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The Great Death

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Extract

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Konts'aghi

(Seven)

Raven jumped up and down, he stomped and stomped, until the overhang avalanched down, killing all the people below. For the rest of the winter, he dined on the corpses, savoring the delicate eyeballs, which were his favorite.

Soon enough, the current quickened as the river increased its descent from the high glacial lake. The girls no longer wondered at its name. Rushing water poured itself faster through the valley, and the canoe gathered speed. Both had to work harder and harder to avoid obstacles, which came at them faster and faster. They had no time for rest. Several times the canoe almost smashed into boulders jutting up into the sunlight, the roiling white waves spraying around them.

"Left!" Millie yelled above the din of the raging river. "Go left!"

And Maura would yell back from the bow, pointing to some approaching object, "Look out!"

The girls paddled so forcefully their arms and shoulders soon sang with pain, but still they fought the water, blinking wetness from their eyes, desperately searching for the next threat. It took all their strength to keep the craft from being swamped. All the while, the dogs tried not to fall out of the canoe as the current twisted it this way and that, dipping into falls and shooting rapids.

Up ahead, on a sharp bend, the girls could see that a bank had given way and a large spruce tree, its roots still holding fast, leaned over the river, some of its branches dragging the surface: a sweeper. The girls paddled frantically, trying to win some distance from the danger, but the current was shoving the little boat straight at the tilted tree. As the canoe passed beneath the drooping boughs, almost sideways, the girls flattened themselves against their supplies.

"Tundra!" Maura shouted.

Millie looked up to see that the dog had been swept into the river. He was bobbing in the raging current, his

paws working madly. Canoe and dog were careering together downriver, Tundra drifting farther and farther from the boat. Millie tried to turn the bow downstream, back-paddling to straighten the craft.

"Get ready to grab him!" she yelled once the bow was turned.

For a long, straight stretch the boat and the dog were side by side on the swift river. Maura reached for Tundra and tried to catch hold, but she was not strong enough to grip him to any good effect. He was tiring, the frigid water sapping his strength. His muscles were too cold to do as his brain told them. He was having trouble staying afloat. Maura was crying. It would have been better had the girls left him tied and starving outside the old man's empty cabin. At least there he would have survived the day.

"We have to save him!" Maura shouted. "Get closer!"

She leaned over the canoe as far as she could, and this time she managed to grasp Tundra's scruff and pull him close, holding him tight against the side of the craft with all her strength. His eyes were wide and terrified. Millie crawled over the pile of supplies. Together, the sisters managed to pull the sopping, exhausted dog back into the boat.

No sooner had Millie crawled back to take her place at the stern than the boat struck a submerged boulder. The impact turned the canoe sideways again. Downriver, a series of boulders, like the humps of a dozen giant bears, awaited them. The girls could hear the water rushing around the great stones.

It was thunderous.

Millie looked for a gap big enough for the craft to pass through.

"Right side!" she screamed at Maura. "Paddle hard! Harder!"

Both girls paddled furiously, digging deep, making each stroke count. But the rocks came too fast. The canoe smashed into one of the boulders, which held the craft for only a few seconds, tucking it against stone while the river poured itself into the canoe, swamping it. The dogs jumped out as the supplies were lifted out of the boat to swirl around the boulder, the chests and the tarp and the dried bundles of salmon, all spinning together, held fast by the foaming eddy.

The screaming girls gripped the gunwales of the canoe. But when the gushing water had entirely filled it, the boat sank, taking Maura's small game rifle with it,

and the girls and the dogs were swept downriver amid the flotsam of their provisions.

Unable to swim, Maura could only try to stay atop the current. As Blue swept by, she managed to grab hold of him. But the skinny sled dog was not buoyant enough to keep them both afloat. Dog and girl went under. Millie swam to her sister and grabbed her around the neck, holding her head above water, as the current tossed and twisted them remorselessly. She looked for a safe place toward which to swim.

Tundra was already standing on a gravel bar, shaking himself dry. Blue and Millie, hauling Maura, who continued to struggle, swam as hard as they could. The river's iciness was already taking effect, so piercing even their bones ached.

This far north and this late in the season, it didn't take long for the cold to steal every last ounce of body heat, stiffening muscles.

Finally, Blue and both girls managed to reach the shallows about a hundred yards downriver from where Tundra had landed. They waded ashore, drenched, holding on to each other, trembling. Blue clambered onto the beach, shaking the river from his fur, spraying

a rain of droplets over the dry pebbles, turning them dark.

Tundra ran to greet them, dripping a long, thin, shining line in the sunlight.

The girls looked downstream just in time to see the two chests disappear around the bend. Perhaps they could salvage them. Though shivering and sopping wet, their clothes heavy as chains, Millie and Maura ran along the shore after the crates. The dogs followed. The running warmed them.

They caught sight of the steamer trunk as it vanished again far ahead of them at the next sharp curve. They did not see the other chest and assumed that it too was gone. The sisters stood on the wide shore, defeated. The oblivious dogs wandered through a thicket of leafless willows, snuffling the vague scent of rabbits or grouse.

Something downstream caught Maura's attention. She stepped closer to see what it was.

"Look! The other box!" she yelled, pointing.

Millie saw it, too. The long rectangular crate had not been carried away by the current but had been drawn into an eddy, wedged against a logjam. The sisters ran to it, plunged knee-deep into the icy water, and dragged

the wooden box ashore. They opened the lid. Inside was the pile of folded blankets, their winter clothing, the cooking pot they had used to boil tea, the waterproof jar of matches, their father's rifle, a box of cartridges, a knife, a hatchet, and a coil of rope. Only a little water had seeped into the box.

As they stood celebrating their good fortune, the folded tarp floated by close to the riverbank. It must have been caught by a sweeper or back-eddy. Millie trudged into the water and grabbed the rope-tied bundle as it passed. It was waterlogged and heavy.

Maura helped her pull it out beside the open crate.

Shaking from the cold, the sisters untied the tarp, unfolded it, and draped it across a stand of willows to dry. They built a small fire beneath it, took off their wet clothes, and hung them on sticks close to the flames. They sat together on a weathered log, huddled under a blanket. When their clothes were dry, the girls collected enough firewood to last the night and picked handfuls of overripe berries for supper. There was nothing else to eat. The bundles of dried salmon were lost, returned to the river.

The sisters had survived again. They had lost the

steamer trunk, which contained extra clothes, the frying pan, traps and snares, the candles, and other important equipment. They had even lost the long-handled ax and a shovel. But though they had no canoe and few provisions, they still had hope—the steadfast resolve of those who have nothing else.

That night, as green ribbons of northern lights arched across the sky, the girls and the dogs slept, exhausted, close to the fire, which snapped and popped and hissed in the darkness—the thieving river sliding beyond the yellow dim light.