

The Creation of Earth, Sky, Waters, and Men

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A Raven, flying over an expanse. From time to time he slowed his flight and scattered his droppings. Wherever solid matter fell, a land mass appeared; wherever liquid fell became rivers and lakes, puddles and rivulets. Sometimes First Bird's excrements mingled together, and this created the tundra marshes. The hardest of the Raven's droppings served as the building blocks for scree slopes, mountains, and craggy cliffs.

Yet the world created from the stomach and bladder of the First Bird was still immersed in utter darkness.

It was then that the Raven called upon his helper-birds and sent them to the east, to peck an opening for the sun's rays in the hard, dark vault of the sky. The eagle was the first to go. The heavy swoosh of his wings echoed long in the distance. He returned, exhausted, with drooping wings and a beak crooked from pecking, but he had failed. Next the Raven sent a puffin – though he is small, his beak is sturdy and sharp. But the puffin too returned beaten. The seagulls, cormorants, sandpipers, guillemots, geese, and slug-gish eider ducks all tried, but in vain.

And then a little snow bunting volunteered. The Raven was doubtful, but there was nothing for it; no one else would now attempt the tough vault of the sky.

Off she went, the little snow bunting, and for a long time there was no word of her.

The Raven grew convinced that the little bird had also failed. But one day he noticed a red speck in the west. It grew larger and larger, like blood spilling across the dark vault of the sky.

And soon everything, the tundra, the lakes, the rivers, the streams, the hills, the mountains, and the rocky crags the Raven had created, glowed crimson. As though someone were painting the western edge of the sky with his blood. And in that bloody swathe, there came a sudden, glinting sunbeam that lit up the Raven-made Earth.

The little snow bunting had returned on the tip of the sunbeam, and at first the birds did not know her: the feathers on the little bird's breast were stained with her own blood, and her beak had been ground almost to nothing.

This is how the little snow bunting brought the Sun to the Earth. But she was left forever with a tiny beak and red breast feathers.

The rest of the animals were made partly from inanimate things and partly from the larger animals. But those first representatives of the natural world were all necessarily created in pairs, so that in the future they could live by their own strength and produce offspring.

The first woman was called Nau.

She did not yet think of herself as a creature apart from the animals that surrounded her, from the short tundra flowers breaking through the earth

toward the light, from the seedlings of the *yuneu*, or even from the clouds in the sky that rushed toward the open sea. The mosses and the soft grass tickled and caressed her bare feet, and she laughed. Her laughter twined with the hiss of the quiet incoming tide, with the wind's rustling, the whistling of the tundra gophers.

Something irresistible drew her to the shore, the tide line, and the many-hued beach shingle that pealed under the waves. Whenever she approached the shore, the sea animals would swim close – walrus, sea lions, ringed seals known as *nerpas*, and bearded seals known as *lakhtak*.

But it was when the whale came, loudly exhaling water and air with a whistle – *R-r-r-r-h-e-u!* – that Nau felt the greatest agitation and delight. And she would call back to him, laughing, naming the whale Reu.

Then one day, this whale, Reu, came to her at sunset, as a trail of light swept from the sun to the shingled beach. No sooner had he touched the wet shingle than he turned into a comely young man who took Nau by the hand, and led her into the tundra, to the green moss beds and the soft grassy hills. There he loved Nau, caressed her – but always, just as soon as the sun sank halfway into the sea, he would hurry back to the shore, walk into the water, and turn back into a whale with the last fading beam of sunlight. Then he would swim away, sending a fountain of water high into the sky – *R-r-r-r-h-e-u!*

And Nau called back to him from the shore: *R-r-r-h-e-u!*

All summer this was the way of things, and their joy seemed to have no end. But the days were growing shorter, and all too often their marriage bed of tundra moss and grass sparkled with the night's hoarfrost. And the sun's rays grew ever more miserly. The first snowflakes danced in the air. There was very little time left now before ice would come to shackle the sea's

expanse and deep snows would fall to swaddle the earth. Soon it would be time for Reu to join his relations for the journey to warmer parts, to where the ocean is always free of ice. And there came an evening when Reu could not bear to step back into the water, though the waves lapped at his feet and the tide softly beckoned him: *R-r-r-b-e-u* . . . Nau stood a little way off, as always, watching him. And then, suddenly, Reu turned and said: “No, I cannot leave you. I am staying here.”

In spring, when the icebound rivers came free and the lagoon’s icy crust had melted, Nau gave birth. She bore several baby whales and immediately let them out into the lagoon. Reu gazed on them joyfully and laughed. To feed her children, Nau would step down into the lagoon and let her breasts, heavy with mother’s milk, lie on the water. The whale babies swam close and suckled noisily. They grew by leaps and bounds and by autumn had to be released into the open sea, as the lagoon had become too small and shallow for them. There, in the freedom of the sea’s expanse, they joined their relations, the whales who had come back from warmer climes where the sea never freezes. Nau and Reu stood on the shore and watched their frolicking children, almost indistinguishable in the great herd of whales.

