle for scraps, Amitok slipped away with it. He carried it off to his corner of the den and chewed at it slowly, tasting the rich juices of the caribou. He was so lost in his contentment that he did not notice Skal standing over him. When Amitok made an effort to defend his prize, Skal attacked fiercely.

The small pup was completely overpowered. Skal went away with the hide, and Amitok lay licking a deep, bleeding wound in his shoulder.

The she-wolf looked at him and said, “You will find a place in the pack, Amitok, but the place you find will be determined by you. You must call all of the spirits that know you.”

“But it was my food,” the pup defended.

“Now it is Skal’s food,” his mother said.

When Amitok looked at Skal, he saw that his brother was not even eating the hide. He was simply holding it for his own.

Always when Tuluk came or went through the narrow passage, or when Linluk left the den for short periods of time, Amitok wondered what was out there. At times, a shaft of light fell into the den. Sometimes, when Tuluk or the she-wolf returned, their fur would be wet, or it would have different smells on it. Tuluk and the she-wolf talked of things that Amitok did not understand. They talked of snow and ice and wind and water. They talked of the sky and the tundra. Tuluk often used the word *far*; “I hunted far,” he would say. “This kill I made at a faraway place. It was an old caribou that did not run as fast as the others. The place is far, and the pups are too young to travel, so I hid the meat in a cache. I buried it well.”

“When the time of the long sun comes, we will move the pups to a summer place,” Linluk told her mate. “Then the hunting will be easier, and you will not need to travel so far.”

“I saw a raven today,” Tuluk said one afternoon. “The raven told me that the caribou would be coming soon and that they would come in great numbers. The hunting will be good then.”

Linluk looked at him evenly. “You have lived too long to believe the words of a raven, Tuluk. You know how they lie.”

“That is true,” Tuluk admitted. “Perhaps I am too hopeful. But I worry that I will not hunt well. I worry that the pups will not eat well. Last winter it was different. Kivvik hunted by my side. Shoulder to shoulder, our kills were many. Now I fail more often than I succeed. I have not the speed I had. But even when I was young, I did not have the speed of my father.”

“Kivvik was a great hunter,” Linluk agreed. “Many stories will be told of him. But you serve us well. We do not hunger. The pups are growing fat—all but Amitok, the weak one. But his failure is not due to any that you have made.”

Tuluk looked at Amitok, who was curled in a corner of the den. Amitok raised his head upon hearing his name, and he saw his father studying him. His tail swept back and forth excitedly over the den floor. He rose to go toward Tuluk, but a rumbling growl stopped him. It was coming from Skal. Skal’s upper lip was curled back, his teeth showing white and sharp. They were baby teeth, but Amitok knew well the pain they brought. Amitok settled back to the place his body had warmed on the cold earth.

Watching the pup, Tuluk said, “Of all the pups of all the litters past, this one, Amitok, is the saddest. By the end of the long sun, I fear that he will be food for the wolverine. May the spirit of old Kivvik protect him.”

“I think he knows no spirit,” Linluk reflected.

“He must know one. But perhaps he is so discouraging that none will guide him.”

From his spot in the den, Skal growled and chewed on the piece of caribou hide. He locked the hide between his paws and teeth and shook it hard. Then he tossed it into the air and caught it as it fell. Again he tossed the hide, and two of the female pups rushed in to retrieve it. In seconds all three pups were yelping and battling over it. Soon the other sisters joined. Old Tuluk and the she-wolf watched proudly. Amitok moved deeper into his corner.

Weeks later, on a day when the sunlight shone brightly into the mouth of the den, the she-wolf looked at her litter and said, “Follow me. Stay together, and do not go where I cannot see you.” Then she started out of the long passage, her lean body splitting the shaft of light. Amitok yelped with excitement. He rushed into the passage, only to find himself caught by the tail and pulled back by Skal. Skal was first into the passage. The females followed. Last went Amitok.

The light hurt Amitok’s eyes, and he blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the glare on the white tundra before him. He saw the land rolling away from the mouth of the den to a narrow inlet of sea bordered by steep cliffs. There were low hills, all snow-covered, and beyond those

were icecaps. Above the icecaps, a sun of hard yellow rested close to the horizon in a sky of clear blue. It was a place of primordial beauty, shaped by ice and wind and unchanged for millennia. He took a step forward and sank into the snow.

Surprised by the snow, Amitok yelped. He heard the sound of his own voice, and it was strange in the outside world. It had not sounded that way in the den. He yelped several more times, and soon Skal and his sisters were doing the same.

