

The pastor cleared his throat. "Wennberg was. Formerly, I mean to say."

"Formerly? Oblige me further."

The pastor housecleaned in his vocal box some more, then ventured into history. "Wennberg was in the group of artisans who arrived here with Governor Etholen--was it ten, twelve years ago? When I myself arrived to succeed Pastor Cygnaeus, Wennberg was a member of our congregation. He came of a God-fearing family, I believe. But you know how a Swede is, a hard knot even for God."

The pastor paused to sort his words with some care here.

"A turn of mind, you see, happened in him. The devil's mischief, always watching its chance. Sometime not long after my arrival here, it could be seen that Wennberg had slipped from the path of right. When I sought to--to show him the way of return, he cursed me. He also cursed--God. Since then he has fallen, if I may say so, even deeper into harmful ways."

Rosenberg pinched the area between his eyes again. Had Melander's name been able to speak off the list, the Governor would have been solemnly assured he had caught the morning-after affliction that they on Gotland called hont i haret: pain in the hair, aye?

"Drink, do you mean, Pastor?"

"Actually, no. Wennberg, ah, gambled."

At this, the governor pursed his lips and looked quizzically at the pastor, who himself was known at the officers' ~~club~~^{clubhouse} as a devout plunger at the card table. The pastor hurried on.

"Wennberg, you see, is--was--long past his seven years of

service here, his gambling debts have kept him on. Not the first ever to--overstay. Yes, well, what I mean. . .Wennberg has become, may God grant that he see his erring way, a man destroying himself. Sullen, unpredictable. A loose cannon, I think the naval phrase is? If you would like my opinion, he is capable of destroying others as well."

Rosenberg rose, crossed to a window, leaned his forehead against the glass coolness, and stared out at the clouded coastline south across Sitka Sound. So, now. Send the Nicholas to alert Ozherskoi? If the damnable Swedes could paddle at all they likely were beyond the redoubt by now. No, the decision was fatter and homelier than that. Whether to order out the steamship to hunt down a canoe which could hide among the coves and islands of this coast like a mouse in a stable. Or let the bedamned Swedes go, let ocean and winter do the hunting of them. Yet this was no trifle of matter, thank you, the economics in the loss of four indenturees, two dozen or so man-years of service left in them. . .and the example to the other laborers could be treacherous. One thing certain, steamship or not: can't be remedied but can't be ignored, therefore paper it over. The Governor knew the saying that paper is the schoolman's forest, and the Governor had been to school. On quite a number of matters been to school, as a further saying had it. Months ago the dispatch had gone off to Russia requesting that he be relieved of his governorship--"ill health...family reasons." In truth, a sufficiency

of New Archangel and the declining fur trade and the inattention of the Tsar's government half the world away. With a resourceful bit of clerkship, this matter of runaway Swedes could slide out of sight into the morass of inkwork his successor would inherit. For his part, Rosenberg would reap one further anecdote with which to regale dinner parties in St. Petersburg.

"Three fools and a lunatic in a Kolosh canoe," he intoned against the window pane as if practicing.

Then, realizing he had rehearsed aloud, the governor added without turning: "That will be all, Pastor. If you know a prayer for the souls of fools and lunatics, you perhaps might go say it."

"Excellency."

That evening, securely downcoast from New Archangel and some careful miles shy of the Ozherskoi outpost, the four canoeists pulled ashore behind a small headland, in a cove snug as a mountain-side tarn.

Weariness weighted every smallest move as they tried to uncramp their legs, shrug the hunch from the top of their backs. Karlsson, evidently going to be methodical until he dropped, at once was unloading the rifles against further risk of accident from one. Wennberg²³ clumsy from the need of food, lurched to a rock and sat.

Melander, though. Creakily, Melander leaned toward Braaf and whispered.

Braaf nodded and ran a rapid hand into the supplies stowed within the canoe. When his hand came up, it held an elegant dark bottle.

"Karlsson, forgive us that it isn't hootchina. But champagne from the officers' clubhouse was the best Braaf could manage under the circumstances."

Melander's long face as he spoke was centered with a colossal grin, which now began to repeat itself on Karlsson and even Wennberg.

"We think it may do well enough for a toast to our first day of journey even so," Melander purred on as Braaf worked the cork free. you furnished the ale,
"Braaf, would you care to sip first?"

Melander, like the others, expected the young provisioner merely to swig and pass along. Instead Braaf stood looking at the slim bottle in his hands and murmured: "Let me remember a moment... Yes, I know..." He lifted his glance to the other three, sent it on above their heads and recited:

"May you live forever and I never die."

Then he drank deep.

Permitting the others their champagne sleep, Melander enlists the last of dusk and begins to re-stow the lesser items in the canoe, taking more care than could be had in the dark and hurry at New Archangel. Fit the spyglass into this cranny, handy to hand. . . Stowage will be a perpetual chore of these voyage days, all the heavy items such as the water cask and the provisions and the guns unshipped each time the canoe is carried up the shore into shelter for the night, precaution against breaking the thin wooden skin with weight. Pauses now, gives a listen toward the water. Resumes: tucks away a box of tea. . . As Melander occupies himself at this, another picture is called for in the mind, large as you can manage to make it. Perhaps larger yet, for this image must be of the northmost arc of the Pacific Ocean:

the chill ascendant quarter-moon of that hemisphere of water, from the schooled islands of Japan up to the Siberian coast and across to the Alaskan, then curving south and east along the continental extent of Canada and America.

Vaster stretches can be found on the earth, but not all so many, and none as fiercely changeable. Most of the ~~climates~~^{weathers} imaginable are engendered somewhere along the North Pacific's horizon coast, from polar chill to the stun of desert heat. Within this water-world, the special law of gravity is lateral and violent; currents of brine and air rule. Most famous and elusive of these is the extreme wind called the williwaw--an ambusher, an abrupt torrent of gust flung seaward from the snow-held Alaskan mountains. But times, too, the North Pacific flings back the wind, gale so steady onto the coast it seems the continent has had to hunch low to keep from swaying.

The North Pacific's most tremendous force, however, is something like a permanent typhoon under the water. Kuroshio, the Japanese Current, which puts easterly push into several thousand miles of ocean. Even here at the farthest littoral from the current's origins, Melander and Karlsson and Wennberg and Braaf feel Kuroshio's shove against their journey without realizing it. Are touched too by the clemency Kuroshio brings from its origins near the Equator, for this region of coast the canoemen are groping their way along, the furrowed southeastern archipelago which on a map dithers at the flank of the main Alaskan peninsula like a puppy shadowing its mother, is spared

the winterlong snow and crackling cold of the northland. Instead, a north-seeking offspring of Kuroshio, the Alaska Current, relays warmth along this shore, moderates winter here mostly to rain and fog. Not that rain and fog are small elements, for they tap and sniff at man as if deeply suspicious whether he is substantial. But to storm, true North Pacific storm, they are only lazy cousins. Storm it will take, storm whirling south out of the Gulf of Alaska where the Alaska Current collides with chill northern water, for the canoemen to know in full the North Pacific's set of strengths.

These four Swedes in a Tlingit canoe are attempting a thousand or twelve hundred miles--something of that range, by Melander's estimate—of this North Pacific-world. Not all so much, you may say. A fraction of a shard of an ocean, after all. Ten or a dozen hundred miles: in fifty or sixty sturdy days one might walk such a distance and perhaps yet have a wafer's-worth of leather on one's boot soles. Except that much of this particular distance is exploded into archipelago; island, island, island, island, like a field of flattened asteroids. Except, too, for season being fully against these watergoing men, the weather of winter capable of blustering them to a halt any hour of each day and seldom apt to furnish the favoring downcoast wind needed to employ the canoe's portable mast and squaresail. Except, more than, that, current too being against them, the flow of the Alaska Current up this coast as they seek to stroke down it. Except, finally, for details of barrier the eye and mind just now are beginning to reach--forbidding bristle of forest on those countless islands, white smash of breakers on rocks hidden amid the moating channels--

so greatly more complex is this jagged slope of the North Pacific than the plain arithmetic of its miles.

In this picture, Melander as he raptly stashes his boxes of tea and swags of sailcloth amounts to a worker ant on the rock toe of an Alp.

"Tumble up! Fall onto your feet and suffer morning!"

Melander roused his trio as rapidly as if they constituted the crew of a schooner aiming into storm, and for the ocean-old reason: to steal minutes. Snatch time whenever it was catchable was going to be the policy of his captaincy. Any distance gained here at the front of their voyage served as that much less to be slogged out later, when weariness would be like a weight grown into their bones.

Melander amended their ~~from~~ ^{But in} ~~They took the same canoe positions~~ ^{again} the night before. Karlsson still the stern paddler. ^{But in} ~~in~~ front of him, Wennberg. In front of Wennberg, Braaf. Melander ^{again} ~~in~~ the bow. In such placement, Melander of course had reason. Karlsson was the adept canoeman of them, far away the fittest to handle the large steersman's paddle. Wennberg, close by Karlsson's example, would be driven to try keep pace with him. Braaf, Melander wanted nearest his own scrutiny, to insure that he shirked no more than could be prevented.

Their early miles went in silence, as if these new canoemen were not sure they could afford effort to talk. ~~And had they been able to~~ ^{And had they been able to} ~~If they could have~~ bend their vision upward over Baranof's dour foreshore to see what they

were traveling on the edge of, they truly would have been appalled beyond any saying of it. A high-standing sea of mountains, white chop of snow and ice and rock, with arms of the Pacific, blue fjords and inlets, thrusting in at whatever chance: Alaska's locked grapple of continent and ocean. Then--

"Melander, you said these first days we'd only to keep this shore on our left, there's no other land along here. ^{the Hell} What d'you call that out there?"

Wennberg was pointing southwest, where a dim bulk rose on the horizon.

"You've caught your eye on Cape Flyaway," Melander said. "Clouds. Sometimes they sit down on the water like brood hens and you'd swear they're land, couldn't be anything but. That Finn skipper spent half of one morning searching our charts for a thunderhead he thought was a piece of Hawaii. We need to take care. This coast would gladly stand us on our ears. Read the map, read the compass, read the landmarks, and not go chasing clouds. That'll fetch us to Astoria. Aye?"

"What'll it be like?" This was Braaf, who took the chance to stop his paddle while asking. "Another wet woodpile like New Archangel?"

"Sailors' buzz I've heard is that it's a proper port but small. Sits on a fat river with Hell's own sandbar at its mouth. The Americans--paddle, Braaf, a scissor of a lad like you is sharp enough

to move your mouth and arms at the same time, aye?--the Americans, recent years, have been coming into that country in numbers and they boast Astoria as tomorrow's town of this coast. But all we care is whether ships touch at the place, and touch they do."

Not far into the day, Melander called a pause in the paddling. "Time for a listen," he said.

"A listen--?" Wennberg caught on. "The steamship, you don't think--Melander, damn you seven ways, you said the Russians'd not come chasing after us with it--"

"I still say so. But maybe we'd do well to have a listen now and again, for the practice of it, aye? Close your face, Wennberg."

Melander cocked his long head as if counting the trees of the forested shore. Braaf sat as always, but still as a gravestone. Karlsson leaned down toward the water, to catch any bounce of sound. Wennberg concentrated so hard his back bowed.

The canoe rolled mildly, moved the heads of the men inches to this side, then same inches to the other, a slow tiny wigwag.

Melander at last turned his head, solemn, to Wennberg.

"What--" the blacksmith started, "is there something--Melander, d'you hear--?"

"Aye," intoned Melander. "Clear as anything." The smile came out. "Silence. Which is just what we need to hear, and more of it."

Melander captained them to near North Cape, twenty-five miles

downcoast from New Archangel, before stopping. By then Braaf, the least accustomed to exertion, looked particularly done in. in the unstowing and then But he said nothing, and lent a hand in hefting the canoe into shelter among a shore-touching stand of spruce.

Melander stepped over to Braaf. "Let's see."

Braaf held out his hands. "Chafed some just here"--the skin around from the back of each thumb to the forefinger, particular target of sea spray as he'd paddled--"but could be worse."

"So are mine," Melander said. "Three or four days, it'll take to toughen the skin there. But then you'll be solid as horn. Braaf, you'll make a deckhand yet."

The sailcloth and mast, fitted onto a pair of long cleft sticks and pegged taut, were put up as tent; Melander had not said so, but he expected shelter was going to be the main service of their sailing equipment.

