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 their 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 canoeists. By holding to a heading of south-southeast they would aim into its embrace. At least, Melander had 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 would manage in the day. Two, he doubted greatly.

_ gravely._

Melander studied forward along the canoe at the others. Stock-still, Karlsson. Wennberg eyeing askance at the wide water. Braaf with his paddle across the canoe thwarts and his fingers restless atop the wood as if absently plucking music.

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 always a following wind; this had been Melander's history, self-belief. Now he needed to apportion 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, Karlsson, Captain Nose, instantly created taller than the men behind, 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 distinct against the sky behind them. Wennberg he had not expected to be slack in this situation; it was Braaf who could be anticipated to scant his labor if 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 today is called Dixon Entrance, a name engrafted for the English captain who delved the region in the ship Queen Charlotte. By whatever christening, the expense forms one of the largest of dozens of plains of water between the broken lands of the North Pacific coastline. For canoeists to come onto this span of water from days in the frequent islands to its north was as if, having got accustomed to visiting from castle to castle across moats, they now found themselves looking from Normandy across to Devon. This water is extensive in its perils as well.

"The tidal currents are much confused," modern navigators are cautioned; in storm the channel can seem to be forty white miles of breakers. Fog spends its season in summer, gales from first autumn until April. 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.

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

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] The broad man held his paddle just above the wave surface, as though trying to recall whether water or air was the element in which it operated. He swiveled the upper part of his body enough to find Melander. Wennberg's face hung open in a look of surprise. His mouth made motions but no sound. Then, with 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] put his head over the side of the canoe and gaped his mouth as if inhaling better health up from the ocean. After a minute his gasps managed to be words: "Can't. Too. Sick."

"You've got to. Wennberg, listen to me, aye? Jab a finger down your gullet, tell yourself you've swallowed baneberries, pretend that Braaf here plopped a slug into your tea this morning—do anything, but heave the sickness out of you now. Do it, Wennberg. Dump your gut."
"Keep on, you'll have me puking too," muttered Braaf.

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

"There now," Melander proclaimed in satisfaction. "You'll be a bull again before you know it. Rest a bit, we can spare you until you get your breath back."

Wennberg focused whitely 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 stroking 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 it was becoming, the shoreline of the islands seemed a footing, a ledge to return to. Then, just after Melander glanced back and saw that the landwall was gone. In place of the islands hung a sheet of fog. Kaigani had enwrapped the canoe and its anything about them nothing other than men, nothing but water or cloud or fog anywhere about them.

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 backs-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. While Melander
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 Karlsson.

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 turned his head enough to pass softly over his shoulder to Melander, as if 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, and what he dreaded sprung to creation. Wind streaks on the water, long ropey crawlers of white. "Neptune's snakes," Melander knew, as from his shipboard years, and knew too that they are the spawn of a thirty-knot gale.

The sky began to fleck, snowflakes like tiny gulls riding down the wind which now steadied into a constant whirl past the canoe men'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 into the canoe. Melander needed to decide rapidly. Still struggling against sea-sickness, Wennberg was erratic at the paddle. But if he put his head down to bail, he would be sicker yet. So—"Braaf, you'll need to bail, and quick..."

The water had three motions 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 bowspry and snow and tried to hold in mind nothing but the pace of paddle. But he did hear an imploring take place behind him. "Oh God who watches over fools and babes," Wennberg implored, whispered. "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 served as figurehead for the craft, if imagination permits that a Kolosh canoe would breast the sea with a Skane 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 on the Eiger, foothold-handhold-foothold-handhold would ensue until further elevation could not present itself. If stone profile and millwork arms could grind a way across Kaigani,

Karlsson meant to do it...Melander: aloud. "Dig that paddle, Wennberg. You're strong as bran wine now. (Melander within: May he not go ill on us again, this Kaigani 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. But worst of all, the nausea which hid so sly within him, re-attacking whenever he thought it might have receded. The blacksmith felt weaker than he could ever remember, this uphill demanded and demanded of him, yet the labor of paddling needed to be attempted. Wennberg too fell into a machined rhythm, jab-lift-pull back-jab, but out of a different drivewheel than Karlsson's. Overswarmed 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 it 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 the 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 consciencelessly pocket another man’s snuffbox—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 the compass where it is. If it shifts, shoves us east into Hecate...) So the matter, like most of this coast’s matters, came down to perseverance. While Melander regulated, Wennberg grunted dismally and Braaf once in a while shirked, out of sheer habit when he wasn’t reminding himself otherwise, and at the bow Karlsson stayed a human piston: all of them trying to put from mind the numbing of their knees and the growing ache of their arms, and across Kaigani Strait the canoe moving steadily southeast, a black sharp-snouted creature against the gray, four broad-hoofed legs striking and striking at the water, running on the sea.

Melander woke on thoroughly tame terrain. Not a boulder nor so
Melander came awake on the tamest of terrain. Not a sea-cliff nor boulder nor so much as a fist-sized stone anywhere in sight. A 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. At the back of the beach, a high-shanked spruce forest seemed to have its green skirt up, daintily ready to come wading.

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 roped together a 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 on Melander that the treetops spearing up through mist just to the west of him stood twice the height it was conceivable for trees to stand.

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

"Maiden's milk this morning, isn't it?" agreed Melander.

