

Courageous Dog Battles Blizzard to Save Eskimo Woman

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"He didn't seem to pay any attention to my commands anymore so I gave up and let him lead the team his own way," recalled Keshorna, my mother. She had just lived through a treacherous ordeal of driving a dog team in one of the Arctic's most severe blizzards. It happened many years ago near the cliffs of Cape Thompson in Northwestern Alaska. Her statement was regarding "Spot," the leader of our dog team.

Spot was a dog of questionable origin. My brother, Eebrulik, had taken him as a gift from his friends at Kotzebue, while the dog was still a pup. The novelty of seeing a puppy that didn't look like a husky must have caught Eebrulik's eye.

Strange Looking Dog

When Spot became full grown, he was a far cry from looking like a husky or a malamute. He had short but powerful legs and a thick, long body. He was mostly white with patches of black on his body. He was named, "Spot," on account of that. He also barked where huskies and malamutes sing-songed when excited.

Spot did have something of a husky face. It was black with white patches over his eyes. But his resemblance to a husky ended there. He had large black ears that flopped down on each side of his head.

In spite of his physical make-up, Spot was a formidable dog. He was powerful. Big malamutes came to know better than to pick a fight with him. He was intelligent without being too friendly. This became apparent early in his life and he was destined to be a leader.

Short legs? That was no problem for Spot. It was amazing to see him perform as leader. While the team was at full gallop Spot would trot, his short legs moving so fast that they were a blur of motion. There was never a slack on his trace.

Fate Sealed

Spot's fate was sealed as soon as he came to our family. He was hated by most all the dogs in our team. This peculiar hatred existed all through his life. If it hadn't been for us, he would have perished even as a puppy. As a full grown dog, he was more than equal to any dog. He could give terrible punishment.

Other dogs in our team would gang fight him every opportunity they got. He was always equal to the occasion by being powerful and lightning fast. It was fortunate for us that we managed to stop these fights, because even he could not keep fighting against odds like that. Huskies or malamutes are vicious and destructive fighters. Given an inch, they can literally tear their opponent to pieces.

Died Fighting

Alas, Spot met his death while fighting off two huge malamutes that had gotten loose while the family was attending church one Sunday. The intrepid leader could not hold out against the two while being hampered with a chain snapped on his collar fastened to a whale jawbone stuck into the ground. Thus ended the life of a great leader. He will not be forgotten as our family tree exists.

Encampment

In 1924, my parents, along with my oldest sister, young

brother, and baby sister, had gone to our trapping camp 22 miles south of Point Hope toward Cape Thompson to trap foxes. There my father had kept up a small sod igloo where we stayed during fox hunting seasons. I had remained at Point Hope with Uncle Nayukuk and Aunt Mumangeena to go to school. The family had made the trip with a 9-dog team with Spot the leader as usual.

While there, father would set his traps for white foxes, red foxes, and for occasional silver foxes, up on the hills back of the camp and at Cape Thompson itself. In between times he would go out to the ice to hunt seals and polar bears. The hunting period usually lasted about two months and the family would come back to Point Hope in time for Christmas.

Unusual Weather

The time of the year was around the latter part of November. The weather had been beautiful. It was not cold. One day the skies clouded up briefly and big snowflakes began to fall almost straight down. There was hardly any wind that day. The temperature was around three below. The flakes settled on the wind-packed snow and remained undriven by wind.

There were three more days of this type of weather. The skies would clear up and the sun would shine beautifully. The flakes fell until the layer was four inches thick. It was feather-like and fluffy. When one walked in it, the slight whiff of wind from one's footstep would blow the feathery snow from all sides of the footprint and made an ordinary man's tracks look like tracks of a massive polar bear.

Feathery Snow

As youngsters, my young friends and I loved to play in the snow of this type. We would run and stamp hard with each step to see which one of us could make the biggest tracks. The winner's tracks wound up measuring about the size of a tub.

On the fourth day, the sun came out. It shone on the virgin snow creating myriads of diamond points of light. There was not a breath of air. The temperature had warmed to about six above zero.

"A beautiful day to hitch up the dogs and get some wood," thought Keshorna.

Shortly before, father had gone up into the hills that morning to look after some of his traps. "I'll go to the ones nearby and I'll be back around midday," he said. We found out later that he had been wary of the weather conditions.

The family camp was located a mile and a half from the shores of the Chukchi Sea. There is a fresh water lake, oval shaped, between the camp and the sea. The little sod igloo was located on the north bank of the lake on a slope about 50 feet from the lake shore.