Before the coming of winter, when the first strip of ice appeared on the horizon, the whale herd departed, and with it the children of Nau and Reu.

The following spring Nau gave birth again, but this time her children were human. After that she only bore humans, who gradually came to populate the coast.

Reu’s soul departed for the clouds, and his body was buried as he wished, in the depths of the sea.

Nau lived for a long time, and everyone believed she would live forever. They even began calling her the Always Living.

The people remembered where they came from because Nau often told them the story. In the summers, the beach swarmed with all manner of sea creatures, which the whale-brothers drove to shore. The people hunted lakhtak and walrus and nerpas, but never raised a hand against the whales, remembering their kinship. And, most likely, things would have remained like this for all time if there hadn't been a man who doubted the kinship of humans and whales. He said, "They are not like us at all. They are very big, and mute; they are nothing but mountains of blubber and meat." And he readied his harpoon for the hunt. Nau admonished him, trying to dissuade him, but the man was immovable. He killed a whale, and at the same moment that the deadly harpoon was thrust into the sea giant's heart, Nau's heart, the heart of the Always Living, ceased to beat.

Among the natural disasters, which the people understood as punishment for their misdeeds and deviations from ancient custom, was a flood that destroyed the land bridge between the islands of Imeklin and Inetlin* and submerged the entire distance from the Last Cape to Kymgyn.†

There is another story of how the Uelen people came to be: they were born not only of the whale Reu, but also of Umka, the White Bear. And the women are daughters of the sun.

It is easy to get tangled in the pantheon of Chukchi mythology – but only

*The Diomedes – two islands in the Bering Strait.

†Alaska.

at first glance. All of the contradictions, the illogical ways of the ancient lore's heroes, the apparent strangeness of their behavior, happen by the will of Enantomgyn, the Creator, sometimes called the Higher Powers or Outer Forces. It is He, or They, who are responsible. Enantomgyn bends to no higher authority: there is no one higher than He. That is why even the doings of Kela – the Demons of Evil – happen according to Enantomgyn's design, according to his mysterious logic and intent.

The First Man of Our Line

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Ermen made a slow ascent of the high crag that hung over the foamy tide line. The disturbed gulls and guillemots bombarded him with stinky excrement, which landed with slurpy smacks on his walrus-skin cloak. Ermen kept looking back at the scattering of dark *yarangas* over a layer of white snow that covered the long shingled spit of land behind him. He was liking this place more and more. From the south, the spit was bathed by a spacious lagoon, while from the north, ice hummocks rose from the icebound ocean. The deep stream, pinched within a narrow valley, still slumbered, frozen through; but very soon the warm spring sunbeams would melt the snow and ice, and a clear, pure stream would come burbling across the rocks.

From afar, the clump of *yarangas* brought to mind a scattering of pellets on a patch of snow. Black, slick pellets, not yet dried by the sun. “*Uv-elen* – Black Pellets,” thought Ermen, and smiled to himself.

That is how the dwelling of the Luoravetlan* got its name.

The place turned out to be a splendid one. When the snows melted and the sea ice abated, the shingled spit – freed from its wintery constraint –

*The Chukchi name for themselves. Literally – a true human, or human in the truest sense of the word.

would lie between the two stretches of water. There were animals aplenty in the surrounding area, and every spring, a colossal walrus herd returned to its breeding ground beneath the crag.

Early in the morning, spears well sharpened, the men of Uelen set out for the walrus hunt. The kill was butchered and piled into permafrost pits on the spot. Seagulls swooped up and down the blood-slick beach, snatching at walrus innards and tearing off over the open sea.

Ermen chose a suitable stone from the shingle, slippery with blood and blubber, and set to sharpening his knife. Raising his eyes, he glimpsed human figures atop the crest of the crag overhanging the walrus breeding ground. They were observing the men of Uelen in silence. Even at this distance he could tell that they were all Aivanalin,* and that they were, to a man, armed with long spears and bows and arrows. Ermen watched the Aivanalin closely, but they did not let loose a single arrow.

The men of Uelen had trespassed on the breeding ground their neighbors considered their own ancient preserve. Ermen had no desire for violent conflict, but there was no other way. It would be useless to negotiate, as these people spoke another language; their appearance, too, was somewhat unlike that of the Luoravetlan.

Numerous encounters with hostile clans on the long road to Uelen had taught Ermen a simple rule: the one who attacks, the one who catches the enemy unaware, is usually the victor.

For some days and nights spears were sharpened in Uelen, women sewed

*Eskimos. In this case, the inhabitants of a neighboring settlement on Cape Dezhnev, called Nuvuken.

thick walrus-hide cloaks for armor, old men carved sharp arrowheads from walrus teeth by the light of stone oil lamps, with their floating bits of burning moss.

Under cover of darkness, the canoes, brimming with armed men, silently put off and, hugging the overhanging crags, headed for Nuvuken.

