

## I Survived the Alaskan Tsunami: 1958

It started out as what looked like the mountains on the other side of the bay, but without snow. It was about a five minute walk down to the fishing spot, and at least a two minute run back. We caught a good seven fish on our first haul, but dad had noticed that something wasn't quite right. There had been a shake just when we had arrived at the docks, and then a distant rumble, like a plane that never passed over you. Dad had a look on his face, a look that, luckily, I rarely saw. It was the look that played on his face when something was wrong, dangerously wrong. As he saw this, I felt my heart lurch, dropping down into my stomach. It was what we suspected and soon confirmed. A tsunami.

"Run!" Dad screamed, grabbing my hand. However, it was kind of too late, as the wave was maybe a hundred meters offshore, and advancing quickly. I looked back and gasped. The wave was massive, looking like the tallest of the surrounding mountains, but it couldn't be *that* tall.

"Nanuq!" Dad yelled, and tackled me, trying to protect me. And then, the roaring of the wave was right in my ear and we were slammed onto the rough ground as I was catapulted out of dad's arms, hitting the ground as all the light filtered out of my vision.

### *10 Hours Earlier*

Nanuq cast his line out into the Gilbert Inlet, dismally watching the undulating ripples busily hurry out away from the bob. September was coming to a close, and the fish haul was wavering and dwindling, and a small Inuit fishing camp inlaid in the Aleutian Islands, neighboring Ivanof bay. The camp was in danger of running out of food, also because the caribou were migrating south, just as the fish were. The snow had been creeping down the short distance to the Inuit camps, and the bay was freezing over. True, they could ice fish, but the prime fishing time was May to September, and the fish supply was running out as the fish moved south to warmer waters. However, to his delight, Nanuq felt a tug. He yanked the rod to set the hook into the fish's mouth and reeled it in. Great! It was a large herring! Almost two feet long and in good health, Nanuq felt bad about killing it, but his weak and frail mother needed food as she was ill. Nanuq slid the herring onto his line and threw the bob out again. He heard footsteps behind him as he felt yet another tug on his line, and he paid the footsteps no attention, presuming they were of another fisherman of the igloo village. He was surprised greatly when the eager little voice of his younger brother, Atka, called out, "Hey, Nanuq!"

Startled, Nanuq yanked his line too hard, pulling the hook fully out of the fish.

"Dang it, Atka! I lost the fish!"

"Oh, sorry," murmured Atka noncommittally.

Ugh! Atka was a little too ecstatic sometimes, and it seemed like he chose the worst to do it. Nanuq caught another herring while Atka stayed at the dock to fish more. Nanuq was about to leave, when, to his astonishment, he realized that there were many more fish popping up, judging from the ranks of ripples all around that he hadn't noticed previously. They could use the net for this! Nanuq ran the length of the path to the shore and soon after, through the jumble of nomadic igloos, nodding to the elders as he passed them on the path. As he reached his home, he saw his mother laying out caribou meat on the oil to cook and dry into jerky.

"Mom!" Nanuq called, and his mother started and whipped her head up in surprise at Nanuq's spontaneous arrival.

"Tell dad to get the net! The fish are swarming in the bay," Nanuq sputtered, out of breath. Nanuq's mom brightened, for she loved fish and, because of the absence of them, hadn't tasted any in a while. However, his mother was wary of this because it wasn't common for so many fish to gather in one place.

"I will *ask* ataata<sup>1</sup> what he thinks of this. It isn't normal for these things to happen." She ducked into the igloo, and Nanuq could hear her discussing with his very excitable father, Kaskae.

"Let's do it!" Kaskae roared enthusiastically, rushing out of the igloo, an elephantine grin playing on his weathered and wrinkled face at Nanuq, patting him on the head and putting a heavy arm around his son's shoulder.

His mother stepped out of the igloo apprehensively and mumbled, "But Kaskae, you know what could happen."

"Piujuq<sup>2</sup>, I have spent my whole life here and I know that if you have a chance like this, you take it, especially because winter is coming along and we need the food."

