

# HERO



*Ron Sanders*

# Hero

*(Glade, World, Master, Boy, Hero)*



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## *Glade*

There is a glacier.

Its blue tongue's tip just tastes a frozen gorge.

There is a gorge, its walls shattered by cold; a once-green thing that, in dying, birthed a thousand aching fissures. It works its jagged way downhill, round ragged rifts and drifts until it comes upon a little frosted wood.

There is a wood, an island locked in ice.

Into this wood the gorge descends. It wanders and it wends; it brakes and all but ends outside a clearing wet with sun. And there, forking, its bent and broken arms embrace a strange, enchanted glade.

There is a glade.

And in this glade the black bears sleep, though sockeyes leap fat between falls. Here the field mouse draws no shadow, the eagle seeks no prey; they spend their while caressed by rays, and halcyon days are they. Here rabbit and roe may linger; no longer need they flee. For in this timeless, taintless space, the Wild has ceased to be. (Outside the glade are shadow and prey, are ice and naked death. There blood may run freely. There the eagle, that *thief*, is a righteous savage, a noble fiend. But once in the glade he is dove, and has no taste for blood, running freely or otherwise).

And in this glade there nests a pool: a dazzling, blue and silver jewel; profoundly deep, pristinely clear. All who sip find solace here, for this is the eye of Being. They lap in peace, assuming blear, not knowing it is seeing. And ever thus this pool shall peer: a silent seer, reflecting on . . . all that is, and all beyond.

(Outside the glade there lies a world where rivers ever run, where ghastly calves in random file revile a bitter sun. East, the day is born in mist. West she dies: her rest, the deep. And North—North the earth lies mute. Wind gnaws her hide, wind wracks her dreams. Wind screams like a flute in her white, white sleep).

And in the glade are tall, stately grasses, sunning raptly, spinning lore. Roots render the rhythms, blades bend without breeze, as signals ascend from the glade's tender floor. (In this wise the glade weaves its word, airs its views. All the glade's flora are bearers of news). They do not wither with fall, for in the glade there is no fall. They do not bind or wilt or brown—they *gesture*, spreading the mood, the mind; conveying, indeed, the very soul of the glade. As ever they have, as they shall evermore.

Bees do not hum here; they sing. They fatten the dream. Mellow and round are the timbres they sound, sweet is the music they bring. Birds do not sing here—they *play*. They carry the theme. Dulcet and warm are the strains they perform. Gifted musicians are they. (All in the glade are virtuosi. They were born to create. Melody, harmony, and counterpoint are innate). Now the performance is lively and bright, now full, now almost still. For, though all in the glade may lean to the light, they must bend to the maestro's feel.

And yet . . . there was a day, long ago in a dream, when this ongoing opus was torn. And on that day (so the lullaby goes) the wind brought a scream, and Dissonance was born.

There was a *noise*.

Moose tensed, their coffee eyes narrowed, their patient brows creased. Bees mauled the tempo, birds lost their place. The grass stood erect, all blades pointing east. There was a crash, and a shriek, and a naked, bleeding beast burst stinking through the fern, fell stumbling on its face.

Moose scattered: *unheard of*. Sheep brawled, geese burst out of rhyme. The symphony, forever endeavored to soar sublime, fluttered, plunged, and, for all of a measure, ceased.

The pool was appalled . . . what manner brute—what kind of monster was this? Furless flank to forelimb, its hide obscured by blood. As for its face . . . it had no face; only a *look*: of shock frozen in time, of horror in amber. A deep, welling rift ran temple to chin, halving the face, caving it in . . . such a grievous wound . . . the pool watched it stagger, on two legs and four, thrashing about till it came to a rise. There it labored for air, wiped the blood from its eyes, lashed at illusion, looked wildly round—beholding the pool, the beast tumbled down.

And there this wretch plunged his thirst, drank his fill, fell back on his haunches.

The pool became still.

The two traded stares.

The glass read his features: that durable eye pondered the wreckage and probed the debris. Revolted, the pool sought the succor of sky. But that thing remained—that face . . . in all creation . . . surely there could be . . . no other creature so ugly as he.

And he gazed in the glass.