Wennberg was cajoled into building a fire, Melander apportioned beans and salt beef into a kettle, Karlsson cut spruce boughs to sleep on and spread the sailcloth which would serve as a ground tarp and then their blankets, and dark brought night two of their leaving of New Archangel.

"Cheery as a graveyard, isn't it? The Russians deserve such country."

They were into their second full day of paddling beside the drab-rocked foreshore of Baranof Island, mile of whitish gray following mile of grayish white, and Melander thought it time to brighten the situation.

"Maybe we ought to have pointed north." First words out of

Karlsson since breakfast, but at least he was going along with Melander's try. "I've been up the coast a way with the bear-milkers and those cliffs are good dark ground."

"You'd see enough gray-gray-gray, white-white-white there too, Karlsson. Go far enough, up past the Aleuts, it's drift ice and glacier, and glacier and drift ice. Cold enough to make the walls creak. No, that's the north slope of Hell up there, the high north. At least credit me with knowing enough to point us the other way. Aye?"

Wennberg jumped for that. "Does that mean you're taking us down Hell's south slope, Melander?"

Melander blew out his breath. "Wennberg, your soul is as dingy as those rocks. Shut your gab and paddle."

Of a sudden, rain swept the coast. Not New Archangel's soft, muslin-like showers, but cold hard rods of wet, drilling down on the men. The downfall stuttered on their garments--pitpitpitpit--like restless fingers drumming on a knee.

The other three donned well-worn sealgut rainshirts, but Braaf sat resplendent in a knee-length Aleut parka, bright yarn embroidery at the cuffs, a front ruff of eagle down.

"What're you, the crown prince?" Wennberg demanded. "Where'd you come up with that rig?"

Braaf held up a wrist and admired the sewn filigree. "Round and about, where all good ware comes from, blacksmith."

"Elegant as new ivory, Braaf," Melander put in drily. "If the Koloshes come pestering again, we'll tell them you're the Little Father the Tsar, aye? Now paddle."

That day and most of the one after it took them to reach the southmost tip of Baranof Island, Cape Ommaney.

In that time Braaf and Wennberg and Melander began to realize, though it never would have occurred to the first two to offer it aloud and even Melander found the sentiment a bit unwieldy to frame into words, that in all their seasons at New Archangel they never really had put eyes on the Alaskan forest. True, timber hedged the stockade and settlement, furred the isles of Sitka Sound and the humped backs of mountains around. But here downcoast, Alaska's forest stretched like black-green legions of time itself, the horizon to the left of the canoemen relentlessly jutting with trees wherever there was firmament for them to fasten themselves upright on. Where soil ran out at the shore edge, trees teetered on rock. Fleece-thick as this forest was, it seemed possible that every tree of the coast was in green touch with every other, limb to limb, a continent-long tagline of thicket.

Along this universe of standing wood the Swedes saw not another human--which was what Melander had banked on--nor even sea-life to speak of, the ~~Russian-~~^{Russian-}~~Russian~~ American Company's "marine Cossacks," the Aleuts, long since having harvested these waters bare of otters and seals.

What abounded were birds. Lordly ravens, big as midnight cats. Crows, smaller and baleful about it. Eagles riding the air above the coastal lines of bluff, patrolling in great watchful glides before letting the air ~~spiral~~ ^{spiral} them high again. Seagulls, coromrants, grebes, loons, ~~kingfishers~~, ducks of a dozen kinds. At times, every breathing thing of this coastline except the four paddlers seemed to have taken wing.

Cape Ommaney steepened southward into nearly half a mile of summit, evidently detailed to hunch there as the ~~island's~~ ^{island's} last high sentry against the open water all around.

Perhaps the stony bluff put Wennberg in mind of the roundbacked mountains near New Archangel, for that evening after supper he nodded out toward the bay between the canoeists' camp and the cape and asked: "What'd you do, Melander, if the Nicholas poked around that point just now?"

"After I emptied my britches, do you mean? So then, Wennberg, the Nicholas chugs in your dreams tonight, does it? Me, by now I think she's still anchored firm in Sitka Sound and the Russians are in their beds with their thumbs up their butts." The canoe's progress thus far had set Melander up on stilts of humor. "But I've been in error before. Once, anyway--the time I thought I was wrong. What about you other pair, now, what's your guess? Are the Russians panting after us like hounds onto hares as Brother Wennberg thinks? Aye?"

"No," Karlsson offered. "They think we can't survive."

"What ~~the Hell~~ makes you think we can?" retorted Wennberg.

"Because we're alive to now, and closer to Astoria each time we move a paddle."

"Your prediction, Braaf?"

"They're not after us. They don't spend thought on us at all by now."

Wennberg snorted. "We dance out of New Archangel practically under their ~~Goddamn~~ noses and they don't even think about us? Braaf, your head is mud."

"They need forget us, or we'll mean too much to them. You learn that fast in the streets. The ones who rule never bother their minds with the likes of us. The provisions I took from the Russians, they regret. That they're short of our faces at work call, they regret. Maybe they even regret the Kolosh canoe gone. But us ourselves, we're smoke to them by now."

None of them had ever heard so many sentences one after another out of Braaf, and in the silence that followed, it seemed to be taken as truth even by Wennberg that whatever they encountered onward along this coast, and there might be much, the challenge probably now would not be Russian.

They readied in the morning to cross the channel from Cape Ommaney east to Kuiu, the first of the island stairsteps onward

from Baranof. On Melander's map Kuiu could have been where palsy seized the mapmaker's hand, a spatter of crooked shores and hedging rocks. Melander said nothing of all this quiver to the other three, simply told them that he judged there'd be stout current up the passage so that they would need to aim mostly south to end up east.

It worked out his way, and by noon the canoe was nearing Kuiu, snow-scarved peaks rising beyond shore. Here, however, the map's muss of dots and squiggles became real, and the coastline stood to them with a rugged headland.

"No hole in the shore, aye?" Surf blasted across rocks not far off the point. "Let's stay away from that horse market," Melander decreed. Avoiding the channel between headland and rocks the canoe stood south again, the paddlers now working directly against the current.

In a few miles a cove revealed itself, but faced open to the weather from the west.

The next break in the shore yawned more exposure yet.

"Damn." Melander's exasperation was outgrowing his epithets. "Is this whole stone of an island unbuttoned like this?"

Two further inhospitable Kuiu coves answered him.

Dusk waited not far by now, and the labor of paddling against the current was sapping the canoemen. From weariness, they nearly blundered into a broad slop of kelp before Karlsson glimpsed it in the gloom.

By now the canoe had reached the southern tip of the islands, a rocky point which bade less welcome than any profile yet.

"Bleak as ashes," Melander bestowed on this last of Kuiu. Then reached out the spyglass, to see whether there was any hope out in the channel.

Maybe, he reported. In the water beyond them stood what looked like thin clumps of timber.

Melander lit ~~the candle lantern~~ ^{a pitch splinter} in order to peer close at his map. Through the channel hung a thread of line; a ship had navigated here, testimony which was needed now because low rocks and shoals so easily could ~~hide~~ ^{hide} themselves in the gray mingle of water and dusk.

Melander set the craft for the timber clumps. They proved to be small islands, and on one of the narrowest, the kind that sailors said could be put through an hourglass in half a day, the canoeists pulled to shelter just short of full dark.

That was their first day of stumble, two stair treads of island when but one had been in glimpse. Yet Melander and his ~~canoe~~ ^{three-man navy} somehow had alit secure, and after Kuiu the going smoothened.

In the days now, the canoe jinked its way southeast amid constant accessible landfall. The major island called Prince of Wales rests dominantly in this topography, like a solitary platter on a table, and the strew of smaller isles along its west is as if that rim of the plateware had been pounded to bits by the North Pacific. Here the

canoeists could cut a course which, while Melander said a snake would break its back trying to follow their wake, kept them mostly shielded from the ocean's tempers of weather. It granted them too a less hectic chance to learn some of the look and behavior of the Northwest coast. How a break in the forest ahead meant not merely gulch or indent of shore, it meant stream and possible campsite. How a bed of kelp could serve as breakwater, smoothen the route between it and shore even when the outer water was fractious. And the vital reading by Melander, that alongshore, in a width about that of a broad street, flowed local currents and eddies which sometimes were opposite to hindering wind or tide. It was not the voyage any of them had expected, these stints in among the eelgrass and anemones, but it eased the miles.

"New Archangel, there. What d'you suppose they're at, just now?"

"The Governor's just done his whole day's labor--taken a sniff of snuff."

"Okhotskans're staring themselves cross-eyed at the bedamned mountains.

"The Finns, they're praying for it to rain ale."

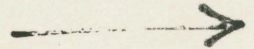
"Trade boots with any of them, would you?"

"No. Not yet."

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P. 97A follows →

The spaces between stars are where the work of the universe is done. Forces hang invisibly there, tethering the spheres across the black infinite canyons: an unseeable cosmic harness which somehow tugs night and sun, ebbtide and flood, season and coming season. So too the distances among men cast in with one another on an ocean must operate. In their days of steady paddling, these four, various as Joseph's robe when they embarked from New Archangel, found that they needed to cohere in ways they had never dreamt of. To perform all within the same close orbit yet not bang against one another.



Meals brought a quandary. Melander began as cook, but fussed the matter. Perpetually his suppers lagged behind everyone else's hunger. When he could no longer stand Melander's dawdling and poking, Wennberg volunteered himself. That lasted two tries. "You're not smithing axeheads here," Braaf murmured as he poked at the char of Wennberg's victuals. Braaf himself, it went without saying, could not be entirely relied upon to prevent food from detouring between his lips instead of arriving at the others' plates. By the sixth day, then, the cooking chore had singled out Karlsson. He was no festal prodigy, but his output at least stilled the nightly grumbling that one might as well go off into the forest and graze.

Wennberg's particular tithe turned out to be his paddling. Not built best for it, much too much ham at his shoulders and upper arms; but his impatience made him take on the water like a windmill in a high breeze. Always exerting toward Karlsson's example of deftness, Wennberg stroked at half again the pace Melander could manage, twice as great as the inconstant Braaf. Day on day, the canoe pushed itself through the water primarily on the aft paddles of Karlsson and Wennberg. Melander would have preferred more balance to the propulsion, yet it worked.

To his own surprise as much as anyone's, Braaf proved the best of them at reading the weather. Long before even Melander, the one seasoned sailor among them, Braaf would know a change was coming onto the ocean, as if along with his naive robin face he possessed a bird's hollow bones in which to feel the atmosphere's shift.

And Melander, Melander's personal orbit was detail: Melander navigating, finding fresh water for the cask, fetching firewood, mothering the canoe and its stowage; Melander sew your button for you, treat your blister, commiserate your ache of knee; the edge strength to hold all into place, Melander provided.

More than this henwork he saw to, though. Subtract parts from this extensive man in their successive value to the escape, the ultimate item would be his tongue. For Melander knew what poets and prime ministers know, that the cave of the mouth is where men's spirits shelter. His gift of gab stood him well with crews on all the vessels of his voyaging. Now he worked words on Wennberg and Braaf and Karlsson like a polish rag on brass. "Keep your hair on, Wennberg, there'll be supper quick as quick...Braaf, it would be pretty to think this canoe will paddle itself, but it won't. Get the holiday out of your ~~stoking,~~ ^{stroking,} aye?...Karlsson, that surf looks to me like worse and more of it. Let's bend our way around, so-fashion..."

Could you, from high, have held to view a certain time of each evening now--the brink when dark is just overcoming dusk--you would see a surprising tracery of bright embers southward from New Archangel: the fires of each campsite of the canoemen. Few, as yet, but trending, definitely trending, drafting fresh pattern along the night coast.

"Too much smoke. We're not signaling Saint Peter from here."

Melander once more. He dropped to his knees to fan the camp fire into purer flame.

"You'd've never lasted over a forge," jeered Wennberg. "A whiff of smoke tans the soul."

Melander calculated. Three camps in a row, this smokey debate with Wennberg. The tall man made his decision.

"You need to know a thing, Mister Blacksmith. Braaf, Karlsson, you also. This I heard from Dobzhansky, that interpreter who helped me out at first with the Kolosh fishing crews. He came once somewhere into these waters with a trading mission the Russians tried..."

The mission had been contrived as retaliation against the Hudson's Bay Company for its practice of slipping firearms to the Sitka Koloshes, so both the Russians and the downcoast natives were in a mood to make as much face as possible. They inaugurated with a night of feast, and Dobzhansky found himself sharing a baked salmon and goathorn cups of fermented berry juice with a canoe chieftain. The pair discovered they could converse in the trading tongue of the coast, Chinook jargon. At once the native sought to know of Dobzhansky how many heads the Tsar had.

