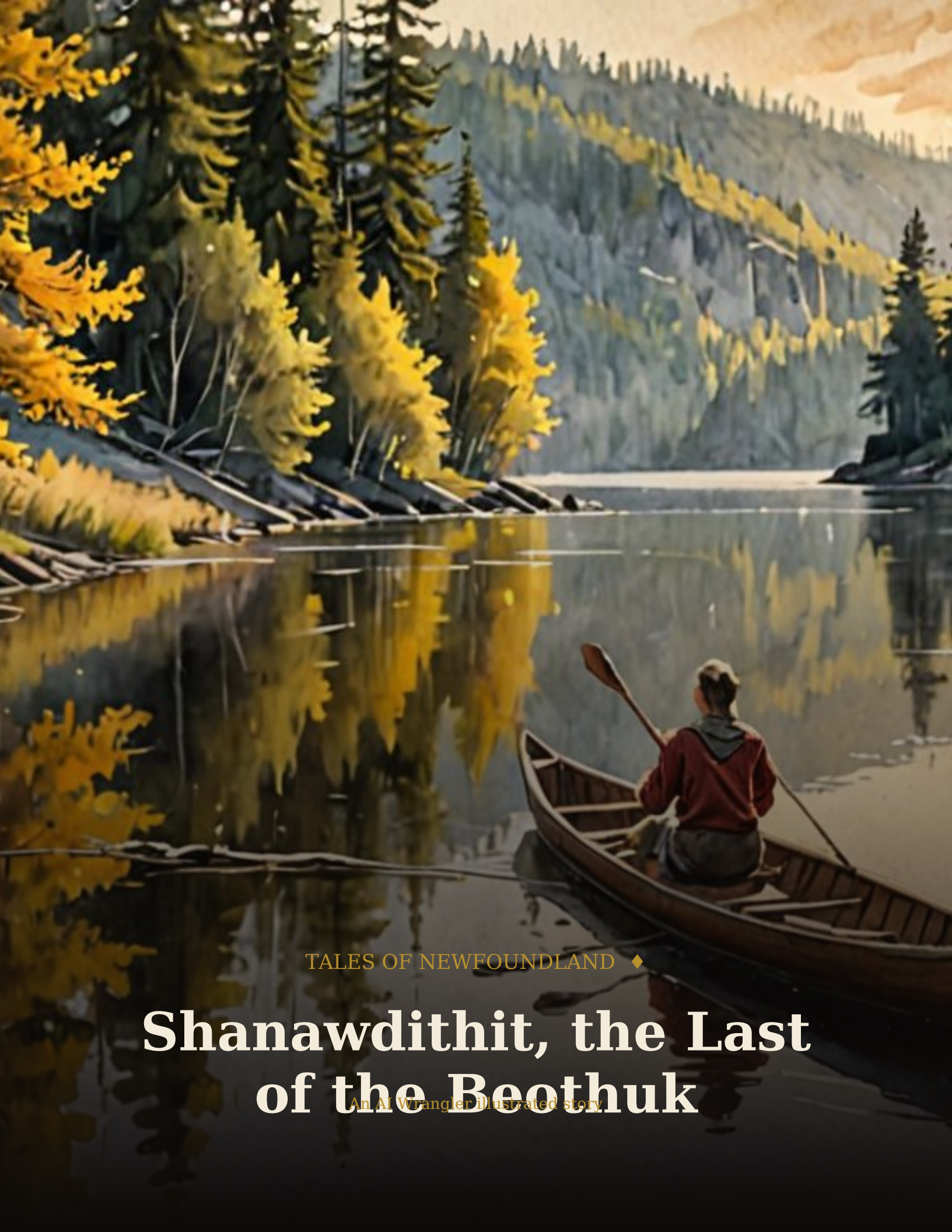


An artistic illustration of a person in a canoe on a calm lake. The person, seen from behind, is wearing a red jacket and a grey skirt, holding a wooden paddle. The lake's surface is a perfect mirror, reflecting the vibrant yellow foliage of the trees on the left bank and the distant, misty mountains. The sky is a soft, hazy orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

TALES OF NEWFOUNDLAND ♦

# Shanawdithit, the Last of the Beothuk

An Al Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

### MARTY

Pull in close, friends. Tonight's Newfoundland tale is the heaviest we will tell all season, and it is important that we tell it, because it is about a whole people who vanished from the earth, and about the last of them, a young woman named Shanawdithit, who carried her entire nation inside her, alone, to the end. She was the last of the Beothuk, and when she died, they died with her.



### CAROL

The last of a whole people. Marty, I can hardly take that in. Who were the Beothuk?



