

the
SEAL HUNTERS

A NOVEL

Paul Sullivan

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FOR KELLY AND CONNOR, WITH LOVE



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 ONE

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, and outside the shelter, the dogs were dug in so deep that only their noses were showing.

Without speaking, the man and 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 far into the north, for Eetuk was keeping a promise to his son. The promise had been made as far back as the boy could remember, and Inuluk had thirteen full winters to reflect back on. It was his first hunt. For many seasons, he had followed his father, but never before had the hunt been his responsibility.

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'd left the village, and in the

beginning, for the boy, the hunger had been annoying. Now, with two days of no food, it was a real thing. He expected his father to make note of it, but Eetuk, skilled hunter and respected shaman, said nothing.

On the morning of the third day, they again 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, too, were into their third day with no food, and they looked half the creatures they had been at the start. Their bones showed under their fur, and the harness hung on them. But to the dogs, hunger was not new. Far back in their canine minds, they knew that at the end of the journey, there would be food; if they stopped running, there would be the whip and continued hunger. So in this way, the *komatik* was pulled on to the north—always north, as Eetuk had a specific 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, and asked, “But what if I don't get a seal?”

“Then we will not eat,” Eetuk replied easily. He started to take the dogs from the traces. He looked back at Inuluk, his strong hand gripping the harness of one big husky. “Put out the gangline,” he told him.

Inuluk put out the line, and one by one the dogs were separated from the team and secured to it, each a safe distance from the last. Hungry dogs running in a team would run for the promise of food. Hungry dogs not running would tear one another apart if one of them irritated 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 piece of wood with a bright ribbon attached to the end of it. He started down toward the frozen sea. The dog rose up off the snow and trotted 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 had located four *agloos*—breathing holes. They were almost impossible to see with the snow that blew over the ice. The boy knew that the seals who came to these holes needed them. They had to come up for air, so they had to keep an open place on the frozen surface

that they could trust. They tended these holes, breaking away 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 the holes would make the seals cautious. They would hesitate and go to the fourth hole.

At the fourth *agloo*, Eetuk strung out the long line that was attached to his harpoon and 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 for a moment, then settled down to float evenly, with the colored ribbon clearly visible 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’m hungry now,” protested Inuluk.

“Good. Hunger makes a better hunter,” Eetuk told him.

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

“All you must do is wait—wait and aim well,” instructed Eetuk. “And if the sea goddess Sedna thinks you are worthy, we will eat. But remember, do not strike until you are sure—only when you see the *idlak* move in the water. Strike when

you see the shadow of the seal. Do you know your first weapon? The one that will bring home food?”

“The harpoon,” answered Inuluk.

“The harpoon is not the first,” Eetuk corrected. “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 he turned and started off. The dog got up and followed him.

Inuluk could hear Eetuk going away, but he dare not move—not to turn his head or even to shift his gaze. 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. And he would wait a long time if *oodjuk*, the seal, demanded it.

A long time did pass, and the Arctic sun, hidden in a gray sky, 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 weapon, and the hand that held it was cold and cramped. Still his eyes were locked on the *idlak*. Still he waited for the shadow of the seal to cut the water.

Time passed slowly. Inuluk learned that the wind makes many different sounds while 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. At others it raced over the surface, picking up loose snow and howling like

a wolf. Sometimes it played with the surface of the water, causing the *idlak* to drift rapidly. But Inuluk held firm.

The sun 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. Inuluk began to doubt, to think that perhaps he was waiting for nothing.

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

A layer of ice formed on the boy's 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. Sometimes they waited a long time and still took 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.

Inuluk grew tired. From time to time he found 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 shadow 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 its large, sad eyes as he plunged the harpoon down with all the strength that was in him. The seal slipped quickly under the ice. The harpoon plunged deep into the water, but it hit nothing.