"Just ...be careful," Kallik, the mother, sighed shakily.

"Alianait<sup>3</sup>!" Kaskae exclaimed happily. "Let's go! We want to get the best of the haul before everyone else finds out!" He winked at Nanuq and they set about getting the net and the bulk bait, along with the line to hook up the fish.

"We do need a knife that will work," Nanuq's father said, for he had lost it on a recent fishing trip with his friends. As they trotted through the jumble of igloos,

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<sup>1</sup> Inuit, father

<sup>2</sup> Inuit, darling, honorary praise

<sup>3</sup> Inuit, a form of jovial exclamation

Kaskae pointed them to the only known arrangement of merch in their temporary camp, run by the elder Amaruq, who Kaskae, along with many others, thought mad. Kaskae always described him as a garrulous, blithering old man who didn't talk about anything important or of use.

"Remember, we want to get out of the assortment as fast as possible once we get the knife," his father said uneasily, as he always was around Amaruq.

As they got to the market, Amaruq eyed them suspiciously with his large, knowing eyes.

"Are you going off to the shore, Kaskae?" Amaruq pronounced questioningly. Nanuq was once again reminded of the calm, flowing eloquence of the elder's voice, making him feel at ease and content.

Nanuq's tranquil state was immediately broken by the rough voice of his father demanding in a derogatory manner, "I'll take the spruce knife."

"Kaskae, you are an intelligent fellow, and you should not let your initial inspiration cover your sensible qualities."

"What do you mean?" Kaskae responded impulsively.

"I mean that it is uncanny for such luck to strike without a greater cause. You, of all people should know that fish scare easily from tremors or quakes, and this could quite easily be the case."

Kaskae insolently responded, "Whatever. We'll be careful." However, Nanuq saw Kaskae roll his eyes. His father threw the pieces of copper he had received in a trade down on the small, wooden counter. Amaruq gingerly counted and collected the pieces. Kaskae grabbed Nanuq's hand and strode out of the market, Nanuq hurrying along behind him.

"Kaskae," Amaruq said quietly, but it was enough to make the father of the two turn around.

"What?"

"Don't go."

"What do you mean, don't go? This is a perfect opportunity to catch a lot of herring! The winter months are coming, and we all know that we need the food, Amaruq, we need the food."

"I would rather suffer from lack of food than have you two die, Kaskae. I can almost guarantee that this won't turn out well."

Kaskae faltered, taken aback from the heartfelt statement. He shook his head, then continued out of the market before Amaruq could stop them.

"Amaruq cares so much about people, Nanuq." His father sighed, troubled. "I would even say *too* much. I don't want you to think I don't like him, but ..." He

trailed off, and Nanuq frowned, as he did in fact think his father didn't like the elder. "It feels like he *hovers* around you." Nanuq thought that it was just that his father was too independent, and when he was told something by someone else that he knew was true, he felt won over and liked to find some way to deny it.

"Oh well," Nanuq's father sighed, and opened his mouth to say something, but after a thought or two, he promptly shut his mouth. He then decided to say simply, "Let's get on with it." Nanuq brooded on the strange experience at the market as he hustled along in haste to keep up with Kaskae's long strides. He found it unsettling, what Amaruq had said; it *was* a bad idea to purposefully walk straight toward a possible earthquake, or a tsunami, and they could be doing it as he walked.

Nanuq had never enjoyed this monotonous walk through the flat land to the docks. It certainly wasn't much to look at, and the dirt was usually hard and bare, with no vegetation whatsoever to pad it, usually resulting in sore feet many a day, for Nanuq fished quite a lot. However, he noticed that the ground seemed to hurt more, more than it had on his recent run back to the igloo village that day. Nanuq presumed that it was because of the growing tension he felt in himself, gnawing away at his contentment. Suddenly, a faint rumble sounded in the far distance sounded, sucking out any peace within Nanuq that was left.

"Father, is this a good idea?" he asked uncertainly.