"How many heads? Why, one like you and me."

No, the native made Dobzhansky understand, not how many heads.
How many skulls?

"Skulls? What would the Tsar do with skulls?"

Sleep on them, the way Callicum does, the native said, pointing

out to Dobzhansky the tribal chief in the middle of the carousal.

"Sleeps on them? Why does he do that?"

For strength, the native answered. Anyone who sleeps on a pile of skulls is a strong man, is he not?

Melander had not intended to tell his crew Dobzhansky's tale of this coast's people. He was not heaven-certain he should have.

But no more objections were heard about care over campfire smoke.

The water met their daily moods with its own. One morning their channel would drowse, lie heavy, with a molten look like gray bottle glass. Another, it would wake in full fret, white lids of wave opened by wind or current.

The weather could change with knife-edge sharpness. Once they saw to the southeast a pastel fluff of clouds, peach and pale blue, which was directly abutted by an ink-cloud of squall: a tender seascape neighboring with tantrum. The join of continent and ocean seemed to excite the weather into such local targeting. Time and time, the canoemen saw a storm swoop onto a single mountain amid many, as if sacking up a hostage as a lesson to all the rest.

Once Braaf pointed out for the others a narrow white sheet of sky, very likely snow, north on the coast behind them. "Stay north and frost the Russians' asses," Melander directed the storm with a

push of his hands. It stayed.

A thirty-nosed sea creature poked abruptly from the water, delivered the canoeists a thunderous burp, and sank.

"Sea lions," Karlsson called. When the school surfaced again, each pug-nosed head making steady quick thrusts as if breaking the silver pane of the water, the leathery swimmers held pace for awhile alongside the canoe, watching the upright creatures in it.

The past few days, Melander had traded about with Karlsson, thinking it well that more than one of them be able to handle the steering paddle, and that these waters were the place to do it. Melander had learned from his Kolosh fishing crew that the practice of some Southward natives was to dub the bowman of a canoe "Captain Nose." Accordingly, with Karlsson's move forward Melander bestowed the title on him, and Braaf and Wennberg took the notion up. For the next while, it was all "Captain Nose, Your Honor, what's it to be for supper tonight?" and "May I suggest, Captain Nose, that it's nice to see something ahead besides Melander's back?"

A number of tossful nights passed before any of them could become accustomed to the noise of ocean ~~contending~~^{contending} against coast. Surf expelling up the beach and draining back, the increasing crash of tide incoming, the held-breath instants of silence at lowest low tide.

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Melander's unease went on longest; an absence of some sort nagged through the dark at him. Time and again he would come up in the night, sit a minute in his long angles, propped and gazing at the blanketed forms on either side of him. Two chosen by him as tools would be pulled from a carpenter's kit, one who had chosen himself. Known to one another at New Archangel, but not much more than that. And maybe no more even now, Melander's plan their single creed in common. Behind their foreheads, still strangers to one another. And perhaps would step out at Astoria yet the same. Be it said, among these new watermen waited crosscurrents which, if they were let to flow free, might prove as roily as any of the North Pacific's.

no # Wennberg of course ^{was} ~~the~~ the oftenest source of tension, for after his manner of wedging himself into the escape none of the others could entirely put trust in him. Then too, as with many strong-tempered men, the anger in Wennberg that could flare pure and fast as pitch-fire covered other qualities. A capable enough voyager, able to put up with the discomforts and as steady at the canoe work as could be asked--that was this blacksmith, if some incident did not set him off. But the trigger in Wennberg was always this close to click.

no # As for Melander ^{himself,} ~~the~~ the problem with so elevated a type is that ordinary men cannot always see eye to eye with him. Difficult to be totally at ease with a man who is thinking so many steps ahead, even though those stairs of thought may be your salvation.

no 4

Similarly, Karlsson's silent style could be judged a bit too aloof. There seemed to be not much visit in the slender man, and less jokery. "An icicle up his ass," Wennberg was heard to mutter of Karlsson.)

no 4

Braaf? Being around Braaf was like being in the presence of a natural phenomenon, such as St. Elmo's fire or marsh vapors. Braaf simply was there, on his own misty terms, take him for what he was.)

no 4

As if still in echo of their encounter on the parade ground, Braaf and Wennberg it was who were most apt to jangle with each other. Wennberg would suggest that Braaf had about as much weight in the world as the fart of a fly, and Braaf would recommend that Wennberg shove his head up the nearest horse's behind to see whether it held any more exact turds like him. Melander was able to slow their slanging, but never quite to stop it. So it was something to sit up with, the fact of these four separate lives he had gathered under this sailcloth shelter.

At last, amid one of these propped sessions, Melander found the bother to him in the shoresounds of the night. He was listening for the creak of ship timbers, the other part of the choir whenever ocean was heard.

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"Red berry pudding," Wennberg burst out one night beside the fire.

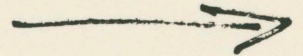
The other three broke into laughter.

"Laugh yourselves crooked, you bastards, but you'd give as much for a red berry pudding right now as I would. Trip your own mother to get to it, too, you would."

"Mister Blacksmith is right," Melander admitted with a chuckle. "Thought with me it's not red berry pudding, but a featherbed in a sailors' inn I know at Danzig. I could bob in that for a week and never open an eye except to look for more sleep, aye?"

Karlsson nominated next. "A woman I knew in our village in Smaland," he said slowly. "Her name was Ulrika and her hair was fox-red."

Braaf blinked as the other three looked at him, awaiting his



choice. "I'll settle just for three paces of headstart on each of you."

To do something about the sameness of their menu, Karlsson suggested they try trolling. Out of the canoe, back alongside Melander, was let a line and a hook baited with a sliver of salt beef. On their second day of attempt, Melander yelped when the line whipped taut across his shins. "It's collect the whale or stove the boat," he boomed happily as he hand-over-handed at their catch.

Melander tugged the head of the fish out of the water against the side of the canoe, then halted his grapple. "Mother of Moses," he swore in wonder.

The other three peered over the side at the spiny, ~~reddish~~ ^{yellow-brown} mottled lump glaring up at Melander.

"Ugly pig of a thing," observed Wennberg. "What the devil is it?"

"Looks like a toad fathered by a porcupine," muttered Melander.

"Could be some kind of cod, my guess. Well, how do you say? Do we try to eat it?"

No one wanted to be the first, repellent as the ~~red snapper~~ ^{red snapper} looked, to commit one way or the other. Finally Karlsson offered, "I'm the potman, and I'll give a try. But I don't know..."

"Hunger is good sauce," Braaf put in dubiously.

"It better be," said Wennberg.

"At least cut off its head first," Braaf prompted. "Else it looks like it'll be gnawing on us before we can get to it."

"Eat it is," Melander proclaimed. "Somebody reach the gaff and heave the bastard aboard."

"I saw a bear make supper on fish once, near Ozherskoi." Skinned and baked over coals, the ~~fish~~ ^{snapper} had proved delicious, and Karlsson's relief was such that he was breaking out in words. "He looked big as a bullock. But he swatted salmon out of the water and peeled off the skin with his claws, ~~ate it~~ ^{skoffed it down} dainty as anything."

Melander pretended to ponder. "You'd ought to have invited him for supper tonight. He'd have been welcome to the outside of that sea beast we've just put into ourselves."

A moment of these encamped nights, cherish with Melander the scroll he fetches from its snug place in the canoe.

Hunkered within the firelight as Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson settle to sleep, he places the waterproof mapcase beside him. One by one, he polishes four biscuit-sized stones against the leg of his britches. Wipes his fingers down his shirt front. From a pocket digs a stub of pencil. Lays a square of sailcloth the size of a baker's apron, smooths it creaseless. Now extracts the maps and, like a Muslim with a prayer rug, unfurls the roll tenderly onto the cloth and sets a scrubbed stone to weight each corner.

Each time, this unfolding of the Tebenkov maps ruffles a profound pleasure through Melander. It is as if an entire tiny commonwealth has

sprung to creation just for him. Sprigs small as the point of his pencil denote the great stands of forest. Tideflats are delicately dotted, as if speck-sized clams breathe calmly beneath. Wherever the land soars--and this coastline, recall, abounds in up and down--the rise in elevation is shown as a scalloped plateau. Threaded among the shores and islets go the proven sailing routes, as though an exploring spider has spun his test voyage of each passage. The total of engraver's strokes on each map is astounding, thousands. Melander cannot imagine who among the Russian quill pushers in the Castle possessed the skill and energy for such pin-precise work.

In time since, a poet has offered the thought that it is within civilization's portions of maps now that the injunction ought be inked, Here be monsters. Melander's firelit maps represent an instant of balance in humankind's relationship with the North Pacific: after sea serpents were discounted, and before ports and their tentacles of shipping lanes proliferated. To cast a glance onto these superbly functional maps is like seeing suddenly beneath the fog-and-cloud skin of this shore, down to the truth of nature's bone and muscle and ligament. The frame of this shoulder of the Pacific is what Melander avidly needs to know, and the Tebenkov maps peel it into sight for him.

The first map, that of New Archangel and Sitka Sound, Melander particularly gazes at again and again. Detail here comes most phenomenal of all: the exact black speck, slightly longer than wide, which was the Swedes' barracks is shown just above the cross-within-a-

cross indicating the Russian cathedral. (That time when Melander unrolled this map to seek Karlsson's opinion about the best route through Sitka's covey of islands, he had been gratified by Karlsson's blink of surprise. "You can see everything but the flea in the governor's ear, aye?") Melander worked much with maps in his sea time, but to be able to trace from the very dwelling where you packed your sea bag, this now is a new thing of the world.

The coastscape at hand just now is not Sitka Sound, however, but the geography enwrapped in the third of Melander's furl of maps. Here these dozen or so days south from Sitka, the map begins to report a lingual stew, islands left oddly paired, Heceta and Noyes, Baker and Suemez, Dall and San Fernando, from the crisscross of British and Spanish explorations, these names Russified by the New Archangel map-maker, then notated into Swedish by the pencil of the man above them now: Melander of Gotland gives his centered grin when the full hibble-bibble occurs to him.

Yet seen another way, such a muss of languages is exactly apt, for everything else of this map Number Three sprawls in pieces as well. Dabs, driblets, peninsulas, spits and spatters, this portion of coastline when rendered into linework looks startlingly like a breathing moil of sea things, jellyfish and oysters and barnacles and limpets and anemones. It takes an effort of will, even for Melander on his knees, to believe they are going to hold motionless, either on the map

or in actuality, to permit voyage among them.

The four fresh beards itched. At New Archangel, because the Russians sported beards most of the Finns and Swedes had made it a point to keep clean-shaven. Now Melander's face and Karlsson's were barbed with growth as blonde as barley stubble, while Wennberg's ducal whiskers came a surprising rich sorrel shade. Braaf sprouted a thin downy fluff of almost white. "Spread cream on," Wennberg snickered, "and a cat'd lick them off for you."

Melander had started from camp to gather firewood from the drift piles along the top of the tideline when Braaf surprised him by saying, "I'll fetch with you." Braaf volunteering for a chore was an event to put you on your guard considerably, as when a parson might offer to keep you company on your stroll to a brothel.

When they were out of earshot of the others and starting on their armloads, Braaf asked, "Melander, tell me a thing, can you?"

"If I can. What?"

Braaf gave him his upcast look and began. "You were a sailor."

"I was that. Until the Russians set me to putting salt on fishes' tails."

"I had a half-brother. Or at least people said he was, and we looked alike. He was years older, and a sailor like you. I'd see him on the docks at Stockholm when his ship was in. The Ambrosius, a brig, it was. Then I heard the Ambrosius had sunk. They said it

followed false lights onto the rocks somewhere, England or Spain, one of those places, and everyone of its crew was drowned, and then the people there took its cargo from the wreck. Do they do that, Melander? Set false lights so that a ship will come onto the rocks?"

For once Melander's tongue held back. Finally the tall man let his breath out with great slowness and began.

"They are called moon-cursers, Braaf. On a black night they hobble a horse and lead him along the shore with a lantern tied to his bridle. The lantern looks like the running light of a ship, and a ship at sea will follow in because it seems a proven course. Aye, Braaf, they do that."

Braaf nodded above his armload of wood. "I thought they did," he said, and turned back toward camp.

The day Karlsson shot ~~the~~^a black-tail deer came none too soon. Of course Melander counted on appetites being built by the constant paddling; he had apportioned into the provisions the prospect that each man might eat half again as much as usual in a New Archangel day. But they all were devouring more than twice as much, and hungering beyond that; Wennberg in particular was proving to be a human furnace for food.