Beneath the surface were . . . images . . . swimming in currents of shadow and light. He saw half-shapes and fragments . . . hideous men, exotic beasts . . . saw blue worlds of water, saw white worlds of ice . . . it was all so vague and unreal—yet somehow strangely familiar. Deeper he peered, but, as his mangled face neared, the sun smote the pool and the shapes disappeared. The brute pawed the ground and, dreaming he'd drowned, shook his head sharply and slowly looked round:

There were starlings at arm's-length, transfixed with suspense, their tail feathers trembling, their dark eyes intense. Fantails and timber wolves, stepping in sync, paused for a sniff and stooped for a drink. Bees, pirouetting, threw light in his eyes. Seizing the moment, the pool pressed its hold.

And the glade revolved.

The thing watched it spin—saw the ferns' greedy fingers reach round and close in, saw the tall grass rise high in an emerald sheen, swaying to rhythms from somewhere obscene. This place was madness; he struggled to stand, but, weak as he was, keeled over cold.

And the glade heaved a sigh, and the tall grass reclined—in curious patterns once rendered in whim. Far off in thunder the hard world replied, as iced pines exploded and screamed on the breeze. Down bore the sun, a chill just behind. The pool, grown blood-red, fended frost from its rim. Details dissolved in the oncoming tide. The pool became black. Night seeped through the trees.

Now flora found slumber while, pulsing below, the pool was infused with a soft ruby glow.

Soon birds bearing beech leaves, and needles of pine, dropped him a spread and returned to the limb. But breath from the North blew their blanket aside. The wind grew in earnest; the air seemed to freeze. And the wolf and the she-bear, of contrary mind, abhorring their task approached, looking grim. They sniffed him for measure, then, loathing his hide, growled their displeasure and dropped to their knees.

All night these glum attendants lay against his quaking form. The rising moon drew dreams in gray.

In time the man grew warm.

Morning swept through the glade in one broad stroke of the master's brush, dappling the foliage with amber and rose. The pool was roused by the sweet pass of light. He opened his eye and the glade came alive: into the whirlpool of life a thousand colors swam, chasing the scattering eddies of night. The magic of morning began.

Bluebird and goldfinch descended in rings, primaries clashing with robin and jay. Dollops of sun, repelled by their wings, splattered anew on the palette of day. Banking as one, the hues struck away.

There was a crowd.

And in this crowd that creature sat, its chin on its chest, its rear pointing west. Its forepaws lay lifeless, upturned and out-pressed. Vomit and blood messed its muzzle and breast. Died overnight. Or perhaps only dozed . . . tendrils by tendrils, claw by claw, the crowd decompressed: the ring slowly closed.

And the stranger cried out and shifted his seat. His eyes sought his feet—*rounding the arches, and topping the toes, the tall grass was questing*. The little brute froze.

And the fauna took pause, and the flora went slack. Leaves followed talons, stems followed claws. Hooves tromped on paws as the crowd drifted back.

Not a breath taken. Not a move made. Stillness, like fog, enveloped the glade.

And the grass tugged his feet, and the sea of jade splayed—left hand and right, the slender shafts reared. Gaining momentum, blade followed blade. The green field was torn till a deep swath appeared. The swath hurtled west, reflecting the sun. A hundred yards distant it died. Once more the grass stood, its tips spreading wide. The swath, born again, repeated its run.

Plain was the message, and clearly conveyed. Still the newcomer gawked . . . awkward seconds ensued. The tall blades were swayed by the pulse of the glade.

But the swath was not renewed.

Something tiny bounced by. He ventured a peek, barely rolling an eye. A chocolate sparrow, with pinfeathers black, popped past an ankle and paused to look back. The bird cocked its head, rocked in place, hopped ahead. It fluttered. It freaked. It glared and stopped dead. Then, vexed to its limit, it burst into flight. The sitting thing stared till it passed out of sight.

Now a breeze bent his back, picked him half off his stern. The wind, done its best, grew flustered at last. It trailed to the west, thrilling lilies as it passed. It wound round the willows and didn't return.

And the fauna repaired to the live oak's shade.

A strange kind of stupor fell over the glade.

From deep in the wood came a shape through the trees—a pronghorn, perhaps, or an elk swift and sure. But up limped a moose, a flyport with fur, low in the belly and wide at the knees. Wized he was, scarcely able to see. Neither vision, nor vigor, nor velvet had he. He hobbled abreast, then lay down or died, his nose facing west, his tail flung aside.