"We should be fine," Kaskae replied gruffly, shook himself, and walked forward determinedly. As they got to the docks, Nanuq found that the fish were still swarming around in a craze, water rings forming all around. Nanuq quickly fastened the weights in the net so as to keep the net from blowing around when thrown. The weights were also buoyant, so the net didn't sink to the bottom fully.

"Goin' fer the fish?" asked a voice behind them. It was Deliat and his son, Aput, both holding one wooden kayak over their heads. Deliat had a strange and heavy accent, and it was usually difficult to decipher what he said.

Kaskae decided to warn them, thinking they were about to go off into the bay, saying, "You know that it is a little weird for things of this sort to happen right?"

"Bah!" said Deliat dismissively. "It's foin. Little Aput hea an' oi'r goin' out t'take avant'age o' this!"

"I'm just trying to warn you that there might be ...a problematic occurrence soon," Kaskae decided.

Deliat and Aput walked down to the shore, getting into the boat and saying nothing more. With their gear, they happily rowed out into the bay.

"Oh boy," Kaskae said nervously. Nanuq had never seen him this nervous, for he was typically confident and possibly a little headstrong sometimes. They set about arranging the net and getting ready for the first catch. They stumbled down to the cold water, readying themselves for the procedure.

"Ready?" Kaskae yelled over the sea spray as he filled his hand with the bait.

"Yep!" Nanuq yelled back. Nanuq's father threw the bait into the water as Nanuq tossed the net out into the bay.

"All right, cinch it!" Kaskae said after confirming that it was a fit time to haul the fish in. Nanuq yanked the crude drawstring, a small length of twine, down and started pulling the net in.

"Good one!" Kaskae said a little falsely, trying his best to reassure Nanuq, but it was a futile attempt, really just worsening the anxiety in Nanuq because he now knew of the profound concern in his father. Nanuq and his father vaguely slung the fish onto the line. Nanuq nervously looked up at the ocean, only to scream,

"Dad!"

"Nanuq!" He yelled back, terrified. "Run!" Nanuq didn't need to think twice. He sprinted toward the mountains, away from the water, his heart choking him as it thumped into his throat. His father, however, was a couple meters ahead of him, leaving Nanuq in the dust, not knowing it. Or at least he hoped.

It made sense now that he thought about it. Amaruq was right. There had been a tremor, the result of the hordes of fish coming in, causing a landslide or something else resulting in the tsunami speeding behind them, a hungry void devouring everything in its path.

"Daddy!" Nanuq yelled. His father looked back, horror in his eyes as he ran back, fumbling with his son's arm. He finally got it, and he picked up Nanuq and ran faster than ever. Over his shoulder, Nanuq saw the wave. It was gargantuan, seeming as tall as the surrounding mountains. Seeing it, a sheet of tears filmed his eyes. He hadn't known Aput very well, or Deliat, for that matter, but from what he had seen, they were decent, nice people, and it saddened him greatly to know that they were most likely drowning at the bottom of the bay currently. He and his father would be fine, though. However, as they ran more Nanuq started to feel less and less certain that he and his father would live through this. His father was slowing, and Nanuq saw that the tsunami was a few hundred feet offshore, at best. Nanuq didn't think they would make it. The massive wave moved toward them at a great speed, and Nanuq could only watch as it greedily zoomed toward land. Then, at the critical point, the shore, the monster tripped and bore down on the two fleeing family members. The roaring of the wave was suddenly right in Nanuq's ear,

and then he was flung out of his father's arms as Kaskae was thrown down on the ground.

Then, all was black.

Nanuq heard worried blabbering as he woke to his senses. The wrinkled face of Amaruq peered solemnly down at him. Nanuq started, meaning to get up, but everything hurt, he simply couldn't get up because of the pain in his body.

"Ohh," Nanuq groaned, or at least he meant to, but he was tossed into a coughing fit, water spitting out of his mouth.

"Easy, there," Amaruq said.

