The hardest wait among them was Braaf's. Melander had forbidden him from stealing until the final flurry of muskets and food on the date of the escape. To keep his hands busy Braaf took up scrimshaw. His first effort, a copying onto whale's tooth of a madonna in the Russian cathedral, emerged from his fingers somehow looking simultaneously mournful and sly.
Night, the sixth of January, 1853. By Russian Orthodox custom, the night of Christmas.

Karlsson staggered from the Kolosh village to the outside of the stockade gate, bounced hard against it, propped himself and threw back his head.

"Be GREETed joyful MORNING HOURR," he bawled. "A Savior COMES with LOVE's sweet POWERR..."

"Shush! Christ save us, man, you'll have that sergeant down here," Bilbin called urgently, hustled from the hut sheltering him from the rain, and hurriedly cracked the gate. "Quick, in, in..."

From the dark beside the blacksmith shop Melander watched the gate wink grayly open, then close. Two man-shapes bobbed together; Karlsson's slurred mutter and Bilbin's guffaw were heard. Melander swiveled his head toward the end of the smithing shop farthest from the gate and spoke:

"Now."

A piece of the darkness—its name was Braaf—disengaged
itself and instantly was vanished around the corner.

Now Melander became motion. Across New Archangel for three hundred yards he hastened, in black reversal of a route he had roved one twilit evening a half-year ago. A different being, that Deacon Step-and-a- Half had been, not yet cumbered with a thousand miles of plan...

Outside the Scandinavian workers' barracks Melander halted and drew deep breaths. For half a minute the rain ticked down on him.

Entering the barracks, he clattered the door shut behind him, began to shrug out of his rainshirt, mumbled something about having forgot his gloves in the toilet, and was gone out the door-way again.

A person attentively watching the arrival and departure of Melander would have had time to blink perhaps three times.

Wennberg had been idly stropping a knife as he spectated the card game being played by three carpenters and a sailmaker. Now he grunted that he too was off to mount the throne of Denmark, if the Russians allowed pants to be dropped on such a holy night, and to the chuckles of the card players pulled on his rainshirt and stepped into the dark beside Melander.

The pair of them, tree and stump somehow endowed with legs, moved with no word through the night for two minutes, three. Apprehension rode them both. Apprehensions, rather for their anxieties were as different as the men.
Wellander told himself, a thousandth time, the logic by which he had singled out this night. Certain as anything, the Russians would be celebrating and capousing and dancing their boots off. Assuredly, the officers and any of the Company Russians who frequented their lodgings for card games and tippling and monotony-breaking argument, all of them would be at the governor's ball in Baranov's Castle, leaving the gun-room accessible. Nor, would when the escapees' absence was discovered, would the Russians be eager to leave their snug festivities to chase them through the cold of Alaskan night. The Koloshi would be keeping to their longhouses, staying clear of drunk and boisterous Tsarmen. Confusion, alcohol, reluctance, all would be the Swedes' Christmas allies for escape. But

Late-going Russians yet within the officers' lodgings...clatter within the gun room heard by a sentry at the eastmost blockhouse...points beyond logic, Melander's months of planning now teetered on such chances, and the fret of it all moved with him in the dark.

Wennberg's perturbation was with himself. Until he stood up from beside the card-players in the barracks the blacksmith had not been convinced he would go through with the escape. How came it that now he was tramping off with Melander into disaster's black avid mouth?

Abruptly a barrier of building met them. As Melander and Wennberg hesitated before the officers' lodgings, a third upright shadow joined them, thrust into Wennberg's hands a heavy sharp-pointed pry bar and into Melander's a pair of long-handled smithing snippers, and muttered: "This way."

In the dark and rain Melander and Wennberg stood rooted for a moment, as though the cold feel of metal conferred on them by Braaf had frozen them into place.
"Come on, you pair of lumps." Braaf's jab brought them to life, tumbled the big men inside the doorway of the officers' club where he waited. "Stay an arm's length behind me, and try not walk on each other's ankles."

Braaf led Melander and Wennberg through rooms their eyes never really took in, so much focus were the two of them devoting to listening, breathing silently, and creeping. Which may go to explain how the outer edge of Wennberg's left boot clanked against a hallway spittoon.

Braaf looked more offended than concerned. He whispered to Wennberg, "Plowhorse."

The door of the gun room stood like the lid of a colossal strongbox tipped on end. Heavy hinges and hasp, a corner-to-corner X of strap iron to thwart notions of chopping in, a padlock the size of a big man's fist.

