



maelstrom
(MAIL-strom) a
whirlpool; the original
meaning "whirling
stream" referred to a
whirlpool on the west
coast of Norway

breathe, listening for the alarm of dogs and men, but only silence and the west wind followed.

Exhausted, borne by the current, the two lassies fell fast asleep. But the spirits must have been angry, she said, for suddenly they awoke to an awful sound: the roar of white water, the thunder of falls. It was too late. Into the maelstrom they drifted, powerless against the current. They were swept to the brink and over.

In the foaming chaos, they were thrown from the canoe. Pummelled by water, battered by rocks, somehow they survived the boiling cauldron and were finally swept into a quiet pool, first one, then the other. Badly bruised

and half-drowned, they staggered ashore and as the sun rose they watched bits and pieces of their canoe float by.

The slave woman coughed and Mr. Knight and I were shaken from our wild reverie. We leaned forward, offered her more broth and some fresh sweet tea that Cookie had brought. She sipped as I poked the fire. The flames and the candles cast hulking shadows upon the rough-sawn walls as she continued.

The two young women decided then that they would go overland to the Barrens to find their people. Hungry and cold, with winter looming, they turned northward. Using the sun by day and the Wolf Star at night, they began their trek. They fought through the gnarly, strangling bush and slogged across the mushy lowlands. They camped on dry gravel hummocks, and ate when their snares found a rabbit or a ptarmigan. But there was little game and the other girl grew faint and often lagged behind. Soon she took sick and could not walk. The slave woman built a fire and a shelter for her friend, then set all the snares, but her traps could find no meat. She herself gnawed the dried red berries still clinging to low bushes, grey caribou lichen from under the snow, and other plants she knew. One cold morning, she awoke to find her friend dead and frozen stiff.

She knew then she would not make it to her northern lands; there was not time. So, after laying her friend out on the ground and singing a song to send her to the spirit land, she turned and angled back. South toward the mighty river, west toward the coast, she headed for the camps of the English she knew lay by the sea. Chased by winter storms that blew in from the north, she dared not stop. And as she walked and stumbled and sometimes even crawled, she longed for the fine things the Cree had, the guns and knives, especially the warm blankets. Finally, past caring if she was awake or dreaming or already dead, she saw tracks and smelled smoke from our goose hunters' fire.

All was silent for a while, save the occasional snapping of the fire, as Mr. Knight and I remained lost in our dark and chilly thoughts. Finally he spoke. "You're safe here, girl. Now go, rest. We have a bed ready for you." He summoned our servants who had been waiting outside. The slave woman stood. She was not much more than five feet tall, and with her eyes half-closed, she was led away, still clutching tightly at her blankets.

With nary a word, Mr. Knight poured us both a soothing bit of brandy. Then he looked at me with a quizzical eye. "I wonder, William, if she did not eat her friend?"

Wolf Star
the North Star

ptarmigan
(TAR-mi-gan): this plump, chicken-like bird summers in the high Arctic and winters on the tundra. Both willow and rock ptarmigan molt their mottled brown feathers and turn white in winter.

dried red berries
kinnikinnick: a member of the heather family used as emergency food because the berries stay on the plant over winter