#### MARTY

They were the first people of Newfoundland, Carol. They had lived on the island for thousands of years before any European ever saw it, a people of the coast and the interior, who painted themselves and their belongings with red ochre, so that the first Europeans called them the Red Indians, and some say that is where that name for all Indigenous people wrongly began. They lived by the sea in the warm months and the woods in the cold, they built fine bark canoes, and they wanted, above all things, to be left alone by the newcomers.



**CAROL**

To be left alone. And they were not, I take it.



### MARTY

They were not, Carol. When the Europeans came to fish the Grand Banks and settle the coast, they took the very shorelines the Beothuk needed to live, the salmon rivers, the seabird islands, the coves where they gathered their food. And the Beothuk, unlike some other nations, chose not to trade or treat with the settlers, but to withdraw, deeper and deeper into the interior, away from the coast that was their lifeblood. And so they were slowly starved, Carol, squeezed inland away from the sea, while disease the newcomers brought, tuberculosis above all, burned through them. And there was violence too, cruel and shameful, settlers who shot Beothuk on sight. Between the hunger and the sickness and the killing, a people who had numbered in the thousands dwindled, over two centuries, to almost nothing.



#### **CAROL**

Squeezed away from the sea that fed them, and struck down by sickness they had never known. Marty, it is a slow horror, worse in a way than any battle. How does the story come to one young woman?



#### **MARTY**

By the 1820s, Carol, there were only a handful of Beothuk left alive in the whole world. In 1819, settlers captured a young Beothuk woman named Demasduit, they called her Mary March, and took her from her husband and her people, and she died the next year of tuberculosis. And in 1823, three starving Beothuk women came out of the woods to the settlers, near death, and two of them soon died. The third was a young woman of about twenty, and her name was Shanawdithit. And she was, though no one knew it for certain yet, the last of her nation.



**CAROL**

The last one. Oh, Marty. To be the only one left of your whole people. I cannot imagine a loneliness like that.



#### MARTY

There is no loneliness like it, Carol, in all of human experience, and Shanawdithit carried it with a dignity that breaks my heart. She lived among the settlers in her last years, and there was a man named William Cormack, who had searched the interior for the Beothuk and grieved their vanishing, and he took her in, and he did something precious. He asked her to tell him about her people. And Shanawdithit, the last Beothuk, sat down and drew. She made drawings, Carol, of her people's history, their camps, their canoes, the ways they lived, the events of their last years, even the deaths of her own family. She poured out everything she knew, everything her people had ever been, onto paper, so that it would not all be lost when she was gone.



**CAROL**

She drew her whole world so it would survive her. Marty, that is the bravest and saddest thing I have ever heard. She knew she was the end, and she tried to save what she could.

**MARTY**

She knew, Carol. She knew she was the last, and she spent her final strength making sure the memory of her people would outlive her, one careful drawing at a time. And then, in the summer of 1829, in St. John's, Shanawdithit died, of the same tuberculosis that had taken so many of them. And with her, the Beothuk people of Newfoundland came to their end. A nation of thousands, thousands of years old, gone entirely from the earth, and its last light a young woman drawing pictures for a stranger so the world would not forget.

**CAROL**

Gone entirely. Marty, I do not have words. A whole people, and their language, and their thousands of years, ending in one lonely young woman in a strange town. How do we even hold something so enormous and so terrible?

**MARTY**

We hold it, Carol, by refusing to look away from it, and by refusing to let her be forgotten, which is the one thing she asked of the world with those drawings. The Beothuk are gone, and nothing can undo that, and it is one of the great wrongs of this land's history. But Shanawdithit is not forgotten. Her drawings survive. Her name is honoured now, in Newfoundland and beyond. Scholars and her fellow Indigenous peoples keep her memory and the memory of the Beothuk alive. And every time we tell her story at a fire like this one, we are doing exactly what she hoped, Carol. We are remembering. She made sure her people would not vanish silently, and they have not.

**CAROL**

She made sure. Marty, that is the one small mercy in it, isn't it. She was not able to save her people, but she saved their memory, and we are keeping it right now.

**MARTY**

We are, Carol, and we always must. So tonight we remember the Beothuk, the first people of Newfoundland, and we remember Shanawdithit, who carried them all inside her to the end, and who, in her last loneliness, drew the truth of her people so that we could not pretend they never were. Remember them, friends. That is her legacy, and it is ours to keep. I'm Marty Shepard.

**CAROL**

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am holding the Beothuk and their last daughter in my heart, and I will not forget. Honour the first peoples of this land, hold your own close, and come back to the fire.