The brute merely glazed—but the glade was unfazed:

The long shafts reshuffled, a tense moment passed, and the ominous shadows of badgers were cast. Three left their holes, as if to attack. They pedaled like moles and the stranger jumped back. He stumbled, fell flailing, and, kicking his guide, threw out his arms and tumbled astride. First he stepped on his tail, then he stepped on his pride. The moose bellowed twice and shook side to side, while the little pest clung to his high, homely hide.

And the snarling moose rose to his knees by degrees. He reeled like a drunk down the path of the breeze. Together they lurched through a break in the trees. And all morning long, and on through the day, both beggar and bearer would buckle and sway. The moose lost his temper, but never his way.

And the wind blew the sun to its deep ruby rest, while the scrub, in obeisance, inclined to the west. Their slow taffy shadow in sunfall would seem to slip round the rocks like a snake in a dream.

And the sun became a beacon, and the underbrush a stream. The wide earth took their weight in stride, and the wind named him Hero.

## *World*

When the sun was low the old moose began to stumble.

They had come upon a swift river lined with stunted pines, and here the moose limped to a halt, expecting a somewhat graceful dismount. But Hero, by now dug in like a tick, wasn't about to let go. The moose bent his knees until his joints objected. He shimmied, bucked, and with a sudden whirl sent his rider flying. Hero scraped himself out of the dirt and looked up forlornly. The ancient moose, his good eye gone bad, glared a long minute before hobbling off; his bony rump rocking with dignity, his scraggly tail fighting off imaginary flies.

Hero managed a few steps and dropped to his knees, staring in disbelief as the moose disappeared between pines. And he remained on his knees for the longest time, gaping, waiting for the moose—waiting for anything to show. At last a ruckus to his left snapped him out of it. His head ratcheted round, an inch per notch.

Fifteen feet off the bank, three screaming gulls were fighting over a rapids-tossed salmon. Hero was instantly famished. He wobbled to his feet and stumbled twice wading out, only regaining his balance by leaning against the current and rapidly wheeling his arms. The gulls backed off shrieking as he stepped in slow-motion through the rushing water. Hero slipped while lunging at the slapping fish, cracked an ankle on the rocks, and hopped around howling with the agony. One foot was as good as none in the fast water. He went right under.

Before he knew it he was being swept downriver. This was glacial meltwater, so cold he quickly became hypothermic. He swallowed a mouthful and surfaced fighting for life; too disoriented to right himself in the water, too numb to realize his waving arm had been striking something solid. That solid something turned out to be a swirling clump of rotted birches tangled up in scrub. Hero embraced one of the trunks as the mass slammed against rocks, kicked his feet wildly, and somehow hauled himself aboard. The raft ricocheted rock to rock until the repeated impacts sent it spinning. Giddy from the whirling and soaking, Hero clung freezing to the trees, retching continuously while the river roared in his ears. Through spray and tears he saw only cartwheeling fragments of the world.

But then the river was widening, its fury dissipating. The raft was approaching the sea. Hero gasped as the seemingly boundless Pacific swallowed the broad red belly of the sun. And while he spun he was treated to a panoramic, breathtaking image: the great indigo ocean with its slow traffic of driftwood and ice, voiced-over by the dismal calls of foraging gulls and terns, and rhythmically broken by intermittent glimpses of the river's rocky banks growing farther and farther apart.

Whirling as it went, the disintegrating raft was taken by the sea.

At the 59<sup>th</sup> Parallel in winter, the Pacific coast plays host to numberless floes and minor bergs orphaned from the Bering and Chukchi. Hero cruised into a watery gridlock on an ice-glazed birch boat, one bit of flotsam among the rest.

The cold wouldn't let him move, wouldn't let him breathe, wouldn't let him think. He lay supine, feet crossed and hands clasped, terrified that to budge was to roll. An ice patina grew over the tangled trees like a white fungus: the growth soon webbed his fingers and toes; it speckled his chest and thighs, glazed his hair and face, danced and disintegrated with his breath's tapering plumes.

Floes and frozen-over debris tended to group with passing collisions; Hero's married birches bit by bit accrued a mostly-submerged tangle of trunks and branches, all becoming fast in a creeping ice cement. Night came on just as resolutely, until land was only a flat black memory.



The raft moved silently over the deep, still accepting the occasional gentle collision. And the floes became thicker and wider in a freezing doldrums; soon the proximate sea was all a broken field of packed ice, bobbing infinitesimally with the planet's pulse.