So the venison banquet was glorious, mid-day on the long slope of beach where the five deer had paused to peer and the biggest of them, a three-point buck, paid to Karlsson for that curiosity.

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"Never thought I'd miss all that Russian grease." Fat was a craving of them all. Even as the haunch of the buck was cooking over the fire the Swedes had put their metal cups under to catch the drippings and then spooned them straight down.

"You can fetch us one of these every day, Karlsson, why not."

"You can talk the deer into it, I will."

After the feed Karlsson and Braaf sectioned the rest of the deer meat, Melander and Wennberg then dunking the chunks in boiling sea water to case them against spoilage. "A crime against good meat," as Melander said it, but the other choice was lose the venison bonanza to the damp weather.

By now, they could ~~be~~ notice that daylight, what there was of it, stayed with them a bit longer.

"After Christmas, each day gets a chicken-step longer," Melander assured them solemnly.

Even in these sheltered waters, the currents sometimes twirled witches' knots in themselves. Once the canoemen watched as such a whirlpool took a drifting tree and spun it like a compass needle in total turn.

The sky opened entirely one morning, cloudless as if curtains

had been taken down.

After days of hovering gray and cloaking rain the breadth of existence was astounding. The nearest mountains stood green as May meadows. The next, loftier group darkened toward black. Then the highest, horizon peaks farthest east and south, were a shadowed blue, as though thinning of substance as they extended along the coast.

"Midsummer Day come early," Melander exulted. "Today we jump over our own heads."

But through the morning the sun hung so low along the southern horizon that the glare made hazard of the water in front of the canoe. An hour or so of the ferocious dazzle left the men air-headed, sozzled with light.

Melander squinted and swore.

"Too much of everything, this bedamned coast has!"

By strong afternoon effort, when the sun had swung out above the ~~ocean,~~
~~canoe~~ the canoeists managed to make a usual day's mileage.

"Braaf, you piss near me one more time and I'll rub your nose in it like a bitch pup."

Wennberg's warning halted Braaf in mid-pull at the front of his thighs. Thoughtfully he arced a look from the item of interest there to the blacksmith seated a few yards away. The look, it could have been, of a marksman calculating windage and declination.

Across the campsite from the pair, ever so slightly Melander

shook his head in message: No, Braaf, don't rile the bull.

"I'll wait the day I've enough to drown you," Braaf said off-handedly and eased away into the timber.

A dusk breeze gossiped here and there in the higher-up swags of forest. His wool britches undone, Braaf stood spraddled, any mother's lad with head cocked dreamily to the croon of the great woods.

Abruptly Braaf stopped hearing the wind, all his listening jerked elsewhere. Standing there with his legs wide, Braaf felt the touch of being watched, as when the thief's timbre within him would warn that the instant was wrong for pilferage. But in these woods, who --

Braaf spun and met the eyes. Eyes big as his hands, staring at him from either side of an arm-long hooked beak.

In a half moment Braaf recognized that the phantasm was blind, as wood must be: and that up from its carved stare squatted several more stock-still gandering creatures, a ladder of sets of eyes.

Braaf broke to the edge of the trees and urged softly to the other three men, "Come look."

Within and around an opening in the forest they found other acrobat columns of gargoyles, some atilt as if peering more sharply down at the interlopers. Creature upon creature bursting from cedar bole, these carvings annihilated reality, loomed in a middle air of existence, as if the knife, adze, whatever edged tool shaved fantasy into form, somehow had flinted life into them as well.

"What's it all?" asked Braaf. "Like those poles the Koloshes put up, but bigger."

"I'd guess a kind of cathedral," Melander replied.

"Don't give us your hagbag riddles, Melander." Wennberg was reaching a hand up to inspect the joinery of the beak-piece onto the column seen first by Braaf. Rather, which first had seen Braaf. In spite of himself, the blacksmith was tugged close by the serene craft of these goblin poles. "Next you'll be telling us Braaf is the saint of egg-snitchers."

Melander looked steadily at Wennberg. "A kind of cathedral," he repeated. "Whatever it is that these people believe is said in these carvings. Like rune stones, aye?"

~~Until~~ now, insofar as Melander and company could discern in their clamber down the precipice of coastline, not another human might ever have existed among these shore islands. Take the matter to truth, though, and their journey more resembled the course a late-of-night stroller might follow through slumbering neighborhoods. In tribal clusters, perhaps as many as sixty thousand residents inhabited this long littoral of what would become British Columbia: Tlingits, Haidas, Tsimshians, Bellabellas, Bella Coolas, Nootkans, peoples often at odds among themselves but who had in common that they put their backs to the rest of the continent and went about matters as if they alone knew the terms of life. For behind the rain-curtains of this winter, theirs

was a Pacific-nurtured existence which asks to be called nothing less than sumptuous. In spawning time the coastal rivers were stippled thick with salmon, veins of protein bulging there in the water to be wrested, fileted, dried for the winter larder. Abovestream the wealth was wood, particularly the cedar whose cunning these people knew how to set free; under their hands it transformed to capacious lodges, canoes the length of a decent trawler, and art, this most startling of art. Tree-sized ~~columns~~^{columns} of carvings simply offered the most evident form of how these tribes told stories of the creatures of timber and sea, sang and recited them, danced and acted them behind masks, in chill times wore pelts as if taking the saga-animals into themselves.

Out of this vivid swirl wafted, inevitably, the reputation of these coastal people as canoe warriors and slave-takers--plus illustrative tales such as that matter of the pillow of skulls. These four interloping Swedes knew no specifics of the downcoast tribes, but reason told them this much; if they never dipped paddle into a one of the populated coves where the rain season was being whiled away in performance and potlatch, so much the better luck.

Just now Braaf was the one of them to speak that dialect called if.

"Why's this out here, deserted? If it is."

"Likely they do as the Sitka Koloshes," Melander guessed. "Hunt from a summer village right around here, in winter pull back to a main village somewhere."

In the dusk, eagle poised eternally atop bear.

Whale stood on end in dive through contorted lesser creatures.

One being, possibly frog the size of calf, pranced merrily upside down.

Every sort of winkless forest changeling, they goggled in unison at the backs of the retreating men.

Later, the others breathing their rhythms of night beside the fire, Melander could not find sleep.

His memory was at a New Archangel market morning, hubbub of Sitka Koloshes and three or four dozen visiting tribesmen from somewhere to the north. Amid the newcomers hawking their wares squatted a seam-faced carver. Word had rippled through the settlement about this man's daggers: blades of power with each hilt carved as the rising neck of some alarming beast. The head topping a hilt-neck sometimes was a bear with glinting abalone inlays of eyes and nostrils and teeth, sometimes a long-faced wolf, again a great-toothed beaver; always, angled and fierce and magical as dragons. The interpreter Dobzhansky tried to converse with the northern carver. Dobzhansky's first question received answer, then the native stayed silent. Melander inquired what had been said. Dobzhansky related that he had asked how many years it took to obtain such skill.

"So long as I have lived, so long have I carved," the dagger-man responded. "If the spirit people will let me, I will carve even after I am dead."

Even Melander could not have said why, but that response echoed around in the corners of his mind this night.

Just past daybreak, the four men slide the canoe out into surf. Usual bruised-looking sky, tatters of fog in the tree tops. This coast's mornings are as if brawl had gone on in the heavens all night.

As ever, trees push down to absolute waterline: boundless green, then immediate blue. You could reach up from swimming and make your way arm-over-arm through the forest.

This day more, the canoemen continue along a lengthy timber-thick island, Dall.

That night: "Sleep deep," Melander advised. "Tomorrow we introduce ourselves to Kaigani."

The letters spoke large near the bottom of Melander's third map, and in sober block rather than the finespun script elsewhere on the paper. The space framing them, three widths of Melander's thumb could have spanned. In actuality the plain of water represented there extends twice the distance of the English Channel between Dover and Calais, and no calm white cliffs stand as guides.

Taken all in all, calculated Melander, they compressed into themselves a marathon day of canoe voyage, did those two thickset words: Prol Kaigani. Kaigani Strait.

The water stretched to them out of a horizonless gray, a blob of

overcast messily sealing together sea and sky. Melander did not at all like it that no line of land could be seen out there. In the canoemen's island-by-island descent of the coast, Kaigani and the channel which intersected it to the east, Hecate Strait, were the first expanses where the day's shore did not stand steadily in sight. Yet the map vouched to Melander that across in that fume of seawater and cloud, the northeast tip of the Queen Charlotte Islands arced toward the ~~canoemen~~ ^{canoeists.} Hold to a heading of south-southeast and they would aim into its embrace. At least, Melander needed to believe that south-southeast could be held to. If not, if current swung them too far eastward, they would be swept from Kaigani directly on into Hecate Strait. One waterstead of distance and risk, Melander reckoned they could manage in the day. Two, he doubted gravely.

From his resumed place at the bow, Melander studied back along the canoe at the others. Braaf with his paddle across the gunwales and his fingers restless atop the wood as if absently plucking music. Wennberg eyeing askance at the wide water. Stock-still, Karlsson; the steering paddle needed his skill today.

What was required of Melander now was a division of faith. Certain of himself, confident of what he could make in his mind, going through life as if ~~he had~~ ^{he had} always a following wind; such had been Melander's history, self-belief. Now he needed to apportion trust into these other three in the canoe with him, into the coil of map which promised firm earth out there over the precipice of water, into the hovering grayness, into the canoe, paddles, compass...

Melander spat over the side to clear his mouth, not recognizing the taste of diluted faith but decidedly not caring much for it. Then he said: "Time for our stroll."

The powerful rumple of the Pacific made itself felt to them at once. Swells were spaced wide, perhaps two lengths of the canoe between crests, but regular as great slow breathings. Each swell levered up the prow of the canoe, Melander instantly created even taller, a foremast of man, then the craft was shrugged downward.

"More beef, Wennberg. Push that paddle deeper, aye?"

Melander's urging began while the tips of the fir trees of Dall Island still feathered ~~distance~~ against the sky behind them. Wennberg he had not expected to be slack in this situation. Braaf it was who could be anticipated to scant his labor if high heaven itself depended on it. But Braaf was thrusting steadily, and onto Melander's admonition tossed gibe of his own.

"Bashful are you, Wennberg? Reach right down there and meet the wet, why not..."

Wennberg grumped something unhearable, but his paddling picked up markedly.

Kaigani Strait has become Dixon Entrance, a name engrafted for the English captain who delved the region in the ship Queen Charlotte. By whatever christening, the expanse forms one of the largest of dozens of plains of water between the broken lands of the North Pacific coastline. Extensive in its perils as well, this water. "The tidal

currents are much confused," navigators are cautioned; in storm the channel can seem to be forty white miles of breakers. All times of year, the flood tide east into Hecate Strait can surge as rapid as a man can walk. Small wonder that at the eastern reach of this mariners' thicket, islands are bunched like galleons desperately seeking a lee anchorage.

Not a whit of this was suggested from that calm space between shorelines on Melander's map.

"Got a lump in it today, it has," Melander admitted as a wave shuddered the canoe.

Thirty or forty hillocks of water later, again the heart-skip in the rhythm of the boat.

"Wennberg!" Melander's tone crackled now. "You're dabbing at it again."

Wennberg held his paddle just above the lapping waves, as though trying to recall whether water or air was the element in which it operated. His face hung open in surprise. His mouth made motions but no sound. Then, with gulped effort: "I'm. Getting. Sick."

"If you don't paddle you'll get dead, and us with you. Have a puke now and be done with it, Wennberg. We need your arms, aye?"

Wennberg glassily found Melander, seemed to mull the suggestion, then shook his wide head.

"Drag it up," Melander insisted. "You've got to."

Wennberg put his head over the side of the canoe and gaped his

mouth as if hoping to inhale better health up from the ocean.

After a minute his gasps managed to be words: "Can't. Too. Sick."

"Wennberg, listen to me, aye? ~~Ja~~ a finger down your gullet, tell yourself you've swallowed baneberries, pretend that Braaf here plopped a slug into ~~you~~^{your} tea this morning--do whatever the hell, but heave the sickness out of you now. Do it, Wennberg. Dump your gut."

"Keep on, you'll have me tossing up, too," muttered Braaf.

Just then Melander's prescriptions took their intended effect on Wennberg.

"There now, you're empty and scraped," Melander proclaimed in satisfaction. "You'll be a bull again before you know it. Rest a half-moment, we can ~~spare~~^{spare} you until you get your breath back."

