A month's canoe journey, Melander estimated it would be to Astoria.

If they had luck, three weeks.

Karlsson stood silent for a minute, looking off around the bay.

Melander noticed his glance linger in the direction of the native women. On such a day sound carried like light, and from the fort's blacksmith shop came the measured clamor of hammer against anvil.

As if roused by the clangor, Karlsson turned back to Melander and said: "Two of us are not enough strength for that much paddling."

"No," Melander agreed. "Our other man is Braaf."

"Braaf? That puppy?"

Melander tendered his new co-conspirator a serious smile which might have been a replica of Karlsson's own aboard the schooner in Stockholm harbor. "We need a thief," he explained.

Braaf would have given the fingers of one hand to be gone from Sitka. He had, after all, the thief's belief that in this boundless world
Stealing was in Braaf like blood and breath. He had been a
Stockholm street boy, son of a prostitute and the captain of a
Danish fishing ketch, and on his own in life by the age of seven.
Alaska he had chosen because, after a steady growth of skill from
beggary to picking pockets to thievery, the other destination
beckoning to him was prison. Braaf arrived to Sitka the year after
Karlsson and Melander, and at once, skinning knives, and twists of Kirghiz
tobacco and other unattached items began to vanish from the fort as
if having sprung wings in the night. The Russians vented fury on
the harborfront natives for the outbreak of vanishment, but the
Swedes rapidly made a different guess, for Braaf was becoming a kind
of human commissary in the barracks. Because he was reasonable in
his prices--interested less in making money than in breaking the
monotony of Sitka life, which he found to be a kind of rain-soaked
prison in its own right--and was diplomatic enough not to steal anything major from
his countrymen, nothing was said against him.
It would have been hard anyway to make a convincing case against Braaf. At twenty, he displayed the round ruddy face of a farmboy—an apple of a face—and a gaze which lofted innocently just above the eyes of whomever he was talking to, as if he were considerately measuring you for a hat. The next morning after tea was taken outside the stockade by two men, it was taken by three; Braaf studied back and forth from Melander's forehead to Karlsson's as Melander once more outlined the plan. Only for an instant, about the duration of a held breath, did Braaf's eyes come steady with theirs, just before he agreed to join the escape.

That is how they became three. Disquieted shipman, musing hunter, agreeable thief, now plotters all. Against them, and not yet knowing it, although habitually guardful as governing apparatuses have to be, New Anchorage stood Bitha and its system of life. The system of all empires, when you come to think of it. For empires exist on the principle of constellations, pattern imposed across expanse—and the Sitkas of the planet at the time, whether named Bitha or Santa Fe or Hong Kong or Algiers or Astoria or Sydney, were their specific scintillations of outline. The far pinspots representing vastly more than they...
themselves were. There in the middle of the nineteenth century, the
work of putting out lines across the planet in a star web this way
was being done with the white wakes of sailing ships; sealanes along
which the imperial energies resolutely pulsed back and forth, capital
to colony and colony to capital. Africa, Asia; Australia;
the lines of route from Europe converged and tensed one
another into place. Such maritime tracework succeeded
astoundingly in North America as well. The gray-gowned
wee queen
of England reigned over Ojibways and Athapascans and Bella Coolas,
merchants of Moscow and Irkutsk were provided fortunes by bales of
Alaskan furs, the United States took unto itself a second broad
oceanfront. But all this atlas of order rested on the fact that
it requires acceptance, a faith of seeing and saying, "Ah yes, that
is the Great Dipper, and here Pegasus comes flying, and there sits
shining Andromeda, exactly so," to make constellations real. So
that what the makers of any imperial configuration always had to be
most wary of was minds which happened not to be of stellar allegiance.
Even in the galaxy of frontier enclaves sparked into creation by imperialism, New Archangel was a mapdot unlike any other. Simultaneously a far-north backwater and capital of more than half a million square miles, more territory than France, Spain, England and Ireland combined, for fifty years the settlement had ran on the Russian capacities for hard labor and doggedness, and was kept from running any better than it did by the Russian penchants for muddle and infighting. New Archangel here at all fifty years after its founding still stood forth very much in the image of its progenitor, the stumpy and tenacious Baranov, first governor of Russian America and contriver of the Russian-American Company's system of fur-gathering. It was said of Baranov, like Napoleon, that he was a little great man, and he it was who in 1791 began to stretch Russian strength from the Aleutian chain of atolls down the great arc of Alaska's coast, bending or breaking the native cultures along the route one after another: the Aleuts chastened into becoming the Russians' seasonal hunters of seals and sea otters, the people of the Kenai cajoled into alliance by Baranov's mating with the daughter of the foremost chief, the stubbornly combative Tlingits—whom the
Russians called Kolosh—at last in 1804 dislodged from Sitka Sound by the cannonades of a gunship.

Sitka Sound, the single sizable and well-sheltered harbor along the archipelagic shoreline of southeastern Alaska, was the maritime ringhold Baranov needed for the firm knotting of Russian influence. Along virtually all of that coast Mountains drop sheer to the ocean; spruce slopes like green avalanches into the seawater, along virtually all of that coast, but at Sitka a long notch of bay is sided by a ledge of shore, and further grudging bequest of topography, at the shore's southmost hook a knoll of rock pokes up like a soldier's helmet. This mound, sixty or so feet in elevation and twice as broad, the Kolosh had employed as a stronghold, and Baranov seized the commanding site for his own thick-logged bastion.