Long strands of ghostly fog came striding over the torn ice field. They leaned this way and that, their mourners' skirts tearing and patching and leaning anew. The ghosts were there to seal it: their locked fingers and gray diaphanous wings quickly became a wholly opaque descending shroud, its boundaries lost in the souging wind.

Collisions came less and less. Darkness and silence, breaching some previously impermeable barrier, gradually took up residence in the dying man's marrow. From Hero's very center broke a weak little cry of refusal, of denial, as mind mustered frame for one desperate surge at freedom. His skin, frozen to the raft, peeled right off the flesh below, and at that his flagging soul succumbed. Hero's smashed head arched back and his face contorted frightfully while the little lamp fluttered and paled within.

A raucous chorus slowly but surely worked its way through the mist. It was a few hundred yards off—a tiny, terrified barking, growing in clarity as it grew in volume and urgency. It was a sound beacon; Hero strained eagerly, and when for one excruciating minute it was cut off by a large passing body he was certain death had claimed him. Then it was back, and his pulse was quickening. In a bit there came a heaving sound: something was moving his way down a wide tributary between floes. Hero could hear a gasping and snorting, accompanied by a hard slapping and splashing. The sounds vanished, and a few seconds later the raft was rocked from below.

A sputtering muzzle blew salt in his eyes. A cold slimy flipper flapped across his chest and slapped about his face. Whiskers raked his dead cheek. The fur seal barked twice, directly in his ear.

A moment later it had slipped back below the surface. Hero listened to the splashing sound retreating whence it came. The seal swam off perhaps a hundred feet, stopped, and began barking hysterically. From much farther off came a hail of answering barks. The seal swam back to Hero's raft circling and calling, louder and more plaintively with each circuit, while the answerers approached en masse.

Now a sallow beam could be seen cutting the fog. In a minute several more showed along a plane yawing with some huge, barely discernible object's rhythmically generated waves.

A herd of northern fur seals burst into sight, barking madly, beating through the ice. They converged on Hero's raft, really bellowing now. Those odd yellow beams came in pursuit, and soon the beams were close enough to eerily illuminate a gigantic wood vessel parting the ice. The seals barked ferociously. Whenever the vessel leaned away, those nearest Hero's raft would

absolutely howl; it was a balls-out community challenge. The fog deepened, condensed, crystallized—and then the light of a dozen lanterns was playing over a low, listing nightmare. Hero heard the shouts of men. But rather than scatter, the waterborne seals pulled onto the ice and redoubled their din, some even fighting their way onto Hero's raft. The sealers hurled harpoons as they clambered down rope ladders. When these men reached the ice the seals snapped and gnashed madly, refusing to be dislodged. The sealers lost all composure with the thrill of the hunt. Wielding clubs, spears, and hatchets—sometimes using iron bludgeons or any old utensil handed down—they crushed skulls, dragged carcasses, and hooked animals still spurting and bleating. Clinging though he was, Hero was flabbergasted by the way the slipping and scampering men went about their butchery, hacking and smashing more with passion than with precision. But not one seal attempted to flee. Throughout the carnage they barked all the louder, as though egging on their slayers—carcass by carcass they drew the sealers to Hero's ice-locked raft. It was all so hazy and macabre. Hero's eyes rolled back, and the next thing he knew he was sitting hunched on the vessel's sopping deck. Two men were rubbing his limbs while another poured warm water down his back. He looked around in shock. The very notion of a boat containing more than one or two individuals—a sort of floating tribe—was way beyond his ken; so to *see* it, to have it come looming out of nothingness, was an experience almost supernatural.

He remembered some of those fur-covered men force-feeding him mouthfuls of halibut and seal fat, and he recalled a small group standing around him shouting words that made no sense. After that he had a very vivid memory of their angry little chief repeatedly punching him while shouting one angry little word over and over and over. Hero couldn't make out his inquisitor's face, for the large feather-lined hood quite engulfed the man's head, yet he could see those quick eyes flash as they caught the oil lamps' light. Finally this man stopped boxing Hero's ear. He stared hard. In these remaining decades of the tenth century it was fully within his power to administer as he saw fit: he could have ordered Hero's immediate execution and not a man of his crew would have objected. He hesitated only because there wasn't a hint of resistance in his prisoner's pinched and frightened eyes. He leaned forward and studied the wound that all but split Hero's face in two, then grunted, raised his right arm, and yanked down its seal hide sleeve. Attached to the stump of his forearm was a primitive prosthesis, consisting of a thick oak cap strapped to the arm with lengths of gut, and, hammered squarely into the center of that cap, a broad, cruelly hooked blade chiseled from a narwhal's tusk. He held this weapon in front of Hero's eyes, traced the scalp's deep diagonal rift, and once more demanded the captive's identity. Hero then vaguely remembered being dragged along the tilting deck and thrown into the ship's tiny hold. He retained a strong mental image of landing in a place of musty odors and dank projections.