Wennberg focused woozily toward Melander. "Melander -- one time I'll ~~reach~~ down that ~~mouth~~ of yours and ~~--~~" But before long, he retrieved his paddle and, while still not able to stroke in smoothness with the others, was adding push to theirs.

For a time--say, the first several dozen hundred paddlestrokes of their journey--a wall of reassurance yet could be seen behind the canoemen, the outline of Dall Island and its greater neighbor, Prince of Wales. Farther though that landline was becoming, the shore of the islands lay as a footing, a ledge to return to.

Then, just after Melander reckoned aloud that they might be a third of the way across, Karlsson glanced back and saw that the land-wall was gone. In place of the islands hovered a sheet of ~~sea~~^{storm.} Kaigani had enwrapped the canoe and its men, anywhere about them nothing other than water or cloud or mix of the two.

They had no timepiece, but an onlooker could have clocked Melander's decrees to within two minutes' regularity of one another. Each time he called rest, one man continued to paddle to keep the canoe from back-sliding in the swells. That sentinel then rested briefly while the other three resumed, then plunged to work again. At the next rest, the solitary paddling duty slid to the next man.

Near to what Melander estimated ought to be the mid-point of the channel, waves began to chop more rapidly at the canoe. A fresh sound, a slapping higher against the side of the craft, could be heard, and spray now and again tossed itself over the bow and Melander.

"A fast ship's always wet forward," he called out, the while wondering how much more the water would thicken.

Braaf, though, noticed an absence. The gulls which hung in curiosity beside them in the island waters and the early distance offshore from Dall were vanished. He discovered too that the air felt different, more tooth in it, and that off to the west a particular splotch of weather resembled neither fog nor rain.

Braaf leaned ahead enough to pass the news softly over Melander's shoulder, as it were their secret: "Snow."

"Jesu Maria," Melander said back.

The squall hit them first with wind. Gust tagged closely onto gust, taking the canoe at an angle from the southwest.

Melander watched the surface of Kaigani intently. Upon the high seas is the wrong saying of it, a horizon of ocean all around makes shallow the place of an onlooker, sloshes him in a basin of the taller water. And then what Melander dreaded sprung to creation. Wind streaks on the water, long ropey crawlers of white. "Neptune's snakes," Melander knew them as from his shipboard years, and knew too that they are the spawn of a thirty-knot gale.

"Melander!" Karlsson called forward. "We need be steadier with the paddles, That slap the Kolosh do, let's try. . ."

"Be the drum lad," Melander agreed instantly, "Braaf, Wennberg, listen sharp. . ."

Karlsson began as the next wave struck the canoe, quivered it. He paddled twice, deep strokes; then rapped his paddle against the side of the canoe, just below the gunwale.

The craft meanwhile mounted the roll of water, another hummock waited to slide under the hull. When it came, again Karlsson's double stroke and rap to signal pause.

The other three took the rhythm and the canoe steadied its pace, two strong climbing strokes up each wave, the tap of waiting,

then next wave and same again.

The sky began to fleck, snowflakes like tiny gulls riding down the wind which now steadied into a constant whirl past the canoemen's ears. Melander looked away from his compass only to monitor the stroking of his crew and to glance at the angle of the swells to the canoe. The compass could not be wrong, daren't be, yet there was constant urge to check it against the evidence of his eyes.

Water was finding its way over the gunwales into the canoe, lopping in off rollers now mighty enough that when they crested beneath the bow, Melander went so uplifted that he had to reach far down to get his paddle to the water.

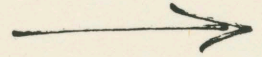
Chop of this sort needed rapid decision. Still struggling against seasickness, Wennberg was erratic at the paddle. But if he lowered his head to bail, he would be sicker yet. So--"Braaf." Waternoise made Melander raise his choice to a shout. "BRAAF! You'll need to shovel water, and quick!"

Three motions fought in the water now: the broad sloshing advance of the waves themselves; the lizardy wrinkle of their texture; and the gale ripple skipping ahead. At odds with all these and with the wind-spun snow as well, the canoe's progress fell to a kind of embarrassed wallow, as when a good steed is forced to slog through mire.

#

Working the bailer, a cedar scoop which coupled over his hand like a hollowed-out hoof, Braaf pawed seawater from the canoe's bottom.

Karlsson gritted against spray and snow and tried to hold in mind nothing but the pulse of ~~stroke~~ stroke slap, stroke stroke slap.



But he somehow did hear the ~~near-whisper~~ ^{voice of agony} in front of him. "Oh God who watches over fools and babes," Wennberg implored. "What am I doing in this pisspot of a canoe?"

Like a prophet promising geysers of honey just there beyond shovel point, Melander preached steadily to his straining crew now..."We're straddling it, Karlsson. No water is wide as forever..." Karlsson's face could have been mounted forward as figurehead for the craft, if imagination permits that a Kolosh canoe ever would breast the sea with a Smaland parson's profile at its front. Everything, each fiber, of Karlsson was set to the twin grips of his hands on the paddle, the portioning-out of effort. In the Sahara, this human implement automatically would have begun the slog that stride on stride had to add up into the route to oasis. Loose him up the Eiger, foothold-handhold-foothold-handhold would ensue until further elevation could not present itself. So if stone profile and millwork arms could grind a way across Kaigani, Karlsson meant it to be done. . .Melander: "Dig the paddle, Wennberg. You're strong as wake ale now." (Melander within: May he not go ill on us again, this lumpy water is no place for a cripple in the crew...) But Wennberg yet tussled with a hive of woes. The tipping wave surface was bad enough, and the unending exertion, and the over-the-side-of-the-world absence of land or even horizon. Worst of all, the nausea which hid so sly within him, re-ambushing whenever he thought the bile might have receded. The blacksmith felt weaker than he could ever remember, listless, yet this

uphill labor of paddling demanded and demanded of him. Wennberg too fell into a machined rhythm, jab-lift-pull back-jab, wait, do-it-again, but out of a different drivewheel than Karlsson's. Over-swarmed with doom and unhealth, Wennberg could think of no way to struggle back but to move his arms, which happened to have a flat-faced rod of wood at their end...Melander: "Braaf, can you find in your heart to stroke along with the rest of us?" (Melander within: May the canoe dance as lightly on these waves as it has been. If just they don't rise...) Among the larger men Braaf sat small and hunched with caution. He was the one of the four of them most in place in this situation, for at basis, this crossing of Kaigani Strait constituted an act of theft. Of stealing survival from a hazard which held every intention of denying it to you. Afloat, you exist in balance between unthinkable distances. Above, the sky and the down-push of all its vastnesses. Under, the thickness of ocean with its queer unruly upward law of gravity, buoyancy. In time the greater deep, that of sky, must win this pushing contest in which you are the flake of contention, and you will go down. The game is to scamper landward before this obliteration can happen. None of this could Braaf have declaimed aloud--just as there never was a philosopher who could pocket another man's snuffbox with no itch of conscience--yet Braaf understood the proposition of Kaigani profoundly: it had to do with dodging life's odds, like all else. Braaf, then, did not stroke mechanically in Karlsson's way, nor try to fend strenuously as Wennberg

did. Braaf poked his paddle to the water as if using a stick to discourage a very big dog...Melander: "Neck or nothing, now. Pull... pull...pull..." (Melander within: May this storm hold to the compass where it is. But oh God if the bastard shifts, shoves us east into the miles of Hecate...) So the matter, like most of this coast's matters, came down to perseverance. While Melander urged, Wennberg was grunting dismally and Braaf once in a while shirking, out of sheer habit when he wasn't reminding himself otherwise, and at the stern Karlsson staying a human piston: all of them trying to put from mind the numbing of their knees and the deepening ache of their arms and shoulders, and across Kaigani Strait the canoe striving steadily southeast, a dark sharp-snouted creature stretched low against the gray wavescape, four broad-hoofed legs striking and striking at the water, running on the sea.

Melander broke awake on the tamest of terrain.

Anywhere in sight, not a sea-cliff nor boulder nor so much as a fist-sized stone.

Beach of sand, all tan satin. Waves did not pound at the tideline, simply teased it, shying tiny clouds of spume along the water edge and then lapping away.

The canoe had taken shore here in the dark, Swedes having prevailed--barely--over storm in the wrestle that went on all day and across dusk and into the first of night. At last dragging their craft

onto whatever this place was, the four men groped together the shelter of sailcloth and collapsed to sleep. Now to find, by this morning's evidence, that Kaigani had flung them through the customary coastal geography to an opposite order of matters: everything flat, discreet, lullful.

No, not everything meek. It registered now on Melander that the treetops spearing up through mist just to the west of him stood twice the height conceivable for trees to stand.

"Are we on the same ocean as last night?" Karlsson was at his elbow.

"Mother's milk this morning, isn't it?" agreed Melander. "Ever see trees to that height, up to the clouds like steeples?"

Karlsson shook his head.

"Nor I. Has to be a rise of land in that fog. We ought have a look there, aye? Wake Braaf enough to tell him, will you, so he and Wennberg won't think we've gone yachting off without them."

The tall man and the slim one pushed the canoe into the placid tidewater, turned the prow toward the middle-air meld of mist and timber. They found that they were crossing the mouth of a river, a sixty-foot width of black water so dense and slow it seemed more solid than the beach and forest on either side. Lacquered and beautiful, this surprise ebony river, and along its surface small circlets of foam spun like ghostly anemones.

On the river's far side a gray-black rim of rock showed itself,

over the waterline and just under the bank of mist. Rapidly this dour rim bent outward into a point, of no height to speak of but too sharp-sided to land the canoe.

"On around," Melander decreed, and they began to skirt the protrusion.

Karlsson glanced inland, drew his paddle into the canoe, and pointed upward.

The fog was lifting from the forest and abruptly, half a small mountain stepped into view: a startling humped cliff as if one of the cannonball peaks around Sitka had been sawed in half from its summit downward. This very top, start of the astonishing sunder, the pair of men could see only by putting their heads back as far as they could. They might have been peering through the dust of eons rather than the morning's last waft of sea-mist. On the sheerness, clumps of long grass somehow had rooted here and there atop basalt columns; together with moss growth, these tufts made the cliff face seem greatly age-spotted, Methuselan.

As the men gaped up, two bald eagles swept soundlessly across the orb of stone.

Around the point Melander and Karlsson pulled the canoe to security and clambered onto the flow of black rock beneath the cliff for a fuller look.

"God's bones, what a place," Melander murmured.

The point had been convulsed into hummocks and parapets, pitted with holes as if having come under siege from small canon,

strewn with a tumble of black boulders the size of ox carts, and finally riven with tidal troughs.

As Melander and Karlsson stood gawking, surf blasted up from a blowhole behind them. A mocking geyser of white bowed toward them as they whirled to the commotion.

"Aye, well. At least we know what's hung those trees into the middle of the air." Atop the dome of cliff over them, tall evergreens poked forth like feathers in a war bonnet. "Had better find a way up there, I had, and see if I can place us on the map. If any Kolosh show up, trade Wennberg to them for a haunch of beef, aye?"

Melander long-gaited off around the base of the cliff. Staying in range of where they had landed the canoe, Karlsson passed time by exploring into the start of the stand of forest between half-mountain and river. He was beside the bole of a particularly huge hemlock when a fat bead of water ticked his right wrist.

In surprise, Karlsson tipped his head until he was peering straight up. He saw another water bead detach from a limb eighty feet above him and drop like a slow tiny jewel, giving him time to step aside before it struck.

Another, another.

Karlsson stepped, stepped again.

Like strange slowed-down rain the droplets descended two, three to the minute. The forest trees had become sharp green clouds, Karlsson upturned to them as a sunflower will seek the sun, the leisured freshet the pulse of attraction between them. Drop and

drop and drop, Karlsson evaded lithely, stepping back and forth around the girth of the tree, face up like a drunk man at the gate of God. As coal is said to concentrate to diamond, the coastal world of water spun tiny in these falling crystals: flicker of a mountain stream trying to leap from itself, white veils of spray brushing back from the Pacific's wave-brows, quick thin lakes strewn by a half-day rain, all here now flying down in sparkle. The moment bathed Karlsson. His mind went free, vaulted the exertions and dangers of the past many days, nothing existed but the beaded dazzles from above and his body, slow-dancing with water...

"At least I know who not to stand sentry the next time it rains, aye?"

Karlsson halted in place, looked around at Melander, and was promptly splattered with a dew glob atop his head. The tall man's amusement twitched behind his mouth.