Fateful Decision

There was still about two or three days of wood fuel to last the family, but mother made a snap decision to hitch up the dogs to go after drift wood on the beach some five miles down toward Cape Thompson. There was no sign of inclemency in the weather. It was a beautiful day.

The dogs had not been worked for several days. They showed their enthusiasm by galloping vigorously when Keshorna got underway. She noticed that Spot was acting rather peculiarly. "He seemed morose but led the dogs as usual," mother recalled. Keshorna traveled the five

miles in comparatively short time. The dogs as they galloped made little puffs of drift on the fluffy snow. The sun shone on and the weather was beautiful, quiet, serene.

Ominous Cloud

When Keshorna reached her destination she started at once to load it with wood. When she was about ready to start on her return trip, she felt a whisper of breeze from the south. She looked south automatically and was startled to see an ominous gray cloud on the surface of the ice on the Chukchi Sea.

Birth Of A Storm

Knowing what was coming she quickly unloaded some of the wood. She "mushed" her dogs toward the camp. The breeze gained momentum each moment. Soon tiny drifts of snow began to form on the surface of the feathery snow. The drifts increased visibly by the moment. The ground drifts became heavier and heavier. In a very short time a full-fledged blizzard formed. The wind turned into a gale in an incredibly short time!

With the increase of the velocity of the wind the blizzard worsened and visibility became difficult. Keshorna could now see the leader, Spot, a blur in the wind driven snow forty feet at the head of the team. She began to try to calculate the direction she was going. It was largely by her imagination but she thought she was heading in the right direction. She directed Spot accordingly by alternately shouting, "Gee," and "Haw."

"Spot seemed to obey my commands at first. He didn't seem to listen to me anymore as we moved forward," Keshorna recalled.

The wind began to scream around her and the blizzard increased with the velocity of it. She could no longer see Spot in the lead. Presently, the wheel dogs next to the sled were becoming indistinct in the swirl of snow.

Incredible Storm

The blizzard, fed by the feathery snow on the surface worsened. Keshorna could no longer see the wheel dogs. The front of the sled was becoming a blur in the density of the blizzard. The flying snow whipped into her eyes, her face, and down her neck through the narrow space around her hood.

"The weather is not too cold. What a blessing!" she thought.

The angry gale increased. It was incredible! The force of it began to blow the sled sideways only to be stopped with a jerk as the sled runners hit a packed snow drift. One of these times, Keshorna almost lost her grip on the sled. "I must hold on to the sled very hard!" she said aloud. She was lost now but she would be utterly lost if the team got away from her.

Sled Buffeted

A great gust of wind hit the team and the sled careened sideways, jerked, and overturned, whipping Keshorna to the snow. She held on grimly. Some of her small load spilled out.

The fury of the storm had slowed the team to a crawl and the fury of it had clouded her thinking. When the sled overturned and dumped some of her load, she suddenly realized what she should have done — unload the sled, at least part of it.

She got to her feet holding on to the sled and then righted it. "Mush, Spot, Mush!" she shouted to the leader and the team she could not see. She was utterly lost and the only thing she could think of was to keep going. The team responded and

moved forward at a walking pace. She pushed to help the team fighting the gale at the same time.

"Spot kept the team going, I knew that. I think the other dogs were ready to stop and curl up in the storm. I could hear them whimpering now and then," Keshorna said.

Wary Hunter

As father had said that morning, he went a short distance to attend to the series of traps that were not far away from the camp. He started back early being wary of the weather. He was in a ravine out of sight of the camp. He was about a quarter of a mile away on a rise when he noticed a telltale surface cloud to the south. Almost immediately he felt a wisp of breeze from the south. He knew what it meant and started to run toward the camp. By the time he reached home, a full-fledged storm was in the making.

Despair

In his haste, he had failed to see the missing sled and dogs as he entered the sod igloo. He saw the children and looked around for Keshorna.

"Where is your mother?" he asked. He was appalled at hearing the answer, "She went to get some wood."

"Ahlaqaa! Sumahva imna?" (Alas! What has she done?) he despaired. The despairing exclamation alarmed the children and they broke into sobs. Father comforted them as best he could and then went out the door into a small hallway and out the other door.

Helplessness

The storm was now raging in full fury. There was nothing he could see beyond the door. It was all a mad swirl of gray whiteness that obliterated everything. He couldn't leave the children. There was nothing he could do!