There was a soft scuffling in the darkness, and presently a blind and exceedingly old woman felt her way to his side, mumbling as she approached. Her speech was comprised not of words; it was rather a running gibberish of cooing vowels and clucking consonants. The old woman was as mad as her circumstances; sick with sea and solitude, bedeviled by age and confinement. She sat cross-legged and patted her withered palms up his arm until she came to his face. Her strange mumbling soliloquy rose and fell in pitch as her bony fingers daintily explored the newly-opened wound. Hero let his head fall back in her lap. The emaciated tarantulas of her hands scurried through the filth and tiny bodies until they came upon an old otter pelt bag that held her secrets. The woman loosened the bag's cord and extracted an assortment of herbs, sniffing each in succession. She then scooped a handful of blubber from a bowl made of a previous occupant's skull, kneaded the selected herbs into the blubber, and commenced gently massaging the wound, clucking and cooing while the black rats watched and waited.

For nine long days Hero remained in that cold, stinking compartment, rocking back and forth between life and death. The old woman never gave up on him. She clung to him during his seizures. She rubbed his limbs vigorously when his blood pressure fell. She gathered various accumulated skins and, using woven strands of her own long hair, sewed him a multilayered, body-length wraparound with arm sleeves and very deep pockets, working by touch with a needle formed of a cod's rib. By this same method she was able to fashion a pair of snug-fitting moccasins. The old woman made him eat; she masticated the cod and halibut their keepers pitched into the hold, then shoved the results down his throat with a long gnarly forefinger. She called into his screaming nightmares, talking him out of sleep and back into their foul little reality. Together they lowed in the dark, while the keel groaned along and the waves beat time.

At the end of those dark nine days his strength was restored, but not his mind. Once again he was taken on deck.

The vessel had reached a chain of remote wind-swept islets, rocky and treeless, naked except for patchy carpets of hardy grass. These islets stretched far to the west, shrouded in mist. The ship was making for the smallest; just a chip on the sea. When they reached depth for anchorage Hero was hustled into a rowboat and lowered over the side. He looked up, saw two men climbing down by rope. These men positioned themselves at the oars and slowly rowed toward the islet. Hero, seated between them, felt like a man being led to his execution. He snuck a peek. The rowers' heads were lowered and their features completely obscured by the heavy feathered hoods; they had all the somberness of pallbearers. Not a word passed between them as they rigidly pulled at their oars; the only sound was the dip and purl of wood in water. Hero looked away. Against his will, he found his eyes drawn to that rocky islet waiting in the fog. There was not a bird, not a sea lion, not a shrub. It was lonesome beyond imagination.

Once they were landed one of the men used the point of a spear to prod Hero ashore. While his companion steadied the boat, he removed a skin sack full of half-frozen halibut, followed by a few armloads of precious tinder. These articles he tossed at Hero's feet. He resumed his place at the oars and, without looking back, used the blunt end of his spear to shove off.

Hero stared in disbelief. He watched the boat moving away, watched the men climbing their ropes, watched the boat being hauled aboard. As the mysterious vessel receded he saw a number of those silent men standing at the stern, stolidly returning his stare. Their hooded forms grew smaller and smaller, finally becoming indistinct. The vessel was swallowed by fog.

He looked around, at a desolate world of rock and drifting ice. In the sunless pools at his feet a few purplish, flaccid sea anemones were waving in a sickly phosphorescence, and along the rocks ran a tattered quilt of wild grass and lichen. It was the end of the world. He began to pace in his anxiety, only to crumple, bit by bit, inside his furs. At last he just sat with his face buried in his arms and wept. When he could weep no more he raised his head and opened his red, swollen eyes.

There were gulls all around him, staring like statuary in a madman's garden. Standing in their midst were auks and puffins and murrelets, absolutely spellbound, unable to lean away. The silence was broken only by a wild, fitfully pursing wind—a wind that seemed, eerily, on the verge of producing syllables. And on that wind a flock of terns was rising slowly, all its beady eyes fixed on the lone sitting man. The terns watched as he trembled, and leered as he swooned.