"Moonbeams must have got into me," Karlsson offered, vastly embarrassed.

"I can believe this place sends a man lopsided," said Melander. "Let's get back to the beach before I go chasing raindrops myself."

Melander discovered from the summit that the arc of beach continued some miles northeastward, to Hecate Strait. This intelligence turned into taunt, however, by the time he and Karlsson returned to the campsite. Wind was pushing in off Kaigani. Not wanting a repeat

of the crossing they just had endured, the canoemen sat to wait out the bluster.

And the wind stiffened. By the afternoon, there were roars of air. A sky-filling sound like that of vast flame. The wind itself seemed cross-purposed, now in great speed to one direction and the next moment whooshing back. Kaigani meanwhile turned ice-gray, with slopes and pools of foam everywhere on it.

When firewood was needed, the men cautiously went out from the shelter in pairs, one to gather, the other to watch for widowmakers flying down out of the shore forest. Often, a gust slammed so hard a man had to bend his knees to stay upright.

For ~~two~~^{three} days of this blow, they held to the site--gaining no distance, which Melander knew was the same as losing it.

During a lull, Braaf scuffed a boot against something in the sand, close by where the other three sat sheltered. A dead loon, its bill thrust ahead like a bayonet, one checkered wing stiffly cocked a bit as though readying to fly, the rest of the body beneath the beach surface.

"Buried as Bering," said Melander.

"Means what?" queried Braaf.

"It's something the Russian navy men say. Bering was a skipper, an old sir, first one into the islands up where the Aleuts come from.

He was sailing in the Tsar's hire, a ship called the Saint Peter. A true Russian vessel, leaky as a basket. Somewhere up there among the Aleuts they got themselves wintered in. Those islands haven't a whisker of timber, so Bering and his crew dug into sandhills, pulled over sail canvas for roof. Lived in burrows like lemmings, aye? Lived till they died, at least, and then, the Russians tell it, foxes would come into camp and gobble the bodies. Bering himself took frail and they laid him in one of the dugouts. Sand caved down over his feet, but he wouldn't let the crew dig it away. Said it kept him warm. Then sand over his knees. Still wouldn't let them dig. Then up to his waist. Next his belly, just before he died. Very nearly all in his grave before the last breath was out of him. So, buried as Bering, a Russian'll say to feel sorry for himself."

"How about melon-headed as Melander?" Wennberg suggested. "Do the Russians say that one, too?"

Melander cut a quick look at Wennberg. His sarcasm notwithstanding, the broad man did not seem to be in the brownest of his moods.

"Wennberg, Wennberg. Always ready to bone the guff out of me, aye? Tell me a thing, how do we come by this honor of having you in our crew? What sugar was it that kept you on at New Archangel past your years?"

Wennberg studied the tall leader. Then he spat to one side and muttered: "Serving for Rachel."

Melander tugged an ear. "Lend us that again?" Karlsson and Braaf also glanced over at Wennberg.

"Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah was tender-eyed, but Rachel was beautiful and well favored. And Jacob loved Rachel, and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel.'" Wennberg broke off his recital and spat again.

Melander and Braaf and Karlsson stared at him.

"Never heard Genesis before?" Wennberg resumed. "Doesn't surprise me, you'd all be off diddling squirrels instead of --"

"Wennberg a Bible-spouter!" Braaf looked ~~genuinely~~ ^{genuinely} shocked.

The blacksmith shifted uneasily. "My family were church-strong. So's I, when I was a young fool."

"This Rachel matter," Melander put in. "It sounds more like a sweetmeat for Karlsson than for you."

"Judas's single ball, Melander, can't you tell a ~~saying~~ ^{Goddamned} when it comes out anybody's mouth but your own? Serving for Rachel means... it means being done out of something." Wennberg drew a breath. "'And Jacob said unto Laban, give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her...And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah; and he said to Laban, what is this thou has done unto me? Did I not serve with thee for Rachel?' Wennberg glowered across at Melander. "Now d'you savvy it?"

"Aye," said Melander softly. "I just didn't recognize Laban as a Russian name."

"Tell us a thing, Braaf. You've earned with your pockets, as

they say. What's the grandest thing you ever stole?"

Braaf blinked in Wennberg's direction. . "Your nose, from up your ass where you usually keep it."

"Just trying to be civil, you Stockholm whelp. Something to pass the time from squatting on this Goddamned sand, I thought."

"The pair of you," Melander conciliated. "Don't make a feather into five hens."

Braaf eyed up into the line of timber, the treetops nodding this way and that in the wind. "Could tell you, though, if I wanted. If I was asked right."

The request for etiquette sank through to Wennberg. "Oh, God's green socks, all right, Braaf, all right. Would you be so kind as to tell us whatever the hell is it you have in mind?"

"A time, I was working slow--"

"Working? I thought this is going to be true."

"Near enough the truth for common purposes, as we say on ship," Melander suggested. "Let Braaf get on with it, aye?"

"Your little finger's between your legs, Wennberg. Working slow is a way we go about it in the streets. Walk as if counting the cobblestones, that's what it means. Do that, and you see what's around. See who's forgot a window, or whose purse is sleeping fat in his coat. So I spied the thimble then. A shopman was sweeping--"

"Thimble? You went round Stockholm stealing thimbles? Christ and the devil, Braaf, some tales I've heard in my time but--"

"The thimble's the chance, ^{ironhead}~~iron~~ soddler. Means you see a chance for yourself. Haven't you heard anything in this world but a hammer?

Wennberg muttered this or that. Braaf resumed.

"The shopman was sweeping the steps. Had one of those birch brooms--widow's musket they're called, isn't that so, Wennberg? So he had his back away from me, and the door open, like so. I slipped in, knew I had to be fast. A shopkeeper likes to be clever. Else he wouldn't be a shopkeeper. Sometimes he'll stash money right there, in some crock like any other. Biscuits here and salt herring there and just maybe rijksdalers somewhere around. This time, there're crocks on parade. All along there. So I picked one, lifted the lid. And there they were, rijksdalers and more of them. My pockets had mumps when I went out of the place. I slid behind the shopman, he's at the other end of the steps by now, ask him please sir, is the store open? Never to the likes of me, he says. Runs me off. Tells himself, clever man like him he'll not let in some street stray."

"The money, Braaf," prompted Wennberg. "What'd you do with it all?"

Braaf reflected. "It lasted just about as long as it's taken to tell of it."

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Their third morning storm-held on the Kaigani shore, a gunshot clapped sleep out of the men in the sailcloth shelter. Then another, even as Melander flung up and out of the tent like an aroused stork and Wennberg and Braaf were untangling from their blankets.

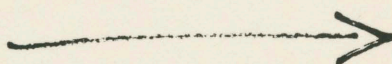
Melander immediately was back to say that Karlsson was absent, along with his hunting rifle and Bilibin's musket. "Bear-milking, he must be."

The pairs of shots continued as the three men got breakfast into themselves. Then after a time of no firing, Karlsson appeared with a bag of ducks, a dozen or more as he emptied the sack.

"Weathered in, like us," was his report. "There at the river mouth."

"A lazy wind, we call this on Gotland." Now the next morning after the duck plucking. "It goes through you instead of around you."

"Melander, serve you a plate of fly shit and you'd declare it pepper," muttered Wennberg.



"And you'd lend me your soul as salt, aye, Mister Blacksmith? But we have deciding to do. We've been holed here too long. The water ahead of us doesn't shrink while we're here. I say we had better chance the next stretch today, wind or no. Karlsson?"

"You're the sailor of us. How much of this wind is between us and the next island?"

"I think six hours' paddling."

"Six hours, we can last, I say chance."

"Braaf?"

The thief glanced out into the white-capped water, then somewhere above Melander's brow. "If you say so, chance."

"Wennberg?"

"The only thing worse than that bedamned water is this bedamned waiting. Chance, Melander. You know so God-all much, teach us how to eat the wind. May it sit better on my stomach than that last ration did."

For a change, luck puffed on them. Once the paddling men had struggled the canoe around the horn-tip of the beach, they came into a wind skewing directly across Hecate Strait. For the first time since their leaving of New Archangel, up went the canoe's small pole of mast and the sailcloth.

"Not much of a suit of sails, more like a kerchief," as Melander said, but the canvas carried them across the strait and once more into

a scatter of shoreline islands.

"Even this hardtack isn't as bad as it might be." Melander, musing, their first day of south-paddling after wafting across Hecate Strait. "A time I can tell you on the brig Odin, we had to break our biscuits into our coffee and skim away the weevils as they came up. No, not so bad, aye?"

Braaf, at the onset of their second day after: "I know what Valhalla is now. It's where I never again hear Melander say, 'Tumble up.'"

Wennberg, midway of their third day and yet another Melander monologue: "Melander, I wonder you don't swallow your tongue sometime for the savor of it."

"Good job of work done": Karlsson, startling them all ^{after} ~~as~~ they hefted ashore at the close of their fourth straight progressful day.

The river shoved through the land like a glacier of slate. Had the surface been solid as its turbid appearance--one newcoming settler or another had inaugurated the jest that in the season of run-off not much more mud content was needed to make the flow pedestriable--a man crossing here from its north shore toward its south would have

had to hike steadily for a full hour. That man would have stridden the Columbia, largest river of the Pacific shore of the Americas, and there on the south bank he would have stamped silt from his feet at Astoria.

Another frontier pinspot of great name, Astoria. John Jacob Astor's wealth, not to say intentions for more of it, installed the settlement as a fur depot in 1811. The ensuing four decades had not made it much more of a place: post office, customs house, long T-shaped dock straddling into the tidal flow, cooperage, Methodist church, handful of stores and saloons catering to the settlers sprinkled south and north of the river's mouth, several tall Yankee houses along the foot of a shaggy Columbia headland. Yet also the recognized port of America's Pacific Northwest, tapping the 1200-mile-long Columbia and its tributaries like a cup hung to gather the sugar of a giant maple. If, through whatever unlikelihood, you found yourself at Astoria, you could aim yourself onward into the world aboard one of the dozen or fifteen vessels which plied here month by month.

This night, the four canoe-going Swedes are encamped not quite half the water distance downcoast from New Archangel to that long T of dock at Astoria.

Trying to yawn the last of sleep from himself, Karlsson eased out through the trees toward the island's edge. As usual, he was the first awake and the earliest to wonder about weather.

This morning he found that the Pacific lay gray with cold, but no storm sheeted up from its surface. Along the beach ahead of Karlsson a small surf pushed ashore, idly rinsed back on itself: low tide. A pair of cormorants amid a spill of tidal boulders hung their wings wide. High up on the beach gravel a hundred or so strides away the sharp-prowed canoe rested, as if having plowed to a furrow-end and now waiting to be turned for another day's tilling.

Between one eye**f**blink and the next, Karlsson's brain filled with the jolt of what he was seeing. He and Melander and Wennberg and Braaf had carried their canoe as ever into the cover of forest for the night: this canoe sat larger by half: the painted designs entwining the prow were different, simpler, bolder: and Karlsson by now was in crouched retreat toward the trees, staring hard at the wall of forest beyond the canoe for any sign that he had been detected.

Putting his fingers lightly across the tall man's mouth to signal silence, he roused Melander. Melander snapped awake with the quickness learned of arising to some thousands of shipboard watches and crept behind Karlsson away from the camp.

"A big one," Karlsson husked when they had sidled far enough not to be heard. "Eight, ten paddlemen at least."

"Cabbageheads. Why aren't they holed up for the winter like the Sitka Koloshes? What do they think this is, the Midsummer's Day

~~yachting~~
~~yacht races?~~ Aye?"

"We had better hope they're not going to hole up here."

"No, just one canoe, they couldn't be. Seal hunters a fishing crew or some such, out for a few days. Cabbageheads."

"You already called them that, and they're still here."

"Aye, so. What's your guess, can we get our canoe to the water and slide away without them seeing us?"

"No."

"No. Outwait them without them tumbling onto us?"

"No."

"No." Melander grimaced as if his echo-word had hurt his ears, ~~then looked~~ ^{squinted} back toward camp. "You greet Braaf, I'll do Wennberg."

Again fingers of silence awoke lips. Again Karlsson told the situation.

When his words had sunk into Wennberg and Braaf, Melander sent Braaf, the most accomplished slinker among them, to keep watch on the beach.

Then Melander glanced at Karlsson, and Karlsson, after hesitation, nodded. "Yes, it ~~was~~ ^{needs} to be him."

The pair of them turned their eyes to Wennberg. Melander asked: "How are you at turning yourself into a sand crab?"