Here in the summer of 1852, Baranov three decades dead, the double-storied governor's house still called Baranov's Castle squatted there in the air at one extent of New Archangel's single street, at the opposite end rose the onion dome and carrot spire of the comely little Russian Orthodox cathedral. (The morning after Braaf joined the escape plan, Karlsson emerges from around a corner of the cathedral, on his way from the workmen's barracks a short way to its north, and
walks the brief dirt street between God's domain and Governor's.

Karlsson has been sent to work this day at the shipyard, so deft with an ax that he often is lent to help with the first shaping of a mainmast. Before reaching the shipyard, however, he veers west toward the stockade gate and the Kolosh village beyond, steps outside and along the wall, undoes his wool trousers, and urinates. As he does so, he studies the Kolosh canoes lined like sleeping serpents on the white sand of the beach. All of New Archangel, cathedral and Castle and the fifty or so squared-log buildings painted a pale yellow as though they were seaside cottages, sat dwarfed by the thronging mountains.

Virtually atop the town as the spire and dome crowned the cathedral, the peaks were those a child would draw: sharp high pyramids of forest, occasionally a lesser summit round as a cannonball for comparison's sake. (As Karlsson begins hewing pine at the shipyard, Braaf materializes at the partially-wooded rise of land north of the settlement and stockade. When Braaf arrived to New Archangel and it immediately became evident that he was not, as listed on one manifest, a shipwright, nor, as listed on another item of record, a shoemaker, and Braaf with shy innocence denied knowing how such misunderstandings
possibly could have come about, a perplexed clerk assigned him to
manages to use this livelihood
the readiest unskilled job, as a cook's helper. Daily Braaf manages
to manufacture free time for himself, much of it spent hiding out
5 somewhere on
this brow of land which holds New Archangel's four capacious
greyware, Koloosh, Russian Orthodox, Lutheran, and unconsecrated.
This morning Braaf angles, as usual, past the particularly handsome
headstone of a Russian officer named Gavrilo. Braaf cannot comprehend
the Russian inscription, but it reads: "Peace be to your dust.""
Perpetually at war with the massed mountains was the weather, for
New Archangel lived two days of three in rain and much oftener than
that in cloud. One minute the vapor flowed along the bottoms
of the mountains to make the peaks float like dark icebergs, the
next the cloud layer would rise and lop the crags, leaving a
plateau of forest beneath. Yet the diminutive port within
all this swirl was a place of queer

clarity as well, its rinsed air imbued with a quality of
cast to smallest spruce swags of tree limbs

on mountains a mile off, the rock skirts of the timbered islands
throughout
of the harbor. Voices and the barking of dogs carried extraordinarily.
(At mid-morning, Braaf reluctantly emerging from the cemetery slope to begin chores for the noon meal, Melander on work-break appears from the saltery being constructed on the point of shoreline southeast of the cathedral. Sitka Sound shares amply in the twenty-foot tides of this region of Alaska, and on the broad exposed tidelands a pig is rooting up clams while ravens seize his find one after another. Melander watches for a moment, then laughs. Other workmen look over at him from their mugs of tea. Melander points to the raucous gulping birds:

"The Castle Russians at one of their banquets.") A last oddity of the port of New Archangel was that it had a fleet of ships permanently larger than were usually in its harbor. Hulks were pulled wherever they could no longer be safely sailed, then improvised upon as needed. Of the first two, beached into usefulness in Baranov's time, one had been used as a church and the other as a gun battery, a diversity which must have made the Kolosh ponder deeply about their new landlords.

Its habit of collecting hull-corpses gave New Archangel, as one visitor put it, "an original, foreign, and fossilized kind of appearance."
Fully equal in complication and unlikeness to its architecture and geography and weather was New Archangel's tenantry. The settlement was ruled by the Russian navy, administered by a covey of Russian-American Company clerks and other functionaries, was provisioned chiefly by British ships of the rival Hudson's Bay Company, seasonally abounded with Aleut fur hunters, relied for most of its muscle work upon creoles—those born of Russian fathers and Kolosh mothers; of New Archangel's sum of about a thousand persons, this was the most sizable group—or upon Russian vagabonds from the Siberian port of Okhotsk, and for its craftwork, such as carpentry, it imported seven-year men from Scandinavia. The hundred and fifty or so Scandinavians mostly were Finns; the Swedes such as Melander and Braaf and Karlson made a minority within this minority.

Yet even this social pyramid, sharp-tipped and broad-bottomed as the triangle peaks above the little port, did not account the most numerous populace on Sitka Sound. The Kolosh, the Sitka Tlingits.
Their low-roofed longhouses straggled for nearly a mile along the beach west of New Archangel's huddle of buildings, and the eighteen-foot-high and four hundred yards long wall of defense and four bulky blockhouses and a couple of dozen full-time sentries constantly expressed the colony's wariness of the natives. (With sufficient reason. The Sitka Tlingits obliterated the first settlement Baranov had implanted here, and a bare three years after this summer of 1852 they mustered themselves and tried, just short of success, to obliterate this one as well.) Precisely this wariness toward the Kolosh, the way New Archangel had to set its most vigilant face daily set its face of vigilance toward those who might want to get in, Melander was counting on as advantage for getting out.

