

Captain Cook and the Biggest Brilliant Noplace

The fields were pristine, flat, white, like virgin paper; the frost-capped mountains appeared as raw marble. The silence of this place was so powerful that Cook felt he could hear the snowflakes hit the ground, each with its own delicate *piff*. Whirls of whiteness scoured his bare feet and face like strands of steel wool. Even the sky had yet to be filled in with any color. The suns hid behind the great white cloud stretch, their colors failing to seep into the sky. Cook knew it as the biggest, most brilliant noplace on the entire planet – it had not so much a name.

On the planet Heaven, nobody but madmen and their dogs ventured out of the pastures and into the wilds. Doing so left one susceptible to sickness, physical injury, and other perils normally muted within the Gates of Paradise. Saint Peter always gave Cook a funny look when he left.

Cook's sidekick, a former track and field athlete, Ben, never looked at any of this. Ben looked at his feet, or the three meters of ground ahead of him, or at Cook; right now, Ben was looking at the fire before them, taking off his socks.

"I really hate stopping and making fires in bright daylight like this," Ben said,

rubbing his legs nervously. "And I *really* hate it when you make me dry my socks."

Cook secretly liked playing the Holmes to Ben's sniveling Watson – it was why he took him on this expedition. Any kind of company will suffice in this nothing. "I suppose you never knew of it before you ascended; but outside the gates, there again exists a thing called frostbite. And if your feet succumb to it, they'll turn black and fall off."

Ben muttered something unintelligible and probably obscene.

"You knew we had to cross that stream. There was no way around it." Cook's socks were already roasting. "Rub some snow on your feet and stop whining. Think of your Florida, or whatever you call it."

"Florida. You British are alike in any life: always viewing the world as a collection of non-British nationalities."

"I prefer to view it as geography."

Ben savagely dug his feet into the snow. "You aren't on Earth anymore, Limey."

It wasn't that Cook wanted to be back on Earth, or that he really missed the place. Ben, being more perceptive than he looked, still knew that all he need do was mention the little wet rock to silence his partner. Cook always regretted that he didn't live long enough to see it all, and the thought sobered him instantly.

Ben continued to huff, "We've been marching around on this tundra off and on for over a year now. All I have to show for it is an uncanny knack for repairing snowshoes and some dry socks."

"Patience. We'll find the egg; and when we do find it, it's all yours." Cook squinted to discern an unfamiliar cloud shape in the distance.

"I still don't understand what is in this for you," said Ben, voicing his most nagging thought for, what seemed to Cook, the one-hundredth-and-something time.

Cook had to smile. "Does it really matter?"

Ben squinted his Cautious Squint. "A fella has to wonder."

"What hatches from a Faberge Egg, Ben?"

"More Faberge Eggs, I'd hope."

"The last of the pearl-winged nothings, that's what." Cook's face cragged up with frown lines as he realized the cloud was moving toward them. "Pack up your things, Ben. We have to find a good reference point before that ripcloud reaches us."

A ripcloud is like a snowstorm, but a variety that can only take place on the tundras of Heaven. It was merely a wide spiral of rotating winds that zigzags across the tundra, of little danger or importance, save that it completely erases every footprint and buried landmark – two essential tools in

navigating the otherwise perfect white plane. After starting back in the wrong direction, it could be hours before travelers realized they were going east instead of north, upsetting the grid system Cook had been so busy mapping for the last year.

"According to the grid here," he said, already in motion, "there are some caves nearby in the northeast. We just have to get them within view before the ripcloud sweeps over us, so we can keep a steady direction."

Ben wanted to curse his reliance on the snowshoes. If only he were on solid ground, he could easily run the distance to the caves. That would shut the old buzzard up. "So you don't think we'll actually make it to the caves before the rip hits us?"

"Not likely, lad."

"Don't call me lad."

The four snowshoes churned up puffs of snow like pistons in a combustion engine, bound for the northeast corner of the snow desert with no intention of reaching a destination in that direction. Cook just wanted to hear *Land Ho!* Before his face was blasted and his eyes blinded by the ever-nearing ripcloud.