"Quite a millpond, isn't it?" 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 should 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 their ark toward the middle-air mix of mist and trees. They found that they were crossing
the mouth of a river, a sixty-foot width of black water so dark and slow it seemed more solid than the beach and forest on either side of it. Lacquered and beautiful, this surprise river, and along its surface small circlets of foam spun like ghostly anemones.

On the river's far side, a black rim of rock showed itself over and just under the bank of mist, the waterline. 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 stood 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 looking through the dust of eons rather than the morning's last waft of seamist. 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 age-spotted, Methusalan. As the men gaped up, two bald eagles sailed across the orb of stone.
Around the point they pulled the canoe to security and clambered onto the flow of black rock for a full 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 cannon, strewn with a tumble of black boulders the size of oxcarts, 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 bowing toward them as they whirled to it.

"Aye, well. At least we know what's hung those trees into the middle of the air." Out of the dome of cliff above them tall firs poked forth like feathers in a war bonnet. "I had better find a way up there 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 the beguiled creature upturned to them as a sunflower will face 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 tree trunk, head 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: the flicker of a mountain stream trying to leap from itself, the white veils of spray brushing back from the Pacific's wave-brows, the quick thin lakes strewn by a half-day rain, all were here flying down in sparkle. The moment charmed 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," said Melander. Feeling vastly foolish, 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.

"Moombeams must have got into me," Karlsson offered ruefully.

"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 found from the summit that the arc of beach continued some miles eastward, to Hecate Strait. That intelligence turned into taunt, however, by the time he and Karlsson returned to the campsite.

A stiff wind was blowing in off Kaigani. Not wanting a repeat of the crossing they had just endured, the canoe men sat to wait it out. the bluster.
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, 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 don't have 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 Rooski 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 Rooskaya says to feel sorry for himself."
"How about melon-headed as Melander?" Wennberg suggested. "Do the Russians have that saying, too?"

Melander cut a quick look at Wennberg. His sarcasm of 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 kept you on at past your years?" Wennberg studied the tall leader. Then he spat to one side and muttered: "Serving for Rachel."

Melander tugged an ear. "Give us that again?" Both 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 shocked.

The blacksmith shifted uneasily. "My family were church-strong. So was 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 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 hast 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."

For the next two days of blow, they held where they were—no distance, which to Melander was the same as losing it.

"A lazy wind, we call it on Gotland. 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'd better chance the next stretch today, wind or no. Karlsson?"

"You're the sailor of us. But 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. "Chance."

"Wennberg?"
"The only thing worse than that water is this waiting. Chance, Melander. Teach us how to eat the wind. It may sit better on my stomach than that last ration did."

For a change, luck puffed on them. Once they 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 they were able to put up the canoe's small lugsail. "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 paddling after coming 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 a 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 as they came ashore at the close of their fourth straight progressful day.

The river shoved through the land like a smooth gray glacier. Had the surface been solid enough to walk on--before many years, one emigrant or another would inaugurate the joke that in the season of fun-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 stride for a full hour. That man would have stridden the Columbia, largest river of the Pacific shore of the Americas, and there on its south bank he would have stamped silt from his feet at Astoria.

Already, Astoria was in its third incarnation. John Jacob Astor's wealth, not to say intentions for more of it, installed the settlement as a fur depot in 1811. The War of 1812 dealt the site to British control, with a consequent rechristening as Fort George. By 1818 it stubbornly was American, and Astoria, once more. The ensuing three and a half decades had not made it much more of a place: post office, customs house, long T-shaped dock straddling into the tidal flow, 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 like a cup hung to gather the sugar of a giant maple. If, for whatever reason, you found yourself at Astoria, you could aim yourself en into the world aboard one of the dozen or fifteen vessels which plied there month by month.
This night, the four canoe-going Swedes are encamped just more than 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 washed 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-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 could not be theirs: it sat larger by half; and the designs entwining the prow were different, simpler, and 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 Kolosh? What do they think this is, the Midsummer's Day 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 or some such, out for a few days. Cabbageheads."

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

"Aye, we'll see. Can we get our canoe to the water and slide away without them seeing us?"

"No."

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

"No."

"No." Melander grimaced as if his echo-word had hurt his ears, then looked 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 has 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 open 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 forward the beached canoe. He ran with his elbows out wide, and his head sighted low, as if butting his way. Under his boots gravel clattered wildly, avalanche-loud to Wennberg, Jesu Maria, 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 stopped to thrust both hands beneath a gray boulder wide as his chest. Gravel bit the backs of his hands, his wrists, and finally his forearms as Wennberg wrestled the rock. With a grunt he brought the burden upward, grappled it into balance on his knees, then across his waist, and like a washerwoman carrying an overfull tub of water, turned with the boulder toward the canoe.

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

Amidships of the canoe, Wennberg heaved the boulder within his arms to the height of his neck, then with a grunt let it crash into the bottom of the craft.

The crunch was not loud, to Wennberg the first luck anywhere in this situation, but the canoe bottom fractured downward beneath the rock, and a split as wide as a finger now creviced toward the craft's bow. Wennberg gave one rapid look at his result, then skirted the
stern of the canoe and saw 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 yell at Wennberg to hurry up and lend a hand.

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

Karlsson hurried a shot at the two riflemen, missed but caused them to flinch back from the shot's ricochet among the beach gravel.

"Paddle-Jesu Maria-paddle-paddle!" Melander was instructing. 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 minutes. 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.

"Sten?" he called. "Sten!"

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