"Stick in your thing, Wennberg," Braaf said under his breath. "Don't be bashful, the padlock won't giggle."

Wennberg pulled from his breeches a queer piece of metalwork the length of about as long as a serving spoon. At its small end the device was shaped like a thick skeleton key. At the other, it flared into a fat doughnut of metal, like the eye of a sizable ringbolt. It was of solid iron, and had taken Wennberg great time to forge in secret.

Into the keyhole of the padlock the blacksmith inserted the key-like end of his device. Shaped the sharp point of the pry bar through the doughnut-end. Moved his thick hands to the outer end of the pry bar for all possible leverage. And strained downward.
The lockwork inside the padlock made a single sharp click.
Braaf reached instantly and the sprung lock was lifted away.

"Done, hair and hide," congratulated Melander. "Now one job
more." The tall leader handed Wennberg the snippers and tugged
open the powerful door.

Somehow rifles racked together multiply their power, in much
the way that cavalry does by drawing up abreast. The repeat of
pattern, the echoing numerousness it implies, as though this
concentrated squad is just a swatch of bigger trouble—such impress

stood now before the three men, black tubes of barrel and brass ramrod
pipes rising straight up from the chain which threaded through each

Beaumarchais

Beaumarchais' triggerguard. Truth be known, except for an occasional Fleury

sportsman's weapon and one hefty American Sharps, the guns here were
eccentric old Bakers or Brunswick bought from the Hudson's Bay

traders; the Brunswick in particular were hard-recoiling, scatter-

barreled specimens recently given up on by the British Army. None

of this could be known to Braaf, Wennberg, Melander: blast and thunder

was their want, not ballistic nicety.
In went Wennberg, then Braaf. Two exertions on the long handles of the snippers, and tempered jaws crushed twice through filigreed metal. The triggerguard of the first rifle cut away, Braaf plucked it free of its restraining chain and handed it past Wennberg to Melander.

Four more rifles the blacksmith clipped rapidly in the same fashion. "Aye," Melander said softly each time.

Hefting their new armory, the trio readied themselves. Braaf shouldered shut the gun room door, slipped the padlock back onto its hasp. The right cast of look would show at once that the lock was awry, but it would be a rare Russian who came home tonight with a quick eye.

Braaf moved in front of the other two; said under his breath to Wennberg, "Try pick up your hooves this time;" and led.

They exited the officers' lodgings and through the dark set off together, now west across New Archangel toward the stockade gate, Braaf like a bat choosing the most shadowed route for them.

The noise exploded atop them then.

PALONG! PALONG!

Braaf was four running strides away from the frozen Melander and Wennberg before he, and they, realized--PALONG! PALONG!-- how cathedral bells resound to those who sneak through the streets at night.
"Your Russian is fond of bells," a visitor who departed New Archangel with ringing ears once noted down, and the sweet-sad

[underline]Russian Orthodox[underline]

holiday peals from the belfry of the cathedral followed the tall

[underline]all[underline]

figure and the shorter two across the settlement toward the stockade gate.
A few feet from the sentry lean-to the trio paused, and Melander called in huskily: "Karlsson?"

Out loomed a figure in sentry cap, with a musket at quarter arms. Wennberg grunted a curse and grabbed for the knife inside his rainshirt.

In Karlsson's voice the figure mildly chided: "I thought I had better look the part. You don't find Bilibin's cap becoming on me, Wennberg?"

"Speaking of caps," Melander said as if announcing tea, "it's time to fling our hat over the mummy wall."

Karlsson eased the gate open just enough for them to slip through with the guns. Minutes stretched, then the three were back from the canoe and the blackness of the Kolosh village.

"We're off to the cache," whispered Melander. "Stand ready with the gate."

Fewer than fifty paces later, Melander and Braaf stopped beside the blacksmith shop.

"What are we doing here?" Wennberg rumbled to Melander. "Where's this hidey-hole of Braaf's?"

"Here."

"What?"

"In the sill loft. Above your forge." The sill loft was a
narrow platform, like a span of board ceiling, laid across the
center of the rafters of the smithing shop. Wood to make window-
and doorframes was stowed there winter-long in the heat rising
from
the forges, to forestall warp or shrinkage; until the summer building
season came, no one paid it any mind. Except of course Melander,
who said now: "On Gotland, we say the darkest place is under the
candlestick."

"You pissants!" The stun of it set Wennberg back a step, these
weeks of the war within himself, escape-or-betray, the lobes of his
mind standing and fighting like crabs over it, and all the while...
"If the Russians'd looked up there they'd have hung me!"