But nature doesn't have to play by the rules outside the Pearly Gates. Cook and Ben clasped instinctively as the ripcloud blustered upon them, smothering their ability to see and hear. For the next forty

minutes, it was going to sound like one long, forever howling sensory train wreck. The two had the tacit understanding that they must either try stay perfectly still for the duration of the storm and run the risk of their muscles freezing up, or start dragging.

Dragging is what Cook had come to call his technique for maintaining steady course while deafened and blinded by a ripcloud: each man would take turns dragging the other by the feet. The dragged man would both act as dead weight, anchoring the dragging man to a reasonably true course, and also served as a human compass, since the winds can't blow over a man who is level to the ground. The physical exertion would keep their muscles loose and bodies warm; the slow movement would make sure that they couldn't get too far off course.

This is how they did it, alternating Ben dragging Cook, Cook dragging Ben, changing every ten minutes.

After two such rotations, it was Cook's turn to drag again. His muscles were still burning from his last turn. He rarely had motivation problems during even the hardest trails; but ripclouds were always discouraging to him. Even the nothing ceased to exist, and his normally keen senses were at the mercy of a seemingly uncontrollable force. Blankness upon blankness created a feeling of directionless futility inside Cook. When the horizon

never stopped, it was inspiring; but now, in the less-than-nothingness, Cook could only seek a direction and heave. It was drudgery. It was work. It was not an adventure.

In these times, he tried to project his senses ahead of him like a sort of probe, or hunting dog. He searched for anything present enough to signify that the less-than-nothingness was only an illusion and that his struggle was amounting to some end. His probe looked, felt, heard, and sniffed at the void.

Something.

Something.

Something? To the amazement of Cook's nose, he picked up a light, Earthly odor through the sensory train wreck. His face shuddered. Feces. Maybe *dog* feces. A dog sled? Ben may have been asleep, since he did not kick to signify that he felt his direction changing. Cook followed the smell, picking up speed, kicking up snow like a two car locomotive wrapped in furs. Soon, the smell disappeared, but the deep tracks of a dog sled could be felt beneath Cook's feet. The locomotive picked up steam.

A thrill oozed through the explorer's veins, stoking his furnace and warming his ambition as if he had just received a blood transfusion of boiling black coffee. He was charging toward a guess, his eyes and ears filled with snow. It was like every great

discovery in his career had never happened, like the seconds of his life had been piling up to reach this moment of anticipation.

And it hit him in the head. A rock. He felt: rocks, a very large rock, an opening inside of them, space, shelter. Ben must have been awake because he was moving the furry bulk of his arms and legs in unsuccessful efforts to roll himself upright.

Cook pulled Ben up and forcibly moved Ben's hand over the rocks and into the mouth of the outcropping. The two crawled in, getting lower and lower to the ground, trying to squeeze their large backpacks into this shelter for all it was worth. Soon, the two could see again, as they were several feet into a long cavern.

"Do you see tracks?" Cook yelled to his partner.

"What?" The continuous white train wreck was either echoing into the cavern, or had made them temporarily deaf.

"Tracks! Foot prints!" His voice was dry from the extended silence. "Let's go deeper!"

The cavern gradually opened up, getting more spacious, and curving deeper inward for several yards before revealing a large room, roughly the size of a high school gymnasium, with a hole in the ceiling the width of a basketball hoop that caused the winds to make a jug-blowing sound every few seconds when they hit it just right.

There was a semi-frozen lake consuming half the room, with a chiseled ice waterfall leading down the wall behind it. It was a natural place, a palace of a kind rarely seen on Heaven.

There was a man and a team of snow dogs waiting for them.

Cook removed his scarf and did nothing to hide his childish grin. "I must admit that you've always had a certain flair for location, old boy," he said, laughing.

Ben tried to question. "Who is-"

The other man, indistinguishable from Ben and Cook beneath the piles of furs and coats, emitted an unusually loud sort of chortle that lingered in echoes for several seconds. "You know I can't just make X mark the spot, James."

Ben looked like he had just woken up for the third time in two minutes. "Who is this?"

"Yes, of course, this is Ferdinand Magellan. He was an idol of mine before back on Earth, and now my colleague in this hunt of ours." Cook untied his snowshoes and strode to meet Magellan. "You did well on this one!"