"Keshorna! Keshorna!" he shouted helplessly. It was the only thing he could think of doing. He might as well have done nothing at all. How could Keshorna hear him in the midst of the screaming fury of the storm? To venture out even a few feet in that storm was extremely dangerous. One can lose his sense of direction in a matter of moments. He shouted for his wife — the only thing he could do.

Father came in and out of the little sod igloo. He comforted the elder children who, by now, had realized the full gravity of the situation — mother was lost in the storm!

Despairing Vigil

Father's anxiety for Keshorna gripped him and he couldn't stay still. To him the inadequacy of his vigil was appalling. He was helpless to do anything except to go out and shout hoping his wife would hear him. She was somewhere out there in the swirling maelstrom of a terrible Arctic storm. To try to look for her was out of the question. All he must do was wait — but how long must he wait?

The relentless storm! Each time he went out, the fury of it had increased. This was the Arctic, uncompromising, merciless. When its mood was terrible, it worsened. It was now venting forth its terrible fury, giving no quarter to any living thing — and Keshorna was out there in the middle of the sternest storm!

Trust

After righting the overturned sled, Keshorna edged forward. Her progress was a little better because of the lighter load, but then, the gusts of the wind were now buffeting it more frequent-

ly. Her mittened hands were getting stiff from gripping the sled but she did not dare to let go. Her face was getting numb from constant contact with flying snow.

Somewhere up ahead of her were the dogs. Through the wild rush of the gale, she could hear one of the dogs yipping and barking. It was Spot. There was no question about it. Reassured, Keshorna thought, "Spot, you are a great dog."

The leader seemed to be encouraging the team behind him. In spite of her numbing surroundings, she pictured Spot digging his powerful short legs into the snow pulling with every ounce of strength he had. She tried to encourage him, "Mush, Spot, mush!"

Keshorna didn't really know why she was doing it but she kept it up. She had no idea where she was going. One thing she knew — she had the urge to keep going. Was Spot inspiring her to push on. She didn't know.

Near Exhaustion

She struggled on and on. The exertion and the terrible elements were beginning to tell on her strength. She began to think constantly of, "My children, my husband." It seemed to give her renewed energy. She struggled on. Snow swirled on her face. It worked down her neck, around her waist. It worked down over the top of her mukluks to her ankles.

Up ahead, she could faintly hear Spot yipping and barking. He seemed more insistent. Although she was near exhaustion, and not knowing where she was going, Keshorna encouraged her leader, "Go ahead Spot, Mush!"

And then — the team stopped! Keshorna shouted for Spot to go ahead, but the team did not budge. She strained against the sled and pushed but the front end of the sled seemed to be up against an obstruction. She could hear Spot barking insistently. His bark seemed to her to come from an elevation.

"I must get to Spot and see what is wrong!" Keshorna decided. She edged along the sled and came to the wheel dogs. She was startled when she saw them curled up for protection against the storm. They hardly noticed her. She labored on using the dog traces as guides. Spot was barking continuously up ahead. She could sense that she was going up an incline.

Saved!

And with great suddenness, she heard, "Keshorna!" She was startled beyond words. She recognized the voice — her husband's voice!

Father met her two tandems of dogs back from Spot. Keshorna didn't see father until he was about three feet from her; the density of the driven snow was so great. He helped her, using the traces to guide them. The leader kept barking all the while. A great gust of wind hit and toppled them. They held on to the traces as they fell dragging the two-dogs nearest them.

When they reached Spot, he was right at the door of the little sod igloo!

Courageous Leader

Spot, as dogs go, would never have won a popularity contest. There was nothing beautiful about him. He was hated by the dogs he led, but he was a dog among dogs. His looks did not matter. His great heart, his courage, intelligence, strength, were the qualities that counted in the Arctic country in which he lived.

Keshorna was one of the human beings Spot saved during his great career as a leader. He

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Arctic Survival . .

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saved Eebrulik, Keshorna's eldest son, through another one of the great blizzards.

Spot was not killed by the fangs of the two huge malemutes. He was killed by the chain around his neck. There is little doubt that he would have survived if it hadn't been for the awful hindrance. This was borne out by the terrible marks he left on his attackers.

Spot had to fight all the way through his life. He didn't shrink from his enemies — vicious dogs and the treacherous north country.

Yes, Spot, a mere mongrel, had an unmistakable niche in the scheme of things in the north. A courageous heart in a strong body is a necessary facet of survival of man in the Arctic.