

Island of the Blue Dolphins



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SCOTT O'DELL

Born O'Dell Gabriel Scott in Los Angeles, O'Dell grew up moving around California a lot. In addition to spending a lot of time in the natural landscape—Los Angeles was still considered a frontier town when O'Dell was born—O'Dell also excelled in school. When he started college, though, O'Dell was shocked to discover that he was no longer the brightest student in his class, which he suggests is why he attended four different colleges. He published his first book, a nonfiction work, when he was 25 and published nonfiction and novels for adults for decades. During this time, his name was accidentally printed in a book as Scott O'Dell rather than O'Dell Gabriel Scott—and he liked it so much that he ultimately legally changed his name. He served in both World War I and World War II, becoming a full-time writer after World War II. *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, published in 1960, was his first book for children. Heavily inspired by O'Dell's childhood adventures, it won the Newbery Medal. He went on to publish more than two dozen books for young readers, almost all of them historical fiction. To encourage other authors to write historical fiction, he established the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction in 1984—and he won this award two years later. He was married twice and died at age 91.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As O'Dell explains in his author's note and as Lois Lowry writes in the novel's introduction, Karana's story is based on the true story of a woman who lived alone on San Nicolas Island (the most remote of the Channel Islands off the coast of California) from 1835 to 1853. She's known as the Lone Woman of San Nicolas or as Juana Maria, but nobody knows what her real name is. She was a member of the Nicoleño tribe. In 1814, the Russian-American Company (RAC) sent a party of Alaska Native otter hunters to the island. The hunters massacred most of the Nicoleños; in the novel, this is the incident Karana's father refers to as he negotiates with Captain Orlov. About 20 years later, in 1835, a schooner commissioned by Catholic priests set out for San Nicolas Island to remove the remaining Nicoleños—and, as with Karana in the novel, one woman and a young boy who was either her son or brother was left behind. By the time a boat returned for her nearly 20 years later, Juana Maria was one of the last of her tribe and one of the last native speakers of the Nicoleño language. Juana Maria spent seven weeks at the Santa Barbara Mission before contracting dysentery and dying. Before her death, she was christened Juana Maria, and she was buried in an unmarked grave. Native

American scholars and current members of Southern Californian tribes have been vocal about the fact that while O'Dell did research heavily and draw from historical accounts to write *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, his portrayal of Karana also relies on the trope of the “Noble Savage.” This is an idealized trope that portrays indigenous people as being uncorrupted by civilization, such that they represent humanity's innate goodness. He also made his protagonist younger so that she'd appeal more to young readers; Juana Maria was described by priests as a woman older than 50 when she finally arrived on the mainland.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In 1976, O'Dell published a sequel to *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. *Zia* follows the titular protagonist, who's Karana's niece, as she and her brother help track down Karana and bring her to the mission on the mainland. It offers a decidedly darker view of Native Americans' interactions with the Spanish missionaries than *Island of the Blue Dolphins* does—the missionaries are, for the most part, antagonists. Eric Elliott's novel *Dear Miss Karana* takes *Island of the Blue Dolphins* as its inspiration; the Native American protagonist writes emails to “Miss Karana” and works with a tribal elder to translate and understand Karana's language. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper paints a somewhat similar picture of a changing and disappearing natural world as *Island of the Blue Dolphins* does. Other novels that pay similar attention to the natural world, wildlife, and the changing seasons include *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerard Durrell, *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson, and *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. And there are a number of young adult novels featuring protagonists stranded on their own in the wilderness. Novels like this include Gary Paulson's *Hatchet*, *My Side of the Mountain* and *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George, and *Incident at Hawk's Hill* by Allan W. Eckert.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Island of the Blue Dolphins*
- **When Written:** Late 1950s
- **Where Written:** California
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction; Bildungsroman; Children's Novel
- **Setting:** San Nicolas Island, off the coast of California
- **Climax:** A boat returns for Karana.
- **Antagonist:** The Aleuts and the Russians; Natural Disasters

- **Point of View:** First-Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Look It Up. To better deal with the deluge of requests for information about the Lone Woman of San Nicolas from *Island of the Blue Dolphins* readers, the National Parks Service created a website dedicated to bringing her story to life. There, curious readers can find information about everything from the Nicoleño people and language, wildlife on the Channel Islands, and how the woman may have survived on the island alone. The site also features a collection of primary and secondary source documents fact-checking O'Dell's novel chapter by chapter.

San Nicolas Today. Since World War II, San Nicolas Island has been the site of a Naval base. The base spans the entirety of the 22+ square mile island, and it has been used off and on as a launch site for munitions testing. In the 1940s, it was even considered as the testing site for the first atomic bomb.



PLOT SUMMARY

Twelve-year-old Karana is gathering roots with her six-year-old brother, Ramo, when they catch sight of a red ship in the distance. Karana, Ramo, and their older sister Ulape are part of a tribe that lives on the Island of the Blue Dolphins, a small, dolphin-shaped island surrounded by kelp beds. When the ship drops anchor and the men come to shore, the Russian Captain Orlov and his Aleut otter hunters negotiate with Karana's father, Chief Chowig. Chief Chowig remembers a Russian otter hunting expedition years ago that didn't end well, so he's unwilling to let Captain Orlov hunt without compensating the tribe. Captain Orlov eventually agrees to share 50% of the profit from the pelts with the tribe, in the form of jewelry and weapons.

Over the next few months, Karana's tribe keeps close watch on the Aleuts. Finally, the tribe notices the Aleuts packing up. Chief Chowig confronts Captain Orlov, since Orlov hasn't paid up yet. The men argue, and a battle breaks out on the beach. Karana's father dies in the battle, along with two-thirds of the tribe's men. Captain Orlov leaves, giving the tribe only a single chest of beads.

The next few months are difficult. The new chief, Kimki, allows women to hunt and fish since there aren't enough men to complete the tasks, but the remaining men in the tribe resent the women's success. In the spring, Kimki takes a canoe east, promising to return for the rest of the tribe. As summer approaches, Kimki's successor, Matasaip, urges the tribe to prepare to flee in case the Aleuts return. But when a ship arrives, it's not the Aleuts—it's white men that Kimki sent, come to take the tribe across the sea. When Karana gets on the ship, she realizes that Ramo is still on the island. She leaps into the

sea and swims to shore, figuring the ship will return for them soon.

Ramo immediately crowns himself the new chief, but a day after he and Karana are left on the island, he goes out by himself and a roaming pack of wild dogs kills him. Karana vows to kill the wild dogs, once she has a place to live and weapons to protect herself. She burns the huts in the village and takes up residence on the headland, sleeping on a tall rock where the dogs can't reach her.

Karana's lack of weapons poses a problem: women in her tribe aren't allowed to make them. Karana searches her neighbors' huts for weapons that were left behind and even digs through the chest that Captain Orlov left in case she finds the spearheads he'd promised. She doesn't; the chest contains only jewelry. Finally, Karana decides she must make weapons herself, even if doing so might invite earthquakes, floods, or high winds. She makes a bow and arrows and a spear, which makes her feel safe.

When summer rolls around, Karana waits for the ship to return for her. When it doesn't, she decides to take a **canoe** and head east herself. The canoe starts to leak overnight and finally, Karana decides to turn back—it's too dangerous to continue. When she returns to the island, she decides that this is her home. She'll be here until the white men return.

Karana decides to make her home on the headland. She makes a fence of whale ribs, a house, and cooking utensils. By spring, she's ready to kill the wild dogs. This means she must make a better spear, which requires acquiring a sea elephant tooth for the point. Her trip to the sea elephants ends badly—she doesn't kill one and ends up tripping and hurting her leg. She spends six days recovering in a cave near the spring so she has access to water; when she's better, she turns the cave into a second home where she can live when she's ill. When she returns to the sea elephants' beach, she discovers a dead sea elephant bull's carcass and takes his teeth.

More than anything, Karana wants to kill the pack's leader. This dog came with the Aleuts, and he's bigger than the wild dogs that have always lived on the island. Karana manages to shoot the dog in the chest and then track him for several days. But just as Karana prepares to kill the dog, she finds she can't. She carries him home, tends to his wounds, and discovers that she likes having another creature around. She names him Rontu.

In case the Aleuts return, Karana needs a canoe. She refurbishes an old canoe so it's small enough to handle. Once it's finished, she and Rontu spend their days exploring the island and its sea caves. Karana finds a cave under the headland that's perfect for storing her canoe, and there, she also sees a giant devilfish (octopus). She decides to spend the winter making the special spear that will allow her to kill it, as devilfish are a delicacy.

The spring is a happy time for Karana and Rontu. Rontu

engages in a final fight with the dog pack and doesn't leave Karana's side again, and Karana tames two brightly colored songbirds, Tainor and Lurai. Karana collects abalone for the winter and, one day, she spots the devilfish on the reef. She spears it, but in the ensuing battle with the massive creature, both she and Rontu sustain injuries. Though Karana manages to kill the devilfish, she doesn't have the strength or will to take it home—and she never tries to kill a devilfish again.

Later in the summer, Karana discovers Black Cave—a cave where some of her ancestors' remains rest—and visits Tall Rock, where she kills 10 cormorants. She's going to make a skirt with their skins and feathers. On the way home from Tall Rock, Karana spots the Aleut ship. She packs her things, makes her house look abandoned, and holes up in the cave near the spring with Rontu. Karana spends most days in the cave, sewing her **cormorant skirt** by the light of burning fish. She stays hidden because the Aleuts have a girl with them, and Karana is afraid the girl will find her. But one day, near the end of summer, Karana is working on her skirt outside when the girl appears at the top of the ravine. Karana doesn't trust the girl, who introduces herself as Tutok. But that night, Karana finds a necklace of beautiful beads left outside her cave. Over the next few days, Karana and Tutok become friends. They laugh together and exchange words in each other's languages. Tutok doesn't return one day, and Karana knows the Aleuts left. Though she's glad to have the island to herself again, she misses Tutok and feels lonely.

The Aleuts left a lot of otter wounded; Karana kills most to put them out of their misery. But she finds one that's not injured too badly and puts him in a tidepool so he can heal. Karana and Rontu catch fish for the otter, and she names him Mon-a-nee—"little boy with large eyes." The weather is too bad to fish for a few days, and when Karana returns to the tidepool, Mon-a-nee is gone. Karana feels increasingly lonely.

In the spring, Karana tames several more birds and throws herself into gathering abalones—she wants to be prepared early if the Aleuts return. During one trip to gather abalones, Mon-a-nee shows himself to Karana. He finds her again several months later and shows her his two babies. Karana realizes that Mon-a-nee is female and renames her Won-a-nee. After this summer, Karana stops killing animals, even those she doesn't like. All animals, she realizes, could become her friends, and they make the world a happier place.

Years pass. The otter leave the Island of the Blue Dolphins every summer in anticipation of the Aleuts' returning, but one summer, they stay—all the otter who remember the Aleuts must be dead. Karana stops keeping track of the months she's been on the island. Late in the summer, Rontu dies, and Karana buries him on the headland with his favorite stick. In the spring, she manages to capture another dog whom she believes is Rontu's son. She names him Rontu-Aru, which means "son of Rontu," and it's sometimes hard to remember that he isn't

Rontu. Karana thinks often of Ulape and Tutok and hears their voices in the wind.

In the spring, the weather suddenly becomes hot and oppressive. Since Rontu-Aru doesn't like the heat, Karana leaves him at home while she goes to the sandspit to repair her canoe. While she's on the beach, Karana hears a rumble—and sees a huge wave coming toward the island. Karana holds onto the cliffs as two waves hit the island, and then she runs home in the morning. That evening, earthquakes begin to shake the island, but fortunately they don't cause too much damage.

The tidal wave destroyed Karana's canoe, so she sets to work making a new one. It takes her most of the spring to do this. As she's on the beach, preparing to finish the canoe, she spots a ship she's never seen before. It's not the Aleuts, but Karana doesn't know if it's the men sent by her tribe. Figuring the men on this ship are looking for her, Karana dresses in her cormorant skirt, packs her things, and heads for the beach—but a storm is rolling in, and the men have already left the island.

Two years later, the ship returns. Karana again dresses in her fine clothes, packs her things, and waits for the three men to find her. The men speak the oddest-sounding language Karana has ever heard, but she's happy to hear another voice. One man makes her a scratchy blue dress, which Karana wears even though she doesn't like it. When the men ask where they can find otter to hunt, Karana pretends not to understand (the otter are hiding at Tall Rock). Nine days later, the ship sails with Karana aboard. Karana thinks of her happy days on the island as she sits with Rontu-Aru, watching the Island of the Blue Dolphins disappear in the distance.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Karana – The protagonist of the novel, Karana is stranded on the Island of the Blue Dolphins, where she grew up, at age 12. When readers meet Karana, she's responsible, dedicated, and caring. She and her older sister, Ulape, care for their younger brother, Ramo, since their mother is dead. Her father is Chief Chowig, the tribe's chief. Karana is distraught when Captain Orlov and the Aleut otter hunters kill two-thirds of the tribe's men, including her father. So, the following spring, when a different ship comes, she's happy to leave the island with the rest of her tribe. But she demonstrates her loyalty to her family by leaping off of the ship to return to the island for Ramo, who was accidentally left behind. When wild dogs kill Ramo the next day, Karana finds herself totally alone. Over the next few years, Karana makes a home and a life for herself on the island. Though her tribe forbids women from making weapons, Karana learns to make useable bows, arrows, spears, and knives with which to defend herself and hunt. She revamps a **canoe** so it's small enough for her to handle by herself, and the year after

she's stranded, she befriends one of the wild dogs, Rontu. Karana lives her life according to the seasons, spending her springs, summers, and falls gathering abalones in preparation for winter, and in winter making weapons and other items at home. When the Aleuts return to hunt otter around the island, Karana hides. But Karana also befriends Tutok, an Aleut girl who comes with the hunting expedition. After Tutok leaves, Karana becomes increasingly lonely. She develops friendships with a number of creatures and ultimately decides to stop killing animals—all animals, she decides, are potential friends. Before coming to this conclusion, she makes herself a **skirt** of cormorant skins and feathers, from cormorants she shot herself. Karana finally leaves the island 18 years after she was stranded, when Catholic missionaries from the mainland return for her. She's happy to go, as she's desperate to be around humans again. Karana takes her second dog, Rontu-Aru, with her, in addition to several songbirds.

Rontu/The Leader – Rontu is Karana's dog. Before she captures and tames him, she refers to him as "the leader," as he's the leader of the wild dogs' pack. She believes he came to the Island of the Blue Dolphins with the Aleuts, as he looks nothing like the dogs that are native to the island—he has thick gray fur, yellow eyes, and is bigger than the native dogs. At first, Karana blames him for killing Ramo and vows to kill him in return. But when the dog doesn't fight back after Karana shoots him in the chest, Karana brings him home, tends to his wounds, and ultimately decides she likes having an animal friend around. At this point she names him Rontu, which means "fox eyes." Rontu is extremely loyal to Karana and only leaves her a couple of times, either to breed or fight with the other wild dogs. He goes everywhere with her, even in the **canoe**. Rontu's favorite things to do are chase the gulls and bark at the various fish and birds on the island. He's especially interested in the devilfish (octopus), even though the devilfish injures him when Karana ultimately catches it. As he gets older, Rontu spends more and more time sleeping in the sunshine. He dies at Karana's feet after uncharacteristically refusing to bark at the gulls. Karana buries him on the headland with his favorite stick.

Ramo – Ramo is Karana's six-year-old brother and Chief Chowig's son. He's small for his age, but very intelligent and observant. He's often getting into trouble and making mischief, which is very annoying for Karana (Karana and Ramo's mother is dead, so Karana and her older sister, Ulape, care for Ramo). Having never seen a ship before, Ramo is entranced when the Aleuts arrive to hunt otter around the island. He's excited and afraid when, about a year later, another ship arrives to take him and the rest of his tribe "across the sea." But disaster strikes when Ramo insists on going back to the village for his forgotten fishing spear, and he ends up getting left on the island. Karana leaps off the ship and returns to the island to care for him, but this only lasts a day. Ramo instantly renames himself Chief Tanyositlopai and decides to take on tasks that are far too

difficult for a boy of his age and size. This results in him wandering off alone and being killed by the wild dogs, though he does manage to kill two before dying. Karana vows to kill the dogs' leader to avenge Ramo's death.

Karana's Father/Chief Chowig – Karana, Ulape, and Ramo's father, Chowig, is the chief of the Native American tribe on the Island of the Blue Dolphins. Chowig is his "secret name"; he usually goes by another name that Karana never shares with readers. So, Karana is surprised when her father shares his secret name with Captain Orlov. Chief Chowig is a suspicious man who remembers how badly things ended the last time the Aleuts came to hunt otter in the kelp beds around the island. Because of this, he negotiates with Captain Orlov for half the profits from the otter pelts, which is supposed to equal three huge chests of jewelry and weapons. But ultimately, Captain Orlov goes back on his word and leads the Aleuts in slaughtering most of the tribesmen, including Chief Chowig. After this, many in the tribe believe that Chief Chowig didn't survive the battle because he shared his secret name with Captain Orlov.

Ulape – Ulape is Karana's older sister. At 14, Ulape is "vain," according to Karana, and she owns many more jewelry pieces. Ulape also dresses up to leave the island and puts a mark on her face that signifies she's unmarried—though Karana knows she's in love with Nanko. Though Ulape doesn't appear again after leaving the island, Karana thinks of her more often as the years pass. She misses her sister and wonders whether Ulape and Nanko married and had lots of children.

Kimki – Kimki is an elderly man in Karana's tribe who takes over as chief after Chief Chowig dies. He's chosen because he was a good man and hunter in his youth. He makes the decision to reallocate the tribe's tasks and assign hunting and fishing duties to women—which, in part because the women are so good at it, ends up being a very unpopular decision with the other men. Ultimately, after a few months as the chief, Kimki decides to take a canoe and head east. He's heard about someplace to the east and believes his people can live there. Though he promises to return, he never does.

Captain Orlov – Captain Orlov is the Russian captain of the Aleut ship. He's blond and tall with a beard, and Karana observes that, from the moment he arrives, he acts as though he owns the Island of the Blue Dolphins. Chief Chowig suspects right away that Captain Orlov isn't going to play fair—he's only barely willing to agree to pay the tribe for the otter pelts he's going to collect. Ultimately, Chief Chowig turns out to be correct in this assessment. Captain Orlov leaves the island after leading the Aleut hunters in slaughtering most of the men from the tribe, and he leaves only a single chest of beads and jewelry, rather than the three chests of beads and weapons he promised.

Tutok/The Girl – Tutok is an Aleut girl who comes to the Island of the Blue Dolphins with the Aleut hunters during the Aleuts'

second visit. She's a few years older than Karana. At first, Karana is afraid of Tutok, hating her like she hates all the Aleuts. But when Tutok eventually stumbles upon Karana's cave and the girls meet, Karana and Tutok become friends. Tutok compliments Karana's **cormorant skirt** and shares a number of words in her language. The girls spend several days together, talking and laughing—and they exchange gifts of jewelry. Though Tutok leaves suddenly and without saying goodbye, Karana thinks of her often after her departure and often hears Tutok's voice on the wind or in the waves.

Mon-a-nee/Won-a-nee – Mon-a-nee is a young otter whom Karana finds, injured, in the kelp beds after the Aleut hunters return to the Island of the Blue Dolphins. His name means “little boy with large eyes.” Karana takes him from the kelp and puts him in a tidepool to heal. While he's healing, Karana brings him live fish—and after several weeks, he's willing to take fish from her hand. When a storm prevents Karana from bringing him fish, Mon-a-nee returns to the ocean. Karana is sure she'll never see him again—but later, an otter she's sure is Mon-a-nee finds her canoe and shows her two babies. Karana soon realizes Mon-a-nee is actually female and changes her name to Won-a-nee, or “little girl with large eyes.”

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rontu-Aru – Rontu-Aru is Karana's second dog. Because he looks so much like Rontu, Karana figures that he's Rontu's son—his name means “son of Rontu.” Rontu-Aru is a faithful companion for Karana, just like his father was, and accompanies her across the sea when the white men finally return for Karana.

Matasaip – Matasaip takes over as chief briefly after Kimki takes a canoe east.

Nanko – Nanko is a young man in Karana's tribe; Ulape is in love with him. He brings the news that Kimki sent the ship with white sails, and that the tribe is going to be leaving the island.

Tainor – Tainor is a male songbird that Karana tames after taking him from his nest as a hatchling. He's Lurai's brother.

Lurai – Lurai is a female yellow songbird that Karana takes from her nest as a hatchling and tames. Lurai has a brother, Tainor.



THE NATURAL WORLD

Island of the Blue Dolphins tells the story of 12-year-old Karana, a member of the Nicoleño tribe living on the Island of the Blue Dolphins—San Nicolas Island—off the coast of California. Life is idyllic on the small island until a ship comes to take most of Karana's tribe away—and she and her six-year-old brother, Ramo, end up stranded there. When Ramo dies a day later, Karana finds herself totally alone. Over the next 18 years that she spends on the island, Karana befriends a number of animals and lives her life in tune with the seasons. For Karana, the natural world isn't something to dominate. Rather, it's something to admire, a giving force that can provide everything she needs to survive, and something to respect and care for—even as it can also be frightening and destructive.

Island of the Blue Dolphins presents the natural world as a living, breathing, almost human entity throughout the novel, one worthy of admiration and respect. Much of Karana's narration consists of simple descriptions of the island's landscape and that of the surrounding ocean and kelp beds. It quickly becomes clear that if Karana doesn't know every inch of the island when she's first stranded, she's going to become familiar with it all—she takes note of every spring, every hidden cave, and every reef where she spends her time and gathers her food. Her tone throughout the novel is one of admiration for the natural world; it's something that, on the whole, delights her. She details the flowers in the spring, the powerful storms in the winter, and her joy at being able to explore the kelp beds and reef on her **canoe**. All of this gives the impression that, for Karana, the natural world itself is her constant companion. The land and sea themselves might be inanimate, but they're full of wonders that entertain, nourish, and protect Karana like another person might.

Karana's understanding of how to work with the natural world is what enables her to survive on the island for 18 years, totally alone. Out of necessity, Karana lives her life according to the seasons. In the spring and summer, when the weather is pleasant and the sea is safe to go out on in her canoe, Karana spends her mornings gathering food to dry and store for winter. Then, in the fall and winter, she's able to spend her time inside, comfortable after all the preparations she's made, and craft clothing, weapons, and other supplies that will allow her to start the cycle again in the spring. In this way, Karana shows how in tune she is with the natural world around her—were she *not* attuned to nature, it seems likely she wouldn't be able to survive. And as a single person on the island, Karana isn't able to rely on simple manpower to accomplish tasks, as some of the villagers did when they lived on the island. For instance, Karana knows full well that as a single girl, it will probably be impossible for her to kill a sea elephant, a task that always took at least three men—and often ended in failure, even for a large group. So, Karana has to find ways to let the natural world do the hard



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

work for her. While it is, perhaps, luck that Karana happens to visit the sea elephants on a day when two bulls fight to the death (which gives Karana the opportunity to go back days later and collect the teeth she needs), the fact remains that because she knows how to let nature take its course, she doesn't have to work as hard or put herself in danger like she might otherwise. This is also how she manages to get items like the whale ribs she uses to build her fence—she's incapable of killing a whale, especially on her own, but she knows that whales were washed ashore years ago and is able to harvest their ribs for her own use because of this knowledge.