Wennberg's debut into the art of creeping also marked the first occasion in his life that he ever regretted his strength. Regretted, rather, that more of his power wasn't directly beneath his nose, as

Melander's was. "This one is your line of country, Wennberg. You have to do it, or those people of that canoe will snore tonight on our skulls." And Karlsson in his rock-faced way agreeing that only Wennberg possessed the muscle for it; Wennberg could not choose between fury at Karlsson for siding with Melander or ire at him for doing it dubiously. Every lens of clarity, Wennberg believed, had slipped from his life when he leagued himself with this muddle of--

A stone nicked Wennberg's right knee and cued his attention back to creeping. Here in the first eighty yards or so he had cover of a sort, a rib of rock and drift logs behind which he managed to scuttle, chest almost down to his knees, without showing himself, much. But next lay a naked distance of thirty yards. An angle across and up the beach, to the unfamiliar canoe.

At the end now of his final driftlog, Wennberg squatted dismally, rubbed the stone bruise on his right knee, and glared back toward where he had departed from Melander, Karlsson and Braaf.

"Puny bastards," he muttered.

From amid the spruce there a hand flashed into sight--Wennberg knew it would be Melander's--and patiently waved him on.

Wennberg braced, unhunched himself, and in a rolling stride ran toward the beached canoe.

He ran with his elbows cocked almost full out and his head sighted low, as if butting his way. Under his boots gravel clattered ~~wildly,~~ ^{wildly,} avalanche-loud it seemed to him. God's pity, those fish-fuckers in

the forest would have to be without ears not to hear this commotion...

Past the stern of the canoe Wennberg plunged, like a ball rolling beyond its target. He hovered an instant, selecting, then stooped to thrust both hands beneath a gray boulder wide as his chest. Gravel roweled the backs of his hands, his wrists, and finally his forearms as Wennberg wrestled the rock. His breath ached in his throat. With a grunt he brought the burden upward. Grappled it into balance on his knees, next across his waist. Now like a washerwoman carrying an overfull tub of water, turned with the boulder toward the canoe.

Five staggering steps to the wooden wall of the craft, Wennberg more certain with each that the gunblast which would close off his life was being cocked behind him.

Above the bow, just there where the interior of the canoe came to sharpness and prow began to rise--just there where Melander had told him to target, Wennberg heaved the boulder within his arms to the height of his neck. Then with one last grunt let it crash onto the cedar craft.

The crunch was not loud, to Wennberg the first luck anywhere in this situation. But the end of the canoe, thin-carved for its sharp slide through water, split open--and back from the rock as well, a fracture wide as the side of a hand sprung toward 'midship.

Wennberg gave a rapid glance at his sabotage, skirted the stern of the canoe and was running again, a bear in a footrace.

He had just passed the driftlog when he heard the shout behind him, and he did not look back.

Ahead of him, Melander and Karlsson and Braaf were putting their own canoe into the surf, Melander somehow finding time as well to urge Wennberg to hurry and lend a hand.

They shoved with their paddles just as the first musket ball tossed up water beside them. Wennberg in puffing agony glanced around to see two natives with rifles raised, others clustered around the bow-broken canoe, more oh God more emerging from the forest.

Karlsson, who had ended up in the bow, turned and hurried a shot at the two riflemen. It missed but caused them to flinch back from the bullet's ricochet among the beach gravel.

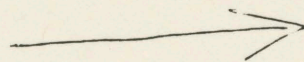
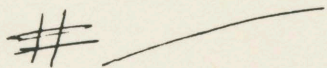
"Paddle-JesusJesus-paddle-paddle-paddle!" Melander was instructing. Another bullet's toss of water, this one nearer. The Swedes stroked as if hurling the ocean behind them as a barrier, and the canoe climbed a mild breaker, sped down its seaward side, climbed a stronger wave and downsped again, then slid rapidly southward from the firing figures on the beach.

Out of the fear and excitement of the escape something other began to grope through to Karlsson in the next moments. From his place at its forepart, he sensed a change about the canoe. Its rhythm felt lightened. Not gone erratic as during Wennberg's sickness at Kaigani, but lessened, thinned.

Karlsson turned enough to look straight back.

"Sven?" he called. "Sven!"

At the stern of the canoe Melander, almost tidily, lay folded forward, the upper part of his long body across his knees, the back of his head inclined toward the other three canoemen as if to show them where the musket ball had torn its red hole.



Death's credence comes to us in small costs, mounting and mounting.

At first within the canoe, capacity only for the disbelief. Melander gone from life, the long coast snapping down the cleverest of them as an owl would a dormouse.

Like wild new hearts this shock of loss hammered in Braaf and Wennberg and Karlsson, there never could be room for all the resound in their minds, any minds, it thudded around ears and trembled in throats, such concussion of fresh circumstance; Melander's body now a cargo, deadweight, clotting not just the pulse of the canoe but of whatever of existence was left to the other three of them...

After, it could only seem that during this blind thunderous time the canoe sensed out its own course. When the thought at last forced a way to one of them--Karlsson in the bow, it happened to be--that to pull numbly on paddles was not enough, that a compass heading and a map reading were necessitated, the needle and the drawn lines revealed the canoe to be where it ought; where Melander would have steered it.

In that catch-of-breath pause, Braaf whitely burrowing the compass and mapcase from beneath the corpse that was Melander, Wennberg in a sick glaze handing on the instrument and container to Karlsson--in that stay of time, the absence began its measured toll on them.

Melander's sailor-habited scrutiny of the water around, every chance of rock or shoal or tiderip announced.

The reminding word to Braaf when he made his habitual dawdle in shifting his paddle.

Regulation on Wennberg's bluster, which evidently even Wennberg had come to rely on.

The musing parleys with Karlsson, treetop communing with stone.

Day on day and all the waking hours of those days, such losses of Melander would be exacted now, in silences conspicuous where there ought have rung the watchword of that voice--aye?

Mid-day, the canoe ashore at the next southward island, Melander's three-man crew yet trying to unbelieve the folded-forward body in the trench of cedar.

Three men, each with new age on him. During the crossing Wennberg had blurted periodic and profound curses, but now said nothing, seemed to be gritting against whatever slunk on its way next. Braaf, too, stood still and wordless as a post. Karlsson it was who stepped first out of the silence.

"We need to bury him."

They managed with Karlsson's ~~axe,~~ the gaff and the cooking pot to gouge a shallow grave in the forest floor. Then, with struggle, they brought the body from the canoe. Queerly, lifelessness had made Melander greatly heavy to carry, even with Wennberg's strength counted into the task, while at the same time the sense of death somehow seemed to thin the gravity around Braaf and Karlsson and Wennberg. This emotional addle, not a man of them would have known how to utter. But now in each there swirled, atop the dread and confusion and gut-gall

from Melander's killing, an almost giddy feel of ascension. Of being up high and more alert than ever before, alert in every hair, aware of all sides of one's self. It lasts not long--likely the human spirit would burn to blue ash in more than moments of such atmosphere--but the sensation expends the wonder that must course through us at such times: Death singled thee, not me.

They dared not spare sailcloth for a shroud. Karlsson took up the axe, whacked limbs from nearby spruce. Melander's last rest along this green coast would be under boughs rather than atop them.

Next, dirt was pushed into the grave. When they had done, Karlsson stepped amid the loose soil. Trod down his right heel, his left. Moved sideways, repeated.

Wennberg and Braaf looked loath, but in a minute joined in the tromp.

Firm dirt over Melander, they hefted stones from the beach and piled them onto the gravetop to discourage--more likely, merely delay--animals.

In the unending windstorm of history, how Sven Melander of Gotland and the sea was put to earth could not possibly make a speck's difference. Yet to these three, this forest grave seemed to matter all. They had done now what could be thought of, except--

Karlsson and Braaf looked to Wennberg.

The broad man licked his lips as if against a sour taste, and much white was showing at the corners of his eyes.

"No. Goddamn, no. I don't believe in that guff any more. Particularly after this."

"Just do it for the words," Braaf murmured. "Do the words for Melander."

Wennberg eyed Braaf; Karlsson. Then in a low rapid rumble he delivered the psalm:

"...A thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night....We spend our years as a tale that is told....So teach us to number our days..."

The next bad time was quick to come.

They needed a meal, and somehow pieced one together. Just after, crossing the campsite on one fetch or another--all the budget of fuss Melander had attended to now needed to be shared out--Wennberg clomped past the sitting Braaf. Stopped, and examined.

"What's here on the back of you, then?" Wennberg demanded.

Braaf glanced dully up toward the blacksmith. Slipping his arms from the Aleut parka, he brought the garment around for a look.

Across the shoulders and the middle of the back showed small dark splats, as if a rusty rain had fallen.

The three men stared at the stains where Melander's blood had showered forward.

At last Wennberg shifted awkwardly. "Maybe it'll wash..."

Twin glistens of tears laned Braaf's round face. "Say anything,

either of you," he choked out, "and I'll gut you."

After, Karlsson never was sure what the flag had been between Wennberg and him, how it happened that they faced each other, off along the brink of shore from the weeping Braaf.

Wennberg began fast, as if the words needed to rattle their way out of him. "Karlsson, listen now--we've--Hell's own dung-ditch, we're fallen in now. The lucky one of us may be Melander. So--"

"You didn't trade places with him there at the grave."

"What? No!" Wennberg seemed startled by Karlsson's rejoinder. Then tried to muster: "No, bad choices're getting to be a habit with me. As when I went out that gate with you damned three."

"But out it you are." Karlsson scanned from Wennberg away into the forest, the constant shaggy nap of these islands. Tried to find concentration in the convoking of all the green beings, the way they touched each to each. Karlsson's head swam a bit and ached a lot and he was wearier than all the axework of his life ever had made him, and here loomed Wennberg to be dealt with, and Melander dead, and. . . "And a far swim to get back in," Karlsson bought a further moment with. God's wounds, think now, how to halter this damned bull of a blacksmith. . .

"Karlsson, hear me. Just--just hear me, will you? We can't go at each other like cats with tails tied together and slung over a fence. Not now, not after--Someway we've got to make miles along this God-lost coast. So somebody needs to lead. Decide, this way

or that, or we'll meet ourselves in a circle in these bedamned islands. Not even Melander's going to make himself heard up through the earth."

Karlsson's weariness abruptly doubled. "So you're lifting yourself to it."

Exasperation flooded Wennberg. "Karlsson, Goddamn--You won't see a matter until it lands on your nose and has a shit there, will you?" With effort, Wennberg tried to steady his tone. Karlsson remembered the same ominous tremor, the earthquake in a man when temper fights with itself, through the blacksmith when Melander informed him the cache had been spirited away. "No, not--not me to lead. You."

As Karlsson tried to believe his way into the seven words he had just heard, Wennberg discharged more.

"It's sense, is all. There're the maps to be savvied and this bedamned canoe to be pointed, and you've done some of so, out with the bear-milkers. So it's sense, you in charge of that."

Wennberg scratched his beard as he sought how to put his next premise.

"All the other, we'll just — we don't need a sermon at every eyeblink, like Melander gave. Divvy tasks without all that yatter, we can."

Wennberg paused. Something was yet to pry its way. Finally--

"Braaf, there. He'd never take to me as leader. Be happy to see him left here to bunk with Melander, I would, but we need the little bastard."

"And you." Karlsson somehow found the mother wit to say this more as statement than question. "You'll take to me?"

Another effort moved through Wennberg. He lifted his look from Karlsson, bent a bleak gaze to the ocean. He said: "I need to, don't I?"

Close by that night's firelight, Karlsson in kneel.

Untying the flap of the waterproof map pouch. Bringing out the scroll of maps. Performing the unrolling, then the weighting of each corner with an oval pebble from the beach gravel.

Into view arrived all their declension of the coast, an amount of trek across white space that surprised Karlsson, as though he were gazing on sudden new line of tracks across snow.

Only the top map of the lot had Karlsson ever seen, the one on which Melander's pencil route took its start at the square house-dots of New Archangel. That once, Melander had been borrowing opinion, and here was traced Karlsson's advice, the canoe's side-loop around Japonski Island and then veering down and down, at last out the bottom of Sitka Sound. The night-forest of a continent ten paces on one side of him and half a world of night-ocean thirty paces on the other, Karlsson could scarcely credit it--that there had been time when he, when any of this canoe's adopted men, existed at that regiment of dots, answered work call, dwelt in barracks, fought fleas, wintered on salt fish...set honey for a gate guard named Bilibin.