A wind blew up from the fiord, and crystals of snow settled on Amitok's nose. He snapped at them and at the wind but caught nothing. He and the other pups went on yelping until the she-wolf turned and said, "Quiet, children."

Amitok smelled the snow, but there was no smell. He tasted it. It was wet and cold, but when he tried to chew it, it disappeared. Again he yelped loudly. The she-wolf looked at him. "Amitok, the world knows you have arrived."

Skal bounded over to Amitok and said, "Come with me. I will show you what I found."

Amitok followed his brother. They went past the mouth of the den, where Linluk was lying in the sun. The sisters were climbing over her back and chewing at her ears. She watched the brothers pass. "Not far," she commanded.

Skal had found a trail. It had been made by Tuluk leaving and returning to the den on his hunts. Here the snow was packed, and the pups walked on it easily. But along the trail, the snow was high, and only occasionally did their tails appear above the surface. The trail climbed steeply from the

mouth of the den to the top of a hill. When they reached the top, Skal said to Amitok, “Look! Look at all of that!”

For the first time, Amitok saw the full extent of his world. There was no end to it. It was the Arctic. It was the whole top of the Earth. Amitok said, “This is what *far* is.”

Skal lifted his head, and a strange cry came from this throat. It was not a true howl, but it was a puppy’s effort. Hearing Skal, Amitok tried to howl, too. His cry was not much better than Skal’s, but together, their voices sounded over the frozen land, as had the cries of wolf pups for ten thousand years and more.

A shadow crossed over them, and old Tuluk appeared. He had been watching the pups, but only now did they realize it. The big wolf raised his head and howled into the empty land, and the pups’ hearts filled with excitement. Then Tuluk looked down at Amitok and said, “That is not *far*, son. *Far* is beyond what you see. There is no end to *far*.”

Amitok looked up at his father. The white wolf stood proudly. Amitok asked, “Are there others like us?”

The wolf looked a long time at the distant land and replied, “Not so many as before. Not so many as when I was a pup. But there are others still. They respect our hunting trails, and we respect theirs. It is a land large enough even for the range of a wolf, and none I know has ever seen the other side of it. It is a land with room for respect.”

“I would like to follow the trails,” said Skal.

“There is time,” Tuluk told him. “But there is much to learn before the first hunt.”

“How old were you when you made your first hunt?” asked Amitok.

“I was not yet a yearling when I followed Kivvik, my father. We killed a fine musk ox that morning. The meat lasted a week.”

“I will kill a musk ox,” declared Skal.

“I will be a great hunter like Kivvik,” said Amitok.

“We shall see,” Tuluk told them both.

From the mouth of the den, Linluk howled, and Tuluk said, “It is time to return.” He started down the trail, and Amitok and Skal followed. This time Skal allowed Amitok to go first. At a place where the trail was the steepest and the snow packed the hardest, Skal gave a sudden push, and Amitok’s feet went out from under him. His legs kicking in the air, he slid under Tuluk and down the full length of the hill. He flew past the she-wolf and all of his sisters and landed in the deep snow below the mouth of the den.

Linluk trotted over, poked her nose into the snow, and pulled Amitok out by the scruff of the neck. The pup hung from his mother’s mouth, looking much like a snowball. Linluk shook him gently and carried him into the den. As they passed Skal, Amitok heard his brother ask him, “Tell me, great hunter, have you traveled far?”

As the days passed, the pups spent more time out of the den. For Amitok, these were the best times. It was his nature

to explore. It was not the nature of his sisters, who preferred to lie close to the she-wolf, soaking up the rays of the Arctic sun, and it was not the nature of Skal, who seemed to need an audience, choosing to stay where she-wolf and his sisters could see him. So alone Amitok discovered the delights of his world, although, unknown to him, he never went so far away that Linluk didn't know where he was. But each day he pushed his range a little farther.

It took him time to learn to travel over the tundra. He learned to use the windswept places where the snow was not so deep. Of course, he often used the trails forged by old Tuluk and Linluk, but there were other trails that he did not know, and from these came the scents of living things not of the pack. There was ice, and he found that he could walk on it once he learned the trick of keeping his paws from going in different directions. The ice was not easy to learn, and on his first attempt, even standing was difficult. In time, however, he mastered it, so he became a traveler in at least a small part of his world.

Amitok traveled most often with his nose to the snow; this was the way to find the strange scents of those living things unknown. He found that he could easily follow some scents for a long distance, but most of the time he lost them or went too far away, and Linluk's howl would order his return.

