

The old man walked along the narrow beach, black and grey pebbles polished smooth by wind and waves rustled beneath his moccasined feet. To his right the cold, deep blue almost black, waters of the Northern ocean spread out from here to the end of the world. White crested waves crashing and breaking on the reef a few hundred yards out, their power sapped as they lapped the beach on which he walked. To his left the sheer grey cliffs towered above him, patches of grass and moss clinging to outcroppings here and there. The only sounds in the world was the wind, the waves and the cacophony of squeals, screeches and calls of the birds nesting on the cliff face. The island was home to a huge colony of birds, hundreds of thousands of them nesting on outcroppings and in hollows in the cliff face. There were black divers, shale beaks, white tips and stripe beaks with their characteristic large orange, blue and red beaks. Sometimes the great albatrosses found rest on the grassy plain at the top of the island, landing and rearing their young before resuming their endless voyage across the vast oceans of the world.

He was slim but far from frail, there was strength in him. Thin fine lines furrowed the skin around his mouth and crawled like spiderwebs from the corners of his big smiling hazel eyes. There was joy in him, a glimmer of inoscense dancing in his gaze. He rubbed his bald head as he watched a pod of black and white wolf wales hunting beyond the reef, tall black fins bobbing up and down in the waves, the occasional spurt of water and air as they breached the surface for breath. He smiled and continued walking.

Summer was coming to an end and the young birds were leaving the nest, throwing themselves off the cliff and clumsily taking to the air for the first time, preparing for winter out at sea. They would return next year and start their own little families, the cycle continuing. A young stripe beak was flailing about in the shallows, its first flight having been less than successful. It was screeching and flapping its wings, trying desperately to get out of the water and failing to do so, pearls of water clinging to the patches of baby down that still stuck out here and there among the black feathers. He walked out in the water, waves lapping against his ankles and bent down to the tiny creature. It made one last little flap with its wings and then stopped, bobbing gently on the surface as it turned to him, big black eyes looking up at him as it tilted its head curiously. He smiled and gently picked the tiny creature up in his cupped hands, it squaked softly and shook itself, water flying off it in a glittering shower. He laughed then, a deep and ringing laughter that carried on the wind, there was something almost otherworldly about that laughter, it struck at ancient gongs in the soul and awoke ancient memory of eras past. The little bird blinked at him and pecked his thumb. Still smiling he left the water and looked up at the cliff face, birds were coming and going, their cries filling the air. There it was. Not too far up, he knew that was where his new friend had come from. Holding the bird in one hand he began to effortlessly climb the cliff. His hands and feet finding grip where none seemed to exist, he scaled the steep drop as easily as he had walked the beach before.

His weathered face popped up over the side of a small outcropping. Two adult stripe beaks turned and looked at him but didn't seem agitated by his presence. Gently he lifted the little bird up over the side and placed it on the ledge, the little family squaked and hopped about, parents doting on their returned child. The little one would soon make the jump again but this time it would fly, he did not doubt that. With a chuckle his head disappeared beneath the side of the outcropping as he began his descent.

The wind began to pick up speed and far out on the horizon a storm was brewing, clouds churning and rising tall, the occasional flash of lightning crackling far out on the ocean. He turned his face to the wind and breathed deep, the cold seeming not to touch him as he drank deep of the crisp ocean air. Further up the beach he found what he had set out this

morning to look for. White bone, bleached by the sun, lay spread out among the stones on the beach, a large tusked skull resting against a black rock. He sat down and picked the skull up by the tusks turning it in his hands and studying it intently. The tusked seal it had belonged to had been a huge bull, in life the creature had been an imposing thing, massive and strong, its tusks atleast a meter long if they were an inch. A creature such as this would have been a king amongst its kind, ruling over a harem on some distant beach before time and nature claimed its life. He slung the skull over his shoulder and began making his way back home.

The leather flap on his large yurt opened and the old man walked in and lay the skull down on the pelts covering the floor. In the middle of the round room a fire crackled peacefully, the warm light making shadows dance in the furrows on his face. He took his jacket off and hung it by the door. Sinewy muscles moved effortlessly beneath the skin on his his now bare torso. Bright white tattoos covered his chest, arms and back, spiraling shapes glimmering golden in the firelight. Above the fire a pot of herbal tea was bubbling. He sat down and placed the skull in his lap and with a knife and deft hands he began to work, carefully extracting the tusks from their hollows in the bone. After a short bit of work he put the skull down and held up the two massive tusks. They were perfect, absolutely perfect. And now the real work began. He put one of the tusks down and gently ran his fingers along the remaining one, turning it this way and that, feeling every crack and bump, closing his eyes he began to sing in a deep voice. There were no words only deep ringing notes, sounds as ancient as the foundations of the world and as powerful as the ocean depths, and as he sang the air around him seemed to thicken and vibrate, waves washing out from him and rippling through the tent, shadows dancing on the walls taking on shapers of their own, images moving and stories told on the canvas walls. And so he began to carve, expertly chipping away at the ivory, methodically searching for the image he knew was in there. On the wall above his small bed hundreds of carvings hung, scenes of battles, of hunts, of demons and of gods, of great events and of the beginings of time covering the wall from roof to floor, carved in everything from the smallest bone to the tusks of great seals and the teeth of mighty wales. Soon one more would be added to the others. He never truly knew what the pictures he carved were of, but he knew that carving them was his purpose. All things had purpose, from the tiny birds on the cliff, to the fish in the ocean and the wolf wales beyond the reef.