"Igaluk," Nanuq heard his mother's voice whisper the Moon god's name in awe. "Oh, piujuq," his mother broke into an intense sob as she gave Nanuq an embrace of daze, fear, and overall relief. Nanuq still couldn't move, the impact of the fling taking its full toll. out of the corner of his eye, Nanuq saw his mother present Amaruq with a homemade stretcher, out of caribou skin and two sticks, that Nanuq was gently placed on. From it, Nanuq could see the devastating destruction the tsunami had conducted. There were no igloos left. Everything was a flat, reflective plain of receding water, backing into the bay after the displacement of it. However, Nanuq did see the occasional log sticking up with a skin or two hanging off it. Nanuq also glimpsed a few bodies, unmoving, and he looked away.

Nanuq was brought to damp ground, the best kind of ground they could find, and could stiffly walk by midday, as he had apparently been asleep for a whole night and day, as Amaruq had previously related to him in his still surprisingly articulate voice. Nanuq stiffly walked about, shaking numerous cold bodies awake, bringing them to the ever increasing dry land to rest pleasantly. Amaruq stumbled to the stretchers, carrying a limp body that was clearly a strenuous effort for the elder. As Nanuq looked closer, he recognized the set complexion of his father, and cried. It took a few hours for the man to awake, and when he did, his stressed mother broke into yet another fit of flowing tears from her large eyes. Most everyone of the camp, at least from their memory, was eventually recovered, with a broken leg being the most dire injury. Deliat and Aput also showed up, ragged and damp, and almost the whole village had listened intently as Deliat relayed their jaw-dropping story of being flung into the air as the wave pushed them, heavy accent and all.

At dinner, Nanuq realized that he was savoring his meal, when he would usually wolf it down quickly without thinking. Since the tsunami, he had been thinking about his actions more, he savored every moment and pensively thought about things in a more deep fashion, taking the time to see into things and

understand about them. He also was more grateful for the moments he *got* to enjoy, as he liked to think of it.

After a restful sleep, Nanuq and his company salvaged what they could of the strewn caribou skins, logs, and other possibly useful wreckage. All of the igloos were gone, melted and demolished when the wave had struck, but there was the rare chunk of snow floating far out in the bay. He strung up his caribou furs, the small wooden bear his grandfather had carved for him of yore, and his bow, without arrows, which were the only belongings of his he found. Kaskae had recovered almost as well as Nanuq after spending a disconcerting long while under water, and, of course, the initial impact. Yesterday, they hadn't known what to say to each other, not that they had really gotten the chance to do so. Nanuq went over and hugged his father, and he, seeming to want to leave the incident, said with a smile, "Well, let's get your pack on."

Nanuq was happy to find that it wasn't the same false happiness that Kaskae had conveyed before the tsunami, but a real, legitimate content with what he proclaimed. He helped Nanuq shoulder and then fasten the bundle onto his back, then easily did likewise with his, and they proceeded to join their mother and Amaruq, who had packed quickly in the main congregation. To no surprise of Nanuq, but of the others who hadn't witnessed the incident at the market the previous day when Amaruq had acutely warned Kaskae to not venture to the bay, Kaskae had a newfound respect for the elder, and, this time to Nanuq's surprise, with no chagrin. It seemed like the tsunami had shaken his father as much as it had Nanuq.

The group started off up the mountains to move to another spot that their leader, Katuq, had in mind. The village had been too devastated to try to rebuild it, and after a long discussion of the elders, Katuq had decided that they would move to another spot. Nanuq wanted to take the hike in quiet, so as even his father chatted with the other inhabitants of their now lost village, Nanuq turned his head out to see the spectacular views of the other side of Lituya Bay and thought of Amaruq, the elder walking in front of him. It dawned on Nanuq only now how much he had thought about him and his father and tried to stop them from going toward something that could ruin them. Kaskae was right, Amaruq cared so much about people, *but not too much*, Nanuq evaluated. He also thought about how good it felt when he had rarely given a helping hand to one in dismay, trouble, or simply going down the wrong path, and thought he wanted to be like Amaruq someday, acquire enough knowledge to have that knowing glint in the elder's eyes when he predicted something and to know what would be the right thing to do when another was in

trouble, how much to sacrifice yourself in that situation, and in all, give a helping hand to others and know how to do it.