

The Runt of the Litter

By Pauline Scott

Great, grey, blizzard clouds darken the sky to the south and the wind is warmer but fierce. Pauloosie's heart sinks and he can feel the first wisps of fear welling up. He feels like he might vomit. He took the team out for a practice run for his grandfather, because Joadamee has a bad cold. The team needs lots of practice runs before the big race – the Nunavut Quest. This year the dog team race is from Pond Inlet back to their home in Clyde River.

Because Pauloosie is 11 now, his grandfather trusts him with the team. He left very early this morning to make a full day of it, and to give the team a really good hard run. Pauloosie is glad he's brought his dog, Big Heart, with them even though the dog isn't officially part of the team. His grandfather told him, Big Heart is too small to be on a Quest team for the race itself. Big Heart was the runt of the litter, but because Pauloosie begged and begged, Joadamee let him keep the dog. Dog and boy go everywhere together – except to school.

Pauloosie thought he could outrun this storm an hour ago, but now he knows he must stop and make a protective shelter. They cannot keep going, as the storm is soon going to obscure the way. They are at least a half a day's run from home. Joadamee has taught him to never keep going in a blizzard, that is how people lose their way and die. The team seems nervous, they too sense the danger.

Pauloosie stops the team and stakes them out so they will be to the lee side of the komatik (their sled) and behind the shelter he must quickly build. He throws each dog a hunk of char to nourish them through the storm. They will eat snow if they are thirsty.

His grandfather taught him to flip the komatik on its side and anchor a shelter to this wind break. Pauloosie takes out his snow knife and begins cutting snow blocks for a shelter. He quickly builds up the walls, they are not perfect, but they will do, and he uses a tarp to make a roof. He is not yet good enough to make a perfect iglu shape that will support a dome roof, so Joadamee taught him how to use a tarp for the top of an emergency shelter. He ties the tarp off to the komatik on one side and uses big blocks of snow to hold the tarp down on the other side all around the bottom and covers those with more snow so there are no places for the wind to grab the tarp – he hopes.



Illustration: Igor Dragoslavic - leaddog.ca

Just as he drags his stove, some seal meat, a kettle for tea and his dog into the shelter, the blizzard hits hard. He sets the stove up near the ventilation hole and boils the kettle for tea. He knows he must drink or he will be more likely to freeze. He cuts off some seal meat from the chunk, with his knife – it is frozen but quickly thaws in his mouth. Seal meat warms from within and he can feel the heat spreading once he swallows. He cuts some seal for Big Heart. The dog curls close to him as the storm rages outside. Every time he starts to fall asleep Big Heart nudges him awake and he checks to make sure the shelter is still holding in the storm.

He thinks about his family. His mother and grandfather will be very worried about him. His grandfather will hope he will have remembered all Joadamee has taught him. His mother will be frantic. His little sisters will cry. He is the one who tells them stories until they fall asleep, when his mother has to go to work at the co-op store at night to clean and stock shelves. What will his sisters do if they do not hear his stories of Spider Man and The Hulk, that he's learned from comic books?

He's drifted off again. Big Heart is barking in his face. The tarp is fluttering hard in the wind, threatening to blow away. He must go out and anchor it again. He struggles through the shelter opening and manages to pull the tarp tight, piling the snow on top of the blocks, higher and heavier. That was a very close call. "Qayanamik" (Thank you) Big Heart!

It is morning again and the storm has passed. He hitches the team in the fan shape used in the

eastern Arctic, but decides to let Big Heart run, unhitched. That dog is so smart; maybe he will be more help, not hitched to the sled. They set off at a good pace, sometimes running behind the sled, some times riding. Pauloosie is grateful for the GPS because their trail is now obscured by the blizzard. They have no trail homeward to follow. The snow has also obscured the places in the sea ice where there is open water. Those leads are dangerous for the team and him.

Big Heart is trying to turn the team. He keeps nipping and barking at the lead dog. What is wrong with that dog? Pauloosie thinks. He breaks the team, anchors them and then walks ahead of the team to see what is wrong. Brave Heart is going nuts, barking and nipping at him.

He understands why in a heart beat, as his right foot breaks through the crust of snow and he plunges into the invisible lead up to his thighs, just managing to keep his upper body from falling into the icy water, too. His heart beats wildly, his breath is coming in great gasps. He tries to pull himself up onto the ice, but fails. Brave Heart slinks forward to him and Pauloosie grasps the dog's collar, slowly but surely Brave Heart backs up, pulling him to the point where he can throw his body onto the ice and creep away from the lead. He lays there for a minute, while his heart beat slows and he can finally stand.



Illustration: Igor Dragoslavic - leaddog.ca

Now he has another problem. He must keep from freezing. He remembers his grandfather's words: "If you are ever wet, run, don't ride the komatik and break the ice off the outside of your

clothing as it forms. Keep moving and you can keep from freezing.” Pauloosie is wearing seal skin kamiks (boots) his grandmother made for him, so his feet will stay warm enough. There is a long way to go, yet to home. He must be brave even though he wants to cry. He must watch harder for other leads in the ice.

They set off, he runs with the team until his lungs feel like bursting, but he rides the komatik hardly at all. He can feel himself getting sleepy, but he runs and runs, Big Heart beside him, Big Heart in front of the team, watching for leads. When the team stops to rest for a few minutes he walks around to keep moving, breaking the ice that formed on his pants and the bottom of his coat. When he slows, Big Heart barks at him and walks with him. And then they are back, running and running the team for Clyde River.

It feels like forever but finally, he sees the lights of Clyde River in the distance. They are nearly home.

As they approach town, three snow machines race out to meet him. His grandfather and his uncles surround him and bundle him in furs. They have hot tea and he drinks. They ask him what happened. He tells them, Big Heart beside him.

His grandfather says, “That dog has earned a place on my team for the Quest. He is well named. And you too, grandson, you can come on this Quest as part of my support team. You did well.”



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