

CHAPTER ONE

RETURN OF THE SUN

Anak woke up. He snuggled deeper into the warmth of his reindeer skin. Although his bed was made of big blocks of ice, he did not feel the cold at all. Sealskins covered the sleeping platform beside the igloo wall.

Light glimmered on the curved walls of the house which was made of snow and ice. A lamp sat in the middle of the circular floor. It was a flat dish that Grandfather Ujark had carved out of soapstone. The hollow of the lamp was filled with seal oil. A wick made of twisted moss burned with a flickering, pale-yellow flame. The lamp provided warmth as well as light. In the middle of the igloo, close to the lamp, it was so “hot” that the temperature was above freezing. Nearer to the walls the temperature dipped to about twenty degrees below zero. Anak’s breath floated like a white mist and sank to the icy floor. But the cold didn’t bother Anak at all. After all, this was his twelfth polar winter. Because Anak lived so close to the North Pole, his body was used to such low temperatures. During the short summers he often found it too warm.

From his cosy spot Anak surveyed the room with his dark, bright eyes.

Mother Imina was feeding Alki, his little sister. She was only two years old. Dressed in white furs, she looked like a baby polar bear. Father Tapik was not there. He had probably gone out with Grandfather. Perhaps they had gone hunting together! For a moment Anak was disappointed. If only he had not slept so long, maybe he could have gone too!

But the disappointment didn’t last long. It was very pleasant here in the igloo with mother and Alki.

Against the wall, at the end of the sleeping platform, stood the komatik, the beautiful sled that Father had given to him. It was still new and very special. The runners were made of polished whalebone and were able to fly over the snow as swiftly as an arrow. Mother had shaken her head saying that Father spoiled him. Did any boy of Anak's age own such a beautiful sled? But Father Tapik wanted his son to become a great hunter. A good komatik would be necessary. Soon, when summer had come, Anak would also be given a kayak.

When summer had come . . . Suddenly the boy remembered. Father had told him that today the sun would return! Yesterday an old Eskimo, Angote, had taken his sled far inland. At noon he had climbed a high hill. From the hilltop he had seen a narrow, gold band, a sure sign that the sun was returning to the dark north. And today the sun would appear . . . At least it would if there was no snowstorm.

Anak leaped out of bed. He did not want to be left behind when everyone went to see the sun!

He was naked. Quickly he pulled on sealskin pants and parka. The hood was trimmed with polar fox fur, a kind of fur on which frost wouldn't form so quickly. He slipped on his foxskin boots and was ready to go, covered from head to toe.

Washing himself and combing his hair wasn't necessary, but eating — that was most important! Anak always seemed to be hungry. Mother gave him a few good pieces of muktuk, walrus skin with a nice layer of fat on it. Anak, like most Eskimos, was very fond of muktuk.

Once his stomach was satisfied, Anak decided to go outside. An animal hide covered an opening in the igloo wall. Anak crawled through this door into a narrow, curved tunnel that led outside.

An icy wind whipped against his face, but he didn't notice. He gazed up into the clear sky. A few stars were still shining faintly, yet it must be almost noon. Fortunately the sky was not cloudy. Perhaps they would indeed see the sun today!



Anak looked around the white, white world. Besides his own family's igloo there were five others. The settlement was built on the ice of the Coronation Gulf. However, the ice was covered with more than a metre of snow.

He knew it was important to live out on the ice in the winter because it was close to the seals, which were the main food supply for the Eskimos. During the early part of the winter, the small tribe had eaten dried meat and fish caught during the summer hunting season. But that supply was all used up. Now, time and again, the men set out to hunt seals or other sea animals. When the hunt was good, winter was a happy time. Sometimes the seals stayed away. Then the whole settlement suffered from hunger.

Most of the men were out hunting now. Only a few hungry dogs roamed between the igloos. Jako, his friend, came running up to him.

"Shall we play the whipping game?" he asked.

“Alright,” agreed Anak. Quickly, he crawled back inside the igloo to get his whip. He also picked up a few bones from the floor. They would be very useful.

Outside, Jako was waiting with his whip. Now the contest could begin. The boys had watched the older men do this many times. They had enjoyed many hours playing this game. The bones were placed in a row, standing straight up in the snow. Anak and Jako stood beside each other, about seven metres away from the bones.

Each boy held a whip in his hand. The whips had a reach of more than eight metres.

The boys took turns with their whips. The idea was to coil the whip around a bone and lift it clear out of the snow. Anak’s father, as well as most other Eskimo men, was very good at it, but the boys missed often. Finally, after three futile attempts, Jako succeeded. His whip coiled like a snake around a bone. Jerking the whip upwards, the bone flew high into the air. Jako screamed with excitement. He had won!

“I’ll be the best sled driver there is,” he boasted. “Even with twenty dogs pulling my komatik, I’ll be able to handle them!”

Anak felt disappointed. He tried once more, but in vain. Jako still boasted and Anak became angry. Even though Jako was a few months older, Anak had never been weaker in strength or skill. It hurt to hear Jako brag about his skill as a future sled driver. A really good sled driver had to be able to hit the one dog of the pack that made a mistake or lagged behind. Anak was sure he could do that. Often he had driven his father’s komatik and just lately, his own! There was no need for Jako to be so boastful.