Melander was of singularly few words three evenings later—June's last evening, another of New Archangel's summer twilights which toyed with dusk until near midnight—when he fell into step with Braaf and Karlsson on their way to the barracks. "All right, Braaf. Tomorrow, begin your harvest."
Braaf proved so adept a provisioner that Melander was forced to ration out his stealing assignments, lest the Russians become suspicious about the fresh blizzard of thievery. By the end of July, one of the planners' cache held a compass, two tins of gunpowder, three-pound boxes of tea the Russians used to trade with the natives, several fishing lines and hooks, and a coil of rope. During August Braaf added a gaff hook, three knives, a couple of hatchets, and a fire flint spiece. September's gleanings were a second compass—

Melander wanted to be as certain as possible about navigation—a small iron kettle, another musket and a water cask. Early in October, Sitka's month of curtaining rain, the plotters convened about the matter of a canoe. Not to talk about the canoe, Karlsson had eyed out one to recommend, an eighteen-foot shell of unusual delicacy with a prow carved in the which, unlike the short terminating blade of bowsprit on most Kolosh canoes, angled onward into a high sharp needle of nose. It gave the craft the look of only awaiting the right word before flying upward. Along both bow and stern, this alert canoe was vividly carved and painted: box-like designs with rounded corners, so that the lines flowed with smoothness in and out of one another.
Karlsson judged there was only one more promising canoe among the Kolosh fleet, a chief's canoe, larger and more elegant; but its beaching spot was nearly to the far end of the village. This choice lay amid the half dozen canoes nearest the stockade gate, convenient.

Melander knew something of canoes, from having paddled a number of times with Kolosh crews to the fishing grounds off the western shorefront of New Archangel; indeed, such journeys were main strands in his decision that seven-yeardom could be fled by water. But those fishing canoes were half again the length of this keen-beaked version singled out by Karlsson. Asked his opinion, Braaf only mumbled that any canoe was smaller than he preferred. Karlsson vouched hard for the waterworthiness of his choice, pointing out that it would be livelier to steer than a larger canoe and less weight to propel. Further, he had watched to see that the native who owned it was scrupulous, on
than any canoe was smaller than he preferred—but Karlsson vouched
for its waterworthiness; the native who owned it was scrupulous, on
New Archangel's rare warm days, about sloshing water over the canoe
to prevent its drying out and cracking, and in damp weather kept
woven mats over it for shelter.

Melandar was persuaded. Next Karlsson, who rarely asserted
himself about anything but was displaying downright passion about
everything to do with the canoe,

insisted on Clyoquot paddles, a broad-headed type carved by a tribe
far south along the coast and occasionally bartered north as prized
items of trade. Braaf frowned. He had reason; it took him all of
the next week to accumulate a trio of Clyoquot paddles from the Chich
natives along the harbor.

"Three?" said Karlsson when they met again. "What if we lose one?"

Braaf cursed in his sweet voice, and went off to start the thief's
siege of watching and waiting which would gleam a fourth paddle.

Karlsson's assigned task, in these months of preparation, was
the watchman above the gate of the fort.

"You have the wedge to open that gate for us," Melander told him
joyfully. "It's between your legs."

Karlsson now made his visits to the native huts even more frequently,
Like the eyes of a great watchful creature, each morning at six
the stockade gate near the westmost corner of New Archangel came open,
at six each evening it came resolutely closed. Only during the day
were the Kolosh allowed into the settlement, in carefully gauged
numbers, and the market area where they were permitted to trade was
delineated directly inside the gate, so that they could be rapidly
shoved out in event of trouble. Moreover, the first of the four
gun-slitted blockhouses buttressing the five hundred yard wall of
stockade sat above the area of market and gate on a shieldlike wall
of rock, miniature of the strong slope supporting Baranov's Castle.
Scan it from inside or out, just here at New Archangel's portal
Russian caution about the Kolosh was at its strongest focus.

Except. Except that, bachelor existence on the frontier being
what it was, the gate sometimes peeped open in the evenings. Until
dusk went into night, it was not unknown that a recreative stay
might be made in the Kolosh village. For those inside New
Archangel, the second and unofficial—and by order of the governor,
absolute—curfew at the gate was full dark.
Karlsson began to make his visits to the native village more frequent, and to stretch each stay deeper into dusk. Before long, he was nudging regularly against the curfew, much to the anxiety of the gate sentry named Bilibin. Bilibin was one of the longest-serving of the Russians who had come across from Siberia, but also something of a scapegrace who had exasperated one superior or another to the point where he now stood the least desirable of guard shifts, the one spanning the middle of the night. He had felt the knout enough times not to invite it again, and the first time Karlsson arrived back late, Bilibin blustered a threat to march him doublequick to the sergeant in charge of the sentries. But did nothing, rousting out a sergeant because a Swede couldn't finish his rutting on time was not the sort of thing Bilibin savored either.

The next time, having conferred that day with Hålander, Karlsson staggered later than ever to the gate, singing as if drunk—"If your blue eyes I could see, gloom would soon depart;" Karlsson was amazed with the evident believability of his acting; "for to me, sweet maid Marie, is sunshine through the heart"—and carrying a jug of the native
"OO"; Karlsson was amazed with the evident believability of his acting; "OO"—and carrying a jug of the native liquor called hootchina. Which without undue difficulty he persuaded Bilibin to take a reviveful swig from: "Have fifteen drops, Pavel, it drives the snakes from one's boots..."

The hootchina did its task. Under the New garrison allotment of fifty cups of rum per man per year, Bilibin was not departing was a man perpetually parched. Soon Karlsson, on the nights when Bilibin stood watch, was slipping out of the fort after curfew.

"Come along, and put your spoon in the kettle," Karlsson would invite;

"No, no, I'm limber as a goose's neck, no more women for me, you can have mine too," Bilibin would splutter back at him—and returning far into in the middle of the night to proffer the hootchina jug.

