

Tree of Life

becomes unpassable. Mary announces that it is time to get off the boat and prepare for the remaining ninety-mile hike east to Alatna.

"If we maintain a decent pace," she says, "we should be able to get to Alatna within fifteen days. David, you, Benny, and Marnie need to find us some fresh meat and some deadwood for a fire. I want to recheck our gear, eat a good meal, and then get a good night's sleep."

Tica had been talking to the boatman back where he had put the group ashore. She turns to the group and speaks loud enough to be heard. "Reino has decided to come with us, too. He wants a hand pulling his boat up out of the water, so the ice won't wreck it when it finally freezes."

"Welcome, Reino," says Mary as she walks over to lend a hand.

Mary is a tough and seasoned traveler, but after a few days over land on the trail, she calls for a stop for the night a little earlier than usual. The hikers pool their rations and enjoy a good meal around the cooking fire. The group sleeps in a single tent to preserve body heat. Early the next morning, Mary wakes up before dawn to start a fire. As she looks up at the sky with the early morning glow telling of the coming dawn, she looks for the ancient patterns among the stars.

She looks particularly at Cassiopeia, across Polaris from the constellation known among most north Americans as the Big Dipper. At this time of year Cassiopeia is upright in her chair and in all her glory and queenly majesty.

Mary had learned about the Greek myths in college. In Greek myth, Cassiopeia is the bold black queen to Cepheus, king of Ethiopia. Cassiopeia believes herself to be much more beautiful than the sea nymphs that surround Poseidon, the god of the waters, but Poseidon becomes offended at her audacity. Eventually, he casts Cassiopeia's beautiful daughter Andromeda into the path of the sea monster, Cetus, where Poseidon hoped she would be eaten. The young warrior Perseus intervenes when he destroys the sea monster with the head of Medusa before it can eat Andromeda.

Mary takes solace in this story. Unlike Cassiopeia she has brought her daughter away from threats by unnatural people. She thinks about the group's forthcoming arrival in Alatna. Allakaket lays across the river, and Anaktuvuk Pass lays farther beyond to the northeast. Soon she will be home.

A large black raven with a white feather on its right wing lands within a few paces of Mary. Over the course of their hike, the raven has followed them. He has become known to Mary because he seems to respond to a sound like Bw'-ak. She makes the sound, and the raven, as always, responds by sidling up to her and rubbing the top of its head against Mary's extended forearm. Bw'-ak and several of his avian mates had accompanied the walkers at a distance through their journey from Ambler. Mary's confidence grows in the belief that he will be there for them for the rest of their journey.

As always Bw'-ak brings a feeling of community with the animism that gives much life and hope to Mary's world. She welcomes the raven.

Mary considers that Bw'-ak will appreciate seeing the blue stone since both the bird and the stone have brought Mary such good luck. She takes the stone out of a small pouch with beadwork that she had kept close to her breast since leaving Ambler. She lays the stone in front of Bw'-ak. Bw'-ak tilts his head to look at it from several angles of view. The raven rubs one side of its beak on the stone, then the other. Then he looks into Mary's eyes, extends his wings, and flies away.

Mary follows the raven's progress out over the snowy horizon. In that moment, Mary feels that all will be well. In a few moments, the others will wake. They will make ready and will continue on their ever-shortening journey. She will hitch her pack higher onto her shoulders and follow her daughter out into the drifts.

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