"That thought did visit us. But you had luck, the Russians
peeped. Shinny the ladder, Braaf, and begin handing down to us,
aye?"

It took three trips, Braaf and Wennberg lugging while Melander
stowed and stowed, to convey the trove which Braaf had accumulated
month upon month like a discriminating packrat.

Then all at once Melander, alone, was back at the gate to say

"We're cargoed," he said to Karlsson. "You'll be our last
item, aye?" And was gone.

Karlsson began to wait out a span of motionless time. The
hammer chorale of the bells at last had ceased, and the all-but-
silence, just the soft rainsound, was worse. Too, there was an
occasional stirring from Bilibin, trussed and gagged and bleary
on the floor of the hut behind him. Karlsson decided it was best
to keep busy within himself, saying and resaying the words.
There are moments, central moments such as what Karlsson awaits now, which form themselves unlike any that have come before in our lives or will again. Ours might seem a kindlier evolution if what we know as memory had been set in us the other way: if these pith incidents of existence already waited on display there in the mind when you, I, Karlsson enter the world—a glance, and A seem ready to happen some certain Thursday; beyond it, B in clear view, due on a Wednesday two years and seventeen days off... The snag is Z, the single exactitude we could never bear to know: death's date.

So then that we can stand existence, the apparatus fetches backward for us rather than ahead, memory instead of foreknowledge, and Karlsson on wait here in the Alaska night is like all of us in life's dark, able to know only that a moment is coming due and to hope it is not the last of the series.

Then the word, as if in chorus to his silent recitings, flew out of the dark to him, in call down from the block—
house on the hump of ridge above the stockade gate.

"Vnimatel!

Every hour it boomed from sentry post to sentry post, this call to attention.

Having been endlessly rehearsed by Melander, whose Russian was better than his own, Karlsson swallowed, cupped his hands to his mouth; and as close as he could raise his voice to Bilibin's bray, cried back the watch call.

Silence from the blockhouse.

Karlsson cracked the gate for himself.

"You're croaking like a raven down there tonight." Karlsson spun to the resumed voice from the blockhouse. "Something got you by the throat?"

Motionless, Karlsson frantically rummaged the times he had shared the hootch jug with Bilibin, what words...Then from beside him in the darkness, a bray in Russian:

"Nothing fifteen drops won't cure!"

Karlsson's right elbow was being gripped by the largest hand in New Archangel, which told him what his eyes couldn't; Melander. "We'll

Fresh silence at the other guardpost. Deeper, tauter silence,
it seemed to Karlsson, unrelenting as Melander's grip.

At last:

"Swig fifteen more for me and make a start on my woes as well.

Merry Christmas, Pavel Ivanovich!"
As if in mock of some dance step, the Russians just then were gyrating through in the Castle, the Swedes' vast voyage southward started off with an abrupt sidestep to the west.

Melander had shown Karlsson on the first of the Tebenkov.

Melander had shown Karlsson maps the pair of southgoing channels threaded like careful seams among the islands of Sitka Sound. Karlsson had said, "At night? Probably in rain?"

That nubbin of opinion pivoted the escapees to the third possible route, a veer around large Japonski Island directly across from the Kolosh village and then outside the shoal of Sound islands. Such a loop was longer than the other channels and unsheltered from the ocean currents, but at least it was not a blindfolded plunge into the labyrinth of isles.

It was, however, the inauguration for Braaf and Wennberg into paddling in untame waters. The canoe bucked, slid down nose first, rocked to one side, bucked again, slid again and rocked to the other side, a nautical jig new to the pair of them, and a horrifying one in the wet dark. Their paddling efforts were stabs into the sloshing turmoil below them until Karlsson, in the bow of the canoe and feeling the splutters of attempt occurring behind him, directed over his shoulder:

"Spread your hands wide as you can on the paddle and stroke only when I say. Now--now--now--now--now--"

This contrived tick and tock, Karlsson's nows and the breath-space between, advanced them through the blackness until Melander spoke from the stern of the canoe.
"Hold up, wait, bring us broadside a moment, Karlsson. We've at least earned a last look."

As the canoe swayed around, the other three saw what he meant. Back through one of the channel-canyons amid the islands of Sitka Sound, an astonishing wide box of lights sat in the air. Baranov's Castle, every window lamp lit for this night of Christmas merriment, sent outward through the black and the rain their final glittering glimpse of New Archangel.