"Yes, yes; what was it, two years?" Megellan's beard was not encrusted with ice, signaling to Ben that there must be a fire somewhere near. "And who is this with you? A new partner, I presume?"

"Yes, that's Benjamin. As soon as he warms up, he'll want to have the prize, you know."

"He'll keep it, you think?" The old Portuguese frowned in anticipation. "You know why I say not to take a partner along."

"Well," Cook looked at his feet, "he was able and interested, and I love the company."

"That's why I suggest dogs, James."

James Cook said nothing, waiting for his fellow explorer to reveal the prize.

Magellan noted the silence and hunched over to unbutton one of the many packs adorning his dog sled and carefully lifted a Faberge Egg from a leather pouch. Ben's eyes opened wide enough to tear their lids. "This is mine?"

Cook was half relieved by the journey's end, half disgusted with the inevitable explanation he would need to make for his partner. "If you really want it, Ben."

"What do you mean, if I want it?"

Magellan sighed. "So this man knows nothing of our Game of Hemispheres?"

"I didn't, um," Cook was struck with the compound shame of the sudden realization that he had deceived, as well as the shame of having to realize that in the company of the deceived person. "I didn't think he would join me if I told him."

Ben didn't seem to care.

"Dogs, James. Dogs," Magellan muttered.

Cook took the rudeness as a cue to repay his debt to his duped companion.

"Hemispheres is a game we have been playing since we ascended to this planet. We thought it was a waste that there was so much undiscovered land and so little exploration."

"Of course, with the way time passes here, it wasn't long before we felt we had seen everything there was to see." Magellan wasn't altogether interested in the explanation, devoting more attention to trying to light a cigarette. His lighter just sparked and smoked. "Lighter must be running out of fluid," he announced.

Cook ignored the rudeness. "So we invented this game. We each hid a Faberge Egg on one hemisphere of this planet, give a few hints to the other, and go about the task of finding them."

"And when we do find them," Magellan having given up on the lighter, fumbled through the mounds of pouches on his sled for a matchbook, "sonuva- where are they?" The matchbox was found, the conversation continues. "And when we find the eggs, we hide them again. We don't keep them." Magellan lit his cigarette in triumph, took a puff, and finally made eye-contact with Ben. "You don't get to keep it."

"Well!" Ben's forehead convulsed.

"Well, what's the point? If you're-

Magellan erupted as if he had stored his anger from the moment he first saw Ben's lips move: "And what good would it be to keep them? Should we just place our eggs on the mantle back home, invite people in and say, 'Oh, of all the riches on Heaven, I have the only Faberge Egg!' But don't you want that? Something that would require no more work and not more *finding*?"