A few of the dogs came wandering over to the boys. They belonged to Lug, Jako’s father. The animals were very hungry. Food had been scarce these past days. Two of them pounced eagerly on the bones. At the same moment, Anak raised his whip. But instead of curling around a bone, the whip struck a dog’s nose. Yelping with pain, the dog jumped back. From a safe distance, he bared his teeth in anger.

“That’s mean! That is my father’s dog!” Jako was furious. He doubled his fists. But Anak was angry too. If that animal had not been there, surely he would have lifted a bone this time! The two friends faced each other angrily.

Suddenly, from the distance, came the sounds of dogs barking and whips snapping. The boys looked up to see about seven or eight komatiks approaching, each pulled by a team of dogs. Although the sleds were still far away, the barking rang loudly in the clear polar air.

Anak and Jako forgot their quarrel and raced side by side over the frozen snow toward the oncoming sleds. The men were returning from the hunt! Had they caught anything? At the last igloo, the boys stopped and waited.

The komatiks travelled ever nearer. Again and again the boys heard the cracking of whips urging the dogs on faster and faster. Eskimos are not gentle with their sled dogs. Each team is made up of six dogs. The cleverest one is the leader. He is fed the best but is the first to feel the whip when something goes wrong. The leader is the boss of the team. All the other dogs must obey him.

Now the sleds had come close enough for the boys to see better.

“My grandfather has caught a seal!” cried Anak triumphantly. Now he had a good reason to feel proud. Not on any other sled did he see an animal! Grandfather Ujark was likely the only one who had been successful.

There they came! At a tearing pace they rushed toward the boys. Anak jumped and danced for joy. Then he started running. The sleds would reach the village before Jako and he did.

The boys ran together at top speed, but the dog teams easily outran them and barked excitedly as they rushed past.

When the boys reached the sleds, the men had already started cutting up the seal. Hungrily the dogs watched, growling low in their throats. They would get nothing yet but a rap on the snout if they came too close.

It was just as Anak had supposed. Grandfather Ujark had caught a nice, fat seal. The sealskin would go to Grandfather, but the meat would be equally divided among the members of the tribe. When food was scarce, this was the custom. Now, at the end of the winter, the supplies of walrus, seal, and caribou caught in the summer and fall were all but gone. There was much laughter and chattering. When all the meat was divided, there were some scraps left over. Hungrily the dogs sprang at them, and fierce fighting broke out. Some of the Eskimos lashed the dogs with their whips to keep them from tearing into each other.

Ujark glanced up at the sky, which had faded to a light gray. "We must go," he said. "The sun will soon be here!"

The time had come! Amid shouting and cheering, the dog teams were hitched to the waiting sleds. Nearly everyone from the settlement went along. Whips cracked, and with a burst of speed, the sleds took off. Even the dogs seemed to sense something special in the air. They ran faster than usual.

Anak sat on his grandfather's komatik. Ujark allowed his grandson to drive the dog team but watched closely. He would be ready to take over if anything went wrong.

Anak felt his grandfather's watchful eyes. He tried to do his best, urging the dogs to go faster and guiding the team so well that soon their komatik was in the lead.

Much of Anak's work was done by Aviak, the lead dog, who watched over the rest of the team. Anak and Aviak understood each other. The sled driver glowed with pride in spite of the bitter cold. He sat up very straight. Now Grandfather could see what a clever young grandson he was.

A second sled pulled up. The dog team ran a little faster than his. At first Anak didn't notice. To the left and to the right, komatiks raced over the snow. Suddenly he heard a merry, challenging voice call his name. He looked over and saw Jako.

His friend sat beside his father. Lug had let his son drive. Clearly Jako was trying to prove himself the better driver and his dogs the

better team. It was as though Tika, the leader of Jako's team, still remembered the sting of Anak's whip. She seemed to be doing her best just to humiliate Anak and his team.

Anak was taken by surprise and forgot to pay attention to his own team. The dogs noticed, and without their young master's cheering voice to urge them on, they no longer did their best. Aviak angrily bit the teammate to his right to make him run faster, but still the komatik lost speed!

Lug's sled took the lead. Jako laughed triumphantly.

But now Anak had overcome his initial surprise. Once again he was in control. He gripped his long whip and dealt some blows to the dogs who lagged. "Hurry up, you scoundrels! Faster!" That helped. At once the team picked up speed, and the komatik raced over the snow. The powdery, white snow billowed into clouds behind them. Anak's team was almost at an even pace with Jako's. The latter did not spare his whip but drove his team on relentlessly. Panting, the dogs raced over the endless, white plain.

The two young drivers were both determined to win. They each did their best to pull ahead. The older men on the sleds enjoyed the race. Ujark hoped Anak would win, and, of course, Lug felt the same for Jako.