The course out of the harbor looped them toward the ocean, then veered southeast, to bring them along the shoreline of Baranof Island. From launching the canoe, the men's legs were wet to just above their knees, and in the winter night it took the first half hour of paddling to warm themselves.

The night was winless, which they needed. The Baranof coastline they could estimate by the surf sound, and occasionally a moving margin of lightness as a wave struck and swashed. To their right, modern the ocean side, the black was intense, of a sort our eyes have been weaned from generation upon starless, so much so that it seemed nothing ever had kindled in that void, and vast, beyond all control vast. New Archangel apart, the next lamp in that black was unknown thousands of miles across the Pacific, if indeed the residents of Japan lit lamps.
four tried to stroke steadily rather than rapidly. Not even Wennberg was impatient about this, for he knew with the others that they needed to pull themselves as far from New Archangel as possible by dawn, and that meant pace, endurance. Perhaps twenty rest-pauses as little as possible, strokes each minute, four men stroking, seven-eight hours to daybreak; through an approximate thirty thousand of these exertions and they could seek out a dawn cove for hiding.

Hours later, near-eternities later to the numbed arms of Melander and Braaf and Wennberg, darkness thinned toward dawn's gray.

Karlsson, glancing back to judge the stamina left in the other three, was the first to see the slim arc of canoe, like a middle-distance reflection of their own craft, closing the distance behind them.

"You bastard, Melander." This was Wennberg. "The Russians won't follow us, ay?"

"They haven't," Melander retorted. "Those are Kolosh. We'll for the little white father in Petersburg see how eager they are to die. Braaf, load those fancy rifles of yours, then pass Karlsson his hunting gun."

The Kolosh chieftain in the chasing canoe counted carefully
as Braaf worked at the loading, and did not like how the numbers added and added. The half-drunk Russian officer who had roused the Kolosh crew told them the escaping men were only three—Braaf at first had not been missed, his whereabouts as usual the most obscure matter this side of ghostcraft—but plainly there were four of the whitehairs, they possessed at least two muskets apiece, and this one doing the loading was rapid at his task. Against the four and their evident armory the Kolosh chieftain had his six paddlers and himself, with but three muskets and some spears.

"Fools they are, you'll skewer them like fish in a barrel," the Russian officer had said. "If they haven't drowned themselves first." But fools these men ahead now did not noticeably seem to be. They had paddled far, almost a surprise how far; a canoe chief of less knowledge than his own would not have reckoned them yet to this distance. They seemed prepared to fight, and held the total of muskets in their favor. Tobacco, molasses, even the yellow coins had been promised by the angry Russian. Those, against the battle these whitehairs might put up. Once wondering starts there is no cure, and here was much, muskets and molasses and Russians and the nature of promises and tobacco and four steady-armed whitehairs instead of three exhausted timorous ones, to be wondered about.
As the leader of the Kolosh sought to balance it all in his mind and the exertion of his crew shortened the water between the canoes, the craft in front suddenly swung broadside, the figure in its bow leveling a rifle as the canoe came around.

Startled, the range being greater than they themselves would expend shots across, the Kolosh paddlers ducked and grappled for their own muskets. But the chieftain sat steady and watched.

This was an instant he owed all the attention within his being.

The chieftain, slender whitehair swung his rifle into place, on a line through the air to the Kolosh leader. The chieftain knew, as only one man of combat can see into the power of another, what Karlsson was doing. The whitehair was touching across distance to the chieftain's life, plucking it up easily as a kitten, either to claim or to let it fall back into place.

The other three whitehairs aimed their weapons as well, but not with the slender one's finicity.

Rattled by the turnaboot of men who were supposed to be desperately fleeing them, the Kolosh crew tried to yank their rifles into place, the canoe rocking with their confusion.

The chieftain still watched ahead. He knew himself to be twice the watcher here, the one intent on the rifleman across the water and the other in gaze to himself at this unexpected point between existences.
The decision was out the chieftain's mouth before his mind knew it had finished the weighing.

The Kolosh paddlers slid their muskets into the bottom of their canoe.

In the other canoe, the slender man set aside his rifle; as did the big whitehair in the stern. Silently the Kolosh watched as the two of them, strokesmen of power, paddled the canoe away while the other pair maintained rifles. The craft was passing from view around a shorewall of timber when the chieftain said one thing more.