Then, beating as one, they threw back their wings and blew into the sun.

There was a blaze.

Behind that blaze a pair of black, bug-like eyes met his and immediately withdrew. A tall man stood abruptly, drawing sparks.

The Aleut gathered his furs and peered queerly into the icy Pacific, his craggy profile merging seamlessly with a jumble of rocks showing just beyond his shoulder. The man was very tall, closer to seven feet than to six, and thin almost to emaciation.

He was also a mute. Soon enough he would display a talent for communication through gutturals, but now his body language spoke louder than words. It told the shivering stranger that he was not only disliked—he was feared.

The Aleut killed the fire and removed the hides he'd piled on the sleeping man. The islander produced a bone awl and strategically pierced a caribou hide, draped the hide over the old woman's handiwork, and ran a cord of tightly woven tendons crosswise through his made

holes, knotting it at the bottom to create a kind of cloak. He then heaped wood, fish, and remaining hides into Hero's arms and led him to a tiny cove where his long skin canoe lay in the grass. This was not the one-man *kayak* used by his people for centuries, but an actual canoe modeled on the graceful vessels he'd observed under the control of northern coastal tribesmen. After dragging this canoe into the water he perched Hero in the fore, placed the cargo in the middle, and stepped into the rear like a gaunt furry spider. The Aleut dug out a paddle and began pulling with smooth strokes of surprising muscularity, his black eyes trained on his quiet companion's back.

So began their long island-hopping journey. They stepped the chain one stone at a time, living off the sea. But much as the Aleut disliked Hero's vapid company, it was not in the islander's nature to proceed expeditiously; his people, remote as they were, had learned to count not in days but in generations. So the Aleut took his time. He showed his dull passenger how to build shelters of skin and gut, and during bad weather the two would sit on an island in utter silence while rain hammered on their stretched seal-intestine window. And one very clear night the islander pointed out constellations and attempted to demonstrate, using broad gestures, just how the brighter heavenly bodies were, not so coincidentally, in perfect alignment with the Aleutians. Hero followed his guide's gestures as a pet follows its master's movements and, like a pet, soon became bored. The Aleut did not grow flustered. He grew ever more wary: behind that granite, weather-beaten exterior squirmed a very primitive imagination. And the islander, superstitious as he was, was almost certain Hero could read his mind. So one time, and one time only, he tested his suspicion with a searing gaze to the back of Hero's bowed and listing head. After a long minute of vigorous thought-projection he shifted his gaze aside. The brute appeared to feel this shift, and too gently turned his head. And both saw the ocean break rhythm, and watched as otters and sea lions surfaced, observed their progress, and slipped without tremor beneath the waves.

In spring the fogs lifted. The grimness gave way to serenity: on the islets grass grew lushly, wildflowers leapt on the casual eye. A generous sun buttered the dappling sea. And the back of the islander's neck itched: he turned to see a flock of arctic terns casually tracking them under a gorgeous, white-plumed sky. As the day progressed the terns came drifting above and cruised a bit. They slowly pulled ahead. The Aleut squinted against the light: never had he observed these birds to pursue a westerly migratory pattern. The terns were distributing themselves into a rough wedge shape, much like geese on the wing.

For a time the Aleut let the flock be his guide. Then, to test his stars, he subtly directed his canoe north. At once the wedge disintegrated. Not until he had lowered his eyes and pulled

purposefully to the west did the disrupted pattern reassert itself. He peered up timidly. The wedge was now in the shape of a perfect arrowhead.

Just so were the fates of mariners and aviators inextricably entwined. At night, once the Aleut had landed his canoe upon the nearest pearl, the terns would light in a quiet circle and remain until sunrise. As the Aleut and Hero took to sea, the flock would gradually form that same authoritative pattern.

In time the Aleut paddled his companion clear to the westernmost islands of the Aleutian chain. His people had dwelt, even here, a thousand years and more, but no contemporary islander knew for certain what lay beyond. Legend told of an enormous land mass forever gripped by cold, where a cruel people waylaid innocent seafarers for barbaric sacrificial rites.

So here the Aleut paused. But even as he vacillated he noticed the terns were veering south.