By first snowfall of that autumn of 1852, Karlsson was well on his way to legendary status among the native women along Sitka harbor, and Bilibin had been enabled to topple into the escape plan.
said in his procedural way that

In early November, Melander told Braaf the time had come to steal
for Braaf to steal
the coastal maps by which they would navigate south. "It's the Tebenkov
maps we want. Tebenkov must have been one Russian who had something
other than cabbage between his ears. When he was governor here he
made his captains chart all of this coastline, and there's a set
aboard each ship. I saw the steamship's when Rosenberg was bathing
his bottom at Ozherskoi. We'll take those, they aren't likely to be
or whenever in hell's time gets fired up
missed until spring when they fire up the steamship again. Can you
read Russian, Braaf?" Braaf shook his head. "No? Well, no matter,
we need the ones from latitude 57 degrees as far south as 46 degrees,
and you'll see they're marked like this." NW bepera Amepuku, Melander
printed carefully. NW coast of America. The theft would be tricky,
Melander cautioned, because Braaf would need to sort rapidly among
all the maps in the steamship's chart room and--Melander stopped short
as Braaf shook his head again. "Aye?" Melander demanded. "What is it?"

"I can't read anything," braaf said.

The unforeseen always irked Melander, and this he had not thought
of at all. His stare of annoyance held on Braaf, then Melander swerved
to Karlsson and his disposition restored itself. "So. It
seems to fall to you. This'll at least be a change from
galloping a Kolosh maiden, wouldn't you say? Now: the
Karlsson was shaking his lean head in reprise of Braaf. "I'm being sent hunting. Perhaps for as long as ten days."

Now Karlsson looked steadily at Melander and for once, so did Braaf. Under the pressure of these looks Melander grimaced, then scowled, then swore. "Jesu Maria. Have to become a common sneakthief, do I? The pair of you..."

The pair of them met him with the same square glances two weeks later. "I have them, I have them," Melander said edgily. "But a close matter it was. Christ on the cross, Braaf, how you go around like a ghost I'll never know. I was at the maps, when for some
damnable reason two of the Russian officers came aboard. They clomped off somewhere on one side of the boat and I got away along the other." Melander opened his mouth as if to go on, but went into thought instead. After a moment he said: "Aye. Anyway, it's done. Let's get on with our enterprise. We'll need new sailcloth for the canoe, can't trust the rotten cheesecloth these Kolosh use. You can recognize sailcloth, Braaf, can't you?"
Braaf was making away with the sailcloth, the folded length of it cradled beneath an armload of skins he ostensibly was carrying toward the tannery, when a voice—through his fright it did register on him that the voice at least was Swedish rather than Russian—suggested huskily into his ear, "Let's talk about what you have under those skins."

Braaf turned his head the fraction enough to recognize the wide sideburn-framed face beside him. The recognition unfroze his mind...one of the blacksmiths...vain bastard he is...Wennstrom,

Wennblad: "Wennberg? What..."

"No, don't walk away and don't put them down." Not suggestion now: orders. "We'll have a visit until we see which interesting thing happens first." Wennberg moved himself in front of Braaf as companionably as if he had every matter in the world to discuss with him. "Whether you spill that load in front of these Russians,
or your friend Melander trots himself over here."

Melander arrived with a lanky swiftness which to any onlooker would seem as if he had been beckoned over to consult with the pair. Around the three of them now centered in the long rectangle of parade ground between Baranov's Castle and the stockade gate, New Archangel's morning life eddied, quartermasters and overseers and shipwrights and caulkers and brassworkers and sailors, humanity in its start-of-day seeps and spurts of motion. Melander's dark look met Wennberg's broad blandness like a cloud against cliff-face.

"Well, Melander," Wennberg said. "Braaf and I were just talking about how much heavier hides have gotten this year. It seems a man can hardly hold a pood of them in his arms these days."

"A man can carry as much as the world puts on him, it is said,"

Melander responded crisply, still glowering at Wennberg.

"You always were a thinker, Melander. Isn't he, Braaf?" The blacksmith stepped close and pressed his elbow slowly, powerfully, into Braaf's right bicep, drawing a strangled gasp from the laden man. "A thinker, hmm?"
"Let's give Braaf a rest, shall we?" Melander offered. "You obviously have much to say about matters of weight." Braaf lurched.

If there is an axis of life in every man, Melander's whirl where the rest of us have an ordinary tongue. Wennberg hesitated, then nodded as if the words were a debt paid.

Braaf lurched his way out of sight in the general direction of the tannery as the other two, Melander more angular than ever beside the wide Wennberg.

stromed to a building not far from the stockade gate. The smithing shop transected the middle of the building, and within its open arched doorway stood three big forges aligned from the outside in. The outermost forge was Wennberg's. Melander now studied out into the parade ground from here where Wennberg stood by the hour at his work, of the view thus presented, nodded in understanding and asked: "So?"

"You have plans to get away from this Russian bear pit, and I'm coming with you."

"Are you?"

"I am. Or you and Braaf and Karlsson will be hung from the top of the stockade for the magpies to feast on."
Melander held Wennberg's gaze in a lock with his own, then gave the serious smile. "First you speak of too much weight, then of too much height. Wennberg, I think you maybe underestimate how far a man can stretch himself if he has to. Can you handle a Clyoquot paddle?"

Melander spent some talking to convince Braaf and Karlsson that the best choice was to bring Wennberg into the plan. Braaf volunteered to kill the blacksmith, if someone would tell him how it might be done. Melander shook his head. He had thought it through, and the death of a valued smith such as Wennberg, especially when the killing would have to be done here within the fort, would raise more questions than it was worth. "Besides, he is a bull for strength. We can use him."