One afternoon he found a scent so strong that he could almost taste it. This trail he followed. But it was not an easy trail to follow, for it was not a trail of packed snow but rather one of pawprints, each spaced a great distance from

the last and each easily large enough to hold the small pup in the hollow of it. The pawprints were so large and so far apart from one another that Amitok found it easier to jump from one to the next. And jump he did, over the clean snow, disappearing into each hollow and leaping out again. It was almost fun. He followed the trail a long way, the scent growing ever stronger.

Amitok did not know that he was on the trail of a snow bear. The bear had spent the dark winter months on the ice floes, feeding on seals, and now it was at its true weight of a thousand pounds. It traveled unhurriedly to the barrier ice near the shore of the fiord. It moved with a power that was both beautiful and unchallenged. Even with its huge bulk, it moved with grace and ease.

The bear's massive paws sank deep into the snow, leaving bucket-size holes with deep scars from long, sharp claws. The snow bear was the largest and finest hunter in all of the Arctic, but it was not hunting, only passing through. Because it was traveling into the wind, it did not pick up the scent of the pup. It had no way of knowing that it was being followed. Had it known, it would have done nothing different.

Amitok was certain of one thing: whatever this creature was, it was easy to track. He wondered if in one of his leaps he wouldn't land right on top of it. If he did, he made up his mind that he would not give the thing a chance. Tuluk said a good hunter killed quickly. A good hunter did not allow his victim to suffer. It was an unwritten law—a code that all hunters abided by. Amitok would follow the code. Tuluk

and the she-wolf would be proud, and Skal would never laugh at him again.

As he continued his tracking, Amitok considered whether or not he should eat the creature right on the spot or carry it back to the den. If he ate it, there would be no proof of the hunt. If he took it back, his littermates might leave nothing for him. The best thing would be to eat enough to fill his belly and carry back the remainder.

No, a better idea came to him. He would fill his belly and bury a large portion in a cache. He would take back only a piece of the hide; that way there would be proof of the kill, and he could visit the cache any time hunger gnawed at his stomach. Skal might take the hide, but he would still have the cache for himself.

But after another leap forward, Amitok worried that there might not be enough meat to do all that he wanted. He did not know, after all, what he hunted. Soon the scent became so strong that he knew he was close, and he sank down into a hollow and waited. He could not see the creature and did not want to scare it away.

The bear stopped. It turned and sat on its haunches, its heavy body settling deeply into the snow. It looked back over the trail it had traveled. With short, rounded ears, it listened.

Amitok held his position. He listened for a long time, but he could hear nothing with the walls of snow around him. He lay motionless. Patience, old Tuluk had often said, was the most important part of the hunt. Amitok would be

patient. He waited. But patience seemed to take a long time. Tuluk had said nothing of how long one should allow for patience.

The bear had no reason for patience. It heard nothing. It saw nothing. It smelled nothing. Nothing threatened it. It lifted its great body off the snow and continued on its way.

Patience, thought Amitok, was taking too long. His ears appeared over the rim of the pawprint; his eyes followed. He saw the rear of the snow bear as it lumbered away. The creature was massive! Eyes wide, Amitok ducked back down into the pawprint, his body trembling with fear. Patience, he thought, was a good idea after all.

Amitok lay curled in the pawprint for a long time, until a shadow passed over him and strong teeth caught him by the back of the neck and lifted him into the air. Tuluk dropped the pup into the snow. Getting to his feet, Amitok looked in the direction the snow bear had taken. The bear was gone. He looked up at the old hunter. “Big,” he said.

Tuluk cocked his head and looked down at the pup. “Big,” he agreed. “And deadly when hungry.”

Amitok would never again follow the trail of a creature he did not know, but his curiosity did not fade. Always, of all the pups, he was the one who had to be brought back. He was the one who drifted too far. He was the first out of the den and the last to return. Skal and the females were no problem, but Amitok, even for his small size, caused Linluk no end of trouble. “In the beginning, I worried that you would die of hunger,” she told him. “Now I worry that you

will be lost and end up as food for scavengers. I do hope there is a spirit that will protect you.”

Late one night, when there was food enough in the cache and no need to hunt, Tuluk spoke to the pups. “The first thing you must understand is the land you live in, this land of ice and snow and water and wind. This is a harsh place, but it is a beautiful place. It is harsh to those who do not understand it and beautiful to those who learn. You must respect it. When you go from it, you must leave it as you found it, as others before you have done. It is yours only for a time, and when you pass from it, all you should leave are footprints.