As giving and as beautiful as the natural world is, though, Karana still finds that it's something that demands respect—as it is still dangerous. Karana lives the first year or so on the island in fear of the island's wild dogs, which killed her brother and continue to stalk her incessantly. But especially once Karana captures and befriends the dogs' leader, Rontu, the dogs—which initially seem extremely sinister and dangerous—become the least of her worries. Karana develops more respect for the dangerous natural world when she and Rontu attempt to spear a giant devilfish (octopus), an endeavor that doesn't go well for anyone involved. The lengthy process of killing the devilfish leaves Karana and Rontu covered in cuts and bruises—and ultimately, Karana is too tired to even drag the devilfish, whose meat is a delicacy, back home so she can eat it. Some beings in nature, she finds, are simply too big, and too dangerous, to mess with. Karana's respect for the natural world increases again when, several years before she leaves the island, she and her second dog, Rontu-Aru, weather a tidal wave and then hours of earthquakes. While the sea once fed Karana and was her friend, the tidal wave turns it into a dangerous enemy intent on carrying her out to sea. The earthquake, meanwhile, makes it almost impossible for Karana and Rontu-Aru to make it back to their house, as the tremors seem to make the house move further and further away. In a way, the earthquake and the tidal wave make it clear that Karana can't trust the natural world to be only giving and beautiful. It's still dangerous, and even though it can also be beautiful and give someone everything they need to survive, it still demands respect from those who live in it.



SOLITUDE

Over the course of her 18 years spent alone on the Island of the Blue Dolphins, Karana—who's stranded on the island at age 12, after white men take the rest of her tribe away—goes back and forth between enjoying her solitude and hating it. Her solitude (or, at least, not having to function as part of a tribe) gives her the freedom to explore her home, pursue things that interest her (such as hunting the elusive devilfish), and learn how to be totally self-sufficient. But despite all of Karana's animal friends, she still sometimes finds her solitude oppressive—she spends a lot of

time, especially during her last two years on the island, wishing only to hear the sound of another person's voice. With this, *Island of the Blue Dolphins* presents solitude as both a blessing and a curse. Being alone, Karana finds, offers her the freedom to live her life in a way that suits her and makes her happy, even while her freedom sometimes—or at the same time—feels like a sort of prison.

Over her first year on the island, Karana finds her newfound solitude horrifying. At first, Karana isn't willing to accept that she's going to be alone on the island for very long; she believes that the ship that took the rest of her tribe away is going to return for her, as promised. So, it takes a long time for her to accept that she's actually alone—and these first six months or so, before she accepts that fact, are extremely difficult. Karana resists making any permanent dwellings and gathering food for the winter, since she believes she's not going to be on the island that long. Ultimately, her loneliness becomes so all-encompassing that she decides to take a **canoe** and head for the mainland on her own, something that illustrates just how ill at ease she is with her solitude. But when, a day into her journey, Karana's canoe proves to be in a condition that makes it dangerous to continue, Karana decides to turn back—and with this, she accepts her solitude on the island. Upon returning to the island and hiking back to the headland where she eventually chooses to build her home, Karana feels happy. With this development, the novel suggests that Karana's happiness comes from choosing to accept her circumstances and live alone (she doesn't, after all, throw herself into trying to leave the island a second time). Put another way, her solitude is easier to accept when it feels like a choice Karana made voluntarily.

Once Karana accepts that she's going to live alone on the island, she discovers that being alone allows her to find happiness in ways that are brand new to her. Before, while functioning as part of the tribe, Karana had to do whatever the rest of the tribe needed her to do. On her own, however, Karana doesn't have to be responsible to a group. When it's just her, Karana still needs to spend much of her spring and summer gathering food in preparation for winter—but she can also throw herself into other exciting tasks she couldn't do before, such as hunting the devilfish (a giant octopus) and hunting cormorants at Tall Rock. She still has responsibilities; she spends most of her mornings gathering food, for instance. But in the afternoons, Karana does as she pleases—and she finds happiness in paddling around the island, exploring sea caves, and befriending various animals. And as Karana crafts several homes for herself, gathers food and supplies, and makes weapons—mostly things she's never had to do, or been able to do, before—Karana becomes increasingly happy and confident. Her solitude allows her to test her limits and see how much she can do. And it's extremely gratifying to discover that she can, for instance, craft a special spear for spearing devilfish, and

rework a canoe to make it easier to handle. Doing all the things necessary to survive on her own shows Karana what she's capable of, and being so self-sufficient makes many of her years on the island pass happily and mostly without incident.

However, Karana also struggles off and on—and more so during her final years on the island—with the crushing desire to be around other humans again, suggesting her solitude, while fun for a while, is untenable in the long term. Things become especially difficult for Karana after Rontu dies and Tutok, an Aleut girl traveling with Aleut hunters whom Karana befriends briefly, leaves the island. Particularly after meeting Tutok, Karana finds that getting to laugh and talk with another person only highlights her loneliness and solitude. And to cope with her loneliness, Karana regularly imagines conversations between herself and Tutok or her older sister, Ulape.

Essentially, Karana goes out of her way to imagine that she's not all alone, showing just how starved she is for human contact. So, Karana is more than ready to leave the island when, finally, Catholic missionaries return for her after 18 years on the island. Though she doesn't understand their language and hates the dress they make her wear, the missionaries are still people—people who are, Karana believes, going to free her from her prison of solitude.



FRIENDSHIP

When 12-year-old Karana finds herself stranded with her brother on the Island of the Blue Dolphins, she figures she and six-year-old Ramo will be able

to survive until the ship that took the rest of their tribe away returns. But when wild dogs kill Ramo a day later, Karana finds herself totally alone—and vows to take revenge by killing all the wild dogs on the island. Ultimately, though, Karana's desire to live by herself wanes, and over the course of the 18 years she spends on the island, she makes friends with two wild dogs, birds, otters, and a fox—in addition to Tutok, a visiting Aleut girl. Through Karana's unlikely friendships with these creatures and people, the novel suggests that, if a person is willing to look, there are friends waiting to be made everywhere. All alone on the island and in desperate need of companionship, Karana realizes that companionship is necessary for her happiness. She also discovers that it's possible to make friends with nearly anyone, if she's willing to put aside her preconceived notions about a person or animal, look for all the things they might have in common, and take the risk of becoming their friend.

At first, Karana and her tribe have very distinct ideas about who and what beings are friendship material. When the Aleuts and Captain Orlov arrive to hunt otter around the Island of the Blue Dolphins, Karana's father, Chief Chowig, instructs the tribe to steer clear of the Aleuts. He insists that the tribe can profit by allowing the Aleuts to hunt—but he says forcefully that “we shall not profit if we try to befriend them. They are people who do not understand friendship.” His reasoning is that the Aleuts

speak a different language and are, in so many ways, too different from the Nicoleños to befriend. This sets up the idea that Karana's tribe is somewhat prejudiced against outsiders—though in the case of the Aleuts, who ultimately murder many of the tribe's men, Karana decides the tribe was right to proceed with caution and suspicion. Once she's stranded on the island by herself, Karana also makes judgments about animals on the island. When the wild dogs kill Ramo less than a day after they're stranded, Karana vows to kill them—especially the dogs' leader, whom she believes came to the island with the Aleuts. As with the Aleuts themselves, Karana has every reason to hate the dogs, fear them, and want nothing to do with them—but ultimately, she finds her lonely situation unsustainable.

The novel suggests that when a person is extremely lonely, people and animals who once seemed too different to befriend can start to look like potential friends. Though Karana follows through with shooting the wild dogs' leader, when she discovers two days later that he isn't dead yet—and when he doesn't fight back—she brings him home with her, against her better judgment. And over the next few days, as she nurses the dog back to health, Karana discovers that the dog—whom she names Rontu—has become a friend. They spend the next several years nearly inseparable, hunting together, journeying together in Karana's **canoe**, and walking along the cliffs to admire the sunset. And while Karana is unwilling to voice outright why she ultimately decides to keep Rontu rather than kill him, she suggests that she was too lonely without another creature to keep her company. Karana goes through much the same transformation when she befriends an Aleut girl named Tutok. Tutok accompanies the Aleut hunters when they come to the island to hunt otter, and one day, she stumbles upon Karana outside Karana's cave. At first, Karana is frightened by Tutok and so is cold and rude to her—Tutok is an Aleut, after all, and Karana still fears and blames the Aleuts for killing her friends and neighbors. But over the next few days, as the girls exchange gifts and words in each other's languages, Karana starts to consider Tutok a friend. And when Tutok ultimately leaves the island, Karana continues to think of her often and craves the company of another person like Tutok. Karana's loneliness makes her desire for friendship even more pronounced.

Though Karana's loneliness isn't remedied by the end of the novel (even though she ultimately leaves with Catholic missionaries, it's unclear if Karana ever finds her tribe again), she discovers that she can counteract her loneliness to some degree by treating animals as either friends or potential friends. Over the 18 years that Karana spends on the island, she befriends not just Rontu, but Rontu's son, Rontu-Aru, in addition to various birds, foxes, and otter. Eventually, Karana decides to never kill another animal on the island (save for fish and shellfish). She states that “animals and birds are like people,

too, though they do not talk the same or do the same things. Without them the earth would be an unhappy place.” In addition, she justifies her choice by saying that the other animals on the island could, in time, become her friends and are more than just a source of food, sinew, or weaponry. Karana’s new beliefs about befriending animals suggest that in dire circumstances like hers, a person’s need for companionship can force them to look outside where they’d normally look for friends and befriend beings they never would’ve thought to befriend in other circumstances. Though Karana hints that there’s no real substitute for human companionship (she longs for human friends and to hear other human voices until she finally leaves the island), her animal friends provide necessary, welcome proof that Karana isn’t alone in the world.



GENDER ROLES AND SURVIVAL

Twelve-year-old Karana has grown up in a society with very strict gender roles. Men are tasked with being leaders, hunting, and fishing; women should keep house, attend to children, and gather foods like roots. Karana’s tribe has functioned well for centuries by adhering to these gender roles. After Aleut otter hunters kill more than half the men, however, her tribe realizes that with fewer men around to hunt and fish, things will have to change in order to keep everyone alive and well. And later, when Karana finds herself totally alone on the island, these strict gender roles prove to be one of her biggest obstacles to providing for herself and thriving. *Island of the Blue Dolphins* shows that gender roles may be able to ensure that all tasks necessary for survival get done—provided there are enough men and women in a given society to accomplish their respective tasks. But as Karana discovers, adhering to gender roles becomes much less important, or even ceases to matter at all, when a person’s goal is simply to survive all alone.

Gender roles are, in the beginning, extremely important to Karana’s tribe. Throughout the novel’s first several chapters, when the Aleuts arrive and begin hunting otter around the island, Karana’s narration makes it clear that there are distinct activities reserved for men and for women. The novel opens with Karana, for instance, digging roots with her little brother, Ramo—an activity reserved for women and children. When the Aleuts and Captain Orlov reach the shore, the tribe divides up along gender lines: the men go to the beach with weapons, while women hide along the top of the mesa—it’s the men’s job to fight the invaders, if necessary. Later, Karana explains the division of labor in more depth: men hunt, fish, and make weapons, while women attend to domestic tasks. These strict divisions keep the tribe functioning smoothly and harmoniously. Everyone has a task, and everyone knows they have to complete their task in order for the tribe to survive—when the Aleut ship arrives, Karana even notes that though she’d like to stop digging roots and go greet the

newcomers, like Ramo, she *can’t* stop. Her tribe is relying on her to provide the roots.

Things begin to change when the Aleuts kill most of the tribe’s men, necessitating a shift in who does what—something the novel portrays as unsettling and difficult for many people. With most of the men gone, the new chief, Kimki, decides to assign some hunting and fishing duties to women. This is necessary, he insists, for the tribe to survive—it would be foolish, he implies, to expect the few men left in the tribe to be able to provide for everyone. Though the women prove themselves to be just as skilled and effective at hunting as their male counterparts (and, Karana notes, are even *more* effective in some regards), this creates a great deal of strife within the tribe. Men resent that women are performing tasks that were once theirs alone—and they start to respect the women less because of this. In this unusual situation, the tribe’s strict gender roles make it hard for the tribe to both survive and exist harmoniously. It’s worth noting that the fact that the women are better hunters and fishers than the men shows that the tribe’s gender roles don’t exist because women and men are naturally better at certain tasks—instead, it shows that the gender roles existed to ensure that everything got done. This paves the way for Karana to later take on tasks once reserved for men; seeing women hunt at this time shows her that she can indeed accomplish all tasks necessary for survival, even if she is female.

Though Karana struggles at first to balance her respect for her tribe’s gendered division of labor with the need to survive, she ultimately discovers that gender roles become mostly irrelevant when her only goal is to survive alone on the island. Karana feels uncertainty and fear as she wonders whether or not she can make weapons. Her tribe’s laws forbid women from making weapons, and according to those laws, a woman making weapons will bring about natural disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes, or the weapon will break when the woman needs it most. Ultimately, though, Karana’s fears of the wild dogs—which stalk around her camp every night, and which killed her brother—outweigh her fear of natural disasters. Over the course of her time on the island, Karana does all sorts of things that she suggests were formerly done by men, such as building shelters, revamping **canoes**, hunting, and making weapons. And in all cases, Karana is extremely successful. She crafts a canoe that’s easy for her to handle, she creates several homes to keep herself safe, and she’s able to feed herself and keep herself clothed, thanks to her handmade weapons that enable her to fish and hunt. And as time goes on, Karana thinks less and less about what she’s “supposed” to do, or not do, as a woman. What matters most is her continued survival. It’s somewhat gratifying, then, when a tsunami and earthquakes do hit the Island of the Blue Dolphins—but these disasters do little damage. Indeed, Karana notes that the earthquake doesn’t dislodge the huge rock on the headland—something that indicates, to her, that the gods aren’t *too* angry with humans (or

specifically, with Karana for disobeying the tribe's rules by making weapons).

Even as Karana accepts that her tribe's gender roles no longer apply, though, she never gives up on being feminine—in fact, she does the exact opposite. And in many ways, her focus on feminine tasks, specifically creating her shimmering **cormorant-feather skirt**, shows just how effective Karana is at marrying her femininity with performing traditionally masculine tasks. She killed the 10 cormorants that make up her skirt herself, with weapons she made. Her skirt, and her continued survival more generally, show that she's capable of surviving and thriving outside the confines of her tribe's strict gender roles.



COLONIALISM, VIOLENCE, AND INDIGENOUS CULTURE

Karana's tribe has faced conflict with Russian and Aleut otter hunters coming to the Island of the Blue

Dolphins before—and, when a Russian ship arrives at the beginning of the novel bringing more hunters, Karana's tribe rightfully fears the worst. After the hunters spend months killing otter, Karana's father and the Russian Captain Orlov argue over payment for the pelts; a fight breaks out and the Aleuts end up killing two-thirds of the men in Karana's tribe. And almost a year later, white men arrive, supposedly sent by a former chief of the tribe, to take Karana's tribe away “across the sea.” The new arrivals not only murder animals that Karana thinks of as her friends; they also seemingly go back on their word to return for Karana for almost two decades. Alone on the island for those years, Karana feels as though she's walking among the ghosts of her ancestors and loved ones, struggling to keep her culture's way of life alive long enough to sustain her until the white men return for her (at which point, the novel hints, Karana's culture basically becomes extinct).

Overwhelmingly, the novel presents colonial forces—in this case, Captain Orlov and, to some degree, the white men who return for Karana—as fundamentally violent and as trying to control both indigenous culture and the natural world. Through their actions, these colonial forces ultimately bring about the end of Karana and her tribe's way of life.

From the beginning, the novel presents colonial forces—the Russian and Aleut otter hunters specifically—as fundamentally violent. Though Karana, like the rest of her tribe, distrusts the Aleut hunters and Captain Orlov on principle because she fears they'll become violent, her main complaint is that they're on the Island of the Blue Dolphins to hunt otter, something that's extremely bloody. Karana fears that there will be no otter left once the Aleuts are done—a fear that is, perhaps, a bit overblown—but one that reflects how destructive the Aleuts are being. The novel suggests that this is Karana's focus, though, because she's too young to remember the last time the Aleuts came to the island, and how bloody and violent that visit was. Karana's father, Chief Chowig, *does* remember, and he

implies that it was terrible and traumatic for his tribe. Indeed, he doesn't trust Captain Orlov in the present because of what happened last time, which shows that the relationship between the Nicoleños and colonizing forces is historically fraught—and that the colonizers' default is to be violent.

Over the course of the novel, the colonizers' violent actions lead to the end of Karana's tribe's way of life. After the Aleuts spend months brutally killing otter in the kelp beds, Karana observes that it doesn't seem like a huge leap for the Aleuts and Captain Orlov to turn to killing the indigenous islanders once Chief Chowig demands payment for the killed otter. In the ensuing battle, the Aleuts do kill about two-thirds of the tribe's men, leaving the tribe with a dilemma: it's impossible for them to continue living as they always have, with men hunting and fishing and women doing domestic tasks and gathering food. It becomes necessary for survival to assign hunting and fishing tasks to women, upending the tribe's long-held social order. So not only do the Aleuts murder a substantial percentage of the tribe, but this action also forces the tribe to completely overhaul their customs and way of life in order to survive. Then, when Spanish missionaries arrive the following year to take Karana's tribe to the mainland, the tribe's departure represents the end of their culture on the island. And when Karana finds herself left behind on the island for 18 years, she quickly casts aside customs and habits that she once followed, as they are no longer necessary to her survival. She burns the huts that once made up her village, she makes weapons (a task the tribe forbade women from doing), and she makes smaller changes, like keeping her fire burning all day and sleeping in in the mornings—keeping a fire going constantly means less work for her, and there's no reason to be up and working early when she's only one person on the island. So, although Karana uses her tribe's customs and knowledge to survive on the island, it's impossible to ignore that the various colonizing forces effectively brought an end to the tribe's successful, peaceful existence on the Island of the Blue Dolphins.

Ultimately, though Karana is happy to leave the Island of the Blue Dolphins with Spanish missionaries at the end of the novel, this ending is bittersweet. Karana leaves believing that she's going to be able to reconnect with her family and friends who left the island so many years ago—but it's unclear if this ever happens. And when the missionaries make Karana change into a scratchy blue dress rather than let her wear her beloved **cormorant-feather skirt**, the novel suggests that Karana will be forced to give up everything that she once held dear about her culture. Karana's story, then, isn't just one of survival and tenacity—it portrays the death of Karana's people, their language, and ultimately their entire culture by colonial hands.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



KARANA'S CANOE

Karana's canoe symbolizes her independence and self-sufficiency. When she first attempts to use a canoe that other members of her tribe made to travel to the mainland, Karana discovers that the canoe is damaged to the point of being dangerous. Not only is it not useful, but this canoe also symbolizes the idea that Karana can no longer rely on her neighbors to protect and guide her. Rather, she must take matters into her own hands and work to ensure her own survival.

Thus, once Karana returns to the Island of the Blue Dolphins, she reworks the canoe not only to make it watertight, but to turn it into a canoe that she can handle by herself as a single woman. The resulting canoe—which Karana acknowledges isn't as beautiful as it could be, but which is still extremely functional—gives Karana the freedom to explore the sea and the sea caves surrounding the island, as well as the means to travel to the reefs to gather food she'll need for winter. The canoe gives Karana her freedom and makes her truly self-sufficient; it, more than anything else, enables Karana's survival during the years she spends alone on the island.



THE CORMORANT SKIRT

The skirt that Karana makes out of cormorant skins represents her comfort with breaking her tribe's established gender roles. Karana grows up adhering to her tribe's strict gender expectations, which stipulate that women should gather food and keep house, while men should hunt and fish in addition to making weapons. When Karana finds herself abandoned on the island, she soon discovers that she can no longer adhere to these rules, particularly the rules forbidding women from making weapons. She's able to find a few weapons that were left behind, but they're not enough to allow Karana to survive—let alone thrive—on the island.

The cormorant skirt that Karana makes, out of skins from cormorants that she shot herself with a bow and arrows that she made, represents her ability to thrive by stepping outside of her tribe's rules about what women can and can't do. While Karana has made a number of lovely skirts out of yucca—a plant fiber that she, as a woman, can gather herself—the fact that she killed the cormorants herself speaks to her comfort with tasks formerly reserved for men. And the cormorant skirt is more beautiful than any skirt Karana has ever made before. Cormorants' feathers are iridescent, so the black skirt shines green and gold in the sunlight. The skirt itself does several things. It shows off Karana's skill as a seamstress and allows her to feel even more beautiful and feminine than she ever has before, while also making it clear that she's comfortable performing—and is extremely competent at—tasks that were

once the sole responsibility of the men in her tribe.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt edition of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

●● Behind in the boat stood a tall man with a yellow beard. I had never seen a Russian before, but my father had told me about them, and I wondered, seeing the way he stood with his feet set apart and his fists on his hips and looked at the little harbor as though it already belonged to him, if he were one of those men from the north whom our people feared. I was certain of it when the boat slid into the shore and he jumped out, shouting as he did so.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Captain Orlov, Karana's Father/Chief Chowig

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis



An Aleut ship, carrying Aleut otter hunters and their Russian captain (Captain Orlov), has just arrived in Coral Cove on the Island of the Blue Dolphins—and Karana can already tell that their visit isn't going to end well. Throughout this passage, Karana alludes to the fact that her tribe has had contact with the Russians and the Aleuts before. And noting that her father has seen Russians before, and that her tribe fears “those men from the north,” implies that the tribe's last encounter with the Russians and Aleuts ended violently. Indeed, though O'Dell doesn't mention it explicitly, he did base *Island of the Blue Dolphins* on a true story, one that begins in the early 1800s when Aleut otter hunters arrived on Saint Nicolas Island and ultimately killed a number of natives. It's this event that Karana refers to here.

Broadly speaking, though, Karana also picks up on the fact that these newcomers want to use and abuse both the natives and the island itself. Her tribe fears the Aleuts and the Russians because of the violence that took place before—but it's also impossible to ignore that Captain Orlov doesn't seem to treat the natives, or the island, with respect. At best, the natives are just annoying obstacles he has to deal with so that he can kill the otter and profit from this hunting trip.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ “The Aleuts come from a country far to the north,” he said. “Their ways are not ours nor is their language. They have come to take otter and to give us our share in many goods which they have and which we can use. In this way we shall profit. But we shall not profit if we try to befriend them. They are people who do not understand friendship.”