Karlsson squinted in thought, then said that what galled him was to be at Wennberg's mercy. What if Wennberg took it into his narrow bull mind to betray them to the Russians for a reward?

"Aye, Melander agreed, that was the very problem to be grappled. We shall have to set a snare for Mister Wennberg."
A week later, the four of them met. Karlsson openly studied Wennberg. Their newcomer was both hefty and wide, like a cut of very broad plank. An unexpectedness atop his girth was fluffy set of sideburns—light brown, as against the blondness of the other three Swedes—which framed his face all the way down to where his jaw joined his neck. Except for young dandies among the Russian officers no one else of New Archangel sported such whiskers, but then it could be assumed that no one either was going to invoke foppery against this walking slab of brawn.

Wennberg. A time or two the blacksmith had re-edged an axe for Karlsson, but Karlsson knew nothing more of him than those spaced hammerblows onto red metal he found it interesting that the man amounted to so much more than arm. Wennberg meanwhile gave back as much scrutiny as he got. Braaf's gaze now floated steadily along three foreheads instead of two.

"We have a thing to tell you, Wennberg," Melander began. "Since you're new to our midst, we can't really know whether your fondest wish is to go with us from Otto or to sell us to the Russians as runaways conspirators. If you've had any waverings, it'll be a relief to you to know we've made up your mind for you. There's no profit whatsoever for you to go to the Russians."
Challenge of this sort was not what Wennberg had been expecting, and he retorted hotly.

"Your tongue is bigger than your brain, Melander. It's not for you to tell me who stands where. Don't forget that I can always show the Russians the hidey-hole where you've had Braaf stashing things these months."

walk out of here
"But Wennberg, heart's friend, there's nothing there," Melander said with such politeness it seemed almost an apology. "Since you've invited yourself along with us we thought we'd get ourselves a new hidey-hole. This is a large fort, and Braaf is very good at finding new places. You'll know where the cache is when we load the canoe, and not the minute before. So trot to the Russians whenever you feel like it, but you'll have nothing to show them."

"Except mouse turds." This unexpectedly from Braaf, who still was studying the air above the other three. Wennberg shot him a look which all but sizzled in the air. "Yes, except mouse turds," Melander chuckled. "And even the Russians might find it hard to believe that we've been busy storing away mouse turds. Aye? No, Wennberg, it's you against the three of us, Wennberg, and we'll see who the Russians choose to believe. You wouldn't be the first one here to be thought off his head, for a maker of mischief for some other reason."

Melander paused, then said in his know-all fashion:

"Wennberg and Braaf, you play a hand of cards occasionally, don't you, Wennberg? I suggest you have a second look before you instant wager."
Wennberg scowled around the trio, opened his mouth to say something, but Karlsson beat him to it. "Be careful of your words, Wennberg. If you're coming with us, we have much time ahead together and don't need the ghost of bad feelings. If you're going to the Russians, you don't want your last words to weigh wrongly on your soul."

Wennberg stared at Karlsson as if the slender hunter had just changed skin color before his eyes. Then he swung his heavy look to Braaf, Karlsson at last and longest to Melander. "You set of squareheads may be better at this than I thought," Wennberg said finally. "I am with you. Now you can tell me, if you can, how we are to run on the sea."

Test the plan in the forge of his mind as he would, Wennberg could come up with a brief speate of questions when Melander had finished.

"Why all this fuss with Bilibin? Why not just cut his stupid throat when we're ready?"

"Because if we kill one of his men, Chirikov, the Russian garrison officer—will have to come after us. If we leave Bilibin alive, Chirikov will take it out on him."
"What of muskets? How many can Braaf lay his dainty hands on?"

Melander replied that they had the advantage of two ready at hand; Karlsson's long-barreled .69 calibre hunting rifle, and the military musket which would be plucked from Bilbin. Then on the night of the escape, Melander continued, Braaf would gather them a few more. "Six, to be exact."

Braaf blinked rapidly at this and even Karlsson looked surprised, but it was

Wennerg who blurted: "Great good God, Melander, nine rifles altogether? We're going in a canoe, not a man-of-war!"

"Can you name me a better cargo, Wennerg? Do you think the ravens are going to feed us on this journey, and the wolves will guard us with their kind teeth? We don't know what we'll face, but I want ball and powder to face it with. If you wish to come along naked, so be it."

Wennerg grumbled, then offered that if Melander was so fixed on muskets, he was willing to help out. When the time was ready Wennerg
A sentry's musket had been sent into the smith shop for a new buttplate. He could hold it back for a time by saying he hadn't got around to affixing the buttplate yet.

Melander congratulated him gravely on entering the spirit of their enterprise. "There, Braaf, he's made you amends. You'll need to pluck only five muskets when the time is ready."

Braaf said nothing.

Karlsson too stayed unspeaking, but he had begun to have a feeling about Wennberg. There was something unreckonable, opposite from usual, about the blacksmith: as when the eyelid of a wood duck watching you casually closed from the bottom up.

Wennberg caromed on from the topic of muskets: "And you know for heaven-certain, Melander, that we'll find this American fort at--what is it, Asturia?"

"Astoria, named for the rich fur man Astor. It is there. I have known sailors whose ships have called there. Perhaps we will not even have to go that far, if we meet a merchantman or supply ship along the way. English, Spanish, Americans or the devil, it won't matter. So long as they're not Russians."