On the next map the penciled line hugged the west shore of Baranof Island to Cape Ommaney, then, as if deflected by what waited south, struck east to Kuiu. Because of Melander's route-sketch in the dirt and the knowledge that their port of destination lay southward, Karlsson had supposed that they were going along the escape route much like men shinnying down a rope--maybe a sidle of effort this way or that, but the total plunge all into one direction. It was a revolution in his thinking to see now that all the time they were canoeing south they also were sidestepping east.

More of angling down the North Pacific, map three brought. The Kuiu-Heceta-Noyes-Suemez-Dall skein of islands and the crossing of Kaigani Strait to the horn-tip of the Queen Charlottes. Those days of voyage, Karlsson tried to sort in his mind. In the waters along Heceta, was it, where they caught the ugly delicious fish? On which island did the carved creatures rear over Braaf? The great trees beside that dome of cliff, the water diamonds dropping in dazzle, had they been--? But the days of this coast blended like its trees, none could be made to stand in memory without the others.

Karlsson unscrolled to the fourth map, the one showing how they crossed Hecate Strait, stairstepped the islands of the past several days, and then, just more than halfway down this chart, at a rough-edged small island with no name written in beside it, Melander's penciling halted. Yes, well...

Melander. In every corner of Karlsson's thoughts, Melander.

A painful stutter in the mind, him, his death, the cost to it. Melander with that abrupt alert face atop his length, like the glass cabin up a lighthouse; Melander who believed that an ocean can be fended with, ridden by a Kolosh saddle of wood and reined with these Russian maps. But Melander no longer on hand to dispense such faith. Too well, Karlsson understood that he and Braaf and Wennberg, none of them anything of a Melander and as different from each other as hip-high and upstairs and the moon, needed now to find their own resources to endure sea-run.

At least Braaf had wrinkled smooth again. When Karlsson and Wennberg returned to camp and the who-ought-lead proposition was put to him, it took the young thief an instant to realize he was being polled at all. He blinked then and said as if it were common fact: "You've to do it, Karlsson. I can't read the maps and Wennberg couldn't lead his shadow. You've to do it."

And at least there were the maps, these extra eyes needed to know the intentions of this coast and ocean. Glancing to the bottom of this fourth map, down from where Melander's tracery of route left off, Karlsson saw that the coastline was shown as far as the northmost tip of Vancouver Island. Cape Scott, Melander had penciled in beside the ragged thumb of land. Karlsson recalled Vancouver Island to be the third of the landforms, those wheres of their escape, scratched into the dirt by Melander the day of last summer. The maps next would bring Vancouver's shore and then the final southering coastline from the Strait of Fuca to Astoria.

Karlsson slipped his fingers beneath the top and bottom edges to lift away this map to those next ones. And was fixed to that motion, if the chill of beach gravel against his knuckles had conducted ~~petrification~~ ^{petrification} into him.

Beneath the fourth map lay nothing but that gravel. The fourth map was the last of the scroll.

Karlsson drew in a breath which met his heart at the top of his throat.

Came to his feet, yanked a brand from the fire for light and was gone past the sleeping lengths of Braaf and Wennberg on his way to the canoe.

There he dug through the entire stowage. Then dug again, and still found only what he dreaded most, confirmation.

There weren't more maps.

"Narrow enough matter it was. . . Needed to paw through every bedamned scrap of sheet. . ." Melander's words spun through the months to Karlsson, their shadow of meaning with them now. "Skimpy bastards, these Russians. . . Should have figured. . ." Should have figured--that the pilothouse of the steamship did not hold the further maps; that since the cumbersome Nicholas never voyaged far enough south to go beyond these four, the Russians simply didn't provide more. So Melander during his theft himself was robbed; had to glom just these four maps and clamber away from discovery. And then, being Melander, at once fathered a judgment; that when these charts of the tangled top of the coast were expended, the rest of the voyage could

be borne on by his sailor's sense; that he would bother the heads of the other three ~~escapes~~^{escapees} with this only at some far-downcoast bend of time, when necessity showed itself. Through and through Melander would have worked it, and when time came would have made the further maps seem as little vital as extra whiskers on a cat.

But Melander was stretched under that heap of stones, and Karlsson it would be to point the prow of the canoe into maplessness.

The sensation going through Karlsson now was of being emptied, as if his body from the stomach down had vanished, the way the bottom of the fourth map dissolved their route of escape.

This Karlsson now. Circumstance's man.

. . . Do I? Do I say, Braaf, Wennberg, surprise in the pot this morning, we haven't the maps we need? Going to voyage blind now, we are. . .

More than any of the other three runners of the sea, a man too of the countryside of Sweden which had birthed him. Karlsson was of the Swedish dispersion which began with the fifth decade of the nineteenth century, the bitter years of bad weather and worsening harvests. Rye thin and feeble in the fields, cows like walking bone-yards for lack of hay, potatoes rotten lumps in the earth--as though the elaborate clock of the seasons was awry, whatever could happen wrong did so sometime in Sweden in those years, and all too much of it repeatedly. Karlsson's father was confounded by the coil of the times,

generations of landholding ^{now} crimping to futility before his eyes. But bafflement was not a helpful crop. Like many another, young Karlsson in that harsh time became extra to his home soil of Smaland, early was uncoupled, simply cast to drift, from his family's farmstead. The two brothers older than he caught America fever, put themselves into the emigrant stream coursing to the prairies beyond the Great Lakes. At their urging that he come along, this brother of theirs shook his head in his parson-serious way and said only: "I am no farm maker."

. . . Melander had reason, whatever to Christ it was, for saying nothing of the maps. Melander had reason for what direction he stirred his tea. So he said nothing. And now I, I'm the Melander of us, is that the matter of it? Or...

But just what he was, seemed to take the young Karlsson some finding out. While he turned the question he set to work as a timberman on the largest estate in the parish, and there the forester's first words to him, after a look up and down this silent youngster, were: "Hear what I tell you, lad. I don't boil my cabbage twice." His next were: "We do the day here. Up like lamplighters we are, and late as a miser's tithe." Stropped by that forester's relentless tongue--until he encountered Melander, Karlsson thought it the most relentless possible--Karlsson began to come keen, learn all of axework, of woodcraft, of a pace to life.

. . . First hour on the gallows is the worst, Melander'd have said. We are still three, we're strong enough yet. We've the chance...

The merchant arrived to the estate in the winter of 1849, another crows' winter in that corner of Smaland, bleak cold week on bleak cold week, with the announcement that he was looking for supple wood for sled hames. His true eye, though, was for the grain on men. What he saw in Karlsson suited very well. Karlsson's lovely thrift at work, that knack of finishing an axe stroke and drawing back for the next before it seemed the first could be quite done. The self-sufficiency of him, working his own neighborhood of timber, the forester never needing to hawk over him. Even the still-water-touches-deep reputation of the lithe young timberman, that no parent of any daughter--and perhaps too husbands of some wives--would weep to see Smaland soil go from under Karlsson's feet; even this augured for the purpose of the merchant.

There was this, too. The merchant was not entirely at ease about trafficking in men, and Karlsson he could account as a salving bargain. The Russian-American Company would gain an excellent workman, a seven-year man, as consigned; but evidently one with enough flint in him to maybe strike the Russians a few Swedish sparks someday, too.

. . . But kill one of us like a rook on a fence, why Melander? Wennberg there. Bellied into this on his own, take him. Wennberg broke that Kolosh canoe for us, maybe earned life with that. Earn life, no, it just happens. Braaf. Never'd have been him, Braaf survives the way a winter hare knows to hide. Me then. Could easily been. I was Captain Nose just then instead of steersman or I'd be under those

rocks and Melander'd be here guzzling this tea...

The recruitment was made, and Karlsson rode in the merchant's sleigh to Stockholm, a place, like heaven, where he had never been and hadn't much expected to get to. Then voyage, the passage to the America of the Russians, if most of a year of patient endurance of tip and tilt can be called passage. Patience, Karlsson possessed in plenty, had it to the middle of his bones; to the extent where, like any extreme, it ought not entirely be counted virtue. This forbearance of his kept him in situations, for instance, when a Wennberg might have crashed out or a Braaf wriggled out. Indeed, now had done much to deposit him, without over-ample debate or decision, onto that whittled spot of the frontier shore where the sea months at last ended, New Archangel.

Promptly Karlsson was paired on the timber-felling crew to a stocky Finn as close-tongued as he, the two of them so wordless the other tree cutters dubbed them "the standing stones." The labor was not all that bad--axework was axework, Smaland or on the roof of the world--although Karlsson had been caused to rethink the task a bit when he overheard Melander state that New Archangel's true enterprise was the making of axes to cut down trees to turn into charcoal which was then used for forge fire to make more axes. Looked at that way, any man within an enterprise such as the Russian-American company amounted to something like one slat in a waterwheel. Laboring in a circle, and a ~~damp~~ ^{darned} damp one at that. But the hunting leavened

Karlsson's Alaskan life some. And the Kolosh women more so. So Karlsson had been self-surprised by his readiness to hear out Melander's plan of escape. Never would Karlsson have put it as beribboned as this, but what drew him was a new echo of that years-long purl of question. Where ought a man to point himself, how ought he use his ableness? Not the answers Karlsson ever had expected or heard hint of, Melander's : down one of the wild coasts of the world, to see whether seven-year men could endure their way to freedom. Which maybe was the beckon in them.

. . . Melander. Melander fathered this, and I've to get on with it. So. The maps, do I. . .

Karlsson knew he was not so wide a thinker as Melander. Come all the way to it, he and Braaf and Wennberg together probably were not that spacious. Melander's province of interest was this entire coastline plus whatever joined it over beyond the bend of the planet. "A roomy shore, this, aye? Not like that Russian woodbox, New Archangel. Here's where you needn't open the window to put your coat on." That was all very well, the power in a grandness of view, it sprung the gate of New Archangel and opened the North Pacific to them, skimmed them across Kaigani and through the labyrinth of isles, propelled them these hundreds of water miles. But grandness has its eventual limits too. In Karlsson was the inkling--he had never needed to think it through to the point where it ought be called creed--that realms much tinier than Melander's counted for something, too. The circlet

of strength, say, where the palm of a hand went round the handle of an axe. Or the haft of a paddle.

"Tea, you pair," Karlsson called.

As every morning, Braaf arrived drowsy, a blinking child somehow high as a man.

Wennberg sat with a grunt, at once fed more wood to the breakfast fire as if stoking a forge for the day.

. . . May as well, get it behind us. . .

"I'll show you what we face." As the other two slurped the first of their tea, Karlsson opened the map case and pulled out the fourth map.

"We're this place, here"--midway down the map, amid a shattered strew of coast--"and Melander meant to aim us east, over to this channel"--trench of white, inland a way, north-south through the coastal confusion. 4 "Then we've a sound to cross"--Milbanke, read Melander's penciling here--"then more of channel, then another sound"--Queen Charlotte, this inscription--"and we're to Vancouver Island."

Wennberg and Braaf were gazing down at the map with fixation, tea forgotten. The Russians' map, Melander's map, the white-and-ink tapestry of their escape there to see. . . Braaf said softly, "I don't savvy front from back of it, but it's Tsar's wealth to us, isn't it?"

Wennberg's eyelines were crinkled in concentration. "Christ sideways on the cross, this's a coast. How we've got this far and only Melander—" That trend of thought treacherous, Wennberg peered

to the bottom of the map. "And more of more, ahead of us there yet.

The piece here, just a tit of it, this's. . . what'd you say, Karlsson?"

"Vancouver Island," said Karlsson, and took a slow drink of tea.

"Only one way to get there," Wennberg rumbled on, "and that's pry ourselves off our asses. Isn't that so, Captain Nose?"

"That's so," agreed Karlsson, and re-rolled the fourth map.

As they pushed east, all three men eyed around at the shoreline continually, on watch for another canoe-load of Koloshes.

Apprehension eats fast at stamina, and Karlsson called an early halt for mid-day.

He did so again for the night. Melander had been able to stretch men beyond what they thought were their heavenmost limits. Karlsson already was calculating just how much he was going to have to ration his demands on these other two. Both of them were wan by the end of this day, looked hard-used, despite Karlsson's care with pace. But then, Karlsson supposed he himself didn't look newly minted.

. . . But there's a day. They're pulling full this way, Wennberg and Braaf, not worrying their hair off about maps we don't have. We've made miles. Melander, old high-head, we're keeping on with it, this voyage of yours. We'll maybe step out at Astoria for you yet. . .

The next day arrived not yet certain of mood to choose, merely average gray or storm-dark. Behind the campsite, the forest walled