Related Characters: Karana’s Father/Chief Chowig (speaker), Captain Orlov, Karana

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis



The day the Aleuts and Captain Orlov arrive on the Island of the Blue Dolphins to hunt otter, Karana’s father, Chief Chowig, warns the tribe not to fraternize with the Aleuts. Given what happened the last time the Aleuts and Russians came to the island, Chief Chowig seems totally justified in treating these newcomers with suspicion. The last trip ended in violence, and the Aleuts exploited the natives’ labor (they forced the natives to hunt for them and didn’t compensate them). So, it makes sense that Chief Chowig doesn’t see these newcomers, though they’re different people, as friendship material.

Nevertheless, his reasoning is interesting. He implies first that it’s impossible to befriend the Aleuts because they speak a different language and observe different customs. Then, he insists essentially that because of these differences, the Aleuts “don’t understand friendship.” Again, while warning the tribe away from the Aleuts and treating them with caution and suspicion makes sense given the circumstances, this also dehumanizes the Aleuts. And as Karana discovers later, it is possible to befriend the Aleuts, as she befriends the Aleut girl Tutok. But in order to do so, she has to cast aside these assumptions that her father made and taught her.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞☞ Many of our tribe went to the cliff each night to count the number killed during the day. They counted the dead otter and thought of the beads and other things that each pelt meant. But I never went to the cove and whenever I saw the hunters with their long spears skimming over the water, I was angry, for these animals were my friends. It was fun to see them playing or sunning themselves among the kelp. It was more fun than the thought of beads to wear around my neck.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Captain Orlov

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

As the Aleut hunters kill otter, many in Karana’s tribe look forward to getting paid for the pelts. Karana, though, doesn’t share their excitement. Karana suggests that her tribe, on the whole, is very connected to the natural world because of the way they live—they have to be in tune with nature, or they wouldn’t be able to survive on the island by themselves. But Karana sets herself apart from the rest of her tribe here, and she shows that she sees the natural world as something more than just valuable currency. The otter are her friends—and this is true even now, when Karana is surrounded by her tribe and lives among fellow humans.


This paves the way for Karana to befriend other animals later, including otter. And it shows that befriend animals isn’t such a huge leap for her, since she’s considered animals to be her friends for quite some time. Further, noting that it’s more fun to watch the otter play than it is to wear beads can be seen as a precursor to her later decision to stop killing animals. Killing them, she decides, isn’t worth it when she values their companionship so much.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞☞ “Most of those who snared fowl and found fish in the deep water and built canoes are gone. The women, who were never asked to do more than stay at home, cook food, and make clothing, must now take the place of the men and face the dangers which abound beyond the village. There will be grumbling in Ghalas-at because of this. There will be shirkers. These will be punished, for without the help of all, all must perish.”

Related Characters: Kimki (speaker), Karana

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

The Aleuts have recently left after killing almost two-thirds of the tribe’s men. Kimki, the new chief, is reassigning tasks

to make sure that everything gets done.

Kimki first describes how tasks have historically been divided along gender lines. It's men's work, he suggests, to catch birds, fish, and build canoes. Women, meanwhile, perform domestic tasks and tasks that are generally safer. This gives readers an understanding of the baseline division of labor in Karana's tribe, which makes it easier to understand why Karana and others in her village struggle so much with the changes later on.


Deciding to assign things to women in this time of need suggests that tasks aren't given to men or women necessarily because men and women are naturally better at some tasks than others. Rather, Kimki suggests that dividing the tasks up along gender lines was just a convenient way to make sure that everything got done. But now, with not enough men to hunt, fish, and build canoes, the tribe's survival will depend on whether or not women can step up and successfully perform these tasks. In this way, Kimki shows that he prioritizes the wellbeing of his tribe over upholding gender roles that, he implies, are somewhat arbitrary.

Kimki does note, though, that he doesn't expect this to go over well. Changing how things have always been done will cause some strife and annoy some people. But again, he makes it clear that this shouldn't be the case. It shouldn't matter who does what; what's more important is that the tribe survives. And if this means a woman has to hunt, so be it.

●● During this time other women were gathering the scarlet apples that grow on the cactus bushes and are called tunas. Fish were caught and many birds were netted. So hard did the women work that we really fared better than before when the hunting was done by men.

Life in the village should have been peaceful, but it was not. The men said that the women had taken the tasks that rightfully were theirs and now that they had become hunters, the men looked down upon them.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Kimki

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Kimki reallocates tasks and gives women some tasks that used to be for men only, Karana describes how successful the tribe is—and how upset some of the men are

about the changes.

The fact that the women are so much more successful than the men at hunting and fishing makes it clear that the previous division of labor didn't exist because men are naturally better at certain tasks. Clearly, the women in Karana's tribe are just as capable at hunting and fishing as their male counterparts are—if not *more* capable. This shows Karana and readers that women are capable of doing everything to keep the tribe going. They can successfully gather the scarlet apples, dig up roots, and find meat—and their sex doesn't affect their ability to do this.

Karana notes that the tribe's success during this time should be either a non-issue or something to celebrate. The tribe is surviving and even thriving, after all, despite having lost most of the men. But instead, this reallocation of duties leads to strife and anger. It seems like the men took pride in being able to do these more dangerous tasks, and now that women are allowed to hunt and fish, those tasks don't seem as exciting or commendable anymore. Put another way, the men seem to believe that women performing these tasks cheapens the tasks. So even as the gendered division of labor existed mostly to make sure that everything got done, Karana also finds here that it gave the men in particular a sense of purpose and pride. Without that, they suffer emotionally and make everyone else suffer with them.

Chapter 9 Quotes

●● As I lay there I wondered what would happen to me if I went against the law of our tribe, which forbade the making of weapons by women—if I did not think of it at all and made those things which I must have to protect myself.

Would the four winds blow in from the four directions of the world and smother me as I made the weapons? Or would the earth tremble, as many said, and bury me beneath its falling rocks? Or, as others said, would the sea rise over the island in a terrible flood? Would the weapons break in my hands at the moment when my life was in danger, which is what my father had said?

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Rontu/The Leader

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 51-52

Explanation and Analysis

Karana hasn't been on the island alone very long, but the wild dogs' constant presence is impressing on her that she

needs to figure out how to acquire weapons. Karana makes it clear that the main reason she isn't just setting to work at making weapons is because her tribe doesn't merely forbid women to make weapons—according to legend, terrible things will happen to Karana if she makes weapons. In this way, Karana starts to see how the gender roles in her tribe are actually jeopardizing her ability to survive alone on the island. So now, she has to decide whether following her tribe's rules is still important. And if her tribe's legends *are* true, it seems likely that Karana is going to die anyway, either because the dogs kill her since she isn't armed, or because making a weapon brings about these natural disasters. Karana's choice, then, becomes basically how she wants to die, and what kind of a death she's willing to accept. Then, it's interesting that most of the terrible things that might happen to Karana are natural disasters—that later happen in the novel. Years after this, when Karana has been making weapons for some time, she weathers a tidal wave (which is akin to the sea rising and flooding the island) and an earthquake. Those natural disasters *don't* kill Karana—which suggests that she doesn't actually need to be expending so much energy deciding whether or not to make weapons. She *can* make weapons, and she can weather those natural disasters, too.

●● It was a pleasant place to stay, there on the headland. The stars were bright overhead and I lay and counted the ones that I knew and gave names to the many that I did not know.

In the morning the gulls flew out from their nests in the crevices of the cliff. They circled down to the tide pools where they stood first on one leg and then the other, splashing water over themselves and combing their feathers with curved beaks. Then they flew off down the shore to look for food. Beyond the kelp beds pelicans were already hunting, soaring high over the clear water, diving straight down, if they sighted a fish, to strike the sea with a great splash that I could hear.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Karana has decided to stay—for a while—on the headland rather than in her tribe's village, which she recently burned. In this passage, Karana's love for and admiration of the natural world shines through. She has the stars to keep her company at night, and during the day, she has all sorts of

animal friends like gulls, pelicans, and fish. And watching the birds, she suggests, is endlessly entertaining—the gulls have odd and charming bathing habits, and the pelicans' dives seem like breathtaking displays of their skill and power.

Mentioning the stars the way she does also highlights Karana's connection to her tribe—and her loneliness. Knowing the stars' names is no doubt a skill she learned from friends and family in the tribe, so those stars she knows represents her connection to her tribe. But she doesn't know all the stars, so she has to resort to naming them herself. This highlights how lonely she is—she doesn't mention, for instance, waiting to reunite with her tribe so they can teach her the names of those stars. In this way, Karana seems to have accepted that she's going to be alone for a while, and that she should make the best of this time.

Chapter 10 Quotes

●● The thought of being alone on the island while so many suns rose from the sea and went slowly back into the sea filled my heart with loneliness. I had not felt so lonely before because I was sure that the ship would return as Matasaip had said it would. Now my hopes were dead. Now I was really alone. I could not eat much, nor could I sleep without dreaming terrible dreams.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Matasaip

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56-57

Explanation and Analysis

When the winter storms come, Karana knows that the ship that took her people across the sea isn't going to come for her—the seas are too stormy for a ship to safely make it to the island.

Up until this point, Karana has been more or less okay with her solitude because she's been able to hold onto the belief that the ship was going to return for her. Put another way, she believed her solitude had an end date. She wasn't going to be on the island forever. But now that the ship is clearly not going to return, Karana has to face the possibility that the ship might never return for her—or, at the very least, that she can't count on it to return any time soon. This feels like a betrayal, especially since Matasaip (a former chief) promised that the ship would return for Ramo and Karana when the ship first left. So, Karana isn't just adjusting to being on her own—she's grieving the fact that she doesn't feel she can completely trust her people anymore. And this

grief affects her overall health and wellbeing, as evidenced by her poor appetite and terrible dreams.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝ I felt as if I had been gone a long time as I stood there looking down from the high rock. I was happy to be home. Everything that I saw—the otter playing in the kelp, the rings of foam around the rocks that guarded the harbor, the gulls flying, the tides moving past the sandspit—filled me with happiness.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Mon-a-nee/Won-a-nee

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Karana has just made it back to the island after trying to take a canoe “across the sea,” to where her tribe went in the white men’s ship a year ago. She’s on the headland, looking down at the sea.

As Karana looks around, her love of the island shines through. She takes note of all the animals on the island, as well as the natural land formations, as though these are all things that she knows and loves. Further, she describes the island as “home,” an indicator that she’s made up her mind to be here. Her happiness at being home also contrasts dramatically with how she felt before her trip on the canoe. Before, she felt as though the island was a sort of prison. Now, the island is a place that comforts her.

Karana also notes otter and gulls specifically; these are two animals she later befriends and keeps as pets of sorts. So, making a note of otter and gulls here foreshadows these later friendships with the gull (which isn’t named) and with Won-a-nee, the otter she saves and rehabilitates after an injury.

☝ I looked out at the blue water stretching away and all the fear I had felt during the time of the voyage came back to me. On the morning I first sighted the island and it had seemed like a great fish sunning itself, I thought that someday I would make the canoe over and go out once more to look for the country that lay beyond the ocean. Now I knew that I would never go out again.

The Island of the Blue Dolphins was my home; I had no other. It would be my home until the white men returned in their ship.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

It’s been a day or so since Karana attempted to take the canoe to follow her tribe across the sea. Here, she decides that she’s going to live on the Island of the Blue Dolphins until someone comes to take her away.

Karana’s tone here differs greatly from her tone a month ago, when she felt like the island was her prison. Describing the island as her home, and insisting she has no other home, is something Karana does with finality. She’s made her choice to stay, and in her mind, that’s that. Importantly, it’s the fact that Karana characterizes this as a choice that makes all the difference. It is, of course, possible to argue that Karana really *doesn’t* have much of a choice; the ocean between the island and the mainland seems dangerous, and taking a canoe out alone might end badly for her. But the fact remains that Karana *believes* she’s making a choice here, and that makes her solitude on the island easier for her to bear. It’s also significant that now, she feels afraid thinking about going too far away from the island on her own. While before it was scarier to stay put, now it’s scarier to consider striking out on her own and leaving her home behind.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ Why I did not send the arrow I cannot say. I stood on the rock with the bow pulled back and my hand would not let it go. The big dog lay there and did not move and this may be the reason. If he had gotten up I would have killed him. I stood there for a long time looking down at him and then I climbed off the rocks.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Rontu/The Leader

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Karana has been hunting the wild dogs’ leader; she shot him with an arrow two days ago and is now preparing to kill him with another arrow. But when the leader doesn’t move, Karana finds she can’t go through with killing him.

This makes it clear that up until this point, when the dog has pretty clearly given up, Karana and the leader have been engaged in something of a battle of wills and wit. Karana has

been using all her skills to hunt the dog and hopefully kill it, while the dog has been using all *his* skills to evade her—and, possibly, kill her if he ever got the chance. It was a battle of equals, despite Karana and the leader being different species.



Now, though, the dog seems to be close to death anyway. Karana seems to crave a real victory that's going to make her feel powerful and in control, and shooting the dog when he's down and shows no signs of fighting back won't give her that. Rather, it stirs her compassion and reminds her of how lonely she is. This is why she goes on to take the dog home, nurse him back to health, and name him Rontu—she realizes how much she needs a friend, and she recognizes that Rontu can fill that need for her.


Chapter 16 Quotes

☝ I was not sure what I would do if the Aleuts came. I could hide in the cave which I had stored with food and water, for it was surrounded by thick brush and the mouth of the ravine could only be reached from the sea. The Aleuts had not used the spring and did not know about it because there was another one closer to where they had camped. But they might come upon the cave by chance and then I must be ready to flee.

For this reason I worked on the canoe I had abandoned on the spit.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

It's summer, and Karana is considering what she'll do if the Aleuts return to hunt otter again. As a single person on the island, Karana's calculations are different than they'd be if she was part of a tribe. She definitely can't stay and fight; after the Aleuts killed so many last time, it seems like Karana would be putting herself in danger needlessly by trying to make a stand. So, her only option is to find a good place to hide, and make sure that she has a way to escape if she needs it.

Throughout this passage, Karana's knowledge of the island's landscape and features is obvious. Because of her observations the last time the Aleuts were on the island, Karana is well aware of what the Aleuts do and don't know about the island's features. So, she's pretty sure that if the

Aleuts do exactly what they did last time, there's no reason they'd ever come upon her hidden cave or her spring.

But Karana is very pragmatic, so she realizes she can't just hope the Aleuts never find her. Rather, she has to be ready to leave at a moment's notice, which means she has to figure out how to make the canoe useable. The canoe will give Karana the freedom to navigate the island by sea, which will give her an escape route in case the Aleuts come—but will also just give her more opportunities to explore the natural world around the island.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝ On the first day of spring I went down to Coral Cove with my new spear. I knew it was spring because that morning at dawn the sky was filled with flocks of darting birds. They were small and black and came only at this time of year. They came out of the south and stayed for two suns, hunting food in the ravines, and then flew off in one great flight toward the north.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Karana has spent the winter making a special spear that will allow her to kill the devilfish (octopus), and now it's spring—which means she can start hunting the devilfish. First, it's commendable that Karana has been able to craft this spear, since making weapons wasn't something women were allowed to do in her tribe. Being on the island alone hasn't just necessitated that Karana make weapons so she can survive—it's also giving her the opportunity to figure out exactly what she's capable of.

Then, Karana shows her close relationship with nature when she explains exactly how she knows it's spring. She doesn't have a paper calendar to keep track of the seasons—rather, she has to look for natural signs that the seasons have changed. And for her, this means waiting for these migratory birds to arrive, stay for a few days, and then continue their journey north. This illustrates Karana's adeptness at reading the landscape around her—and how prepared she is to live on her own on the island.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☛ Often I would put on the skirt and the sandals and walk along the cliff with Rontu. Sometimes I made a wreath of flowers and fastened it in my hair. After the Aleuts had killed our men at Coral Cove, all the women of our tribe had singed their hair short as a sign of mourning. I had singed mine, too, with a faggot, but now it had grown long again and came to my waist. I parted it and let it fall down my back, except when I wore a wreath. Then I made braids and fastened them with long whalebone pins.

I also made a wreath for Rontu's neck, which he did not like. Together we would walk along the cliff looking at the sea, and though the white men's ship did not return that spring, it was a happy time. The air smelled of flowers and birds sang everywhere.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Rontu/The Leader

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 110-11

Explanation and Analysis

Karana has just finished making another skirt from yucca fibers, in addition to sealskin sandals and a sealskin belt. This passage makes it clear that even though Karana has taken on traditionally masculine tasks, like hunting and fishing, that doesn't mean that she's given up on her femininity. It's still important to her—and fun—to sometimes get dressed up and feel beautiful so she can walk along the cliffs, admiring her home. And while it's unclear if Karana killed the seal herself or found it dead, if she *did* kill it herself, the sealskin items symbolize her ability to marry these masculine and feminine tasks.


As the only person on the island, Karana has the ability to decide that this is the sort of thing she'd like to spend her time doing—and she can make Rontu join her and wear his flower wreath. This isn't something she'd be able to do as part of the tribe, which shows that in some ways, Karana has much more freedom as a single person on the island than she did as part of a tribe. She still has to do things so that she can survive, but she also seems to have a lot more leisure time than she used to.

The aside that Karana's hair has grown out since she singed it off after the Aleuts' last visit also suggests that Karana is moving on from the trauma of seeing so many of her friends and neighbors killed. Just as the island is in full bloom right now, Karana has recovered from her trauma and can now blossom in her own way, enjoying life on the island—even if, in some ways, she's still haunted by the violence that's taken place here in the past.

Chapter 20 Quotes

☛ The star passed out of sight and another took its place. The tide lifted the canoe higher in the room, and as the water lapped against the walls it sounded like the soft music of a flute. It played many tunes through the long night and I slept little, watching the stars change. I knew that the skeleton who sat on the ledge playing his flute was one of my ancestors, and the others with the glittering eyes, though only images, were too, but still I was sleepless and afraid.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Rontu/The Leader

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 123-24

Explanation and Analysis

Karana and Rontu found a new sea cave, which contains the remains and effigies of some of Karana's ancestors. The tide came in faster than Karana expected, so she and Rontu end up spending the night in the cave.


Discovering her ancestors in this cave makes it impossible to ignore that Karana is the last of her tribe alive on the island. She is, in so many ways, living amongst ghosts—both the ones she knew about (like the ghosts of the murdered men who haunted her tribe during the tribe's final winter on the island) and these ones that she didn't know about. Even though so much of the novel is about Karana's life, all the delights she finds on the island, and all the things she does to ensure her survival, she finds that she can't go anywhere without remembering that she's the last of her tribe. And this reminds readers that the novel is both a survival story about Karana and a story that details the final years of Karana's tribe and culture.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☛ It was dark in the cave, even when the sun was high, so I burned the small fish I had stored. By their light I began to make a cormorant skirt, working every day on it. The ten skins I had taken at Tall Rock were now dry and in condition to sew. All of them were from male cormorants whose feathers are thicker than those of the females and much glossier. The skirt of yucca fibers was simple to make. I wanted this one to be better, so I cut the skins carefully and sewed them with great care.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

The Aleuts have returned to the island to hunt otter, so Karana has holed up in the cave she stocked for when she's ill and is spending her time working on a cormorant-feather skirt. The fact that Karana is in this cave, where she knows she's safe, highlights how well she knows the island and its various natural features. She's able to look around and know that this is the safest place for her with the Aleuts around, which speaks to her survival ability.

Then, the cormorant skirt symbolizes Karana's ability to perform masculine tasks—like killing birds—with feminine tasks, like creating this skirt. The skirt itself will be beautiful and will highlight Karana's femininity, showing that she clearly hasn't given up on being feminine. But the fact remains that she's only able to make a cormorant skirt because she's also decided to cast aside her tribe's strict gender roles, make weapons, and hunt the animals she needs to survive. And as she describes choosing the male cormorants, drying the skins, and cutting the skins carefully to create her skirt, Karana demonstrates her immense skill at *all* of these tasks, both masculine and feminine.

accepting the string of beads that Tutok left for her. First, Karana's choice to move her baskets back to the cave shows how much she trusts Tutok. Even though Tutok is an Aleut (and therefore is an enemy, or is at least aligned with Karana's enemies), Karana has decided that Tutok isn't going to give her away or otherwise hurt her. She's okay with Tutok knowing where she lives, essentially showing that she trusts Tutok enough to put herself in a vulnerable position.

Then, as the girls chat and spend the next two days together, it's clear how much Karana has yearned to spend time with another person like this. Part of the reason why Karana gets over her fears of Tutok so quickly is because Karana is starved for companionship—and human companionship specifically. While Rontu is a wonderful friend, he can't talk back. And Karana says outright throughout the novel that there's nothing quite like hearing another human voice to make her feel less alone.

Finally, it's another indicator of how much Karana trusts her new friend that she shares her secret name (Karana) with Tutok. (Karana initially introduced herself as Won-a-pa-lei.) Recall that Karana's father shared his secret name with Captain Orlov, and the tribe believed that this choice led to his death. So, when Karana shares her secret name with Tutok, it shows that she's not afraid she's going to die—she trusts Tutok completely to keep her existence a secret and to be her friend.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝☝ I watched her go through the brush. I stood for a long time listening to her footsteps, until I could hear them no more, and then I went to the headland and brought the baskets back to the cave.

Tutok came again the next day. We sat on the rock in the bright sun, trading words and laughing. The sun went fast in the sky. The time came soon when she had to leave, but she returned on the day that followed. It was on this day, when she was leaving, that I told her my secret name.

“Karana,” I said, pointing to myself.

☝☝ At first, knowing that I could now leave the cave and move back into my house on the headland, I was happy. But as I stood there on the high rock looking down at the deserted harbor and the empty sea, I began to think of Tutok. I thought of all the times we had sat in the sun together. I could hear her voice and see her black eyes squinting closed when she laughed.

Below me, Rontu was running along the cliff, barking at the screaming gulls. Pelicans were chattering as they fished the blue water. Far off I could hear the bellow of a sea elephant. But suddenly, as I thought of Tutok, the island seemed very quiet.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Tutok/The Girl

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Karana has just spent her first day with Tutok, after

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Tutok/The Girl, Rontu/The Leader

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 139-40

Explanation and Analysis

The Aleut ship has just left, which means that Karana can

move back home to her house on the headland. But while Karana was happy in her solitude before the Aleuts came and she befriended Tutok, Karana now realizes she feels lonely again. It was an extremely fulfilling experience to be able to sit on the rocks in the sunshine and share words with Tutok, laughing all the while. And now, with the Aleuts gone, Karana isn't going to have the opportunity to do that again with another person—there's no guarantee that the Aleuts will return, or if they do, that Tutok will be with them on their next voyage. So, for now, Karana has to accept that she's probably going to be alone again for some time.