"And the natives?" Karlsson put in.
Even Wennberg was silenced by that, and Melander now disclosed to them the escape date. Christmas. The Russians would be celebrating and carousing and dancing their boots off as they did on the holiday. Nothing could be more natural than for Karlsson to offer Bilbin a few extra swigs of hutzina, Melander explained. Nor, when their absence had been discovered, would the Russians be eager to leave their warm festivities to chase them through the cold of night. Confusion.

Moreover, nothing could be more natural than for Karlsson to offer Bilbin a few extra holiday swigs of hootchina. Confusion, alcohol, reluctance, all would be their allies for the escape, the tall leader concluded, the best possible guests for Bilbin's Christmas. New Archangel.

The waiting became a kind of ghost attaching itself to each of their lives, as if a man now cast two shadows and one somehow fell into his body instead of away. The outer man had to perform as ever—do his work, eat, sleep, carry on barracks gabble—while inside, this sudden new shadow-creature, the one in wait, bided the days only in thought of what was ahead.
Melander as he waited studied the map firmly into his mind. Before long, the south-descending coastal chain of islands could have been recited out of him like Old Testament genealogy

of Sitka—its Baranof on today's charts of the splattered southeastern Alaska coastline—would

beget Kuiu Island for the escape: Kuiu to beget Kosciusko, Kosciusko Heceta and Heceta Suemez, south and south and south through watery geography and explorers' mother tongues until the eventual rivermouth port called Astoria. Perhaps because he had in him the seaman's way of letting the days take care of distance, simply accepting that because there is more time than there is expanse of the world any journey at last will end, Melander tended to think of the escape only in this stepping-stone manner, rarely by the totality of what he and the other three were intending. This made a loss to them all, for Melander alone of the four had traveled greatly enough on the planet to entirely understand the scope of their escape; to grasp that their intended miles of paddling stretched—wove, rather, through the island-thick coast—as far as the distance from Stockholm to Venice, or from Gibraltar across all the top of Africa to Sicily. Each mile of the thousand, too,

along a cold northern brink of ocean which in winter is misnamed entirely:
not pacific at all, but malign. His knowledge of water, wrapping the world, the force of its resistance to the intentions of man, he might have used to put a tempered edge on the plan to have said, "Listen. Things beyond all imagining may happen to us..." Yet—-it may be a necessity for those who choose vast risk—even Melander seemed not able to face the thought of all the miles at once. only those from island to island to island.

In his waiting, Wennberg too spent long spells of calculation. Turning and turning the question of whether to betray the escape. Certainty did not seem to be in the matter. If the Russians could be relied upon to reward him, say grant an early return to Sweden; but it did not seem likely the Russians would willingly lose blacksmith that way, whatever they promised. If he told of the plan but and Melander convinced the Russians there was nothing to it, Wennberg would never after be safe in New Archangel; Karlsson and perhaps even Braaf would be a constant threat to his life. If he fled with the other three, into freedom; or perhaps to the bottom of this ocean like cats in a sack. If and perhaps;
work at them as he would, Wennberg could make them do no more than somersault themselves into perhaps and if. Stanzas of argument were not Wennberg's style. He preferred to bang a point, go on to the next if it misechoed. But this damned skitter of a matter...Wennberg did not at all have full faith in the
prospects of Melander's plan, but neither did he see, now, any clear way out of it. What Wennberg imagined was going to be his power over Melander and the other two somehow, by some coil of the escape plan, was turning out to be their power over him as well.

Karlsson waited with less edginess than the others. There always was about Karlsson a calm which verged on coldness. He knew his own capabilities, could gauge himself accurately as to whether he was living up to them, and had indifference for people who lacked either capability or gauge. Unlike Wennberg who was continually flexing himself, Karlsson went through life as a man in wait. This patience of his was not nearly all virtue; it kept him in situations when Wennberg would have crashed out or Braaf wriggled out, and indeed it had deposited him, without much decision or debate, into Alaska. Karlsson was a particle of the Swedish diaspora which began in the 1840's, a man uncoupled from his family's farm by a surplus of brothers and absence of opportunity. The two brothers younger than Karlsson caught America fever, put themselves into the emigrant
stream aimed to the prairies beyond the Great Lakes; at their suggestion that he come along, Karlsson gave his serious smile and said only: "I am no farm maker." His liking for hunting and trapping for time in the forest sent him toward Alaska, even at the price of becoming a seven-year man. The occasional hunting assignments he enjoyed greatly, and even the work as an axman seemed to him unobjectionable an attractive crisp task, although he had been made to rethink that a bit by Melander's josh that New Archangel's true enterprise was the making of axes to cut down trees to make into charcoal, which was then used to make more axes. But all in all, Karlsson minded New Archangel life less than any of the other three Swedes. What held Karlsson into the pattern of the escape was the plan itself, the question of capability, whether Melander's idea could be made real, could transport men along the wild coast. There was also the musing to be done about how he himself would perform. For one thing, Karlsson wondered whether sometime during the escape he would have to kill Wennberg and for another, whether he could manage to kill him.
The hardest wait among them was Braaf's, for Melander had forbidden him from stealing until the final flurry of muskets and hardtack on the date of the escape. To keep his hands busy Braaf had taken up carving. After his first effort, a copying of a madonna in the Russians' cathedral of St. Michael who emerged from Braaf's fingers somehow looking simultaneously mournful and sly, it had been Melander who suggested, "Carve us a little figurehead for the journey, Braaf. A lady for luck." It had been Wennberg who added, "Where we're going, better make her a mermaid," and so Braaf did.
The night of the sixth of January, 1853. By the Gregorian calendar of the Russian Orthodox custom, the night of Christmas.