As the sun set and the storm rolled in from the ocean, bringing with it thunder and rain, the old man sat, shadows dancing on the walls, carving without stopping, singing his song, power radiating out from the yurt and rolling across the tall grasses on the plain atop the island.

Fine shards of ivory fell gently to the floor infront of him, small piles growing with every calculated and precise cut of his knife. Hours bled in to each other, time flowing like treacle as he sat chipping away at the large tusk resting on his lap, the song now seeming part of the very air around him, as if it no longer needed him to exist. Then, suddenly, he stopped and lay down the knife. The song ended abruptly and the air inside the canvas walls was suddenly light again, the power dissipating in an instant and time flowing back in like a welcome breeze on a warm day. He looked down on his creaton, it wasn't finished yet but images had began forming in the white ivory, a man falling from a high tower, a great fire roaring near the tip of the tusk, a well filling with coins and images of whales hunting in the deep ocean. He looked at it approvingly, this was correct, this was what the tusk of the mighty beast had wished of him. He got up and poured himself a cup of herbal tea from the bubbling pot above the fire then walked over to the entrance and lifted the flap, outside the storm was still raging, the grass laying flat against the ground in the wind, cold rain

hammering down, pooling in shallow basins and pouring off the sides of the cliffs. He took a sip of the warm tea, the steam rising from it fluttering in the wind, and looked out across the plains and the ocean as rain splashed his face. Then he saw it, moving across the plains with determination, a low black shape, powerful and dark coming towards him at speed. As it drew closer he could make it out more clearly, the wet shaggy fur clinging to its muscular frame, the occasional flash of lightning reflected in white fangs, yellow eyes trained on him as it ran.

The old man straightened his back and stepped out of the yurt, cup in hand, and waited. The creature jumped across a large boulder without breaking stride or pace, coming closer. The old man raised the cup to his mouth and took a sip of the hot tea, eyes not leaving the dark shape bounding towards him. With a deafening crack lightning struck somewhere on the other side of the island, the creature momentarily lost its rhythm, scrambling briefly to get it back, he could hear a yelp escape its fanged jaws, a sound of uncertainty perhaps? He rubbed his bald head absentmindedly, otherwise staying completely still. The creature was close now, a couple of hundred paces away perhaps, he could hear it breathing heavily. He put the cup down on the ground and crossed his arms over his chest. One hundred fifty paces, the hound was huge, its head level with his chest and its fur was black with streaks of grey and white. One hundred paces, the beast bared its fangs, yellow eyes focused sharply on him. Fifty paces, thick black claws tore up furrows in the ground as the creature sped up, with a guttural growl it took one last leap towards him, another lightning strike illuminating its bared fangs and scarred face. The old man didn't flinch, he didn't blink and he made no sound. The huge hound skidded to a halt a few meters in front of him and began pacing, its eyes locked with his. Its face and snout were covered in scars and it was baring its massive fangs at him and growling, a low aggressive growl. The old man's eyes narrowed as he kept his eyes locked with the hound. Suddenly it made a lunge for him, barking angrily, he didn't move. Its jaws snapped in the empty air and it resumed its pacing, back and forth, looking at him, sizing him up. The old man lowered his arms and spoke.

"So you return." The beast lowered its head, looking at him with suspicion. He crouched down, his head now lower than the hound's.

"You are a strange thing, are you not." It was a statement more than a question.

The hound walked carefully up to him, its fanged visage drawing slowly closer. It snapped at him but he did not move. He could see the confidence drain out of the beast, it pressed itself lower to the ground, pacing much more erratically, tail slowly sinking.

"These displays are not necessary. Enter if you wish." With that he got up, picked the cup off the ground and went back inside the yurt, leaving the flap open, outside in the rain and wind the huge black hound continued to pace back and forth, back and forth.

The old man sat down once again, picked up the tusk and began singing again as he resumed his work. The power returned once again, the air grew as thick and saturated as before, time seemingly curling up around him. Outside the hound howled and jumped towards the open doorway, then with a pained and panicked yelp slipped and scrambled to its feet moving away from the door. He could hear it wimper but paid it no mind as he once again lost himself in his work. Thunder shook the island, the rain beating down relentlessly as the great black hound paced just outside the reach of the firelight flowing out through the open flap in the old man's yurt. After a couple of hours the beast stopped its pacing and wandered off to a grouping of large rocks a short distance away. It was shaking slightly from the cold, water pouring off its drenched fur as it lay down close to one of the largest boulders, seeking what little protection it could find from the wind and the rain. Its gaze never left the open flap and the light streaming through it.