"Let the sea eat them."
Shortly before noon, Naval Captain of Second Rank Nikolai Yakovlevich Rosenberg, governor of Russian America, pinched hard at the bridge of his nose in hope of alleviating the aftereffect of the previous night's festivities, decided that no remedy known to man could staunch such aches as were within his forehead, sighed, and instructed his secretary to send in the Lutheran pastor.

The pastor, a Finn from Saarijärvi who was considered something of a clodhopper not only by the Russian officers but the Stockholm contingent of Swedes, dolefully had been anticipating his call into the governor's chamber. By breakfast every tongue in New Archangel knew of the escape of the double number of sentries along the stockade catwalk retold the news, and the sidelong glances every Russian was casting at every Swede and Finn this morning bespoke most eloquently of all. The pastor's
hesitant entrance into the governor's presence gathered under one ceiling two of the three unhappiest men in New Archangel. The third was named Bilibin.

"Excellency."

"Pastor. As you may have heard, our citizenry is fewer by four this morning."

"I did happen to hear the, ah, rumor."

"Yes. Oblige me, if you will. Were these men parishioners of yours?" Rosenberg intoned through the list of four names his secretary had initiated this blighted day with. Melander: remarkable, that gabby stork of a sailor. Karlsson and Wennberg: the Governor could put vague faces to them; average slag among the seven-year force. Braaf: this one he could not recall ever having heard of at all.

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 came here with Governor Etholin—was it ten, twelve years ago? When I myself arrived to succeed Pastor Cygnaeus, Wennberg was a member of the congregation. Soon after, he married a Kolosh woman, and soon after, the woman died. Croup, I believe."

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

"When I sought to console him, Wennberg cursed me. He also cursed—God. Since then he has fallen, if I may say so, 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 as a
devout plunger at the card table. The pastor hurried on:

"Wen

Rosenberg rose, crossed to a window, leaned his forehead
against the glass coolness, and stared out at the clouded coast-
line south across Sitka Sound. Worthless to send the Nicholas to
alert Ozherskoj; if the damnable Swedes could paddle at all they
would be past Ozherskoj by now. Nor could the steamship hunt
down a canoe which would hide among the coves and islands of this
cost like a mouse in a stable. Yet this was no idle matter, the
economics in the loss of four indenturees, twenty-eight man-years...
and the example to the other laborers could be treacherous. No,
can't be remedied but can't be ignored, therefore paper it over.
The Governor knew the saying that paper is the schoolman's thickest,
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. With a resourceful bit of clerks

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, some forty miles downcoast from New Archangel and a secure twenty beyond the Ozherskoi outpost, the four canoeists pulled ashore behind a small headland, in a cove snug as a mountainside tarn. Weariness weighted every smallest move as they tried touncramp their legs, shrug the hunch from the top of their backs. Creakily, Melander leaned toward Braaf and whispered.

Braaf nodded and ran a hand into the supplies stowed within the canoe. When his hand came up, it held a small jug. Champagne. Karlsson, forgive us that it isn't hootchina, but rum from the officers' club was the best Braaf could manage under the circumstances."

As he spoke Melander's long face 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. "Braaf, would you care to sip first?"

Melander, like the others, expected Braaf merely to swig and pass along. Instead Braaf stood looking at the jug 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 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; center the water cask more exactly...

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 down-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 imaginable are engendered somewhere along the North Pacific's horizon of coast, from polar chill to the stun of desert heat. Within its 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 snow-flung seaward from the cold Alaskan mountains. The North Pacific's most tremendous force, however, something like a permanent typhoon under the water, is the Kuroshio, the Japanese Current, which puts an 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 ceaseless shove against their journey without realizing it. But should a storm whirl south out of the Gulf of Alaska, where Kuroshio collides with cold northern water, they will know in full the North Pacific's set of strengths.
These four Swedes in a Tlingit canoe are attempting a thousand miles of this North Pacific-world. Not all that much, you may say. A fraction of a fraction, after all. One thousand miles: in forty or fifty study days one could walk such a distance and perhaps yet have a wafer's-worth of leather on one's boot soles. Except that 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. 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 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, bit

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 identical reason: to steal minutes. Snatch time whenever it could be 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 ground out later, when weariness would be like a weight grown into their bones. They would be wearier.

They took the same canoe positions as the night before. Karlsson the bow paddler. Behind him, Wennberg. Behind Wennberg, Braaf. Melander in the stern. Melander as ever had his reason for such placement. In such placement too, Melander had reason.
Karlsson was the strongest paddler, the best to handle the prow of the craft. Wennberg, behind Karlsson's example and with the eyes of the other two on him, would try to keep pace with Karlsson. Braaf, Melander wanted under his own nearest scrutiny, to see that he shirked no more than could be prevented.