Karlsson staggered against the outside of the fort gate, propped bounced hard against it, propped himself and there, he threw back his head. "Be GREETed joyful MORning HOURRR," he bawled. "Christ the SAVior is BORNNN..."

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

From the dark beside the blacksmith shop Melander watched the high gate wink grayly open, shut, and two shapes bob together. When he heard Karlsson's slurred mutter and Bilibin's guffaw, 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.

It was nearly three hundred yards across New Archangel to the workers' barracks Melander strode rapidly, then halted and drew deep breaths. 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 again. A person attentively watching Melander's arrival and departure would have had time to blink perhaps three times.
Wennberg, who had been casually stropping a knife as he watched
speculated the card game being played by three carpenters and a sailmaker,
grunted that he too was off to the toilet--if the Russians allowed
such a matter 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 three minutes, four.

Apprehension rode them both. Apprehensions, rather, for their anxieties were as different as the men. The single
time in all the unfolding

of the plan that Melander had visibly blanched was when he asked Braaf

where best to steal the final installment of muskets on escape night

and Braaf responded with entire matter-of-factness: "The officers' club.

The gun room."

("Next, Braaf, you'll want to go up to the Castle Russians and ask
if we can have their underwear for warmth," Wennberg had said sardonically.)

But in talking the matter out, it had seemed that Braaf probably was

right. That the officers and the other Russians who frequented the

clubhouse for card games and tippling and monotony-breaking argument

probably all would be at the governor's Christmas ball in Baranov's Castle.

That the small collection of rifles racked like fat billiard cues on

one end wall of the clubhouse--on one of his invented errands which

wafted him into all crannies of the settlement Braaf had spotted the

wepons--and which were used for shooting parties when the governor's
retinue went downcoast to Ozherëkoi probably could be got to on

that necessary night. Probably.

But a few late-going Russians yet within the clubhouse... a padlock on the door of the gun room... 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 he had not been certain he would go through with the escape. How came it that now he was traipsing into disaster beside Melander?

Abruptly a barrier of building met them. As Melander and Wennberg hesitated before the officers' club, a third upright shadow joined them, thrust into the hands of each of them two hefty long rifles, and held the fifth weapon for itself.

In the dark and

rain Melander and Wennberg stood rooted for a moment, as though

conferred on them by Braaf

by the filigreed feel of the metal and in their hands ammunition would

vanish if they dared move.

The noise exploded over them then.

PÅLÅNG! PÅLÅNG!

Braaf was four running strides away from the other two before he,
and they, realized—PALONG! PALONG!—how cathedral bells resound to
through
those who sneak in the streets at night.

"Your Russian is fond of bells," a visitor to New Archangel
with ringing ears once noted down, "and the holiday peals from
belfry of the
the little cathedral followed the tall figure and the shorter
A few feet from
two across the settlement toward the stockade gate. At the sentry
lean-tow, the trio paused, and Melander called in huskily: "Karlsson."
A figure loomed out in military sentry cap with a musket at quarter arms. This time Wennberg's nerve-ends ignited first: the blacksmith rumbled a curse and grabbed for the knife inside his rainshirt.

The figure chided in Karlsson's voice: "I thought I had better look the part. You don't find Bilbin's hat becoming on me, Wennberg?"

"It's time," Melander said. Karlsson eased the gate open just enough for them to slip through, and the men below him began to carry supplies.
to the canoe somewhere in the blackness of the Kolosh village, the five guns from the officers' club, Karlsson's hunting rifle, and the sentry's musket Wennberg had dawdled over in the smithing shop; the month upon month trove Braaf had accumulated like a discriminating packrat; and magpie the final food he had diverted from the kitchen that very day. It took a number of trips, for Melander would have stuffed the canoe full as a sausage if he hadn't had to leave room for the human occupants, Braaf and Wennberg lugging while Melander stowed and stowed, then all at once Melander, alone, was back at the gate to say, "Ready. Come when you can."

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. Yet Karlsson was busy within himself, saying and resaying the words.

Then the words, as if in chorus to his recitings of them, came out of the dark to him, raised in call down from the blockhouse uphill from the stockade gate.
"Eleventh hour, all quiet, God save our father the Tsar."

Having been endlessly rehearsed by Melander, whose Russian was better than his own, Karlsson cried back the watch call as close as he could make his voice to Bilbin's bray.

Silence from the blockhouse.

Karlsson cracked the gate for himself. And then, although he had no idea he was going to do such a thing, Karlsson turned his head up the hill and brayed once more:

"Merry Christmas!"

A moment of silence of another sort at the other guardpost--deeper, suspenseful, as of surprise. Then:

"And Merry Christmas to you, Pavel Ivanovich!"
As if in mock of some dance step the Russians were gyrating through in the Castle, the Swedes' vast voyage southward started off with a sidestep to the west. Melander had shown Karlsson on the first of the Tebenkov maps the pair of southgoing channels threaded like careful seams among the islands of Sitka Sound, and Karlsson had said: "At night? Likely in rain?" That strong sum of words on the escapees on the third 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 the three except Karlsson 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 Wennberg and Braaf, and a horrifying one. Their paddling efforts were stabs into the sloshing turmoil beneath them until Karlsson, in the bow of the canoe and feeling the splutters of effort occurring behind him, directed over his shoulder: "Spread your hands wide on the paddle and stroke only when I say. Now—now—now—now—now—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. "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, a wide box of lights sat in the air. Baranov's Castle, every window lamp-lit for this night of Christmas merriment, its glittering outline the one final flare of New Archangel.

sent outward

into the black and the rain their final glittering glimpse of New Archangel.
Hours later, near-eterminities later to the numbed arms of Melander and Braaf and Wennberg, darkness thinned toward dawn's gray. They saw then the slim arc of canoe, like a middle-distance reflection of their own craft, closing the distance behind them.