At the prow of the lead boat sat Ermen's son, Akmol'. The boy had been maturing almost imperceptibly, growing into a real man, a fearless warrior. Should the night raid prove successful, Akmol' might get himself a wife. That was one benefit of war: the tribe's single men had the opportunity to win a life mate. The older brothers had already started their families; now it was the youngest's turn. If they were lucky, they could hope for a real injection of new blood. The marriages of Luoravetlan with the other-tongues were considered the most productive, and the children of such marriages were born healthy and strong.

Akmol' was well aware of the task ahead but was so nervous that more than once he noticed his hand going numb from clutching his spear, his stomach awash in cold waves, his heart climbing up into his throat.

Silently the oars rose and fell, and only the weak splash of water rolling off them might have betrayed the raiders' presence, were it not for the ceaseless rumble of surf upon shore, running at a constant clip until the ice came to tame it.

The moment the skin boats reached the surf line, the Luoravetlan launched themselves ashore. Agile and silent, they clambered up the steep slopes, bursting like a hurricane into the cave dwellings of the Aivanalin. Now there were shouts, moans, calls to arms.

Akmol' threw the heavy walrus skin that served as the dwelling's door

roughly aside. The flame that trembled in the small stone lamp inside was tiny, but gave enough light for him to see a huddle of people in the far corner, terrified. Two burning coals – the eyes of a young woman – flicked toward the youth. Akmol' took a step toward her, grabbed her by the hand, and began to drag her out. He didn't even feel it when a set of teeth, sharp as a young dog's, sank into his hand. The darkness around the stone huts was thick with women's screams, moans, curses in both tongues, and threateningly loud shaman songs, accompanied by thunderous tambourine claps. Small moving lights began appearing everywhere, flitting from hut to hut as though alive. In some places the fires were stronger, spearheads glistening and the eyes of the warriors glinting in their skittish light.

Akmol' had managed to drag the young woman down to the skin boat.

Uelen's warriors were already regrouping back at the shore with their plunder of young women.

The Aivanalin of Nuvuken did not give chase. The men of Uelen raised sail and made for their native shingled beach by the light of a newborn day.

Akmol's plunder lay at the bottom of the skin boat, and only when the Senlun crag, ringed with water, loomed before them, did Ermen give his son the signal to free the young woman. The Aivanalin girl struggled, turning away her head, and once even spit right in Akmol's eye. He raised a hand to wallop the captive, but his father gave stern warning: Don't you dare beat the future mother of your children!

So Akmol' had to tame Ulessik as one might a wild little beast. Months would pass before she allowed him to come near.

In the meantime, the Nuvuken Aivanalin made an attempt to avenge themselves on the men of Uelen, but were roundly beaten on approaching

the shingled beach in Ekven's Valley,* and retreated to their stone huts with heavy losses.

Ermen ordered that the walrus breeding ground by the Senlun crag be left alone, as another, more plentiful, had been discovered to the west of Uelen.

When most of the young women taken in the first raid fell pregnant, Ermen decided to make peace with the men of Nuvuken. This time they sailed in daylight, openly, rather than hiding in the shadows of dark cliffs.

Nuvuken is hard to spot from afar. It seemed merely a conglomeration of stones strewn about the slopes. But Ulessik had recognized her home settlement from a long way off and chattered happily in her croaking, guttural native tongue. Seeing her home again, she grew so impatient to reach it that she sprang forward, almost falling out of the boat's prow.

Her countrymen had formed a dense row on the beach. Spearheads of sharply honed walrus tusk glinted over their heads. Behind the stretch of armed men stood the shamans, bearing gigantic tambourines, whose ominous thrumming could be heard from afar.

The men of Uelen had brought no weapons. Even their walrus harpoons had been left behind at home. When the skin boats neared the shoreline, a host of arrows whistled over the men's heads: it was as though the Aivanalin were warning the others to turn back.

And then everyone heard a woman's loud scream. It was the voice of Ulessik, Akmol's wife. She was pleading with her kinsmen not to shoot, shouting that they had come in goodwill, without weapons. She was so anxious that more than once her voice broke into sobs. The bows fell silent yet Ulessik's voice did not; now her shouts suddenly turned into screams

*An abandoned settlement between Uelen and Nuvuken.

of pain. Akmol' feared that his wife had taken an arrow, but the Aivanalin women and the older of the men in the boats could guess what the matter was: the young woman was in labor. It was to the sound of those birthing pangs that the skin boat of the Luoravetlan touched shore. The elder women delivered the newborn, cut his umbilical cord with a plain hunting knife instead of the ritual stone blade, wrapped him in a fawn pelt, and handed him to the happy mother.

Akmol' and Ulessik were the first to step onto the shore of Nuvuken. The eldest of the Aivanalin came closer and upon ascertaining that the child was a boy, broke an arrow over him as a sign of eternal peace.

The newborn was given the name Mlemekym, which means "broken arrow."