Their first miles went in silence, as if the canoemen were not sure they could afford effort on talk. Then—"Melander, you said these first days we'd only to keep this shore on our left, there's no other land along here. What do you call that out there?"

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

"You've sighted 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?"

"The 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 taken it back from the British and they boast it as tomorrow's town
of this coast. But all we care is whether ships touch at the place, and touch they do."

Melander helmed them to near North Cape, a mile downcoast from New Archangel, before stopping. By then Braaf, the least accustomed to exertion, looked particularly done in. But he said nothing, and lent a hand in hefting the canoe into shelter among a shore-touching stand of spruce. Wennberg was cajoled into building a fire, Melander apportioned beans and salt beef into a kettle, Karlsson spread the sail-cloth which would serve as a ground tarp, and dark brought night two of their leaving of New Archangel.

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

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

"Maybe we ought to have pointed north." Karlsson was going along with the try. "I've been up the coast there with the bear-walkers and those cliffs are good dark meat."

"You'd see enough gray-gray-gray, white-white-white there too, Karlsson. Icebergs and glaciers. That's the north slope of hell up there. No, 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."
If these new canoemen could have bent their vision upward over Baranov's dour foreshore to see what they were traveling on the edge of, they would have been wildly 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 any chance: Alaska's locked grapple of continent and ocean.

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—pitpatpit-pit—like restless fingers drumming on a knee.

The other three were in well-worn sealskin rainshirts, but Braaf sat resplendent in a knee-length Aleut parka, bright yarn embroidery at the wrists, 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 Kolosh come pestering again, we'll tell them you're the Little Father the Tsar, aye? Now paddle."

It took them that day and most of the next to reach the southern 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 matter a bit unwieldy to frame into words, that in all their time at New Archangel they never truly had seen the Alaskan forest. Pinched onto its site as it was, New Archangel stood grand as Stockholm when compared with this universe of standing wood.

True, timber hedged the fort and settlement, furred the isles of Sitka Sound and the humped backs of mountains around. But now the forest stretched like the black-green legions of time itself, the horizon on 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 the forest was, it seemed possible that every tree of this coast was in touch with every other, limb to 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, for the Russian-American Company's hunters long since had harvested these waters bare of otters and seals. What abounded were birds. Baleful ravens, big as midnight cats. Eagles riding the air above the coastal lines of bluff, patrolling in great watchful glides before letting the air spiral them high again. Seagulls, cormorants, grebes, 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 determined to hunch there as the land'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 would you do, if the Nicholas came 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, I think she's still anchored in Sitka Sound and the Russians are in their beds with their thumbs up their butts." Melander was in high humor from their progress thus far. "But what about you other pair, 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 makes you think we can?" retorted Wennberg.

"Because we're alive to this moment, and closer to Astoria with each stroke of the paddle."

"Your prediction, Braaf?"

"They're not after us. They don't think of us at all by now."

Wennberg snorted. "We dance out of New Archangel practically under their noses and they don't even think about us? Braaf, your head is mud."
"They have to 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 four faces at work-call, they regret. Maybe they even regret the Kolosh canoe. But us ourselves, we're wisps 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 a spatter of crooked shores and hedging rocks. Melander said nothing of this to the other three, simply told them that he judged there'd be stout current up this 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 whitely across rocks not far off the point. "Let's stay away from that horse market,"
Melander decreed and 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.

"Jesu Maria." Melander's exasperation was outgrowing his epithets.

"Is this whole whole damn stone of an island unbuttoned like this?"

Kuiu

Two further inhospitable coves answered him.

Dusk waited not far by now, and the labor of paddling against the current was becoming terrible. 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 Kuiu, a rocky point which bade less welcome than any profile of the island yet.

"Bleak as ashes," Melander bestowed on this last of Kuiu. "Karlsson, take the spyglass, see if there's any hope out in the channel, aye?"

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

Melander lit a candle lantern 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 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-reads of island when but one had been intended. Yet Melander and his canoe-man had alit secure, and after Kuiu the going smoothened. In the days now, they jinked their way southeast amid constant accessible islands.

The major island called Prince of Wales rests dominantly in this topography like a large platter, and the strew of smaller isles along its west is as if that rim of the plateware has 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 steadily shielded from the ocean's tempers of weather.