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

"They haven't," Melander said. "Those are Kolosh. We'll see how eager they are to die. Braaf, load the rest of the rifles; then pass Karlsson the cask gun."

The Kolosh chieftain in the stern of the canoe counted carefully as Braaf worked at the loading, and did not like the numbers. The half-drunk Russian officer who had roused the Kolosh 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

possessed the whitehair, they had at least two muskets apiece, and without doubt this one doing the loading was rapid at his task. Against the four and their 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, but fools they did not noticeably seem to be.
They had paddled far, they seemed prepared to fight, and they had the total of muskets in their favor. The Russian had promised much tobacco and molasses, but was it worth the battle these whitehairs might put up?

Once wondering starts there is no cure, and the Kolosh leader definitely had begun to wonder.

As the chieftain sought to balance it all in his mind, muskets and molasses and Russians and tobacco and four steady-armed whitehairs instead of three cowardly ones, and the exertion of his crew steadily shortened the water between the canoes, the craft in front abruptly swung broadside, the figure in its bow leveling a rifle as the canoe came around. Startled, for the range was greater than they themselves would expend shots across, the Kolosh paddlers ducked and grappled for their own few muskets, ducked and grappled for their own few muskets, but the chieftain sat steady and watched. If this was his moment to die, he owed the instant all the attention Smoke puffed from the rifle of, within his being. The slender whitehair in the other canoe, and splinters sprayed from the high curve of the stern behind the chieftain. The chieftain knew, as only one man of combat can see into the power of another, what Karlsson had done. The whitehair had touched across phenomenal distance to his life, plucked it up easily as a kitten, and let it fall back in place.
Rattled by the turnabout 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 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 point between existences. The slender whitehair lifted another rifle—the other three steadily aiming their weapons but not firing—and swung it into place, once more on a line through the air to the Kolosh leader. This time the chieftain could see in the manner of the aiming man that he would claim the existence called life.

The decision was spoken by the chieftain’s mouth before his mind entirely knew of the words.

The Kolosh paddlers slid their muskets into the bottom of their canoe. In the other canoe, the slender man set aside his rifle; so did the big whitehair in the stern. The Kolosh watched silently as the pair of them then powerfully paddled the canoe away while the other two kept their rifles aimed.

"Let the sea eat them," the chieftain said.
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 soul in New Archangel knew of the escape, the doubled number of sentries along the stockade catwalk underscored the news, and the sidelong glances the Russians were casting at each Swede and Finn this morning were most eloquent of all. The pastor's entrance into the governor's presence brought together every two of the three unhappiest men in New Archangel that morning; the third was named Bilibin.

"Excellency."

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

"I did happen to hear the, ah, rumor."
"Yes. Oblige me, if you will: Were these men?"—Rosenberg
glanced at the list of four names his secretary had initiated this
blighted day with, and read them aloud—"parishioners of yours?"

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 Etholam—was it
ten, twelve years ago? When I myself arrived to succeed Pastor
Cygnaeus, Wennberg was a member of the congregation. Soon after that,
he married a Kaloosh woman, and soon after that, the woman died."
The pastor paused to sort his words. "When I sought to console him,
Wennberg cursed me. He also cursed—God. Since then he has fallen
into harmful ways."

Rosenberg pinched the area between his eyes again and asked:

"Drink, do you mean?"

"Actually, no. He, 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 cardplayer. The pastor hurried
"Wennberg, you see, is—was—long past his seven years of service here, his gambling debts have kept him on. He has become, may God grant Sullen, unpredictable. that he see his erring way, a man destroying himself. If you would like my opinion, he is capable of destroying others as well."

Rosenberg rose, crossed to a window, leaned his forehead against the glass coolness, and stared out at the clouded coastline south across Sitka Sound. Worthless to send the Nicholas to alert Ozerskoi; if the damnable Swedes could paddle at all they would be past Ozerskoi by now. Nor could the steamship hunt down a canoe which would hide among the coves and islands of this coast like a mouse in a stable. The single piece of luck Rosenberg could find in the situation was that his request to be relieved of his governorship—"ill health... family reasons": in truth, a sufficiency of New Archangel—months ago had been dispatched to Russia, and the insight came to him now that with a resourceful bit of delay, this matter of the runaway Swedes could slide out of sight into the paperwork his successor would inherit. For his part, Rosenberg would have one further anecdote with which to regale dinner parties in St. Petersburg.

"Three fools and a lunatic in a Kolosh canoe," he said as if practicing.

Then, realizing he had spoken aloud, the governor added, without turning:

"That will be all, Pastor. If you know a prayer for the souls of fools and lunatics, you might go say it."

"Excellency."
That evening, some forty miles downcoast from New Archangel and a secure twenty beyond the Ozheraskoi outpost, the four canoeists pulled ashore behind a small headland, in a cove snug and tideless as a tarn. Melander muttered something to Braaf, Braaf nodded and ran a hand into the supplies stowed within the canoe. When his hand came up, it held a small jug.

"Karlsson, forgive us that it isn't hootchina, but rum from the officers' club was the best Braaf could manage under the circumstances." Melander's long face was centered with a colossal grin, which now repeated itself on Karlsson and even Wennberg. "We think it may do well enough for a toast even so.

"Braaf, would you care to begin?"

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 looked up at the other three, sent his glance over their heads and recited: "'May you live forever and I never die.'" Then he drank