And because Karana feels so alone, her animal friends—Rontu, the birds, and even the sea elephants—stop making her feel like she has friends and companions. Rontu's antics as he chases birds have amused Karana for years now, but she no longer finds him as charming. And the noise of the animals on the island is nothing like the sound of other people, which is what Karana longs to hear. So, in this passage, Karana's loneliness sets in again and makes the years to come even more difficult for her to bear.


Chapter 23 Quotes

☝☝ On sunny days I would wear them with my cormorant dress and the necklace, and walk along the cliff with Rontu.

I often thought of Tutok, but on these days especially I would look off into the north and wish that she were here to see me. I could hear her talking in her strange language and I would make up things to say to her and things for her to say to me.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Rontu/The Leader, Tutok/The Girl

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

The year after Tutok and the Aleuts leave, Karana regularly dresses up to walk with Rontu—and remember her last human friend. In this passage, Karana makes it clear how lonely she is. While wearing her cormorant skirt is a way for her to celebrate her independence and self-sufficiency, wearing the necklace from Tutok also shows how much she longs to connect with her friend. Similarly, imagining these conversations between herself and Tutok shows how starved Karana is for conversation with another person. Though she's taking these walks with Rontu, whom she

loves, she also finds that his companionship isn't completely satisfying. Instead, Karana desperately wants human contact—enough to be willing to make up conversations in two entirely different languages, one of which Karana doesn't understand.

This is a big shift from earlier, when Karana was relatively happy with her solitude and feared the Aleuts' visits. Having Tutok on the island, even if it was just for a brief time, has reminded Karana how much she enjoys being around other people. Now, it's hard to get back to the mindset she had before, where she appreciated and even celebrated her solitude.

Chapter 24 Quotes

☝☝ Ulape would have laughed at me, and others would have laughed, too—my father most of all. Yet this is the way I felt about the animals who had become my friends and those who were not, but in time could be. If Ulape and my father had come back and laughed, and all the others had come back and laughed, still I would have felt the same way, for animals and birds are like people, too, though they do not talk the same or do the same things. Without them the earth would be an unhappy place.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Ulape, Karana's Father/Chief Chowig, Rontu/The Leader, Mon-a-nee/Won-a-nee

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

Karana explains that after nursing the otter Mon-a-nee back to health, she decides to stop killing animals (aside from fish and shellfish). This goes against how her tribe used to do things, and Karana knows that were her tribe here, she'd be a laughingstock. By noting this, Karana illustrates how far away she's moved from her tribe's customs. As a single person on the island, she's able to pick and choose which of her tribe's habits and customs she continues—and there's no one around to laugh at her, no matter how seemingly ridiculous her choices might be. This is a blessing and a curse for Karana, as it allows her to put more effort into making friends with animals. But at the same time, it drives home how lonely she is, since she doesn't have to worry about what people are going to think of her new habits. At the same time, Karana's situation also represents the end of her tribe's culture—a mark of how much the colonial powers have forced life to change on the island.


As Karana articulates her reasoning, though, it becomes clear that she's more or less given up on connecting with humans again. Now, she doesn't have to worry about pleasing them, or making other people think well of her. Instead, she can pour all her energy into making friends with the animals on the island. They are, after all, the only friends and potential friends she has at this point.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝ We had many happy times that summer, fishing and going to Tall Rock in our canoe, but more and more now I thought of Tutok and my sister Ulape. Sometimes I would hear their voices in the wind and often, when I was on the sea, in the waves that lapped softly against the canoe.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Rontu-Aru, Tutok/The Girl, Ulape

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

The summer after Rontu's death, Karana befriends another dog, names him Rontu-Aru, and takes him on many adventures with her. Rontu's death was a huge blow to Karana, as he was in many ways her best and only friend on the island. So, it makes sense that she'd want to find another dog to take his place—dogs, she's found, make excellent friends and companions, especially when she spends so much time paddling around in her canoe. Rontu-Aru helps Karana feel less alone, and he makes her feel more at ease with living alone on the island.

But even as Karana enjoys having another dog and spending so much time exploring the island, she also can't ignore that she's becoming increasingly lonely. Karana hasn't mentioned Ulape like this in a long time, which suggests that these days she's thinking more and more about her tribe and her family—and wishing they were together. It's also been many years now since Tutok was here; Tutok is extremely important to Karana because she's the only person Karana has spoken to since Ramo died so many years ago. And as Karana hears Tutok and Ulape's voices in the wind and the waves, it shows just how desperate Karana is for human contact. Her mind is almost making up companions for her from what she has available to her. Because of this, though, the novel also begins to suggest that the natural world is no

longer enough to satisfy Karana. Karana will only be satisfied when she actually hears humans speaking again.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☝ Like two giants they crashed against each other. They rose high in the air, bending first one way and then the other. There was a roar as if great spears were breaking in battle, and in the red light of the sun the spray that flew around them looked like blood.

Slowly the second wave forced the first one backward, rolled slowly over it, and then as a victor drags the vanquished, moved in toward the island.

The wave struck the cliff. It sent long tongues streaming around me so that I could neither see nor hear. The tongues of water licked into all the crevices, dragged at my hand and at my bare feet gripping the ledge. They rose high above me along the face of the rock, up and up, and then spent themselves against the sky and fell back, hissing past me to join the water rushing on toward the cove.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Karana's Father/Chief Chowig

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis



Karana is clinging to a cliff on the beach, watching with horror as the first tidal wave to hit the island heads back out and the second one starts to come in. In this passage more than any other, Karana shows that she thinks of the natural world as almost a person or another being in its own right. The sea is made up of "giants," who fight each other with spears and spray blood everywhere. The second wave is a "victor" and the "tongues" of water almost rip Karana off of the cliffs, putting her in danger of getting dragged out to sea. In this chapter, Karana has to confront the fact that the natural world isn't always the delightful, generous entity it's been for most of the novel. The natural world is still something she has to respect—and, on occasion, protect herself from.

It's interesting too that Karana uses anthropomorphism (ascribing human characteristics to inanimate objects) at this point, when the natural world is experiencing a natural disaster. In doing so, she equates humans with violence and destruction.

☛ Night came, but the earth still rose and fell like a great animal breathing. I could hear rocks tumbling from the cliff, falling down into the sea.

All night as we lay there in the house the earth trembled and rocks fell, yet not the big one on the headland, which would have fallen if those who make the world shake had really been angry with us.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker), Karana's Father/Chief Chowig

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Karana weathers the tidal wave, earthquakes shake the island. Again, Karana shows that she thinks of the natural world—especially when it's doing violent things like shaking or creating massive tidal waves—as almost an animal or a living being. The island is, in this case, “like a great animal breathing”—as it breathes, a sign that it's alive, Karana has to struggle to *stay* alive. She and the natural world won't always be on the same page about what it means to live peacefully and coexist. Just as Karana has to sometimes protect animals and nature from other humans, she now has to protect herself from nature.


However, this passage also contains one gratifying aside: the big rock on the headland doesn't fall, and Karana takes this as proof that “those who make the world shake” (gods, presumably) aren't too angry with humans. It's possible to take this a step further: the gods aren't too angry with Karana, a woman, for going against her tribe's rules and making weapons, a task designated for men. So, while the earthquake is frightening and destructive, Karana nevertheless gets proof here that she didn't need to fear making weapons. She may have made the gods mad, but even the gods seem to acknowledge that Karana still needed to be able to make weapons in order to survive.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☛ I came to the mound where my ancestors had sometimes camped in the summer. I thought of them and of the happy times spent in my house on the headland, of my canoe lying unfinished beside the trail. I thought of many things, but stronger was the wish to be where people lived, to hear their voices and their laughter.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 167-68

Explanation and Analysis

Karana is heading down to the beach; there's a ship there with men, whom Karana believes are looking for her to take her off the island. In this moment, Karana finally feels comfortable acknowledging how lonely she's been over the last 16 years. The years she's been on the island have been happy, for sure, but it's also difficult for Karana to live on the island all by herself, with only animals and her ancestors' ghosts to keep her company. Before, Karana couldn't admit how much she wanted to be around people because it would've been too painful to wallow in her sadness and loneliness. But now, because Karana believes she's getting off the island, she's willing to think of all the things she misses about being around people: laughter, voices, and community.

Everywhere she goes on the island, Karana finds mounds like this, or other evidence, that reminds her that she's the last of her tribe on the island. Her tribe used to thrive here—but now, all that's left are Karana and ghosts. This highlights for readers that this novel isn't just a survival story about Karana. It's also the story of how her culture slowly dies as first the rest of her tribe, and finally Karana, leave the island for good.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☛ Then one of the two men who stood behind him spoke to me. His words made the strangest sounds I have ever heard. At first I wanted to laugh, but I bit my tongue.

I shook my head and smiled at him. He spoke again, slowly this time, and though his words sounded the same as before and meant nothing to me, they now seemed sweet. They were the sound of a human voice. There is no sound like this in all the world.

Related Characters: Karana (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

Two years after a ship came looking for Karana, it returns. The Catholic missionaries have come to Karana's house to

invite her to come with them on their ship across the sea. Keep in mind that Karana hasn't spoken to another person in about 15 years, since she befriended Tutok. It's also worth remembering that Karana's tribe was very small and spoke a language unique to the tribe and the island. Because of these things, it makes sense that Karana would find the missionary's language so strange—she's never heard Spanish before, only Aleut, perhaps Russian, and possibly languages related to her own, if she ever met people from the other indigenous tribes who lived on the other Channel Islands. But as when Karana met Tutok, she quickly realizes that the fact that Spanish sounds funny to her doesn't actually matter. What matters is that a person is speaking to her. She doesn't have to understand what this man is saying to enjoy the fact that she's in conversation with another

person, after almost two decades spent in total solitude. With this, the novel shows just how lonely Karana has been since she was stranded on the island.

This moment is bittersweet, however. Karana might be reveling in the fact that she's hearing another person speak to her, but it's worth remembering that missionaries had a poor track record when it came to interacting with the natives. Karana is in contact with people again, but she's in contact with people who, in all likelihood, will want her to give up her religion, abandon her traditional cultural practices, and even stop speaking her language. So, while Karana is happy, the ending of the novel itself is pretty ambiguous as to whether or not readers are supposed to take it as happy.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

When Karana first catches sight of the Aleut ship in the distance, it looks like a small shell. Next it looks like a gull, and then, finally, Karana sees what it is: a red ship with two red sails. She's gathering roots with her six-year-old brother, Ramo. He's small but quick, and he's sometimes foolish. To keep him from running off, Karana keeps quiet about the ship and digs carefully. But Ramo doesn't miss much. Soon, he stares out to sea and notes that it's smooth, like a stone, and there's a small cloud sitting on it. Karana argues that the sea is water and waves, and there are maybe dolphins out there, but no clouds.

Ramo has never seen a ship before, so he watches it get closer without knowing what it is. Karana hasn't seen one either—but she's heard about them, and so she knows what she's seeing. She scolds Ramo and asks him to help her dig, but instead, he remains focused on the ship. Finally, he asks if Karana has ever seen a red whale. Karana lies that she has—but Ramo suddenly shouts that it's a big, red canoe coming to the island. He tosses his stick and races away. Karana keeps digging. She's excited, but the village needs the roots, so she finishes her task.

The Aleut ship has already entered Coral Cove by the time Karana fills her basket. The village already knows about the ship, so the men take their spears and hurry down to the shore. The women crouch at the edge of the mesa, and Karana hides in the brush just above the cove. She watches half of the men stand at the waterline, waiting for the newcomers to come ashore. The other men are hidden and ready to attack. A boat leaves the ship with six men in it. One of them is tall with a yellow beard—a Russian. Karana wonders if these are the men her people fear, especially when the Russian man leaps out of the boat onto the shore, shouting. He acts like he owns the island.

The Russian man shouts for a moment and then switches to Karana's language. He says he'd like to speak with the villagers, so Karana's father steps out and introduces himself. He introduces himself as Chief Chowig, the chief of Ghalas-at. Karana is surprised to hear this. Everyone in her tribe has two names. One of them is secret and is seldom used—and Karana's father gave his secret name. Karana usually goes by Won-a-palei, or Girl with the Long Black Hair—Karana is her secret name. The Russian introduces himself as Captain Orlov.

The novel's opening shows Karana's closeness with the natural world. Even when confronted with a ship—something readers will immediately recognize as a man-made object—Karana likens it to natural items, like a shell or a gull. Ramo does the same, which suggests that this close relationship with nature is something that most (or all) people in their tribe enjoy.



The fact that Karana has heard about ships before suggests that her tribe has encountered outsiders in the past, and that was a meaningful enough experience to tell stories about it to younger generations. Ramo, on the other hand, may be too young to have heard the stories yet—or, given how excited and flighty he seems, he just won't sit still to listen. Karana, in contrast, is level-headed and focused on the importance of her work for the tribe as a whole—a concern that the novel will develop in more detail.



As the Aleuts approach, the tribe's division along gendered lines suggests that there are clear gender roles guiding how the tribe functions. This is probably also why Karana felt compelled to fill her basket with roots before joining the others. Karana's observations create tension and make this ship's arrival feel ominous. Clearly, something bad happened last time people came to the island—and this Russian doesn't seem inclined to treat the natives respectfully.



It is, perhaps, a good sign that Captain Orlov can speak Karana's language. At the very least, this man has taken the time to learn how to communicate with the natives on the island. Things start to feel a bit more dangerous, though, when Karana's father shares his secret name with Captain Orlov—it suggests that the stakes of this encounter are high. Captain Orlov's shouting and high and mighty conduct are also ominous.



Captain Orlov explains that he and his men have come to camp on the island and hunt sea otter. Karana's father says nothing—Aleuts hunted otter once before, and her father remembers what happened. Captain Orlov explains that he's heard of the last expedition, and it went poorly because the captain was a "fool" and the tribe, rather than the Aleuts, did the hunting. Captain Orlov explains that his men will hunt and when they're done, they'll pay for a third of the pelts in supplies. Karana's father insists on getting half, but Captain Orlov asks to discuss this later, once his men and supplies are on shore.

Again, the way that Captain Orlov and Chief Chowig discuss the Aleuts' last visit to the island makes it clear that things didn't go well. Because of this, it makes sense that Chief Chowig would greet Captain Orlov with suspicion and be unwilling to trust the man. And his suspicions seem even more reasonable when Captain Orlov is unwilling to pay the tribe appropriately for the otter. Captain Orlov wants what he wants, and he doesn't see the natives as people worthy of compensation.



Karana's father asks Captain Orlov to agree to half now. The sea surrounding the Island of the Blue Dolphins, he explains, belongs to his tribe. Finally, Captain Orlov agrees.

Karana's father wants Captain Orlov to see the natives as people to trade with, not people to exploit. The land and the seas belong to them—they're not just there for Captain Orlov to take.



CHAPTER 2

Karana's father allows Captain Orlov and the Aleut hunters to camp on higher ground. The Island of the Blue Dolphins is two leagues long and one league wide—it looks like a dolphin. It's windy, so rocks are polished smooth. Karana's village, Ghalas-at, is on a small mesa near Coral Cove and a spring. The Aleuts pitch tents a half-league to the north, near another spring.

Given the size of the island, Karana makes it seem like the Island of the Blue Dolphins really isn't big enough to accommodate both the tribe and the Aleut hunters. The Aleuts are invaders and trespassers, and their presence on the island isn't at all welcome.



That night, Karana's father warns people not to visit the Aleuts. He insists they're too different to befriend; they can only profit from this relationship. The villagers obey, but someone always keeps watch on the Aleuts. Ramo brings news that Captain Orlov combs his beard in the morning, and Karana's older sister Ulape shares that there's an Aleut woman with the hunters. Nobody believes this.

Recall that the Aleuts' last trip to the island ended terribly—because of this, it makes sense that Karana's father doesn't want anyone fraternizing with the Aleuts. The Aleuts have proven themselves untrustworthy and dangerous. This fact also implies that it's unlikely the tribe will actually profit from this relationship.



The Aleuts also watch Ghalas-at; this is how they learn of the village's good fortune. It's early spring, when fishing is poor. But one afternoon, Ulape discovers a school of huge white bass stuck on the shore in the cove. She fetches the other women and they all run to grab the fish. The bass are so big that it takes two women to carry each one. Everyone in the village eats well that night—but in the morning, two Aleuts come to Ghalas-at, demanding a share of the bass. Karana's father refuses to share. The villagers enjoy the rest of the fish and celebrate that night, but they don't know yet that their good fortune with the bass will cause trouble.

This event with the bass allows Karana to demonstrate how well her tribe works together to accomplish a task. Ulape knows she can't handle the bass herself, but when all the women work together to snag the fish, the entire tribe profits. They don't share with the Aleuts because they don't consider the Aleuts friends—their business relationship with the Aleuts is tense and fraught. The Aleuts' demand for fish makes them seem entitled, which also shows how little they respect Karana's tribe.



CHAPTER 3

The island is surrounded on three sides by kelp beds, which extend into the sea about a league. The Aleuts hunt otter in the kelp every day. From the cliffs, Karana watches their canoes skim through the water and spears fly at the otter. In the evenings, two men skin the otter on the beach. Every morning, the beach is covered in carcasses and the waves are bloody. Many villagers count the dead otter every night and think of how many beads they'll get in return. But Karana is angry—the otter are her friends, and it's more fun to watch them play than wear beads. One day, when she tells her father this, he laughs at her and insists that the otter will return to the kelp beds once the Aleuts leave in a week or so.

Karana knows her father believes the Aleuts will leave soon—he sent young men to build a canoe out of driftwood, which means those men are always on the beach to make sure the Aleuts don't try to leave without paying. Everyone is afraid Captain Orlov will try to leave without paying, so they keep close watch. They notice the Aleut woman cleaning her aprons and the hunters shift to skinning rather than killing. The villagers wonder if Captain Orlov will pay, or if they'll have to fight. Karana's father stays silent, but he works on a new spear every night.

CHAPTER 4

There's no sun on the day the Aleuts leave. As they pack their tents, it's clear a storm is going to strike soon. Captain Orlov still hasn't paid for the otter, so the tribe hurries to Coral Cove. The men take their weapons to the beach, and the women—including Karana and Ulape—hide in the brush on the cliff. Karana watches the Aleuts load bundles of otter pelts and keeps an eye on her father, who's talking angrily to Captain Orlov. A boat heads out to the ship with pelts and, when Captain Orlov raises a hand, it returns with a black chest.

Captain Orlov opens the chest and shows Karana's father several sparkly necklaces. But Karana's father shakes his head. Captain Orlov insists that there are more chests containing iron spearheads on the ship, but he seems unwilling to bring them to shore. Ulape and Karana don't trust him and watch their father step in front of an Aleut headed for the boat. Captain Orlov insists he has to load up before the storm arrives and ignores Karana's father's offer to help load the ship with his canoes.

Even if Karana's entire tribe is in tune with the natural world, Karana seems even more in tune than the others. Unlike, say, her father, she's unwilling to see the otter as currency. To her, they're friends, and the beads she'll get in return for their bodies are meaningless. But describing the kelp beds and all the dead otter situates the Island of the Blue Dolphins as a place rich in these natural resources. And this makes it a prime target for colonizing forces, like the Aleuts and their Russian captain.



Once again, given how poorly things went last time, the tribe's distrust of the Aleuts and Captain Orlov make perfect sense. At this point, though, it's not easy to tell whether Karana's father is right to be so suspicious of Captain Orlov. At the same time, this passage also shows how tasks get split up along gender lines in Karana's tribe. It's a task for young men, Karana implies, to build canoes.



The coming storm creates a sense of urgency—Captain Orlov needs to get his things to his ship and get out of here, or he's going to be stuck and will have to deal with the tribe for longer than he intended. Karana's tribe again divides up along gender lines as they confront Captain Orlov; it seems to be men's work to potentially fight the Aleuts, while the women hiding suggests they're expected to protect themselves.



Karana's father might want some of the necklaces, but necklaces are pretty useless in the grand scheme of things—especially compared to iron spearheads. Captain Orlov seems aware of this. His unwillingness to bring the spearheads to shore suggests he is trying to rip off the natives. More specifically, he seems unwilling to present them with weapons that might allow them to fight back more effectively—perhaps he never intended to actually hand over the spearheads.



Karana isn't sure who makes the first move, but a battle breaks out on the beach. As the men from the village race toward the Aleuts, a puff of smoke and a loud noise comes from Captain Orlov's ship. Five villagers are dead. Women throw rocks at the Aleuts but stop when they can't tell the difference between their own men and their enemies. Karana watches her father fall and not get up again. At first, it seems like the villagers will win, but Captain Orlov brings more Aleuts from the ship. Suddenly, as the wind picks up, Captain Orlov and the hunters get in their boats and head for their ship. They send one more puff of smoke back toward the island.

The storm rolls in as Ulape and Karana race for the beach. Most of the men are wounded, and their father is dead. Karana and the other villagers agree that he shouldn't have told Captain Orlov his secret name. This, they decide, caused him to die.

CHAPTER 5

On this terrible day, the tribe goes from 42 men to only 15, seven of them old. The storm rages for two more days and finally, on the third day, Karana's tribe buries their dead. They burn the Aleut bodies and spend the next few days in silence. Several villagers discuss taking their canoes to a nearby island, Santa Catalina, but there's supposedly little water there. Ultimately, everyone decides to stay.

The council chooses a new chief, an old man named Kimki. He's a good man and a good hunter. Once he's chosen, he announces that since the village has lost the men who build canoes and hunt and fish, women will have to start taking on some of these tasks. People will be upset—but everyone has to pitch in, or the villagers will die. Kimki assigns everyone jobs. Karana and Ulape are tasked with gathering abalone on the rocks, and Ramo is assigned the job of protecting the drying abalone from gulls and wild dogs. The pack of wild dogs on the island has grown, since many domestic dogs joined the pack when their owners died.

Notice that Karana's narration never refers to the puffs of smoke and the noise coming from Captain Orlov's ship as a cannonball; such a thing is far outside of what she's familiar with. In this passage, Captain Orlov proves that Karana's father was right: the Aleuts and their Russian captain aren't trustworthy. Indeed, it doesn't seem like a huge leap for them to go from killing otter to murdering Karana's family and friends. The natives, to the Aleuts and Orlov, aren't people worthy of respect.



It's interesting that the villagers essentially place the blame for Chief Chowig's death on the chief himself, rather than on Captain Orlov for double-crossing the tribe and being violent. This suggests the villagers believe they should be able to fight back effectively against colonial forces. They also seem to think that by telling Orlov his secret name, the chief surrendered some of his power unnecessarily.



It's a huge blow to Karana's tribe to lose almost two-thirds of its men. This not only highlights how violent and uncaring the Aleuts were—they left the tribe high and dry, after all—but it also throws the tribe into disarray. Now, they don't know what to do or how to manage without the men to perform certain tasks.



Kimki takes a very pragmatic approach here when he assigns some hunting and fishing tasks to women. He understands that this isn't going to go over well with everyone—having such specific gender roles can be comforting and a source of pride and stability for many. But Kimki also suggests that pride and comfort are much less important when a person's survival is on the line, and accomplishing these tasks at all is more important than who actually does the hunting and fishing.