If the Aleut had been able to curse aloud he would have been vociferous. He was being compelled to follow an even less desirable course—that of the unknown open ocean. Now he looked upon his passenger's hunched back not with fear but with loathing. He took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders, and defiantly continued west. The wedge broke up immediately. The terns circled and plunged, circled and plunged. Something huge broke surface behind them, but the Aleut was way too frayed to turn. He lowered his head, a beaten man, and began paddling south. Little by little the birds returned to formation.

The tiny canoe had no business going up against the mighty Pacific. It would soon have been swallowed and smashed had not the terns veered as one whenever the coming sea appeared too rough. Once he'd lost his bearings the Aleut followed their movements religiously, and soon the sea's bounty all but leapt in the canoe, and the days began to warm. It seemed he was forever catching the finest currents; practically sliding down a corridor entirely free of peril. In this manner he was able to safely navigate waters no such craft had mastered before.

They were now proceeding south by southwest. The going became easier by the day, and the sea heavier with cod. The weather continued to warm. At night the Aleut drifted comfortably, but a lifetime of wariness made him wake off and on. Pallid in moonlight, he'd slowly rise to find Hero sitting raptly under the stars. And he'd see, not so far ahead, a large dark body neatly pleating the ocean's plane. The shape would precede them a while, only to vanish without a ripple.

All this strangeness had the Aleut wholly jacked, though he took pains to maintain his poise. To allay his fear he kept a flat black stone planted squarely between them. It was his oldest treasure; an oddity he'd taken off the body of a mauled Tlingit woman when he was a child. Who she was, and how she'd come by the stone, were mysteries far beyond him, for no such piece had

ever been known to Aleut or Inuk. The stone was smooth and had been worked perfectly round. There were flecks of bright yellow scattered about its dull black face. Long ago someone had etched a quaint and clumsy rune on that flat black surface. It was the crude, universal symbol for sun: a broad circle surrounded by several rays. When the stone was rubbed against a pelt it had the curious property of growing quite warm and bright in the rune's grooves, while the surface remained cool and dull. This stone, both friend and overlord, had always "spoken to him." It caused him to become restless when it was time to move, and allowed him to relax when a destination had been reached. In this way he'd come to the familiar islet and discovered the unconscious little man. Just so: the stone, he was sure, was responsible for making him "feel bad" as he watched the stranger shiver, and "feel better" once he'd built him a warming fire from the small pile of tinder he'd found nearby.

By now, however, the Aleut was fully disenchanted with his stone, and deeply regretted having done its mysterious bidding. Never before had he been so long from sight of land, and never before had he felt so very, very small. The unimagined immensity of the Pacific was really beginning to jangle his jewels when, after all their while at sea, a gray, seductive haze broke the horizon. They had reached another chain of islands: the dark and smoky Kurils. Here a cold current kept the climate cool and foggy, and the chill, along with the prevalence of otter and seal, helped make the Aleut feel almost at home.

But this chain gave him the creeps; he knew he was a trespasser somewhere somehow sacred. There was a looming quality to the island mountains that made him extraordinarily aware of his transience, his pettiness, his puniness. He grew more and more cautious, *sure* their progress was being monitored. And he could have sworn he saw shapes padding persistently between the trees. The big islands watched breathlessly: all along the rocky cliffs thousands of auklets and puffins followed the canoe in dead silence, their heads slowly turning as one, their countless tiny eyes peering redly through the fog. As the days passed, the Aleut's discontent was manifested in tics and sighs—when the sun fell, the mountains seemed to rise right out of the sea, as though to pluck him. Every day he would cringe when the red rim began to disappear behind those black volcanic summits. But the mountains, in all their dignity, would always refuse to acknowledge so meek a stranger, and return their eyes to sea. The Aleut would hang his head and timidly paddle by.

Then for several days he pulled his weary canoe west—through a strait parting two mighty islands not part of the chain, and thence into a sea that was a warm, enticing bath. Spring had come to the East Asian coastal waters, and the Ainu, alone and in groups, were venturing deeper in search of increasing bounty. The Aleut, absorbed in his thoughts of sweet climate and bitter fate, was unaware they'd been spotted.

This first meeting between strangers of different worlds was a brief and awkward one. A lone Ainu fisherman, seeing the Aleut come paddling out of the unknown, dropped his net and turned to stone. The Aleut, for his part, instinctively froze with his body turned half-away to make the leanest target possible. Their stares locked. Never had the Aleut seen a face so heavily bearded, and never hair so fair. The Ainu shouted at the top of his lungs. Other fishers appeared to the east, effectively cutting off the Pacific. The Aleut caressed his stone and looked to the sky. But the wedge had vanished. He put down his head and paddled for all he was worth.

