

Lone Wolves



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After making the world and the sun, moon, and stars; after making all the seas, lakes, and rivers; after making all the birds, animals, and fish, Raven found the first people cowering inside a clamshell. Seeing they were frightened of the world, Raven taught the people how to hunt and fish and how to make shelter and fire. Most importantly, she taught them language. Raven told the people to give names to everything she had created, even the stars. For a long time, people gave names to all living things, big and small, as well as to rivers, creeks, lakes, hills, glaciers, and mountains. Everything had a name. And for a long time, those things knew the names they had been given. Bear, Wolf, and Wolverine knew their names. Rabbit, Squirrel, and Fox knew their names. Back then, mountains always returned their names when they were called upon. It was as if the earth and the people were the same. But after a very long time, humanity fashioned new gods with new languages, and the people began to forget the language that Raven had given them, and the animals and mountains no longer remembered their names, and the earth and the people were no longer the same.



Łts'ii c'eliis

Song of the Wind

In a wide valley—far away from bustling boulevards and traffic jams, street lights and parking meters, far away from sidewalks and crosswalks, far away from shopping malls and fast food chains—a frozen river winds through snow-covered foothills. In the boundless distance beyond the floodplain, the jagged peaks of mountains jut into a blue and cloudless sky. And on the frozen river, eight dogs pull a wooden sled over the rattling ice. The driver stands on a small platform at the back holding on with both hands, peering through the wolf-trimmed hood of a parka, mindful of the trail ahead, and ready at any moment to command the dog at the front of the line with a single word. A yellow snowmobile follows behind. Ahead, the packed trail steers away from a perilous stretch of open water. As they edge dangerously close, vapor rises from the river and billows from the labored breathing of the dogs. Both sled and machine veer off the river and turn up a steep bank, which leads into the forest. At the crest, the sled tips and throws the driver, who scrambles to chase the runaway sled until it vanishes around a bend in the trail. The yellow snowmobile pulls alongside briefly, and the

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sledless musher climbs aboard. For almost a mile, the two follow the sled until, finally, they are able to cut it off and stop the oblivious dogs. The thrown musher dashes to the back of the sled and steps on the foot brake.

“Set the hook, Denny!” shouted the old man sitting on the idling snowmobile.

The sled driver reached for the metal claw attached to a short rope, and with one hand still gripping the sled, set the hook onto the packed trail and stomped on it, driving the long, curved teeth deep to anchor the sled, and then tied the snub line to a tree, the way one ties off a boat to keep it from drifting away downriver.

At first the yelping dogs strained to move the sled, but then settled, realizing they weren’t going anywhere.

“You still have a lot to learn,” said the old man, pressing the kill-switch on the handlebars to shut off the noisy engine. “Let’s rest and have lunch here.”

The sled driver pulled back the fur-trimmed hood, revealing long, black hair and the smiling face of a 16-year-old girl!

“Sounds good to me, Grandpa.”

The grandfather dug out a hatchet from a large bag nestled in the sled’s basket.

“You go cut firewood while I get the dogs off the line.”

The old man shuffled to the front of the team, snow crunching beneath his boots.

“Line out!” he said sternly to the lead dog, named Kilana, who was staring keenly at the man, his head cocked, waiting for any signal.

The white-and-yellow husky understood the command. Immediately, he tugged against the anchored sled, pulling the other dogs forward, drawing the tow line taut. Without speaking, the old man deftly unhooked the dogs from the line and tied each one to a tree far enough from others to avoid fights over food. At

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times, when trees were unavailable—which was often the case—he used metal stakes or a long tether line. While he worked, his granddaughter collected wood for a fire, carrying several armfuls, which she piled in a heap on the side of the trail.

Within minutes, all eight dogs were unharnessed from the sled, and a large pot of water was heating over a crackling fire. When the water was warm, but not too hot, each dog received a scoop of dry food with a chunk of dried salmon and a cup of the warm water poured into a metal dish. The salmon were caught in the summer and fall and hung and dried and stored to feed the dogs all winter long. While the lithe dogs ate greedily, as if starving, licking the bowls clean, the girl and her grandfather shared their lunch of dried salmon strips, biscuits, and homemade blueberry jam.