Other women gather “scarlet apples” from cactus bushes, catch fish, and hunt birds. They work so hard that the village actually does better than it did before, when men did all the hunting. Life should be peaceful, but it isn’t. Men resent that the women have taken men’s “rightful” tasks, so they look down on the women. Finally, Kimki reassigns all hunting to men and all gathering to women. There’s already enough food for winter, so this reassignment doesn’t matter much.

But what makes things even worse at Ghalas-at this winter is that all those who died at Coral Cove are still haunting the island. Karana remembers her father all the time, and it’s hard to look after Ramo with no parents. Once people settle into their houses for winter, they grieve for those who died.

When spring arrives, Kimki calls a meeting and announces that he’s going to take a canoe east, where there’s a land far across the sea where the villagers can live. He promises to return for everyone else. Everyone goes to the cove and watches him leave, and then people wonder if he’ll be back before winter—or if he’ll ever come back.

CHAPTER 6

When Kimki has been gone a month, people start keeping watch for him on the cliffs. But he doesn’t return, even when summer arrives. The winter wasn’t very stormy, which means that the villagers will have to carefully ration water. While this has happened before and hasn’t caused problems, now people are terrified. Matasaip, the man who takes Kimki’s place, urges the villagers to stay calm and worry about more important things—like whether the Aleuts will return. The tribe no longer has enough men to fight off an attack, so they plan to leave at the first sighting of the Aleut ship. They hide food, water, and canoes at the south end of the island. If the Aleuts return, the villagers will leave for Santa Catalina.

People keep watch day and night and finally, one night, a man returns to Ghalas-at with the news that the Aleuts are here. Matasaip encourages everyone to stay calm and pack only necessities. Karana, however, packs her yucca skirt and her otter cape. She follows the villagers to the canoes—but halfway there, the man who first sighted the ship runs up to Matasaip and says this ship isn’t the Aleut ship. This one is white and small. Matasaip sends the rest of the villagers to wait at the canoes while he goes back.

As Kimki predicted, reassigning duties that were once men-only doesn’t go over well with some in the tribe. The men find it threatening that the women are able to do better than the men ever did. Moreover, the fact that the women are more successful than the men were shows that hunting and fishing weren’t men’s tasks because men are naturally better at them. Rather, dividing the labor this way just ensured that everything got done.



Karana implies that she and her neighbors are living amongst ghosts. Their way of life is starting to come to an end, and it’s impossible to go anywhere on the island without remembering how things used to be.



After the Aleuts killed so many of the tribe’s men, it’s becoming clear to Kimki that the tribe can’t continue to function happily and effectively on the island. They’ll need to look elsewhere to find safety and security. Kimki’s actions suggest that the tribe’s way of life coming to an end.



With all the upheaval and grief, people in Karana’s tribe now see anything that doesn’t go their way as a potential catastrophe. Matasaip proposes that while this is understandable, it’s not useful—the tribe has bigger issues to worry about. These days, the tribe believes that their very existence is in danger, so it’s necessary to prepare to leave their home at a moment’s notice. Again, the specter of colonialism looms large here; it’s the colonizing forces—like the Aleuts and Russians—that are forcing the natives to consider leaving.



Things become a bit more confusing when the ship turns out not to belong to the Aleuts. But this, of course, raises the question of who the ship does belong to—and whether they’re here to do further harm to the natives or to help them. In any case, Matasaip knows that they can’t simply trust that everything is going to be okay. If they intend to survive, the tribe needs to be ready to leave at the first sign of trouble.



Karana and the villagers wait, afraid to start a fire to cook breakfast. Finally, while Ramo is down checking on the canoes, a young man named Nanko returns with a message—which is clearly good news. He says the ship belongs to white men, whom Kimki sent. The ship is going to take everyone away from Ghalas-at. Nanko doesn't know where they're going, but Kimki does. Everyone follows Nanko, afraid and happy.

Kimki seems to have kept his word to move the tribe across the sea, where they'll be safe from the Aleuts. But the fact remains that the Aleuts are still essentially forcing the tribe off its land, simply by making them too afraid to stay put and risk encountering the Aleuts again.



CHAPTER 7

The villagers pack their baskets excitedly. Karana packs whalebone needles, an awl, a knife, cooking pots, and a box of jewelry. Ulape packs two boxes of earrings (she's vainer than Karana) and then draws on her face with blue clay. The mark means she's unmarried. Nanko encourages everyone to hurry—there's a storm coming—but Ulape, who's in love with Nanko, jokes that the ship will come back with handsomer men. Finally, the villagers head for the cove. Ramo starts in front, but then tells Karana he forgot his fishing spear. Karana refuses to let him go back for it.

Karana noting that Ulape is vainer than she is suggests that she looks at Ulape's jewelry collection—a mark of Ulape's femininity—as something to roll her eyes at. Karana might have a jewelry collection of her own, but she doesn't place as much importance on having lots of jewelry as Ulape does. This showed up earlier, too, when Karana insisted that she cared more about the otter than about the beads their pelts would get for the tribe.



The ship is just outside the cove; due to the high waves, it can't come closer. There are two boats and four white men on the beach. They speak a language Karana doesn't understand. Aside from Nanko, all the men—and Ramo—are already on the ship. The women get into the two boats and then manage to climb onto the ship. It's huge, with tall sails.

As when the Aleuts arrived and left, the tall waves and impending inclement weather create tension. Getting everyone onto the ship needs to happen quickly, or getting everyone off the island isn't going to go well.



Karana calls for Ramo; he's bound to get in the sailors' way. She can't find him. But then, Ulape points to shore: Ramo is on the cliff with his fishing spear. The ship is already moving away and Karana screams. Matasaip tries to reason with Karana, but when the ship starts to turn east, she leaps into the sea.

For Karana, it's inconceivable to think about leaving Ramo on the island by himself. He's just a little kid, after all, and he's going to need someone to look out for him. This shows how seriously Karana takes her role as Ramo's caregiver.



A wave pushes Karana down so far that she fears she won't rise again. Finally, she reaches the surface. She still has her basket, but she realizes it's too heavy and lets it sink. Then, she swims for shore. She intends to punish Ramo when she gets there, but when she sees how forlorn he looks, she just hugs him. Karana assures Ramo that the ship will come back for him. She's angry: her beautiful yucca skirt is ruined.

As Karana dives into the sea, she discovers that the natural world isn't always friendly. In this situation, the sea might swallow her whole—and it does take all her supplies, in addition to ruining her brand-new skirt. Nature isn't predictable, and this dangerous situation suggests it won't make life easy for Karana.



CHAPTER 8

Karana and Ramo climb the trail, but the blowing sand makes it hard to see. They shelter amongst rocks until night, when the storm starts to die. When they return to the village, it looks ghostly—and wild dogs are poking around in the huts. The dogs, Karana finds, have eaten all the abalone they left. Karana finally finds enough for supper and lights a small fire. She can still hear the dogs on the hill, though they return to their lair on the island's north side at dawn.

Ramo and Karana spend the day gathering food. They find more than enough to eat, but Karana has to cook on a flat rock since her bowls are in the sea. The dogs circle the village again that night and leave at dawn. Now that the ocean is calmer, Karana weaves a seaweed basket and collects abalone. They stop on the cliff on their way back to the village and look in the direction the ship went. Though Karana doesn't think it'll come back today, she tells Ramo it might.

Eyes shining, Ramo says he doesn't care if the ship comes back—he likes it better on the island with just Karana. He announces that he's going to fetch one of the hidden canoes tomorrow so he and Karana can fish and explore. He brushes off Karana's insistence that it's too heavy and puffs out his chest. Ramo notes that he's the son of Chowig—and since Chowig is dead, he's now the chief. Karana points out he has to become a man first, which entails being whipped with nettles and tied to a red ant hill. Ramo goes pale, so Karana says perhaps they can skip the ritual. Karana knows that Ramo crowning himself chief will make things difficult—especially when he announces that his new name is Chief Tanyositlopai.

Even if Ramo is the chief now, Karana has no intention of letting him get a canoe alone. But when she wakes up the next morning, he's gone. Karana is afraid—Ramo would have trouble with even the smallest canoe. But Karana also knows that Ramo will have to grow up faster than normal if the ship doesn't return. She heads for Coral Cove, reasoning that if he is successful, he'll want someone at the cove to greet him after his voyage.

Karana gathers mussels as she waits, wondering if the ship will actually return for her and Ramo. When her basket is full, she climbs to the mesa and studies the coastline. She returns to the village; Ramo isn't there. So finally, Karana heads south. She hears dogs barking near the cliff. Karana follows the sound and finds the pack. Ramo is in the middle of the circle of dogs, his throat bleeding. He's dead and Karana can tell he's been dead a while—he never even reached the canoes. There are two dead dogs near him, and Ramo's spear sticks out of one.

Nature continues to make things dangerous and difficult with the blowing sand. Describing the village as "ghostly" makes it seem as though the village itself is dead; all that's left of Karana and Ramo's friends and neighbors are their homes. And the wild dogs present a problem, as they're dangerous, hungry, and don't seem to be nearly afraid enough of people for comfort.



Karana demonstrates her resourcefulness and her knowledge of how to survive on the island when she weaves this basket and manages to cook without her bowls. It's also essential that she give Ramo hope that this won't last forever. By doing this, Karana steps into a more adult, caregiving role.



Both Ramo and Karana show here that they're well aware of the tribe's gender roles. Though Ramo is only six, he knows that as the only male on the island, he can name himself chief—and can choose a long, difficult name to exert his power. But Karana also suggests that being a man or a chief isn't so simple; in order to truly be a man, Ramo is going to have to undergo some unpleasant experiences to demonstrate his tenacity and maturity. She also suggests that this ritual is something unique to men in her tribe; she mentions no equivalent ritual that makes girls women.



Again, Karana realizes that she has to humor Ramo somewhat if she expects them to stay alive on the island. They're going to have to work together, and Ramo is going to have to mature extremely fast in order to survive. And at his age, Karana believes this means that she has to build him up and boost his confidence.



Ramo's death means that Karana is now totally alone on the island. And as she notes here, it's impossible to know for sure whether the ship is actually going to come back for her. The fact that the dogs killed Ramo makes it clear that for now, they're one of the biggest threats to human life on the island—especially now that Karana is all alone. Because of their presence and their willingness to kill humans, the island becomes much less hospitable.



Karana carries Ramo home and then scares the dogs off with a club. The dogs' leader, a big gray dog with yellow eyes, leaves last. Karana follows them to their cave. There isn't enough brush to light a fire and trap them in there, so she returns home. She sits with Ramo's body and vows to kill the dogs.

After Ramo's death, Karana wants to dominate over the dogs and the natural world. It's essential to her that she get revenge for Ramo's death and show the dogs that they can't pick off humans so easily.



CHAPTER 9

Karana doesn't remember much of this time. Many days pass and she only leaves the village to gather more food. Eventually, she decides she won't live in the village anymore. The fog creeping through the silent huts reminds Karana of the dead villagers. She can almost hear them speaking. So, she builds a fire and burns the huts, one by one. Karana takes a basket of food with her to a headland west of Coral Cove. There's a sheltered spot between a big rock and two trees, and there's water nearby. Karana sleeps on the rock that night; the wild dogs can't get her there.

The ghostly fog drives home that Karana is the final survivor on the island. The way her tribe has always lived is coming to an end—she's just one person now, surrounded by ghosts. By burning the village, she destroys evidence that her tribe ever lived here. And while she's definitely using everything her tribe taught her to survive, her solitary predicament means that she's inevitably moving away from how things have historically been.



It's still winter and the ship might return any day, so Karana doesn't bother storing much food. Instead, she makes weapons to protect herself from the dogs and ultimately to kill them all. She found a club in a hut, but she needs a bow, arrows, and a spear. Ghalas-at's laws state that women can't make weapons, so Karana searches for any left behind. She checks the village and then the hidden canoes. Finding nothing, she heads for Coral Cove, hoping to find spearheads in the chest the Aleuts left on the shore.

At this point, Karana is very lonely and can only focus on how and when she might get off the island. However, her attention is being pulled in multiple directions. She knows she has to figure out weapons of some sort, or she won't survive long enough for the ship to return. By deciding to look for weapons rather than make them, though, Karana keeps one of her tribe's traditions (that women can't make tools) alive.



It's low tide. Karana starts to dig small holes in the sand, figuring the storms covered the chest up. Finally, she finds the chest. Karana digs all morning until the tide comes in, and she resumes digging when the tide turns. Eventually, Karana can lift the lid. The chest is filled with jewelry. Karana puts on a long string of beads and two matching bracelets to walk the shore. When she reaches the spot where the villagers and the Aleuts fought, Karana remembers those who died. She returns to the chest, knowing she can never wear this jewelry. Karana flings all the beads into the waves and discovers no iron spearheads underneath.

The jewelry is beautiful, but it's impossible for Karana to ignore that this jewelry is no compensation at all for the villagers the Aleuts killed. So, though she tries to put a positive spin on the jewelry, she finds it's impossible to do so. It's even more salt in the wound when Karana doesn't find any spearheads under the beads. It doesn't seem like Orlov ever intended to keep his promises—the natives were nothing to him but an obstacle, there only to be exploited.



Karana forgets all about weapons until, days later, the dogs howl under her rock. She watches them slink through the brush all day and dig up her buried supper that evening. Karana is afraid of the dogs, but she's also afraid of what might happen if she makes the weapons she needs. Will the winds smother her, or will an earthquake bury her in rocks? Will the sea flood the island? Will the weapons break just when she needs them, as her father said? After two days of thinking, Karana decides she has to make weapons.

Being on the island alone—and having to face dangers like the wild dogs—forces Karana's priorities to change. She's grown up hearing that terrible things will happen if she disobeys her tribe's rules. But at this point, she also realizes that if she continues to not make weapons, terrible things are going to happen anyway—at some point, the dogs are going to get her. In her mind, it's better to tempt natural disasters than essentially let the dogs win.



Karana needs a sea elephant's tusk for her spear tip, but she doesn't have a weapon—or three men—to kill one. So, she fashions a tree root into a point and ties it to a long shaft. The bow and arrows are harder, but Karana eventually finds the right kind of wood for the bow. What's even harder than finding the materials, though, is making the weapons. She's only ever watched them being made, and she never paid close attention. But finally, Karana crafts a useable bow and arrows. She carries it everywhere. The dogs don't visit her camp while she's making weapons, but once, when the weapons are done, Karana notices the dogs' leader watching her.

Having weapons makes Karana feel secure, and she's certain that the dogs will eventually come to the camp. She makes herself a bed of seaweed on her rock. Karana watches the gulls, pelicans, and otter every morning. At night, she thinks about the white men's ship, but it never returns for her. Though the village used to wake up and get to work early, Karana starts sleeping in. She doesn't have much to do as winter and spring come and go.

CHAPTER 10

Now that it's summer, Karana figures the ship will return for her. She spends most of her time on her rock, watching, but only ever sees a whale spouting. When the first winter storm arrives, she feels hopeless and lonely. Before, she didn't feel lonely because she trusted that Matasaip was right, and the ship would return. She knows now that it never will. Karana has nightmares and doesn't eat much.

The winds are so bad that Karana can't keep sleeping on her rock. For five days, she sleeps at the bottom of the rock with a fire going. She kills three dogs when they come, but not the leader. The storm ends, so on the sixth day, Karana goes to find one of the canoes. The food in them is still good. She's decided to take a canoe and head east on her own. Karana remembers that Kimki asked his ancestors' advice before heading east, but Karana can't do this—she's never been able to speak to the dead. Still, she's not really afraid. Her ancestors crossed the sea in canoes, and Kimki did the same. She's too interested in leaving the island, its ghosts, and its wild dogs to worry about what might happen.

As a woman, Karana has been educated in traditionally feminine tasks: gathering, caregiving, cooking. She's never had to care about how to make an effective weapon, so now she finds herself at a disadvantage. When she does successfully construct weapons, though, it shows that women weren't forbidden from making weapons because they're naturally incapable. Rather, it was just a way to ensure everything got done. As a single person on the island, though, Karana's sex starts to matter much less—she has to do everything for herself now.



Being able to successfully make weapons shows Karana that she's capable of being self-sufficient on the island. With her weapons, she can perform tasks that were once just for men, like hunting and fishing. And her descriptions of the landscape and animals suggest that these things do make her happy—but for now, she's too lonely to appreciate them as much as she might otherwise.



As the seasons pass and the ship doesn't return, Karana feels as though her tribe has abandoned her. Now, she has to adjust to being alone on the island, and this is no small task—she essentially has to grieve her friends and family, as well as her former lifestyle and any hopes she had for the future.



These days spent at the base of the rock, fending off the wild dogs, impresses Karana how alone she really is. There's no one else to protect her, and the dogs aren't going to show her mercy if they manage to get close. So, it starts to seem like a better option to take matters into her own hands and head east alone. Taking the canoe east seems like something that only men could do before. The fact that Karana doesn't see an issue with going shows how little gender roles matter to her now, when her survival is the most important thing.



Karana selects the smallest **canoe**, which is still almost too big for her to handle. Using a slippery bed of kelp, she steers it into the water. She kneels in the back (which allows her to go faster) until she reaches the southern sandspit. Eventually, the Island of the Blue Dolphins disappears behind her. Night falls, and Karana listens to the waves. She's so afraid that she's not hungry, but her fear starts to dissipate as the stars come out.

About halfway through the night, Karana discovers that the **canoe** is leaking. She bails out the water in the canoe until she finds a crack as long as her hand. Karana fills it with a piece of her skirt just before daybreak. She realizes she's going a bit too far south, so she paddles north toward the sun. Karana is tired, but hopeful—another day and she'll be able to see the shore. But before long, the canoe develops a bigger leak. Karana fills it with more of her skirt, but she realizes that all of the canoe's planks are weak and brittle. It's dangerous to keep going.

Karana lets the **canoe** drift. The thought of going back after working so hard is painful—and she's not excited to return to the island to live alone for who knows how long. Finally, when more water starts to seep through the canoe's cracks, Karana turns back toward the island. There's no wind, which allows Karana to make good time. And then, when the wind does pick up, a pod of dolphins swims around the canoe. They're lucky animals and watching them play helps Karana forget that her hands are bleeding. The dolphins feel like friends. The animals disappear just before dusk, and thinking of them keeps Karana from falling asleep. She drifts off several times—but she can see the island in the morning. When she reaches the island, Karana, exhausted, collapses in the sand and sleeps.

CHAPTER 11

Karana wakes up that night when she feels waves at her feet. She's still too tired to go far, so she goes back to sleep once she's on slightly higher ground. In the morning, Karana gathers her things and turns the **canoe** upside down—this way, the tide can't take it. Then she returns to the headland. To her surprise, she's happy to be home where she can see the otter, the seafoam, and the gulls. Looking out at the sea, though, Karana feels afraid. She knows now that she'll never try to leave the island again; she'll be here until the white men return for her. This decided, Karana knows she has to build herself a house.

The canoes, it seems, were built for bigger, male bodies; because Karana is still a young girl, she struggles with the canoe. But once the canoe is in the water, Karana demonstrates her skill and her strength. She may not have much practice maneuvering canoes on land by herself, but once she's in the water, she's more or less at home.



This canoe may have represented freedom to Karana at first, but now, it starts to feel like it's trapping her. It doesn't seem likely that she can rely on it to get her where she wants to go. And even as Karana finds herself in a potentially dangerous situation here in the breaking canoe, she also shows that she knows something about canoes. She can identify the problem, which suggests she also knows how to fix it—assuming she can make it back to the island.



It's a difficult decision to turn back, but it is a choice. This makes it easier for her to deal with, especially when the dolphins show up to escort her back. They make it seem like the natural world is rallying around Karana to get her back to the island safe and sound—and they suggest that being on the island alone might not be such a terrible thing. When she thinks of the dolphins as friends, this also shows Karana starting to move away from being friends only with people. If she's going to live alone on the island, she's going to have to look for some new friends.



Navigating the natural world, Karana discovers, is exhausting—after her ordeal, it takes her about a day to be able to simply move away from the water. But, as she looks around and realizes she's happy being amongst the animals on the island, she also concludes that the natural world is beautiful, fulfilling, and something she can deal with. And the prospect of staying seems easier now that Karana is making the choice to stay. This makes her feel more in control, rather than being at the mercy of outward circumstances.



The following morning, Karana starts to hunt for a good place to build a house. It needs to be sheltered, close to a water source, and close enough to Coral Cove. There are two spots like this on the island, one on the headland and one to the west, and Karana hasn't been to the western spot in a while. She arrives and remembers that it's close to the wild dogs' lair. The leader watches Karana as she looks around. Karana knows she'll have to kill the wild dogs if she builds here. That will take time. This spring is better than the other, and this spot offers a bit less protection from the wind than the spot on the headland.

Ultimately, Karana decides on the spot for her house because of the sea elephants. Near the western spot is a place where the sea elephants like to spend time. The bull sea elephants are massive, but the smaller cows are noisy and scream all the time. Even though the sea elephants are far out on the rocks, they make so much noise that Karana returns to the headland.

It rains for the next two days. Karana makes a small shelter and shivers, since she can't build a fire. When the rains stop, she goes out to scout for supplies to build a house and fence. She needs to keep out the wild dogs in addition to the red foxes. The rain makes everything smell wonderful, and Karana sings to herself as she walks to the sandspit. It feels like a lucky day to build her home.

CHAPTER 12

Several years ago, two whales washed up on the sandspit. Karana digs up the whales' ribs to make her fence. She sets them deep in the earth, curving out, so that nothing can climb them and get in. Then, she weaves kelp between the ribs. Creating the fence doesn't take too long, as the rock forms part of the fence. Karana digs a hole under the fence, lines it with stones, and covers it with a rock that she can move. Now she's safe from the wild dogs.

The house takes much longer than the fence to build. It rains a lot and there isn't much wood on the island. According to legends, the island was once covered in trees. But two gods, Tumaiyowit and Mukat, fought about lots of things—and when Tumaiyowit angrily descended to the underworld, this is when people started to die. There were trees when the gods were fighting, but now there are just a few. After searching for several days, Karana has enough poles for the house. She finishes her house when the winter is half over. She feels safe—the foxes and wild dogs circle outside the fence, but they can't get in. Karana shoots at the dogs, but she doesn't shoot the leader.

Karana seems to know the island very well—and to have good instincts about its potential. As she inspects this spot, she also demonstrates a nuanced understanding of what it'll take to live by herself on the island. It'd be silly, she knows, to live so close to predators, but it's also important to her to weigh how close and how good each water source is. There's a lot to consider, and by weighing these factors, she shows how prepared she is to live alone.



In addition to being safe and having access to water, Karana also needs to be able to sleep and hear herself think. Being close to the sea elephants won't give her any peace and quiet, which makes this an easy decision.



Having to spend the two days shivering impresses upon Karana how important it is that she build herself a house. It also gives her the time to think through all the parts of this process, from where to find supplies to what exactly she needs to build. Karana demonstrates her logical, practical nature—and her preparedness.