“The land gives us life. With it comes all of the creatures that walk upon it. Of these you must learn and respect. Of those that you hunt and kill—the caribou, the musk ox, or even the rabbit—all are as important as the wolf. A wolf kills for food, never for sport. It has been this way for the many thousands of times the sun has passed. If it had not been this way, there would be no caribou, or musk ox, or rabbit, and there would be no wolves.

“After the land and all the creatures that walk upon it, the pack is the most important. Always you are part of the pack. Always you must return to the pack, defend the pack, support the pack. Every kill you make is for the pack. Every snow trail you break is for the pack. The pack is your life. There are few lone wolves, and they do not survive well.

“To every living thing there is a spirit. Some come to know this spirit; others do not. In some it is strong; in some

it is not. This spirit is what will give you the courage and the strength to survive. It will guide you and protect you. You will follow it when you know not what to follow.

“There are few who have known a great spirit; those who have are changed. They are different from others. They are great hunters. Old Kivvik was one. I have known no others in my time.”

Amitok sat listening, his eyes intent on the hunter before him. He did not understand the spirit that Tuluk referred to that was to protect and guide him. He knew nothing of it. If it was there, he could not see it, and it had no scent. He had learned that even things he could not see had a scent, but a spirit had nothing. Yet it seemed to be of great importance to the old hunter and the she-wolf. His understanding would come only with time.

April passed into May, and the hours of darkness grew fewer. The Arctic sun hung in the sky for a long time, and often Tuluk would not leave for the hunt until late. It was on such an evening that the she-wolf and pups lay at the mouth of the den, and Amitok climbed the snow hill to watch the hunter trotting easily in the endless distance.

As Amitok settled on the snow, he saw another creature. This creature was not as big as the wolf, and it moved low to the ground. It cut across the trail Tuluk had made, but Tuluk could not have seen it, for he was far away, and he could not have smelled it, for the wind was against him. For a long time Amitok followed the creature with his eyes as it came

nearer. He sensed the power in the low, heavy animal by the way it moved—as if nothing could stop it, as if it had no fear.

The creature was moving toward the sea ice, at times disappearing behind a hill and coming out again. It moved steadily, purposefully. When it grew closer, Amitok saw that it had brown, bushy hair, with a yellowish stripe running the length of it. Its head was bear-like, and it had strong forelegs and large feet. Its back arched down to a thick tail. Something about it sounded an alarm of caution in Amitok, and he watched it as it came toward the den.

A sudden wind blowing up from the fiord carried the animal's scent to Amitok, and the pup was immediately struck at how strong and unpleasant the smell was to him. At the same moment, he heard the she-wolf's cry. She, too, had picked up the scent, and she sent a long, shattering howl across the tundra to Tuluk. In seconds a reply came from the distance; old Tuluk had heard Linluk and was returning. A second howl of the she-wolf ordered Amitok home, and Amitok obeyed, running and sliding down the snow hill. He was the last to pass into the den, and as he passed, Linluk nipped him on the tail for it.

The litter huddled far back in the den. Linluk placed herself between the pups and the entrance, guarding it from the inside. She whispered to her pups, "Quiet. No matter what, stay quiet."

A shadow crossed the mouth of the den. The creature moved back and forth restlessly. There were sounds of chewing and growling and snarling. The scent was strong

and horrible. When the creature tried to enter the opening, the she-wolf showed her teeth and growled threateningly. The pups moved back as far as they could. Even Skal was shaking.

The creature came into the opening of the den, and Linluk lashed out at it. Then Tuluk howled from outside, and slowly, reluctantly, with a wolf in front of it, a wolf behind it, and no room in the tight space to maneuver, the creature backed out and moved off. Tuluk entered the den to join his family, licking Linluk's nose and gathering the pups around him.

Amitok's fear was replaced by an urgent need to understand. "What was it?" he asked.

Tuluk answered him. "That was a wolverine," he said. "It is a bloodthirsty animal—the most savage in all the land. It kills for the love of killing. Even the great snow bear avoids it. The bear is to be feared, but its spirit is not evil. The bear has a code. But the wolverine has no code. It does not understand fear. You will know it by the smell of death that surrounds it."

"I was not afraid of it," boasted Skal.

The hunter looked at Skal and said, "Then you have a brave but foolish heart."

Skal's ears lowered.

Amitok said nothing, but he knew that he would always remember the smell of the wolverine—the smell of death.