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: a cosmic harness which somehow tugs night and sun, ebbs and floods, 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 were an instant quandary. Melander began as cook, but Perpetually fusses the matter too much. His suppers perpetually lagged behind everyone else's hunger. When he could no longer stand Melander's dawdling and poking, Wennberg volunteered himself, but proved too rough and ready. "Wennberg," 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
finding its way into his mouth before it could arrive at the others'
plates. By the fifth day, then, the cooking chore had chosen Karlsson.
He was no chef de cuisine, but his output at least stilled the nightly
grumbling that one had might as well go off into the forest and graze.

Wennberg's particular tithe turned out to be his paddling. He
was 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 pulled itself
through the water primarily on the forward 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 had 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
blisters, commiserate your ache of knee; the edge strength to hold all
into place, Melander provided.

More than this homework he saw to, though. Subtract parts from
this extensive man in their successive value to the escape, the
ultimate item will be his tongue.
to the other men than his vocal trait. Had parts been subtracted from Melander in successive value to the escape, his tongue would have been the ultimate item.

For Melander knew what poets and prime ministers know, that the cave of the mouth is where men's spirits shelter. His gift for talk 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 stroking, aye?...Karlsson, that surf looks to me like worse and more of it. Let's bend our way around, so-fashion..."

"We're not signaling Saint Peter from here."

"Too much smoke."

"You'd've never heard over a forge," jeers Wennberg. "A bit of smoke tans the soul."

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

"You need to know a thing, Wennberg. Braaf, Karlsson, you also.

I heard this 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 Kolosh, so both the Russians and the downcoast natives were in a mood to make
as much face as possible. They began with a night of feast, and Dobzhansky found himself sharing a baked salmon and goathorn cups of fermented berry juice with a canoe chief. The pair discovered they could converse in the trading tongue of the coast, Chinook jargon. At once the native wanted 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 meant to tell his crew Dobzhansky's story of this coast's people. He was not 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 heavily, lie 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 would see 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 leathery swimmers held pace silver pane of the water, they swam for awhile alongside the canoe, watching the upright creatures in it.

Melander had learned from his herring crew that the practice of the southward natives was to dub the bowman of a canoe "Captain Nose." Accordingly he bestowed the title on Karlsson, and Braaf and Wennberg took it up. For the next few days, it was all "Captain Nose, Your Honor, what's it to be for supper tonight?" and "May I suggest, Captain Nose, that we point ourselves to the right of that rock."
It took a number of nights for any of them to become accustomed to the noise of ocean meeting coast. Surf expelling up the beach and draining back, the increasing crash of tide incoming, the held-instant of breath/silence at lowest low tide.

Melander's unease went on longest; an absence of some sort bothered him. At last he placed it. He was listening for the creak of ship timbers, the other part of the choir whenever ocean was heard.

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[Handwritten note:]

It's surprising how much I change my mind as I write. But I still feel a few words must be said, even if I can't say why.
Pouched as they were in the canoe day on day, the closeness now and then rubbed on them. For be it said, among these four watermen waited crosscurrents which, if they were let to flow free, might prove as roily as any of the North Pacific's.

Wennberg of course was 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 his other qualities. The blacksmith was a highly capable voyager, able to put up with the discomforts and as steady at the canoe work as could be asked—if some incident did not set him off. But the trigger in him was always close to click.

As for Melander, the problem with so toplofty 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.

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

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 as for what he was.

As if still in echo of their encounter on the parade ground, it was Braaf and Wennberg 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.
"Rye-cakes," 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 rye-cake right now as I would. Currant jam on it, you'd trip your own mother to get to it."

"Mister Blacksmith is right," Melander admitted with a chuckle. "Though with me it's not rye-cakes, 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 Skane," 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-hand pulled 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 snouty dark lump glaring up at Melander.

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

"Looks like a shark fathered by a toad," muttered Melander. None of them had ever seen the miniature species of shark called dogfish.

"Well, how do you say? Do we try to eat it?"

No one wanted to be the first, repellent as the dogfish 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 hatchet and конец the bastard!"

"Maybe all this fuss with cooking isn't needed." Skinned and baked over coals, the dogfish had proved surprisingly civil to the taste, and Karlsson was so relieved he was trying a rare joke. "I saw a bear eat fish once, near Ozhereskoi. He looked big as an ox. Swatted salmon out of the water and skoffed them down belly-first."