As a single girl, Karana obviously can't kill a whale all by herself. But she can use her knowledge of the island and its history to find the supplies she needs—this is exactly how she locates these whale ribs. Building up against the rock also creates the sense that Karana is working with the island to protect herself—the rock provides a lot of security.



As Karana forges onward to build her house and her new life, she still remains emotionally and spiritually invested in her tribe's legends and lore. In this way, even though Karana's tribe is pretty much nonexistent, Karana is still trying to keep customs alive. She can do this in part because she's willing to find new ways to do some things; this allows her to survive. Staying alive at all gives her the option to choose which customs are still useful.



Karana also makes some cooking utensils at this time. She makes bowls to save the juices from cooked fish and a woven basket in which to make gruel. Karana creates a fire pit in the middle of her house and unlike in Ghalas-at, she keeps her fire alive through the night. To deal with the pesky mice, Karana cuts out some cracks in the rocks and makes shelves that the mice can't reach. By spring, Karana is comfortable, safe, and has enough to eat.

Now, it's time to focus on killing the wild dogs. Karana knows she needs a bigger spear and a bigger bow. She spends weeks searching for materials during the day and working on the weapons at night. For light to see, she uses small, dried fish called *sai-sai* as lamps—they stink, but they burn brightly. The bow and arrow turn out well. As Karana works on the spear's handle and the collar that will hold the point, she wonders if she can use a sea elephant's tooth for the point. She isn't sure how to get the teeth, but the more Karana thinks about it, the more determined she becomes to try.

CHAPTER 13

Karana barely sleeps the night before she visits the sea elephants. She thinks about the law forbidding women to make weapons and wonders if a bull will turn on her. If she's injured, will she have to fight off the wild dogs to get home? But Karana puts her fears aside and heads for the sea elephants in the morning.

The bulls sit on the rocky slope, while the cows and the babies—which are still the size of adult men—play in the waves. The bulls are all far apart, since they have terrible tempers and are quick to fight each other. Karana studies the six ugly bulls and decides to target the smallest. He's young and without his own herd, so he won't be as angry as the others. Quietly, Karana slips down the cliff and passes behind the other five bulls. She doesn't want to tip them off. Finally, she crawls behind a big rock and fits an arrow. Karana remembers her father's warning: because Karana is a woman, her bow will break.

Again, Karana casts aside some customs that aren't useful for her as a single person, such as starting a new fire every day. So even as she manages to survive and make less work for herself, her tribe's way of life is still disappearing. In this sense, Karana is creating a totally new path, using what she knows of her tribe's habits and customs.



Killing the wild dogs is a major undertaking, but killing them will also give Karana the sense of accomplishment and power that she craves. As she crafts the weapons for this task, it's notable that she doesn't mention any fears about performing this work formerly reserved for men. Nothing bad has happened to her yet, and with this sense of security, her tribe's gender roles cease to matter as much as they once did.



Keep in mind that Karana has grown up believing that women will be punished for making weapons. This is something she's learned to take seriously. Now, though, she has to decide whether this is a good enough reason to leave herself vulnerable. By deciding to go, she shows she prioritizes her own safety over her tribe's legends and customs.



As Karana sizes up the bulls and decides which one to kill, she again shows how knowledgeable she is about the animals on the island. She might not have ever been part of a sea elephant hunting party before, but she still knows enough about the creatures to plan the safest attack possible. But still, her father's warning sticks in her mind, and shows her how much is at stake here—she could die, for a variety of reasons.



Karana stands, trying to decide where to aim her first arrow. Bull sea elephants have small heads, so that's a bad target. As Karana deliberates, the young bull starts to approach an old bull's females near the water. Karana shoots, and her bow doesn't break—but the bull turns, and the arrow misses him. At the same time, the old bull rushes the young one and slams into him, rolling him into the water. The other sea elephants watch the battle between the old bull and the young bull. The bulls bite at each other's necks and roll in the waves.

When Karana's arrow misses its mark, it seems a bit like a warning from above. But even if some supernatural power is trying to tell Karana that shooting the bull is a bad idea, it's possible to read this another way. The bulls' fight seems bloody—and as though it might result in one of the bulls' deaths. Karana might not have to actually shoot a bull to accomplish her task of securing sea elephant teeth.



When the bulls pause, Karana knows it'd be a good time to shoot the young bull. But she finds that she hopes the young bull will win, so she stays still and watches. When the old bull finally breaks free of the young bull's grasp, he hurries up the beach—right toward Karana. Karana steps back, trips, and feels a sharp pain in her leg. The bulls are locked in battle again by the time she's up, and the water is turning red. The sun is down and Karana's leg hurts, so she begins the journey home.

Karana can't help but get caught up in the drama and majesty of the bull elephants' fight. It's far too compelling, and it's impossible for her to not root for the underdog. Her interest, though, results in her seriously injuring her leg. Again, it's possible to see her injury as something of a warning against making the weapons, though this is impossible to verify.



CHAPTER 14

Karana can barely crawl under her fence due to the pain in her leg. Her leg swells, and for five days, Karana stays in her house. Two days later, her water basket is empty, so Karana packs food, ties it to her back, and crawls to the ravine. She brings her weapons with her. Because she can't climb the rocks, she has to go the long way through the brush. At one point, while she stops to rest, Karana sees the wild dogs' leader above her. He's clearly tracking her with the rest of the pack. The dogs all fade away as Karana fits an arrow in her bow. She can't hear the dogs, but she's certain they're surrounding her.

After injuring her leg, Karana has to face up to the consequences of taking risks like trying to kill a sea elephant on her own. And keep in mind that such a task, as she's implied, would be dangerous for anyone on their own—not just a young woman who isn't "supposed" to be making weapons. Dealing with this injury impresses upon Karana how deadly being alone on the island can be. The sea elephants are dangerous, but even when she's nowhere close to them, she still has to contend with the wild dogs.



Karana crawls on, leaving her bow and arrows since they're now too heavy. The ravine wouldn't be a good place for the dogs to attack, so Karana drinks her fill and then fills her basket with water. There's a cave nearby, but as Karana crawls toward it, she sees the leader of the dogs and then the rest of the pack. She crawls into the cave and knows she's safe. The dogs stalk around the cave's entrance for the six days that Karana stays there. As she waits for her leg to heal, Karana decides to make the cave into a house where she can stay when she's injured or sick.

Karana manages to survive this situation because she knows the landscape and the dogs' hunting habits. She's able to look around her and know that she's safe—which shows how prepared she is to live and survive on the island. And this experience does have an upside, as it shows Karana the importance of planning ahead for injury or illness. Her house on the headland is great, but it's best used in addition to another, safer home.



Karana's ancestors used this cave at some point in the past. In addition to cutting figures of pelicans, dolphins, ravens, and foxes, they also cut deep stone basins. Karana decides to store water in them and then cuts shelves into the rock as well. She stores preserved food, her first bow and arrows, and creates a bed of seaweed. After leaving wood for fires, she covers the opening with stones. Everything Karana has done is work for a man.

As Karana works, she isn't able to avoid acknowledging that she's the last of her tribe on the island. She's living amongst the ghosts of her ancestors. In the case of this cave, though, they seem to be watching over her and helping her, particularly when it comes to the stone basins for storing water. By this point, Karana has also become comfortable doing traditionally masculine tasks.



Finally, when the second house is done and Karana's leg is better, she returns to the sea elephants. She finds the old bull's body high on the slope, picked clean by gulls, but the bull's teeth are still there. Karana manages to make four good spear points from the teeth. Now, she's ready to kill the dogs.

Though Karana did get hurt during this process, she still learned an important lesson: if she's patient and allows nature to take its course, it can and will provide for her. Sea elephant fights don't seem uncommon; she may be able to get teeth again, just by waiting for another set of bulls to fight to the death.



CHAPTER 15

There have always been wild dogs on the Island of the Blue Dolphins, but the pack has become much bolder since the Aleuts killed villagers and the villagers' dogs joined the pack. The villagers had planned to get rid of them, but then everyone left. Karana believes the pack grew bolder because of the leader, who she believes came with the Aleuts. He's bigger than the other dogs and looks very different. At this point, Karana has already killed five dogs, but the dogs keep reproducing. There are many to kill.

Karana's description of the dog pack's evolution shows that colonial forces are changing life on the island in unexpected ways. They not only killed enough villagers to put the survivors in danger from the dogs; they also left a dog—the leader—that has made the pack even bolder and more dangerous. It also doesn't help that Karana's tribe left; it seems like her neighbors probably also left behind dogs which further expanded the pack.



Karana begins by collecting brush near the pack's lair. Then, when the dogs are all in the cave, early in the morning, Karana lights the brush on fire and pushes it into the cave. Eventually, the dogs will have to leave and escape the smoke. Karana decides to save her arrows for the leader. As the fire dies, small groups of dogs come out of the cave. Then, the leader comes out alone. He doesn't run away—and he doesn't see Karana until she raises her bow. Karana's arrow strikes him in the chest. He wanders away, and Karana shoots three more dogs.

Karana has been on the island alone for just over a year now, and it's clear that she's learned a lot about hunting in that time. She's quickly become an accomplished shot with a bow and arrow, if she can hit the leader right in the chest on her first try. And smoking the dogs out of the cave again shows that Karana knows how to manipulate her surroundings to get the results she wants.



With her spear, Karana goes to look for the leader. She can't find him. After a while, she goes inside the cave. There's a dog in there with four pups, and one approaches Karana. Karana wants to pick it up, but its mother bares her teeth. Though Karana threatens the mother with her spear, she doesn't kill her. The leader is nowhere to be found.

Karana wants to kill the dogs, but when confronted with a protective mother and a curious puppy, she finds herself feeling less violent. Rather, her priorities shift to making sure the mother doesn't attack her, suggesting that Karana is developing more of a live and let live attitude.



It's nearly night now. Karana follows a trail that winds along a cliff until she comes across the broken shaft of the arrow that she shot the leader with. She finds the leader's tracks, but she loses them in the darkness. It's raining the next day, so Karana makes more arrows. The day after, it's nice again, so Karana follows one of the dogs' trails until she finally finds the leader. Karana raises her spear—but the dog lifts his head and then drops it again. Karana is surprised, but she's used to animals playing dead. She climbs onto a tall rock and then notches an arrow. But her hand won't let go, and the dog never gets up.

As she tracks the leader across the island, Karana demonstrates her ability to keep track of animals on the island—an important skill, especially now that she's living alone. The leader's refusal to fight back or show aggression of any sort makes the thought of killing him seem way less satisfying. Killing him seemed like a great outcome when he and Karana were locked in a battle of wills and wits, but now, the dog has clearly given up.



Karana climbs down again and approaches the leader. She picks him up and carries his limp body to the headland. He's too difficult to get through her hole under the fence, so Karana opens the fence to get him in. In her house, Karana pulls the arrow out and cleans the wound with a stick. Figuring the leader will die, Karana leaves water for him and goes to the sea to gather shellfish. But he's still alive when she gets back, so she cleans his wound and forces him to drink water. He looks at her for the first time; his eyes are sunken.

For four days, Karana nurses the leader and sleeps on her rock at night—she doesn't trust him. During the day, she leaves the fence open, but the leader never leaves. She shares her fish with the thin dog, though he won't take it from her hand. On the fourth day, Karana returns from the sea and the leader isn't at the fence. Strangely, Karana is almost sad that the dog left. She calls, "Dog," and finds him inside the house. He wags his tail at her when he sees the fish. Karana sleeps in the house that night and decides to give the leader a name: Rontu, which means "fox eyes."

CHAPTER 16

The white men's ship doesn't come back to the island all spring or summer, though Karana watches for it every day—and she watches for the Aleuts' red ship. Karana ponders what to do if the Aleuts return. She figures she can hide in the cave she set up for illness, since it's difficult to access and the Aleuts don't know about the spring near it. But she decides if she's going to stay there, she needs a **canoe** in case she has to flee. So, Karana decides to improve her canoe. It takes days to dig the canoe out of the sand, but it helps that it's warm enough for Karana to sleep on the beach.

The **canoe** is still too big for Karana to easily get in and out of the water, so she decides to take it apart and make it smaller. When she's done, the canoe isn't as pretty as it once was—but she can lift it. All summer as she works on the canoe, Rontu is nearby. He sleeps in the shade, chases the pelicans, and quickly learns his name. Karana speaks to him often and Rontu learns several words. But even when he doesn't understand, he still cocks his head as though he does. Now, Karana isn't lonely anymore.

At first, Karana expresses no emotion when she decides the dog is probably going to die. But she also doesn't want him to suffer; she's a compassionate person and doesn't want to torture him. And seeing him in such a helpless, needy state seems to affect Karana. It shows her that she's not actually alone on the island—the dog might need her, and he might be able to alleviate her loneliness.



Karana didn't go into this expecting to come out the other side with a friend. But she finds that having another being around, even one she doesn't totally trust at first, makes her feel less alone. And the fact that Rontu chooses to never leave the yard suggests that he might be just as lonely as Karana is. Recall that he came with the Aleuts; in a way, he was abandoned in much the same way Karana was.



Even though Karana is settling in on the island, she's still focused on being ready to leave with the white ship at a moment's notice. But she also knows that she needs to prepare for the Aleuts' return, which isn't guaranteed but seems likely to happen. So even though Karana is alone on the island, her activities are still being dictated by colonial forces—one that might kill her, and one that will take her away.



Canoes, Karana implied earlier, were designed for men in her tribe or for groups of people. As a single woman, she needs to make the canoe useable, which means using everything she knows about canoes to turn it into something appropriate for a single teenage girl. This task seems easier now that Karana has a friend. Rontu makes her solitude easier to bear.



When Karana finally finishes the **canoe**, she and Rontu take a trip around the entire island. It takes all day, but once the canoe proves dependable, Karana starts taking other trips. There are lots of sea caves on the island, and one day, Karana and Rontu explore one just under the headland. Once they make it through the narrow opening, they find a relatively large, black, smooth room. The gold light illuminates the fish in the water. This room opens into another small, dark room that Karana finds disturbing. But she can see a tiny spot of light ahead, so she lets the canoe drift toward it.

Karana and Rontu come out in a room like the first one. It's high tide, but there's still a rock shelf—this is a perfect place to stash a **canoe**. If Karana cuts a trail from her house, she'll be able to get to the water much faster. She tells Rontu this is a great discovery, but he's busy watching a massive devilfish (octopus) swimming near the surface. Karana lets the canoe drift closer and slowly picks up her spear. Devilfish can be dangerous, with their many strong arms and sharp beak. But as Karana leans out to use her spear, the devilfish releases a cloud of ink.

The devilfish appears ahead of the **canoe**, but it's too fast. Karana can't catch up. Rontu doesn't acknowledge Karana when she says he has a lot to learn about devilfish. Instead, he stares at the water, confused—especially when there's no devilfish once the black ink cloud clears. Devilfish is a delicacy, but they're hard to catch. Karana decides to spend the winter making a special spear to catch it and heads home to Coral Cove. Winter is coming, so Karana hides the canoe on the beach. In the spring, she'll take it to the cave she found. With the cave, the dog, and the thrill of hunting the devilfish, Karana is happy.

CHAPTER 17

The winter storms come early. When it's not raining, the wind blows sand into the air. Karana spends her time making another dress and working on the spear to catch the devilfish. As with the other weapons, Karana has seen this spear made but knows little about it. But she remembers what it looks like and how to use it, so with Rontu sleeping nearby, she works on it. Karana breaks three sea elephant teeth, but she manages to fashion one into a barbed point. The point gets fastened to the end of the shaft with a ring, which has a long, braided string tied to it. When a hunter throws the spear into a devilfish, the head comes loose from the shaft and remains tied to the hunter's wrist with the string.

Finishing the canoe gives Karana freedom that she hasn't had before. This smaller canoe isn't difficult to use, and it allows Karana to become even more knowledgeable about her home. Going on these expeditions with Rontu, meanwhile, highlights how close Karana and Rontu have become. Even though Karana is sometimes disturbed or nervous about what she finds, with Rontu around, she knows she isn't going to have to do something scary alone.



Finding this cave allows Karana to ensure her safety, as storing her canoe here will make it way more accessible for her (especially if she has to leave quickly in the event the Aleuts return). Karana knows very well that there are some animals she has to approach with caution, such as a devilfish—especially one of this size. And Rontu proves a helpful friend, as he's the one who first sights the devilfish.



Rontu's confusion about the devilfish adds lightness and humor to this passage; readers at all familiar with dogs can imagine how silly he looks. His humorous confusion, combined with Karana's happiness, gives the impression that Karana is settling into her life as a single person on the island—and is even enjoying it. In particular, the thrill of the devilfish hunt gives her something to look forward to. And that isn't something she would've been able to do before, as part of the tribe.



Out of necessity, Karana has to live her life in tune with the seasons. As she describes the violent storms and the blowing sand, she makes it seem like the only real option is for her to stay inside, working on crafting items that will help her reenter the wider world in the spring. When Karana manages to make the special devilfish spear, it again shows that she's capable of doing anything she puts her mind to—even if she is female. And this sounds like a complex weapon to make, which only highlights her ability.



Karana takes her spear to Coral Cove on the first day of spring. She knows it's spring because flocks of migratory birds came and stayed for two days and then headed south. Rontu is not with Karana; she recently let him out and he hasn't returned. He's spent the winter ignoring the wild dogs, but the night before last, he finally took notice and whined. Karana let him out when he refused to eat.

Karana pushes the **canoe** into the water and heads for the reef where devilfish live. Through the clear water, she can see many devilfish. Though it's nice to be on the sea with her new spear, Karana can't stop thinking of Rontu. She wonders if he'll turn into her enemy again. She won't be able to kill him now that he's been her friend.

After several hours, Karana hides her **canoe** in the cave she found last fall and hikes up the cliff to her house with some small bass she caught. At the top of the steep climb, she hears dogs fighting. Karana grabs her bow and arrows and hurries toward the sound. Near the spring, she finds Rontu's tracks. She continues to follow the sound until she gets to a meadow with a mound in the middle; the mound was created when Karana's ancestors left shells here. Rontu is on the mound, his back to a cliff. The pack of wild dogs are in front of him, with two dogs with bloody mouths between Rontu and the rest of the pack. One is the new leader; Karana doesn't recognize the other one.

The dogs don't notice or respond to Karana, though Karana is sure Rontu knows she's around. The two dogs pace around Rontu, and Rontu never takes his eyes off of them. Karana knows she can't shoot the dogs—this is Rontu's fight, and they'll fight again if they don't finish this now. When the two dogs finally attack, Rontu breaks one's leg, but the other dog strikes him on the flank. Karana fits an arrow in her bow, but she can't shoot. When the other dog leaps at Rontu again, Rontu locks his jaws around the other dog's throat. After a minute, Rontu lets the dog go, climbs the mound, and howls. Then he trots home as though nothing happened. After this, Rontu never leaves again, and the wild dogs never return to the headland.

Karana demonstrates her deep knowledge of the natural world when she recognizes that it's spring because of the specific birds that passed by. Letting Rontu out of the fence shows that Karana trusts him to return and remain her friend, even if she doesn't understand his reasons for leaving.



After spending so many months with Rontu to keep her company, it's difficult for Karana to go out in the canoe by herself. She can't enjoy the wonders around her, like the devilfish and the reef, not knowing where her friend is. And now that she's befriended Rontu, her perspective about killing him has completely changed.



A loyal person, Karana is more than ready to run to Rontu's rescue, if he needs rescuing. Finding him in this specific location, in a place where Karana's ancestors used to congregate, again reminds readers that Karana is the last of her tribe left on the island. Even as she's surviving, making friends, and even thriving, she can't escape the fact that all signs point to her being the last of her tribe to ever reside on the island. This is, again, the result of colonial forces pushing Karana's tribe off the island.



Part of being a good friend, Karana believes, is letting Rontu fight this fight without interference. She knows he's capable, and she also knows that the fight won't be over until Rontu ends it. Still, she wants to be prepared in the worst-case scenario, which is why she notches the arrow and prepares to shoot. Rontu, though, shows that he's just as self-sufficient as Karana by killing and injuring the other dogs. And allowing Rontu to finish this fight himself has an unexpected positive consequence: Karana implies that because of Rontu's dominance, she'll never have to deal with the wild dogs tormenting her again.



CHAPTER 18

Thanks to the heavy rains in the spring, sand flowers, yuccas, lupins, and comuls all bloom profusely. Many kinds of birds, including hummingbirds and blue jays, come to the island. One bird, with a yellow body and bright red head, is one that Karana hasn't seen before. A pair of these birds nests near her house. Karana leaves abalone for the parents to feed their two babies. The babies are gray and ugly, but Karana takes them from the nest and keeps them in a cage. Eventually they become just as beautiful as their parents, and they sing the same sweet song.

When the birds grow too big for the cage, Karana clips their wings and lets them loose inside the house. They learn to take food from her hand. When their wings grow out again, Karana clips them and lets the birds into the yard. This time, when the birds' wings grow, Karana doesn't cut them. The birds only go as far as the ravine, and always return to sleep and beg for food. Karana calls the larger one Tainor after a boy she loved and the small one Lurai, the name Karana sometimes wishes was hers.

Karana makes another yucca skirt as she's taming the birds. She makes a sealskin belt for it and also sealskin sandals to protect her feet from the hot sand—or just to feel dressed up. Karana often puts on her skirt and sandals and walks the cliffs with Rontu. Sometimes, she makes a flower crown to wear. All the women in the tribe singed their hair short after the Aleuts killed the men at Coral Cove. Karana had done this too, but now, her hair comes to her waist. Karana also makes a flower wreath for Rontu's neck, though he doesn't like it. They walk the cliffs, staring at the sea. They're happy, though the white men's ship doesn't return. Everything smells like flowers, and birds sing.

CHAPTER 19

Karana still hasn't speared the giant devilfish, so she and Rontu look for him every day. Finally, she gives up and sets to work gathering abalones to eat through the winter. The red ones are the sweetest, but starfish also like them—the starfish sometimes spend days trying to open and suck the contents out of a single abalone shell.

As Karana describes the various flowers and birds that abound on the island in the spring, her admiration of the natural world shines through. Everything coming to life in the spring suggests to her that life will continue and will even be beautiful, regardless of her solitary plight. Capturing the birds shows Karana that she can continue to make friends and surround herself with other beings, even if she's the only human on the island.



Because Karana understands something of bird psychology, she's able to successfully tame Tainor and Lurai and turn them into pets—without having to keep them caged all the time. Tainor's name in particular allows Karana to pay homage to her tribe, which shows that she still hasn't forgotten her former friends and neighbors. In fact, she's trying to recreate that community with her new animal friends.



At this point in the novel, Karana hasn't given much thought to whether or not she should perform tasks that were formerly done only by men—now, they're just tasks she must do to survive. But she shows here that performing those tasks doesn't mean she's given up on being feminine; indeed, the exact opposite seems true. Karana can make a yucca skirt and flower crown—feminine tasks—in addition to, presumably, killing a seal (a masculine task) to make the belt and sandals. And noting that her hair has grown so long suggests that she's healing and moving on from the trauma of seeing the tribesmen being murdered.