The other komatiks had all been left far behind. The boys felt alone in a world of snow, swept by icy blasts. Ahead of them, on the southern horizon, a pale-yellow spot had risen that gradually became bigger and broader. It looked as though a golden gateway had formed. Whoever shot through the gate first would win this great race.

Jako lashed his whip recklessly at his dogs. Even Tika felt a few fierce blows. Yelping and growling, the tortured dogs threw themselves into the harness to squeeze the last bit of power from their muscles. Although the komatik swerved back and forth because of his recklessness, Jako still managed to gain a small lead.

Anak realized that he would lose the contest. He was on the verge of lashing out with his whip but quickly changed his mind.

The trail left by Jako's swerving sled was not straight but very crooked. Jako's dogs were wild with pain and fear. They no longer pulled in a straight line. Tika, who was a very good leader, could no longer control the crazed dogs.



Immediately it became clear to Anak. He would not harass his dogs but work together with Aviak to keep them going on a straight course. He cracked his long whip above his animals without touching them and called out encouraging words. He steered the komatik straight and true toward its goal.

They had left the ice of the Coronation Gulf and had reached the mainland. It did not make much difference since there was still a good layer of snow everywhere. However, the landscape was now dotted with black shapes. Here and there a jagged peak rose up out of the snow. The greater parts of the rocks lay hidden beneath the snow. Grandfather Ujark knew they had to be careful now. The sled could easily hit a half-hidden rock and be upset or badly damaged. Ujark was prepared to take over but allowed Anak to drive as long as possible. With pleasure he observed his grandson using extra caution. Carefully, Anak avoided every suspicious-looking irregularity in the snow. The boy was becoming a very good sled driver.

Anak had almost passed Jako. Both sleds raced beside each other up a long, gradual slope. Its surface was scattered with rocks. Jako was frustrated. He couldn't shake off his rival. His whip cracked continuously. But the dogs had nearly reached the end of their endurance. They couldn't go faster. Jako's frustration only made them run more erratically.

The two dog teams were neck and neck. With their tongues hanging out, the tough polar dogs raced on. Then, Anak's team, which was better driven, inched ahead.

Unmindful of the bitter cold, Anak's face glowed with pride. He was winning! Then, from behind him came Ujark's cry, "Stop Anak! It's too dangerous here!"

For a moment conflict raged in his heart. Must he give up now, just when he was ahead? But Grandfather, with more experience than he, knew best. Quickly, Anak called out, and his dogs slowed down.

With a shout of triumph, Jako swept by. Sadly, Anak watched the winning sled. Then, not fifty metres further, Jako's komatik suddenly tipped and fell over. The riders were thrown out. The dogs ran on further. Then, in confusion they snapped and snarled at each other in a wild tangle of dogs and harness.

Ujark, Anak, Lug, and Jako sprang forward to separate the animals and restore order.

Although the over-turned sled was damaged, it could still be used. It had ploughed into a snow-covered rock. Lug was ashamed of himself. He knew he should never have allowed Jako to continue driving. The risks had been too great. Yet he had wanted his son to win. Ujark had been much wiser.

The other komatiks quickly pulled up. They stopped close to the two waiting dog teams. To go further would be too dangerous because of the many half-buried rocks.

The Eskimos continued on foot to the top of the slope. Their view stretched far to the southeast, to the place where the sun would soon appear.

The pale-yellow spot on the horizon had grown. The colour began to change — first orange, then deep pink, and finally bright red.

The sky was clear. In the west, a few stars still twinkled. Breathless, the men, women, and children stood waiting for the sun.

Long red streaks glowed across the sky. Ujark stood beside his grandson. He said, "Those are spears of fire used by the great spirit of light to drive away the blind spirits of darkness. Now the evil spirits will lose their power over the world and over people."

Anak listened and shuddered with amazement. Grandfather often spoke of things that made the boy afraid, yet these things fascinated him because they were mysterious. Father Tapik and Mother Imina never approved when the old man spoke of these things. They had listened attentively when the missionary had visited their small settlement. He had told them about God, who had created

the world, and about the Lord Jesus, who wanted to make people happy. But Ujark had remained stubborn, true to the old heathen beliefs. At times Anak did not really know who to believe, his parents or his grandfather.

Then, suddenly, there it was! The great, golden disk of the sun peeked over the edge of the world. The snow glittered and sparkled with brilliant colours. Those who watched squinted their eyes against the startling brightness. With strange cries and uplifted arms, the members of the small settlement welcomed the return of the sun.

Anak gazed around, excited by all the strange colours and the many shining things in this miracle world.

The beauty did not last long. Soon after it rose, the sun slipped back behind the horizon. An afterglow lingered in the distance.

“The great spirit is very tired with its struggle against the spirits of darkness,” said Grandfather. “But it will return and soon grow stronger with each new day. The long night is over.”

For a time the Eskimos stood and watched. Then they turned and made their way back to their waiting komatiks. Swiftly, the sleds sped northward, back to the small, round igloos on the ice.

Separated by other sleds, Anak and Jako were each too absorbed in their own thoughts about what they had seen to consider another race.

The sun had returned. This return would bring many changes in the life of the small Eskimo tribe.