Melander pretended to ponder. "I think it was well you didn't invite him for supper tonight. He might have turned up his nose at 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, 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 small square of sailcloth, creaseless, smooths it flat. Now 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 pleasure profound through Melander. It is as if an entire tiny kingdom has sprung to creation just for him. Sprigs small as the point of his pencil denote the great stands of forest, where forest stands. Tidelfats are delicately dotted, as if speck-sized clams breathe 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 pen-jabbers in the Castle possessed the skill and energy pin-precise for such work. (In actuality, none. After Governor Tebenkov wrenched the navigational information from his ship captains, he turned it over to a gifted copper-engraver among the New Archangel Creoles.)

In our time, a poet has offered the thought that it is within
civilization's portions of maps now that the injunction ought be
linked, Here be monsters. Melander's firelit maps represent an
instant of balance in humankind's relationship with the North Pacific:
amoreafter seaserpents were discounted, and before ports and their
tentacles of shipping lanes proliferated. To cast a glance onto these
functional maps is like seeing suddenly beneath the fog-and-cloud
skin of this shore, down to the truth of 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. The detail here is most
phenomenal of all: the exact black speck, slightly longer than wide,
which was their barracks is shown just above the cross-within-a-cross
indicating the church of St. Michael. (Melander had unrolled for
Karlsson this map for his opinion about the best route through the
Sound's covey of islands and 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, well, now, this 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 miles south from Sitka, the map begins to report a
lingual stew, islands left as Heceta and Noyes, Baker and Suemèz, Dall
and San Fernando, from the crisscross of British and Spanish explorations, these names Russified by the Creole mapmaker: Melander of Sweden gives his centered grin when the full hibble-bibble occurs to him.

Yet seen another way, such a musk 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 coast-line when drawn is something 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, 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. "Angel feathers," Wennberg snickered. "Spread cream on 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 had started on their armloads, Braaf asked: "Meland, tell me something, can you?"

"If I can. Aye."

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 would 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 said: "They are called moon-cursers, Braaf. On a black night they hobble a horse and put 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 safe course. Aye, Braaf, they do that."

Braaf nodded above his armload of wood. "I thought they did," he said, and turned back toward camp.
By now, it could be noticed 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 canoe men 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 the days of hovering above the breadth of existence was mountains astounding. The nearest meadows stood green as May meadows. The next, loftier group darkened toward black. Then the highest, the horizon peaks along the east and south, were a shadowed blue, as though thinned of substance as they extended down the coast.

"Mid-Summer Day come early," Melander exulted. "Today we jump over our own heads."

But through the morning the sun swung so low along the southern horizon that its glare made hazard of the water in front of the canoe. Air-headed, An hour or so of the ferocious dazzle left the men light-headed, with light sozzled. Melander squinted and swore. "Too much of everything, this bedammed coast has..." By strong afternoon effort, when the sun had swung out above the ocean, 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 parabola and windage. 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 forest.

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

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 but obscured by tree limbs squatted several more ganderung 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 is all this?" Braaf asked.

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

"Don't give us your hagbag riddles," 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 him. 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 theirs was a Pacific-nurtured existence which
asks to be called nothing less than sumptuous.

coastal
In spawning time the rivers were stippled thick with salmon, veins of
protein bulging there in the water to be wrested, fileted, dried for
the winter larder. Abovewstream the wealth was wood, particularly
the cedar whose cunning these people knew how to release; under their
hands it transformed to capacious lodges, canoes the length of a decent
the most startling of
trawler, and art, alarming art. Tree-sized 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 cold times wore pelts as if taking the saga-animals
into themselves. (And thereby drew the attention of white newcomers to
the coast, who bartered for those furs to cargo them beyond the bend of
the world and barter in turn to yellow people: linkage queer in its
way as any carved concatenation.) Out of this vivid swirl wafted,

inevitably, the reputation of these coastal people as canoe warriors
and slave-takers—and smarmy 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 had
never dipped paddle into a one of
luck, they would not encounter 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 deserted? If it is."

"Likely they do as the Kolosh," 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 thing, 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 Kolosh 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 spread through the settlement about this man's daggers: blades of power with each hilt carved as the rising neck of some beast. The head topping a hilt-neck sometimes would be a bear with glinting abalone inlays of eyes and teeth, magical as dragons, again a great-toothed beaver; sometimes a long-faced wolf, always, angled and fierce and unforgettable.

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 attain 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 sliding the canoe out into surf.
Usual bruised-looking sky, tatters of fog in the tree tops. This
cost's mornings were as if brawl had gone on in the heavens all night.

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

This

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 paddling,
did those two thickset words: Prol Kaigani. Kaigani Strait.