Noting how the starfish hunt the abalones makes it clear that Karana isn't the only being fighting for survival on the island. She has to compete with all sorts of other creatures for food, even ones as seemingly innocuous as a starfish.



One morning, Karana and Rontu paddle out to the reef. Karana has been keeping an eye on the reef for the right time to harvest abalone (which is when there aren't many starfish hunting). There are only a few starfish, so Karana fills the **canoe** with red abalone. Then, she ties the canoe and climbs onto the reef to spear a fish for supper. There are blue dolphins leaping on the other side of the kelp. Otters are playing in the kelp, and the gulls are busy fishing for scallops. They do this by picking the scallops off the kelp and then dropping them onto the rocky reef. Karana laughs at Rontu, who's very confused.

Karana picks her way to where the big fish live and manages to catch two. She gives one to Rontu and then picks up a few purple sea urchins for dyeing. But then, Rontu drops his fish. The giant devilfish is there in the shallow water, an unexpected spot for a devilfish. Rontu watches the fish silently as Karana prepares her spear and crawls to the edge. She can see the devilfish's black and gold eyes. She's right above a crevice where a fish is hiding, and the devilfish reaches an arm in after the fish. As the devilfish grabs the fish, Karana aims for the devilfish's head.

Karana misses and the devilfish lets loose a black cloud. She starts to pull the spear in, hoping to throw it again, but Karana realizes the point came loose. The string tightens—Karana hit the devilfish. She drops the string coils so she doesn't burn her hands. In moments, the coils disappear. When the devilfish reaches the end of the string, Karana lets him pull her along. She knows that if he gets back to the cave, she'll lose him. It'd be ideal to get back in the **canoe** and make the devilfish pull her, but she can't untie the canoe one-handed. And Rontu is barking, which isn't making anything easy.

Karana stops moving so the devilfish can't enter the cave. Her hands start to bleed. Then, suddenly, the tension disappears and the string circles toward some rocks, where the devilfish can hide. Karana wades into the water on a sandbar and puts herself between the devilfish and the rocks. Finally, after the devilfish has swum back and forth a few times, Karana starts to pull the giant devilfish onto the sand. At first, the devilfish seems dead—but Karana notices his eyes moving.

This idyllic passage shows Karana and Rontu having a delightful time exploring the natural world—and portrays nature as extremely giving. Karana is able to fill an entire canoe with abalone, which will go a long way toward feeding her over the winter. In addition, without even having to go anywhere, she can find herself dinner for later tonight as well. Rontu's confusion about the gulls provides some comic relief.



Picking up the urchins to use as dye highlights another of Karana's skills and shows how self-sufficient she is. Discovering the devilfish in such a surprising spot shows how unpredictable nature can be. But it also presents Karana with an amazing opportunity to spear it and accomplish this goal. Rontu seems to be helping things by being so quiet and not frightening the fish.



It's somewhat surprising for Karana that she actually hit the devilfish, when her initial throw didn't look so good. She can, she discovers, accomplish difficult tasks like this. But she soon realizes that spearing the devilfish is actually the easiest part of this whole thing. Now, she has to balance a frightened, massive devilfish; Rontu's excitement; and the remaining task of killing the devilfish, all without hurting herself.



Karana's bloody hands illustrate that there are consequences for doing battle with this devilfish; she isn't getting out of this encounter without injuries of her own. Recall that Karana is used to animals playing dead, which seems to be what the devilfish is doing here. But unlike earlier, when Rontu was the one playing dead, the devilfish seems far more dangerous and less predictable.



Rontu rushes forward and bites at the fish. Though devilfish are most dangerous in the water, where they can drown a person, their arms and suckers can still cause injury on land. The devilfish flails toward the water, dragging Rontu with him. And because the string is now tangled in Rontu's legs, Karana can't pull the devilfish toward her. She pulls out her whalebone knife and gets between the devilfish and the water. Several of the legs whip and burn her, and Karana can hear the devilfish's beak snapping. As she stabs the devilfish's body, all the devilfish's suckers seem to pull at her skin. Finally, the devilfish goes limp. Karana is too tired to drag it out of the water or fetch her **canoe**. Both she and Rontu are covered in cuts and bruises. Though Karana sees two more giant devilfish that summer, she leaves them alone.

As Karana describes the dangers the devilfish poses to her and to Rontu, she implies that she really should be approaching the devilfish with more caution than she does. But when Rontu rushes the devilfish, putting himself in danger and compromising Karana's ability to restrain the creature with her spear, it seems like Karana has only one choice. She has to intervene and put herself in danger, or the devilfish might seriously injure—or kill—Rontu, Karana's only real friend. Deciding to leave devilfish alone going forward shows that now, Karana has decided to prioritize her and Rontu's safety over the thrill and challenge of hunting such big, dangerous creatures.



CHAPTER 20

Karana fills the **canoe** twice more with red abalones, cleans them, and dries them on shelves. There are no children to protect the abalones from the gulls, so for a while, Karana leaves Rontu at home to chase the birds. He hates this and howls, so eventually, Karana ties some bright abalone shells to poles, which keeps the gulls away. Karana also catches small fish for light during the winter.

Karana doesn't want to make Rontu miserable, since he's her friend. She's able to call on her resourcefulness and knowledge of what's going to frighten the gulls so that he's able to accompany her, and the drying abalones will remain safe.



Karana spends each morning gathering food for winter, and in the afternoons, she and Rontu go out on the sea. They spend their afternoons visiting the sea elephants, Black Cave, and Tall Rock, where cormorants roost. At Tall Rock, Karana kills 10 birds and prepares their flesh—she wants to make herself a **cormorant feather-skirt**.

As a single person on the island, Karana doesn't have to spend every moment of every day trying to survive. Rather, she only needs to work in the mornings and can then spend the afternoon exploring the island and surrounding rocks. Her goal of making a skirt from cormorant feathers symbolizes a marriage of feminine and masculine tasks, since Karana killed the birds herself and is now going to make a garment that will make her look and feel extremely feminine.



Karana discovers Black Cave on the south coast of the island one day. She only notices it because she sees a sea hawk fly out of it. Even though Karana has a long way to go to get home, she's curious about the cave. She paddles through the small, low entrance and comes out in a room with shiny black walls. There's an opening in the back, but on the other side of the narrow passageway is a bigger, brightly lit room. Rontu starts barking and then howling—and it gives Karana chills. She makes him stop.

Karana's curiosity about Black Cave suggests that prior to seeing this sea hawk, she thought she knew about all the caves on the island. Now, she has to confront that she doesn't know everything and set about figuring out what this cave is all about. Her curiosity, though, starts to turn to fear and dread when Rontu has such an intense reaction to the cave and makes such a disturbing racket. It raises the question of why he reacts this way, and if Karana should be afraid for herself.



As Karana turns the **canoe** to leave the cave, she notices a deep shelf with two dozen strange figures on it. They're Karana's height, with bodies made of reeds, gull feather clothes, and abalone eyes. The figure in the middle is a skeleton, and it's playing a pelican bone flute. Karana paddles for the opening, but the canoe won't fit. The tide is coming in, and she'll have to spend the night in the cave. Karana doesn't look at the figures' glittering eyes and instead watches stars through the crevice at the top of the cave. The water against the walls sounds like flute music, and Karana barely sleeps. She knows the skeleton and the others are her ancestors, but she's still afraid. She leaves in the morning and tells Rontu they'll never return.

Karana continues to hide the canoe in the cave below the headland every time she returns from an outing. It's now been two summers since the Aleut hunters came, but Karana keeps an eye out for their sails. She never goes any further than a half-day's journey away. Finally, the last time Karana and Rontu go to Tall Rock, the Aleuts come. As Karana climbs the cliff with the 10 cormorant skins, she gazes at the sea. One of the clouds on the water is a ship, but Karana can't tell what color the sails are. She tries to scout from several places, but then realizes that the white men's ship came from the east. This one is coming from the north.

Karana isn't sure the ship belongs to the Aleuts, but she packs her things anyway and leaves them by the fence. Then, she returns to the headland. The ship traveled faster than she expected, and she can see clearly that it has a bow like a bird's beak and red sails. Even though Karana knows the Aleuts won't come to shore in the dark, she spends the night carrying her things to the cave. In the morning, when everything else is at the cave, Karana tosses her abalones that aren't dry, gets rid of the shells to scare the gulls, and brushes her footprints away. The house now looks deserted.

Karana climbs the rock to check on the Aleuts. Now, the ship is anchored in the cove and men are bringing supplies to the shore. Others are already hunting otter—and there's a girl cooking on the shore. Karana has taken care not to create a trail to the cave; this time, she takes a circuitous route through the brush. Rontu is hesitant to enter the cave, but he finally follows Karana in. She closes the opening with stones behind them and sleeps all day.

Karana still can't escape the ghosts of her ancestors, even in a new-to-her cave on the island. Her ancestors clearly knew about all the nooks and crannies on the island, and now, Karana can't avoid acknowledging that she's the last one left here. Spending the night with these representations is disconcerting in part because they're so ghostly, and in part because of the sad reminder that Karana is the last of her tribe on the island. Deciding to never return to Black Cave is, in a way, a sign of Karana's discomfort with her tribe's past.



Even as Karana does fun, exciting things like explore sea caves and hunt devilfish, she still lives with the constant threat that the Aleuts might return and make life miserable for her again. Seeing this ship, and realizing it's coming from the north, pretty much confirms that it's the Aleuts. So, in order to preserve the life she's carved out for herself on the island, Karana will have to take evasive measures and try to keep herself safe.



In Karana's experience, it's not smart to trust newcomers to the island—even if they're not the Aleuts. Newcomers have, for the most part, proven themselves to be violent and mainly interested in exploiting the people and natural resources on the island. But Karana's anxiety is surely heightened as she remembers how violent the Aleuts were when they were here last time. It's also worth noting that it's a huge loss that Karana has to throw out her abalones; because of the Aleuts' arrival, she'll no longer be prepared for winter.



Karana might have lost the abalones she was drying for the coming winter, but she has prepared well enough to survive while the Aleuts are here. This illustrates her resourcefulness—but again, it also shows that outsiders, and the potential threats they pose, are a constant concern for Karana.



CHAPTER 21

When Karana leaves the cave that night, she leaves Rontu inside—she doesn't want him to find the Aleuts' dogs, if they're on the island. The Aleuts are camping where they did last time, about a half a league from Karana's cave. She wonders if she should move to the cave where the wild dogs lived. The men don't frighten Karana; they're too busy. Rather, she's worried the girl will find her. There are edible roots and seeds in the ravine, and the girl might notice the spring and Karana's footprints. After staring at the Aleut camp for a while, Karana decides to stay in the ravine.

Karana stays inside the cave until the next full moon. At this point she needs food, so she and Rontu hike to the headland. Three of the whale ribs are missing from her fence, but nobody is there. Karana gathers a basket of seawater and abalones. The next time Karana goes out for food it's too dark to get to the reef, so she spends several dark nights digging roots. Karana doesn't see the Aleuts, though she does find the girl's footsteps further down in the ravine. Fortunately, the Aleuts haven't brought dogs.

Karana and Rontu's days are long. At first, Rontu paces and resents being cooped up. But he soon gets used to it and watches Karana work on her **cormorant skirt**. She works in the light of the fish lamps and carefully cuts the cormorant skins, so the feathers go in different directions in different parts of the skirt. When she runs out of fish for light, she starts taking it outside to work. She sometimes finds footprints, but they're not close to the cave. Karana feels safe—the Aleuts will be gone by the end of the month, as winter is coming.

This is the first time Karana has seen the **skirt** in the sunlight. The black feathers shimmer green and gold, and it's so beautiful that Karana is almost giddy. As Karana admires the skirt, though, Rontu suddenly leaps up and Karana hears steps. It's the girl. Karana grabs her spear, but she doesn't throw it—she doesn't know why. When the girl speaks, Rontu approaches her with his hackles raised. He allows her to touch him, and the girl makes a motion as though Rontu is hers. Karana cries, shakes her head, and picks up the spear, but the girl makes another motion that seems to say Rontu is Karana's.

It doesn't make any difference to Karana that the Aleut girl is female; she's dangerous because she's an Aleut. Making this assumption about the girl makes sense, at this point, because of how violent and destructive the Aleuts were during their last visit. As Karana weighs her options and decides to stay in the cave, she again shows how well she knows the island and can use that knowledge to predict how someone else will interact with it.



Being able to effectively gather food at night, when the light is poor, is another indicator of how well Karana knows both the island and how to perform these tasks. And she shows that she's also resourceful and can feed herself, even when the situation isn't ideal (when she digs roots in the dark, for instance). But the girl's footsteps hint that Karana might not be totally successful in staying hidden.



While the winter storms present their own problems (such as making it dangerous to go out on the canoe and fish), they also have an upside—terrible winter weather, Karana implies, is what causes the Aleuts to end their hunting trips. However, her confidence here mirrors her father's confidence that the Aleuts were going to leave at the beginning of the novel, which ominously foreshadows that this might not end as well as she hopes.



Karana's reaction to seeing her skirt in the sunlight shows that she definitely hasn't given up on being feminine, just because she performs masculine tasks to survive. She still delights in traditionally feminine things, perhaps especially knowing that she has the skill to create them. Threatening the girl with her spear also mirrors how Karana almost killed Rontu at first. Karana doesn't throw her spear because, as frightened as she is of the Aleuts, and as much as she hates them, she's lonely—the presence of another human is irresistible.



The girl introduces herself as Tutok, but Karana ignores this and calls Rontu to her. Tutok smiles and points to the **cormorant skirt**. She says a word that sounds a lot like the word for “pretty” in Karana’s language. Karana is so proud of the skirt that she holds it up so it glimmers in the sunlight. Tutok approaches Karana and holds the skirt up to herself. She’s a bit older, and she’s graceful, but Karana hates the Aleuts. She takes her skirt back. The girl says the word that sounds like “pretty” again. It’s good to hear words again—even if an enemy is saying them.

Tutok continues to speak, but Karana doesn’t understand much of what she says. Tutok seems to want to know if Karana lives in the cave, but Karana gestures that she lives far away across the island. She’s certain that Tutok will come back with men and take her to their camp. But still, Karana doesn’t throw her spear. Tutok touches Karana’s arm, which Karana doesn’t like. Then, she drinks from the stream and disappears.

Karana spends the rest of the day packing her things. She plans to take her **canoe** to the western part of the island until the Aleuts leave. Karana carries her baskets away a few at a time, but when she returns for the final two, she can tell someone has been there. Afraid that someone is waiting for her to go into the cave so they can capture her, Karana turns away. But as she does, she sees a string of black stones on one of the rocks.

CHAPTER 22

Karana doesn’t enter the cave or take the necklace. She sleeps at the headland and, at dawn, hides on a ledge in the ravine where she can see the cave. As the sun gets higher, Karana studies the necklace. She wants to count the stones and see if there are enough to make two loops around her neck. Finally, when the sun is high, Tutok emerges from the brush, singing. She stops when she sees the necklace, looks around, and then turns to leave.

Karana leaps up and calls for Tutok. Tutok turns around and watches Karana loop the beads three times around her neck. Tutok says her word for “pretty,” and then Karana gives Tutok her word. The girls laugh. They exchange words for the necklace, the spring, a gull, Rontu, and the sun. They spend hours laughing, and then Tutok gets up and waves. Karana introduces herself as Won-a-pa-lei, keeping her secret name a secret. Once Tutok is gone, Karana brings her baskets back to the cave.

Karana is extremely conflicted here. The Aleuts killed her friends and family, and the threat they pose is why Karana has spent the last few years on the island living in fear of their likely return. But Tutok doesn’t seem particularly threatening on her own. She compliments the skirt, and it’s a big deal for Karana to hear another person speaking after so long alone. And noting that the words for “pretty” aren’t so different suggests that the girls might have more in common than they think.



Killing Tutok would tip the other Aleuts off to the fact that there’s someone else on the island. So even though Karana hesitates to throw the spear because she craves human contact, she’s also no doubt considering that killing Tutok might end badly for her, too.



At first, it’s frightening to realize someone has been here. But the string of stones also doesn’t seem at all threatening. Instead, it seems like a peace offering of sorts. But to add more nuance to this, Karana also remembers that Captain Orlov left her tribe strings of beads and not the promised spearheads, so these beads are probably very ambivalent in Karana’s mind.



Karana is curious about the necklace and seems to want to trust Tutok—but given that Tutok is Aleut, this isn’t an easy thing to do. When Tutok appears, though, it’s impossible to ignore that she’s just a girl, much like Karana herself, and that she’s trying to treat Karana with respect and dignity.



Having not spoken to a person in so long, Karana doesn’t want to miss out on this opportunity to make Tutok happy and accept this gift. And this leap of faith pays off: Karana seems to love spending the day like this, learning new words. Bringing her baskets back to the cave shows how much Karana trusts Tutok. Tutok could easily bring Aleuts here to ambush Karana—but Karana trusts Tutok not to do this.



Tutok visits again the next day, and the girls spend the day sitting in the sun, trading words and laughing. At the end of the third day, Karana shares her secret name with Tutok. That night, she starts to make a gift for Tutok to thank her for the necklace. Since Tutok's ears aren't pierced, Karana makes her a circlet for her hair with abalone and olivella shells. It takes five days and, when it's complete, Karana ties it around Tutok's head. Tutok loves the circlet.

Tutok visits the cave often—until one day, she doesn't come. At dusk, Karana becomes afraid that the men will come for her, so she sleeps on the ledge. Tutok doesn't return the next day, either, so Karana wonders if the Aleuts have left. She creeps to the headland to look and sees that the men are loading the ship. They'll probably leave the next morning. Karana returns to her cave and, since it's cold and she's not afraid of the Aleuts now, she builds a big fire and cooks enough supper for her, Rontu, and Tutok. She knows Tutok won't come, but she saves food for her anyway.

Karana goes to the headland the following morning. It's no longer windy, but it's foggy. When the fog finally burns off, the red Aleut ship is gone. At first, Karana is thrilled to be able to move back to her house. But then she thinks of laughing in the sun with Tutok. Rontu is chasing gulls and barking at them, pelicans are chattering, and a sea elephant is bellowing. But the island seems quiet as Karana thinks of Tutok.

CHAPTER 23

The hunters leave many otters wounded. Karana watches some die, and she kills others to save them from their suffering. But one day, she finds a young otter that isn't wounded too badly. Rontu barks at the young otter; at first, Karana thinks it's just sleeping in the kelp. Then, she sees a deep cut across its back. Karana paddles close and reaches for the otter. Its eyes are huge from pain and fear. Karana cuts it out of the kelp and takes it to a tidepool near the reef. She spends the day catching fish live and leaving them in the pool. The otter sleeps on its back and Karana knows the saltwater will help it heal.

It's a mark of how much Karana trusts Tutok that she's willing to share her secret name with her. Especially since Karana no doubt remembers that her father died because he shared his secret name, this indicates that Karana fully trusts Tutok not to betray her. And making this circlet for Tutok also allows Karana to demonstrate how much she appreciates her new friend.



Karana might trust Tutok, but the other Aleuts are a different story. Still, when Karana discovers that the Aleuts are preparing to leave, her fear seems to dissipate—there's no reason now, she decides, for them to care about her at all. Cooking this grand supper for herself, Rontu, and Tutok seems to be wishful thinking—Karana wants to be able to hold a goodbye feast of sorts to thank Tutok for her friendship and show the girl how much she means to Karana.



After spending time with another person, Karana finds her solitude is once again difficult to deal with. While it's nice to be able to move around the island without fear, the fact remains that Karana is also alone again. And because she's so lonely, Rontu and the other animals that have been her constant companions don't quite cut it anymore.



Karana shows how compassionate she is by killing the otter she knows are just going to suffer, and then by rescuing this one that she believes will heal with some help. Rescuing this otter and caring for it, though, also gives Karana the opportunity to make another friend—something that seems important to her, especially now that she's alone again after Tutok's departure. Karana is trying to recreate that feeling of companionship.



Over the next few weeks, Karana discovers that the otter needs to eat six fish per day. She fishes for it every day, no matter the weather. Its wounds heal and, after a while, the otter takes fish from Karana's hand. Though Karana knows it can leave the pool, it doesn't. Eventually, it grows as long as Karana's arm. It watches her with its huge eyes and responds when she speaks to it. This makes Karana's throat hurt: the otter, like her, seems simultaneously happy and sad. Eventually, she names the otter Mon-a-nee, which means "little boy with large eyes."

Fishing for Mon-a-nee is hard work, especially in bad weather. He gives Karana dirty looks if she can't catch a full six fish. One day, the waves are so high that Karana can't fish, so she doesn't go to the pool. The bad weather continues for three days. On the fourth day, when Karana returns to the pool, Mon-a-nee is gone. She's sad, as she'll never catch fish for him again or be able to recognize him amongst the other otter. He looks just like all the others now.

Soon after the Aleuts leave, Karana moves back to the headland. She fixes her fence and puts her house back together, but she does worry about what will happen now that she had to throw out all the abalone she gathered over the summer. She'll have to fish daily to feed herself. This task becomes easier once Mon-a-nee swims away.

The Aleuts' presence meant that Karana couldn't catch and dry fish for light. So, all winter, she only works during the day. She spends the winter making string, fishhooks, and earrings to match the necklace from Tutok. The earrings are time-consuming. Karana finds pebbles on the beach that are the right color and soft enough to work with. When she's finished with them, Karana puts them on with her **cormorant skirt** and the necklace. She and Rontu walk the cliffs, and Karana thinks of Tutok. Karana wishes Tutok were here to talk to, so she imagines their conversations in her head.

The relationship that Karana forms with Mon-a-nee shows her that she and the animals on the island aren't all so different from each other. They all, she believes, want to be part of a community of their own kind. But Karana and Mon-a-nee also end up having to look outside their own species to find friends—and this, she suggests, is both fulfilling and extremely sad. She implies her animal friends don't quite cut it, and that she probably isn't enough for Mon-a-nee, either.



On the plus side, Mon-a-nee gives Karana a purpose for a while; fishing for him every day seems like a fulfilling undertaking. And fishing in this inclement weather also shows how skilled Karana is at navigating the island during every season. Mon-a-nee's departure is difficult for Karana, even as she knows it's a good thing on some level. Unlike Mon-a-nee, she probably won't be able to do the same thing and rejoin her tribe.



Even if the Aleuts didn't purposefully do anything to harm Karana, they've still made it much harder for her to get through the winter by forcing her to throw out her abalones. But again, Karana shows that she's resourceful and knows how to work with the natural world, and she can feed herself no matter what.