By the time they were in sight of shore the sea was riddled with watercraft. Now a train of small boats cast off from the mainland, and a number of two-man coracle-like tubs showed in the battered skin canoe's wake, their inhabitants calling back and forth in astonishment at the sight of these dark, savage newcomers. But the pursuing little coastal men, banging excitedly on the sides of their boats, were not Ainu. They had very straight black hair, prominent cheekbones, and strangely slanted eyes. And their speech, oddly marvelous as it was, was a rapid series of coos, chirps, and barks. Their boats formed a semi-circle around the canoe, forcing the Aleut to approach the mainland. The little men began banging their boats maniacally, with more joining in as they neared shore.

A bit farther south was a natural harbor swarming with fishing vessels of every description. As the canoe was forced into this harbor, people along the rocky coast began banging whatever they could get their hands on, until the air was filled with their lunatic percussion. Hero smiled at the tiny brown men running along a cliff overlooking the harbor. He laughed, hoarsely, as heads popped out of boats, and creaked to his feet in mimicry. Their canoe was squeezed between a chain of tubs and the shore, and as it slowed the tempo and ferocity of the banging decreased accordingly. The canoe came to a halt, and the banging and shouting stopped. The first North American to set foot on Asian soil stepped shakily onto the rocks.

There followed the profoundest silence imaginable.

And a second later it was as if a dam had burst.

Hundreds of hysterical, yammering voices erupted from hundreds of hysterical, clinging men and women. Hero was spun and jostled. He was handed along. He saw their astounded, pinched little faces. The sun, pulsing between their heads as he was turned, repeatedly stabbed his eyes. He heard an excited outburst and frantic splashing which could only have been the Aleut's end, and then he was somehow limping alongside a primitive fishing village, blindly following a narrow dirt path that hugged the cliff's base. The warm spring sun caught the dust as he shambled. Hero rounded a bend and stopped.



Before him stood half a dozen gaping children, too fascinated to run. There was a chatter and scuffle behind him. He slowly turned to see that he was now in the midst of a small crowd of these children, and that more were running up with cries of amazement.

A stone struck his shoulder. As he turned back another glanced off his chest. A moment later he was being pelted from all sides, and the giggles and gasps had become something wildly unreal. He dropped to his knees in a hail of pebbles, covered his head with his arms and slithered up the path on his belly.

A new voice broke in; an older, authoritative voice. The children scampered off squealing as Hero, shaken to his feet, found himself staring in the face of a diminutive, shouting, incomprehensible old man. The old man threw his arm around Hero's waist and, jabbering all the way, led him to a secondary path cut into the cliff's soft yellow face. This path sloped gently upward over the waves. Together they picked their way to a place maybe halfway up, where the cliff's face was honeycombed with natural alcoves and dug-out caves. Most of these spaces were used as one-man shelters; a few, cut deeper in the earth, as family hives. Strange gabbing people slid out of these holes like worms, reaching, but the little old man, who was evidently a little old man of some means, embraced his find possessively and shouted them back inside.

The path began to broaden and climb, and soon they'd reached the top: this was the upscale end of the neighborhood. Hero was led to a hovel nestled amid dozens of similar hovels, all scattered around a dainty stream wending between patches of stunted vegetation.

The old man's place was basically a one-room hut fashioned of earth and salvaged boat hulls, with a slender side-yard surrounded by dry, dusty hedges. But inside it was clean and tidy, with rice paper partitioning and, built into the far earthen wall, a miniature stone fireplace. The old man sat his guest in the exact center of the room. There he fed him scraps from his bowl, using long sticks to pluck out bits of fish and clumps of tiny, starchy white pellets.

He studied the brute closely.

He watched him chew, walked round and round him. He poked here. He pinched there.

And that night he lit a fire on his crushed-shell hearth.

Hero, full but confused, curled up on a mat and squinched his body to a place where the gossip of flames could reach him. Nearby, at his delicate wicker table, the old man sat in semi-darkness, illuminated only from the waist down.

But his eyes were alive. They spat and darted as they reflected the fire's light, and, when at last they had begun to sputter, his scratchy little voice came pattering out of the dark, muttering something vile and oddly modulated, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a gathering snarl.

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