Inuluk fell to his knees and looked into the dark water of the *agloo*. He had missed his mark, and he had missed badly. All of his long hours of waiting had been for nothing. He had been patient, but he had been much too slow when the time had come to make the kill. His mind had not been ready. Perhaps the cold had worked on it too long. Perhaps he had thought too much about the pain in his body or his hunger. Perhaps he had paid too much attention to the wind. It could have been all of those things, but he had missed his

mark, and he knew full well that the seal would not return to this *agloo*.

Inuluk pulled in the harpoon and collected the *idlak*. He started back over the sea ice toward the ridges that were now deep in shadow. His muscles ached. His legs pained him. Even the marrow in his bones felt 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 that he was not a good hunter.

Eetuk had built a snow house close to the ice ridges, out of the wind. The dogs were sleeping in the snow on the gangline. As Inuluk neared, they came to life. First one and then the entire team lifted up out of the snow that covered them. They howled and barked hungrily. Inuluk 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 in his father's eyes.

“Have you given up?” Eetuk asked.

Inuluk stared at his feet. “There was a seal.”

“And where is this seal now?”

“I don't know,” replied Inuluk. “He was there, but I missed him.”

Eetuk nodded. “That happens with the best. But of course, you haven't given up. I am hungry. The dogs are hungry.” He 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, 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.

Inuluk stood silently. He was so tired and cold that he didn't want to find another *agloo*. Even the thought of repeating the process 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 went back to the sea ice, but he moved slowly, as if there was little life left in him. He moved so slowly that the dog had to stop and wait for him.

A hard wind came up with the sun, and it hit Inuluk as soon as he cleared the ice ridges. It was lifting snow off the surface and blowing it with such force that 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 he quickly put the thought out of his mind. He found the dog; the dog had found a new *agloo*. Soon the dog found two others close by. Then he selected a place to lie down, and before long, 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 to think only of the seal. He directed all of his thoughts into the dark water. And he stood that way for a long time.

The sun lifted, and the shadows retreated. The wind piled snow over Inuluk's 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 together 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. He accepted the warmth that it 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. The seal had just broken the surface of 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.

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 around 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. It was dead. It had died quickly,

and its blood was floating in the black water. Inuluk pulled the seal up out of the *agloo* and onto the ice, not even aware of the effort it took. He pulled the seal a long way across the ice, away from the *agloo*, as if the creature would hurry back to the water and escape.

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

The hunter had heard him and hurried 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 Eetuk’s parka and raced across the ice to his seal.

The husky was licking the blood that flowed from the warm body steaming on the ice. Inuluk pushed the dog away. The husky set himself and snarled back at the boy,

showing his teeth in his hunger, but when Eetuk appeared out of the wind and snow, he backed off carefully.

Again Inuluk was jumping up and down. He was running around the seal. “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 replied. “I have seen few better than this *oodjuk*. He will feed us and the dogs for days to come.”

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

Inuluk knelt by the seal and took the long knife from his father. When he was almost ready to make the first cut, Eetuk held up his hand to stop him. “First you must thank Sedna. And you must thank the *ino*, the spirit of the seal.”

So, quietly, Inuluk whispered words of thanks to Sedna, goddess of the sea, and to the *ino* of *oodjuk*.

Afterward, 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 open, glazed eyes, he poured the water slowly over the seal's mouth and whiskers. "So you will not travel with thirst," he said.

Eetuk nodded. "That is good. Now it is done properly. And I think it is proper that we should eat." He looked at Inuluk with a wide 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. Just as he had often seen Eetuk do, he cut away a large piece of meat and pulled it free. He offered it, 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 one end of the meat into his mouth and, taking the knife from his son, cut off the remainder. He chewed for a long moment, with the boy watching, and said, "It is the most delicious I have ever tasted." He smiled and then laughed, and Inuluk laughed with him. "We will make a feast of your first seal!" said Eetuk. He took another bite of the meat, again using the knife to cut away the remainder.

Inuluk looked on happily. After a moment, he took the knife back and cut away a large piece of fat and skin. This he tossed to the dog. The husky caught it in 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. 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.