The Aleuts' visit to the island influences how Karana spends her winter, not just how and what she eats. Even as Karana lives alone on the island, she still has to change her behavior to respond to these colonial forces. Making the earrings to match Tutok's necklace is a way for Karana to make sure she remembers Tutok. Meanwhile, imagining conversations with Tutok shows that Karana is feeling increasingly lonely without a human friend on the island.



CHAPTER 24

When spring comes, flowers bloom and water flows in the ravines. Tainor and Lurai build a nest out of seaweed, leaves, and Rontu's hair—which Rontu doesn't appreciate. Lurai lays two eggs, which hatch. Karana clips the babies' wings, names them, and they become as tame as Lurai and Tainor. Karana also discovers a baby gull that fell from its nest on the cliffs. It has a broken leg, so Karana takes it home and binds its leg with a splint. With so many birds and Rontu, Karana's home is full and happy. But she still remembers Tutok and wonders what happened to Ulape. Did Ulape marry Nanko, and do they have lots of children now? Karana knows Ulape would smile at all of Karana's animal children.

Karana begins gathering and drying abalones early in the spring; she wants to be prepared if the Aleuts return. One day, while she's harvesting on the reef, she notices a group of otter playing nearby. The otters' game reminds Karana of games she used to play with other kids years ago. Smiling, she fills her **canoe** and heads for the shore. But an otter follows her and then pops up in front of the canoe. Karana is sure it's Mon-a-nee—and sure enough, she holds out a fish and he snatches it from her.

Karana doesn't see Mon-a-nee again until two months later. He comes to visit her with two babies in tow. When Karana tosses a fish for him, Mon-a-nee encourages the babies to eat it, but they're too distracted by Karana. They remain uninterested, though, and then return to Mon-a-nee and nuzzle him. This makes it clear to Karana that Mon-a-nee is actually female and the babies' mother. She renames her Won-a-nee, which means "girl with the large eyes."

Won-a-nee's babies grow quickly and are soon happy to take fish from Karana's hands. Won-a-nee prefers abalones. She floats on her back and strikes the abalones with rocks until the shell breaks. Karana loves watching all three otters do this once Won-a-nee teaches her babies the trick. Karana knows that all otter eat abalone like this, but she still wonders if Won-a-nee does it just because she knows it makes Karana happy.

In this passage, O'Dell juxtaposes Karana's growing family of animals with her sadness and loneliness. In many ways, surrounding herself with all these animals and observing their antics makes Karana happy. But the passage also implies that Karana can't quite shake her loneliness. This is the first time in a while that Karana has brought up Ulape, which suggests that Karana is thinking more and more these days about her family and her tribe, not less. And these thoughts throw Karana's solitude into sharp relief.



Again, the threat that the Aleuts might return forces Karana to change her habits so she can be prepared. Watching the otter makes Karana think that humans and otter aren't all that different—their young play some of the same games. And when Mon-a-nee appears, it shows Karana that she didn't lose him as a friend when he swam out of the tidepools.



Realizing that Won-a-nee is female and a mother is no doubt gratifying for Karana, as it means that Won-a-nee was able to reintegrate into the community of otters after leaving the tidepool. But again, it also reminds Karana that such a thing is impossible for her. In this way, the novel draws parallels between Won-a-nee and Ulape, whom Karana believes is probably a mother by this point.



One way that Karana combats her loneliness is to anthropomorphize (assign human characteristics) to her animal friends. She does this here with Won-a-nee as she wonders whether Won-a-nee eats abalones like this just to please Karana. Believing this makes Karana feel like her animal friends are invested in her emotional wellbeing.



After this summer, Karana stops killing otter. She wears her otter cape until it wears out and doesn't make a replacement. She also refuses to kill any more cormorants, even though they make terrible noise. Karana stops killing seals, wild dogs, and sea elephants. She knows that Ulape and her father would laugh at her, but now, the animals are her friends. Those that aren't her friends now could become friends any moment. She doesn't care if people would laugh at her to see her now. Karana won't change her mind. Animals are like people, even if they don't talk. They make the world a pleasant place to live.

CHAPTER 25

Even though the Aleuts never come to the Island of the Blue Dolphins again, Karana keeps watch for them every summer. Every year, in early spring, she gathers and dries shellfish just in case. Two winters after the Aleuts leave, Karana makes more weapons and stores them in the cave below the headland. Then she's ready in case she needs to live in her **canoe**. For many years after the Aleuts' last visit, the otters leave Coral Cove every summer. They live around Tall Rock until winter. Karana and Rontu often go to Tall Rock for several days during the summer to catch fish for Won-a-nee and the other otter.

Finally, one summer, the otters don't leave Coral Cove. When this happens, Karana knows that there aren't any otters left who remember the hunters. Karana doesn't think of the hunters much either, or the white men who were supposed to return for her. Karana has been keeping track of every month since she and Ramo were left on the island. Now she has marks on a pole from roof to ceiling. This summer, though, she stops making marks. For a while, Karana makes marks to signify the seasons, but she eventually stops making those, too.

Rontu dies late in the summer. During the early summer, Rontu doesn't accompany Karana to the reef unless she convinces him. He prefers to lie in the sun. Then, one night, Rontu barks to be let out of the fence. He usually only does this during full moons, but it's not a full moon. He also doesn't come back in the morning. Karana waits for him all day and finally, at dusk, she goes to look for him. She tracks him to the wild dogs' lair but finds him in the back of the cave, alone. He isn't hurt, but he only licks Karana once and then hardly breathes.

Seeing the terrible aftermath of the Aleuts' hunting impresses upon Karana that killing animals isn't something she wants to engage in. Part of this no doubt stems from seeing so many injured otters suffer, but Karana also knows now that she has to rely on her animal friends to keep her company—in her situation, human friends are no guarantee. And even though Karana is still lonely, she credits her happiness to her animal friends and their interest in her life.



It's a mark of just how damaging the Aleuts' visits were that Karana continues to watch out for them, even when they don't return for years. Even when they show no signs of appearing, they still dictate how Karana organizes her spring and summer activities. The fact that the otters also leave Coral Cove to avoid the Aleuts shows that these colonial forces aren't just harming people. They also force animals to change their habits.



Time seems to blur together between the last passage and this one; it seems that years have passed, if otter no longer remember the Aleuts' last visit. This definitely seems true for Karana as well. As she stops keeping track of how long she's been on the island, she settles more into her solitary existence. If there's nothing to look forward to, keeping track of the time no longer seems important.



Rontu's behavior in the months before his death reads as pretty normal behavior for a very old dog. When Karana lets Rontu out when he asks, it shows how much she respects her long-time companion. And going out to find him and make sure he's comfortable during his final days is another way that Karana can show him compassion. She's not going to let him die alone.



Karana sits with Rontu the whole night in the cave. When the sun comes up, Karana carries him out of the cave—his body is very light. She carries him along the cliff and puts him down when he looks at the gulls with interest, but he doesn't bark at them like he usually does. Karana encourages him to bark, but instead, he walks to Karana and falls at her feet. Karana feels his heart beat twice and then stop. She buries him on the headland with flowers and his favorite stick, and then she covers his grave with colored pebbles.

With Rontu's death, Karana loses her best friend and closest companion. Especially after losing Tutok and Ulape, Karana will now be even more alone. Burying him under the colored pebbles and with his favorite stick, though, allows Karana to honor him. His grave also gives her a place to go to mourn and think of him going forward. And burying him on the headland also means his final resting place is close to her house, which is also on the headland. All these factors underline Rontu's significance in Karana's life.



CHAPTER 26

Over the winter, Karana only leaves her house to get water. The weather is terrible, so even if Rontu had been around, Karana wouldn't go out much. She makes four snares, which she intends to use to catch a young dog who looks like Rontu. Karana believes he's Rontu's son, as he's big and has Rontu's heavy fur and yellow eyes. Late in the winter Karana sets the snares outside her fence. She catches several dogs, but not the one she wants. When she tries again, the dogs refuse to get close to the snares. Karana does catch a red fox, which she keeps for a while. But the fox is crafty and keeps getting into the food, so Karana lets her go.

Having befriended a wild dog once before, Karana doesn't think twice about catching and taming one again. She now recognizes how important it is to have a companion with her at all times, and that need for companionship outweighs any residual fear of the wild dogs. Karana's unsuccessful experiment with keeping the red fox shows her that not all animals make such great companions.



Karana is ready to give up on catching the dog when she remembers how her tribe used to use toluache weed to catch fish. It's not exactly a poison, but it makes fish flip over and float. Karana digs some up and puts it in the wild dogs' water. Then, she watches the pack drink. The toluache doesn't seem to affect them, so Karana decides to try xuchal, a mixture of wild tobacco and ground seashells. When the dogs encounter it in their water, they act suspicious. But eventually, they all drink, and a bit later, they lie down and sleep.

As Karana experiments with the toluache and xuchal, she shows how connected she still is to her tribe. She still remembers this cultural knowledge, and she can still put it to use as she makes her way alone on the island. It seems like this is something that takes her a bit to recall, though, highlighting how long she's been alone on the island and how removed she is from memories like this.



Karana finds the dog she wants, picks him up, and quickly carries him home. She ties him to the fence and leaves him food and water. He quickly chews through the tie and spends the whole night howling. In the morning, Karana tries to come up with a name for him. Because he looks so much like Rontu, Karana decides to call him Rontu-Aru, or son of Rontu. He becomes Karana's friend quickly. Though he's not as big as his father, he chases the gulls and barks at otter just like Rontu did. At these times, Karana forgets he *isn't* Rontu. Though they have a lot of fun that summer, Karana finds herself thinking more and more of Tutok and Ulape. Sometimes, she hears their voices in the wind or the waves.

Things get easier in some ways now that Karana has another dog to keep her company. At the very least, her loneliness isn't so pronounced now that she has a dog's antics to laugh at. But still, Karana has been separated from other people for years at this point, so it's perhaps not surprising that she thinks more often of her old friend and her sister. The note that she hears their voices around the island speaks to just how lonely Karana really is, as it seems like her mind is trying to make up companions where there are none.



CHAPTER 27

Once the winter storms pass, the wind stops. It's hard to breathe, extremely hot, and the sea is too bright to look at. On what turns out to be the last day of this weather, Karana takes her **canoe** to the sandspit without Rontu-Aru, since he doesn't like the heat. The sea is so shimmery that Karana has to wear wood shields over her eyes, with small slits to look through. When she gets to the sandspit, she pulls the canoe onto the steaming sand. As she does every spring, Karana reapplies pitch to the parts of the canoe that are brittle. When the sun is at its hottest, Karana takes a nap under the canoe.

Karana hasn't been asleep long when she hears a sound like thunder. But the sky is cloudless, and though the sound seems to be far away, it also seems to be getting louder. Karana leaps up and notices that the tide is lower than she's ever seen it. She's never seen some of these reefs before. Then, the air suddenly feels tight, and Karana hears a sucking sound. Something starts to rumble. More than a league away, Karana sees a massive white wave coming toward the island.

Terrified, Karana races along the sandspit. The ground shakes as the first wave hits. Though Karana would like to get to the mesa, there's no time—the water is already at her knees. Instead, she climbs the cliff and watches the crest of the wave pass below her. After the wave hits, the water starts rushing back out to sea, but another wave, bigger than the first, is coming. Karana can't climb any higher, so she faces the rock and shoves an arm into a crack. She watches the second wave approach, fighting the first wave just beyond the sandspit. The waves crash into each other, and it sounds like spears breaking in battle. The sun is red, and it makes the spray look like blood.

The second wave wins the battle and moves quickly toward the island. When it hits the cliff, Karana can't hear or see. The water pulls at her, but then, everything is silent. Night comes, and Karana knows she can't stay on the cliff all night—she'll fall. She climbs down the cliff and sleeps at its foot. At dawn, the sandspit is covered in crabs, lobsters, kelp, and fish. There are two small whales stranded in the cove, and there are sea creatures even up on the mesa.

Karana finds Rontu-Aru waiting for her at the fence when she gets home. She's glad to be home, even though she's only been gone a day. Karana sleeps most of the day—and when she wakes up, everything feels strange. There's no noise, and it almost seems like the earth is waiting for something bad.

Even now, when the natural landscape seems to make it difficult for Karana to live in it and complete her tasks, Karana's tone is still reverent—even in this heat, she still loves her home. And describing how she fixes up her canoe in this way every year conveys that Karana has developed these yearly cycles out of necessity, after being here for so long and discovering what needs to be done and when. Karana still trusts the natural world, as shown by her willingness to nap on the beach.



Karana is seeing a tidal wave moving in toward the island—something that makes it very clear that the natural world isn't something she can always trust to be benevolent and giving. Tidal waves can be extremely dangerous. But the tidal wave also gives Karana a brief opportunity to see more of her home than she ever has as she notices the exposed reefs.



In this passage, the natural world—the sea specifically—becomes even more like a human. Karana uses human descriptors to explain what's going on, such as the sound being like battling spears. And describing how the sun makes the spray look like blood makes it impossible to ignore how dangerous this natural disaster is. Karana might know how to survive on the island, but surviving this wave will be a matter of luck as much as anything else.



Karana seems to find the tidal wave's damage and debris horrifying. But it's worth noting that the tidal wave has also provided her with more whalebone, assuming the whales die or are already dead. So even as the natural world becomes destructive and dangerous, it's still possible to see this as a net positive—especially since Karana wasn't hurt.



Karana sees her house as a safe haven on the island, especially now that she's experienced such a traumatizing natural disaster. But when she wakes up and senses that something else bad is going to happen, it suggests that the natural disasters aren't over.



At dusk, Karana and Rontu-Aru are walking along the cliff with water from the spring. The sea is smooth, and the gulls are silent. Then, slowly, the ground starts to move. Karana's water spills, and she thinks it's another wave. Karana runs—but this is a “wave of earth,” and it makes it impossible to run. The waves continue, and as Karana looks back, she can see them coming from the south. She and Rontu-Aru struggle to their feet and run for the house, but the house keeps moving further away. They finally reach it and climb under the fence. The earth continues to move all night, and Karana can hear rocks falling into the sea. But the big rock on the headland doesn't fall—which tells her that those who made the world shake aren't too angry with humans. Everything is quiet in the morning.

CHAPTER 28

The earthquake doesn't cause much damage; the spring stops flowing for a few days, but it comes back stronger than ever. It does destroy all Karana's food and weapons stored in the cave, and her **canoes**. The canoes are a huge loss. Rather than spend all spring and summer looking for wood to make a new one, Karana goes looking for any of the canoes that the waves might've washed up. Finally, on the south of the island, Karana finds parts of one canoe. She digs it out and scrapes it clean. Then, she has to make a choice: cut it apart and carry it to Coral Cove in pieces, a process that will take days; or build the canoe here. Karana decides on a third option: floating the canoe pieces around the island and into the cove.

Karana finds the remains of her other **canoe** stuck so far in the cave that she can't get it out. She manages to find enough new wood to build a whole new canoe. It's now late spring, and Karana needs the canoe to gather shellfish. She isn't worried about the Aleuts anymore, but she does feel unsettled without reliable transportation. The work on the new canoe is difficult, but the big waves did help by washing long strings of black pitch onto the shore. These are normally hard to find. Once the pieces are prepared, the work goes fast. By late spring, Karana is ready to finish the seams.

To do this, Karana builds a fire to soften the pitch. It's windy and cold, so the fire takes a while to start. While Karana is on the beach looking for dry seaweed to help the fire, she looks up at the sky. The clouds look like a storm might be coming—but in the cloud's shadows, Karana sees a ship. She drops her seaweed and races to the headland for a better look. It's moving fast, but it doesn't look anything like the Aleuts' ship or the white men's ship.

Even though the earthquake is terrifying for Karana and Rontu-Aru, it's somewhat gratifying when it doesn't seem to do much damage. Recall that as Karana was deciding whether or not to make weapons, she noted that one of the possible punishments for making weapons as a woman was natural disasters like this. The note that the gods aren't too upset with humans can be taken to mean that the gods aren't too upset with Karana for going against her tribe's laws and deciding to make weapons. Even the gods, it seems, understand that the weapons are necessary for Karana to survive on her own.



Now that Karana has spent so many years relying on her canoe to get around the island and provide for herself, it's unsettling for her to suddenly be stuck on land. This further establishes the canoes as symbols of Karana's freedom—without them, she doesn't feel free at all. Fortunately, though, Karana now has the skills to fix and rebuild the canoe, so though there are a lot of factors to consider as she makes her plan, there's no question as to whether or not she'll be mobile again when she's done.



Again, Karana's nervousness now that she doesn't have a reliable canoe highlights the canoe's symbolism. More than anything else, it helped Karana feel free and capable on the island. She also discovers that the tidal wave did help her out somewhat. Even when the natural world is destructive, then, Karana discovers that this isn't always a bad thing. There are silver linings, if she can learn to work with the natural disasters instead of just fearing them.



Recall that at the time Karana started work on the canoe, she wasn't worried anymore about the Aleuts. She also hasn't mentioned the white men's ship in a long time, which suggests she's no longer spending much time waiting for it to come back. Seeing this ship forces Karana to reorient herself once again and prepare for the possibility that she might see another person again soon.



Karana doesn't know what to do. If these men are here to hunt otter, she has to hide. They'll find her fire and her **canoe**, but she'll probably be safe in the cave. Alternatively, if Karana's tribe sent these men to get Karana, she *shouldn't* hide. She watches the ship move into Coral Cove; it's close enough now that she can tell the men aren't Aleuts. They lower a canoe and head for the beach. Soon after, Karana hears a shout and knows they found her canoe. The men shout, but not at each other—so Karana knows they're calling to her.

Karana goes home. She puts on her otter cape and her **cormorant skirt** and grabs her jewelry. Then, she and Rontu-Aru head for Coral Cove. When she comes to the place where her ancestors sometimes camped in the summer, she thinks of all the happy times she's had here. But Karana desperately wants to be with other people. When she gets to the beach, though, the men have already gone back to the ship. The wind is loud, so Karana shouts. The men don't see her. It starts to rain, but Karana wades out into the water. The ship moves away, and Karana watches it go.

CHAPTER 29

Two springs later, on a calm morning, the ship returns. By midday, it's in Coral Cove. Karana watches the men make a camp on the beach all day and then spends all night thinking about the man who called to her two years ago. She's spent the last two years checking for the ship twice daily.

Karana can smell the men's fire in the morning. She bathes in the spring and dresses in her otter cape, **cormorant skirt**, and her necklace and earrings. Then, with clay, she draws her tribe's mark across her nose. Smiling, she then copies what Ulape did years ago and draws the sign that means she's unmarried. As Karana makes breakfast for herself and Rontu-Aru, she tells the dog that they're leaving the island. He cocks his head at her, eats both of their portions, and then goes to sleep in the sun.

Karana can't picture what she's going to do across the sea. She can't picture what the white men do, or what her people have been doing. Karana realizes that after so many seasons on the island, she can't remember her neighbors as individual people—but she can feel them in her chest.

Karana finds herself in a difficult spot here, since she's never seen this ship before. And as a single person on the island—and one without a canoe—she's in a vulnerable position if these people are dangerous. But when the people call for her, it suggests that they're connected to her tribe and have come to get her. At last, it seems, Karana won't have to be alone on the island any longer.



Now that Karana is certain she's getting off the island, she can say outright that she's ready to be around other people. This isn't something she's been able to voice before, presumably because acknowledging her loneliness would make it harder to bear. So, it's extremely difficult for her when the ship moves away without her. She's now lost the chance to get off the island. And given how long it took for this ship to return for her, there's no telling how long she'll be stuck here.



Because the novel doesn't describe what Karana has spent the last two years doing (aside from checking for this ship), it gives the impression that Karana no longer takes much joy in her daily and yearly activities. Now, her focus is on getting off the island.



Dressing up and drawing the mark that signifies her single status shows just how ready Karana is to be part of a group. Marking herself as single is, in many ways, a way to broadcast that she doesn't want to be single. Copying Ulape is also a way for Karana to connect with her sister. Additionally, it signifies that Karana has come of age over the last 18 years on the island.



People have become something of an abstract concept for Karana after so many years alone. But even if she can't fathom what people do across the sea, her desire to be with them is still strong. It doesn't matter that she doesn't know what's to come.



It's a sunny morning. Karana watches three men notice the house on the headland. Two are tall, and one is short with a long robe. Karana crawls under the fence to greet them. The short man, who wears a necklace with a polished wood ornament at the end, makes a motion in the same shape as the ornament. One of the other men speaks to Karana, but his words are the strangest Karana has ever heard—she has to stop herself from laughing. She has no idea what he's saying, but it's so good to hear another human voice.

The man points toward the cove and draws a picture in the air of a ship. Karana nods, points to her three baskets, and gestures that she'd like to bring them and a cage containing two birds. Karana and the men exchange more gestures. They like her clothes and jewelry—but they still make Karana a different dress to wear. It's blue and made of two pairs of trousers, and it takes one man all day to sew. Karana pretends to like it, but she doesn't—her **cormorant skirt** and otter cape are way more beautiful. But Karana puts on the scratchy, long dress. She stores her cormorant skirt and decides to wear it once she's across the sea.

The ship stays for nine days in Coral Cove. The men are here for otter, but all the otter are gone—some must still remember the Aleuts. Karana knows where they are, but when the men ask her, she pretends not to understand. Though Karana asks about the ship that took her people away years ago, no one understands. Later, at Mission Santa Barbara, Father Gonzalez explains that the ship sunk not long after it reached his country; there was no other ship to return for Karana. This is why no one returned for her.

Finally, on the 10th day, Karana leaves the island. It's a beautiful day. Karana stares back at the Island of the Blue Dolphins; the headland is the last thing she can see. She thinks of Rontu in his grave, Won-a-nee, the red fox, her **canoe**, and her many happy days on the island. Dolphins appear and swim ahead of the ship for most of the morning. Karana's birds chirp, and Rontu-Aru sits next to her.

O'Dell based the novel on historical events, so these men are Catholic missionaries (the wood ornament is presumably a cross) and they're speaking Spanish. But as odd as they look to Karana and as silly as their language sounds, Karana doesn't really care. Her desire to be around people is strong enough that she's willing to look past their seemingly odd qualities.



Historically, missionaries were sometimes violent to native populations, forcing them to give up their native languages and cultures. Even though Karana is happy to be around people, forcing her to change out of her beloved cormorant skirt and into this scratchy dress points to the possibility that her happiness might be short-lived. She's getting what she wants in one respect, but the change of clothes suggests she's also going to have to give up many things she holds dear to leave the island.



The language barrier proves to be a blessing, as it allows Karana to protect her otter friends one final time. And this glimpse into the future offers some hope that Karana will reunite with her tribe: they clearly reached the shore, if the ship sank after everyone got there. But still, the fact that Karana also doesn't mention reuniting with her friends and family leaves readers on a bittersweet note.



Readers might suspect that Karana doesn't have happy things coming to her, but it's impossible to ignore Karana's happiness in this passage. Now that she's leaving the island, she can look back on her years with happiness and nostalgia. Her animal friends made those years bearable—and hopefully, human friends will make her life happy going forward.





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