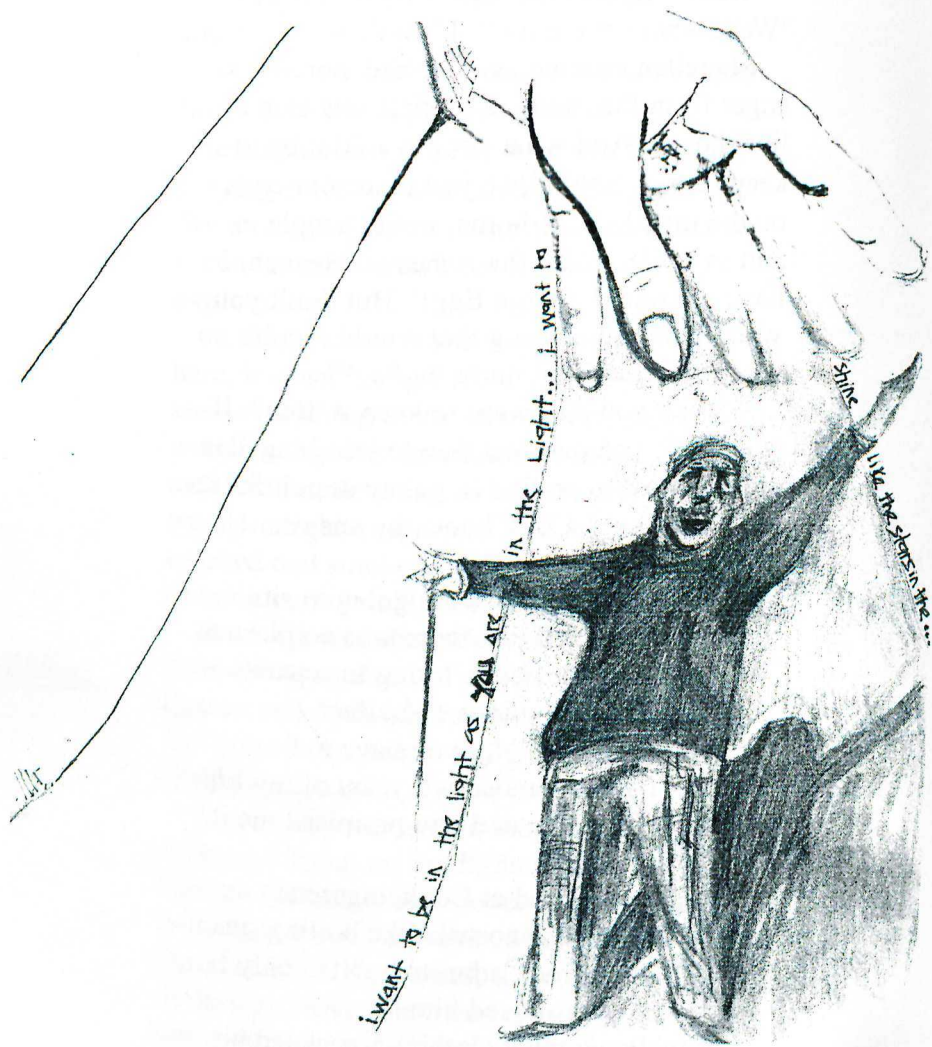
"So do you still want to keep it, Ben? If you don't you can feel free to join Magellan on his quest to re-find it, or my search for its hiding space." Cook knew the answer. He tried not to cringe.

Ben acted as if her were going to sit down, but noticed that there was no place to sit. He stood, thinking, trying to separate fact from too-ridiculous-to-be-fact.

"No," he said. "No, you have to be joking. I spent almost two years of my life trying to find this, and you promised me it would be mine."

Magellan glared at Cook, cigarette smoke exiting his nostrils like boiling steam jets. "I did," Cook admitted. "It is only fair, Magellan. I promised him."

Magellan's thick clothing translated his wild gestures into a frantic waddle. He waddled within two inches of Ben's face. "I refuse! Your reward was this journey! It



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was the freedom from that mundane life inside the Gates."

Ben shoved Magellan, knocking him off balance, standing him with limbs splayed, belly-up on the floor. "Cook, don't do this to me. You promised. I *earned* this."

"You earned nothing!" said the beached Portuguese.

Cook stooped to help him, "Ferdinand-

"No." Magellan fumbled back to straightness. "No no *no*. He earned nothing."

"Ferdinand, please. We can hide something else."

Magellan snorted at both Ben and Cook. "Okay," he said. He dropped the egg back into the leather sack, tightened the draw cord, and spun it around like David's sling. "If this is your reward, you are free to claim it." Magellan let go of the string and let the relic fly. He did not look. Cook winced. Ben gasped. The sack plunged into the half-frozen pond with a *kerplunk*.

Ben, too shocked to yell, jolted to retrieve it, jumping from a ledge and diving into the pond. Magellan watched with delight as he landed flat on his face in the shallow water right next to the sack containing the egg, which Ben thought would be lost forever.

The cavern echoed with the tremendous thunder of the explorer's laughter. "You

win, you win!" laughed Magellan, as he applauded his spectacle. "You win!"

"Yes, good form there." Cook was also chuckling, but his guilt slowly caught up with him. "I take it you won't be following us out Ben?"

The soaking track runner refused to answer, concentrating, instead, on his beautiful prize. It was something worth more for its rarity than monetary value – by far the most prestigious trophy ever awarded him. He *earned* it.

"Very well." James Cook's wave of guilt passed, realizing that Ben, even as he sat drenched and shivering in that pond, was as happy as he'd ever seen him. "We'll keep the fire going."

Magellan was still laughing. "You win! You win!"

The two partners in the treasureless hunt mounted the dogsled and charged into the big brilliant noplance. The ripcloud had passed. The land and the sky had resealed themselves. And again, everything was blank.

Brad Latino