A pot of coffee was percolating on the fire, the little glass bulb atop the blackened pot filling with brown liquid every few seconds as if measuring time.

Camp time.

“I love it out here,” said the old man, smiling as he looked at the frozen river, the lonely sled, and the mountains in the distance. “This is home.”

The girl nodded.

Neither said a word as they stood by the fire, listening to the wind singing in the trees and the caw of a raven far off. The dogs rested, quiet and content with full bellies. Some pulled ice from between their toes with their teeth. Two were curled up fast asleep, their bushy tails covering their face.

Deneena, for that was Denny’s given name, broke the silence.

“Grandfather, teach me some more words.”

The old man, whose name was Sampson, crouched to pour a cup of coffee and then stood, cupping both hands around the warm cup.

“Let’s see,” he said, looking around him. “I’ve taught you so

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many already. Let me test you. What is the word for tree?" he asked, pointing at a nearby spruce tree.

"That's easy. *Ts'abaeli*. Come on, Grandpa. Give me something harder."

The old man pointed at the far mountains.

"What is the word for mountains?"

"*Ghelaay*," boasted the girl. "That was easy, too."

"Okay. But what do you call *that* particular one?" he asked, pointing to the tallest mountain on the horizon.

Deneena was temporarily stumped. She searched her memory, struggling to remember when she had heard the name.

"K . . . Kell . . ." I know it starts with a K," she grumbled, angry with herself for not remembering.

"*K'elt'aeni*," replied Sampson with a smile. "For thousands of years, Indians been calling that mountain *K'elt'aeni*. But first White man comes along, sees that mountain, writes down some English name on a map, and people call it that ever since. Same thing goes for almost everything. No one remembers Indian names. It so bad, I think dogs even bark in English nowadays."

Denny laughed at her grandfather's joke.

She loved the word game, which they played often. But to the old man it was no game at all. Very few people spoke their language any longer, only the very old, like himself. His wife and maybe a dozen others still spoke it. But none of their children, including Denny's mother, had ever learned it. It was important to the old man that some of the younger generation try to keep the language alive, at least a little while longer. Denny was the only grandchild who had showed any interest at all. She liked to learn the words from her grandparents and from other elders, writing them down in her own little dictionary. She also wrote down the old stories they told her, the ones about Raven. Without even realizing it, Denny was a kind of anthropologist-in-training, a documenter of culture. He was proud of her for that and for the

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way she wanted to learn other old things, like their customs and traditions, such as mushing a dogsled and catching and drying salmon on a fish rack, smoking them slowly with green, leafy alder branches tossed on a smoldering fire, until the meat glazed over hard enough so that flies couldn't lay their eggs and ruin the meat.

Just then a curious raven flew overhead.

"*Saghani*," proclaimed the girl, looking at her grandfather for approval.

"Very good."

With a slight breeze blowing campfire smoke into his face, making him squint, the old man poured another cup of coffee. Then he stood away from the smoke.

"Our people been living on this land for thousands of years, Denny. It's part of us. That river's been sliding past our village ever since flowing water carved its bed. Them mountains been looking down on us for even longer. Our world goes from here to there and from there to there," he said pointing at mountains all around them, some very far away.

The girl turned her head to follow his finger, her blues eyes taking in everything.

"We are part of the land," he continued, "and the land is part of us. We give it names and the names become part of us. We see the world in a particular way—*our* way—because of the words we give it. This is *my* world. This is *your* world. It takes care of us, provides for us; and we must take care of it."

"I feel the same way, Grandpa," replied Deneena, with a reverence in her voice.

The old man smiled broadly.

"I know you do," he said, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder. "That why I bring you out here."

When the break was over, the two worked together to hook the dogs back up to the tow line, careful not to entangle them. Sometimes they had to lift a dog and place him on the correct