

Journal 25 - the Tundra

Once we had determined our position on the navimap, we started out in the direction of the nearest orange zone. Once the sun began to set, we put up the tent Victor carried in his sack. It was inflatable and so the canister of compressed air that came with it filled its walls with enough air to keep it upright and solid. All we had to do was hold it down with rope, pegs and snow. There was room for four, with each area separated from the others by a wall of thin plastic sheeting. Each area opened onto a sort of living area that stretched the full width of the tent, with a zipped flap to the outside. The instructions assured us the tent would fully deflate when required, with all the air being drawn back into the canister; it would then have to be folded up.

Dinner was courtesy of our self-heating bags; though we were satisfied Bernard remained hungry. Our sleep was interrupted by a vicious storm in the night, but we remained warm and cosy.

While walking the next day Bernard made a discovery: a pheasant buried in the snow, frozen solid. Since it was unlikely that pheasants were common in the arctic, we took it to be a sign of the new peculiarity of the region.

The next day we agreed to Victor's suggestion of shooting a bear for extra food, mostly for Bernard, who was suffering somewhat. Once we located a good candidate I shot him a few times before he was brought down. No sooner had we reached it than we noticed we were being observed by some of the natives.

We saw three figures come over a drift towards us, walking slowly and calmly to show they were not hostile. When they got closer we saw two were quite old, late forties I would say, while the third was certainly less than twenty. It was hard to tell as their furs and weather-beaten faces denied me a more accurate estimation.

When they were close enough one of the older two asked if we needed any help, so they helped Victor skin the bear. The younger one asked if he could keep the bear's skull; apparently he needed it for the bear's soul because he had yet to kill one himself. We obliged since there was no reason to deny his request. One of the older natives offered me a snack of seal blubber to chew on, but I politely declined. Victor had some though. I think it must have been very chewy, as he did not speak for about five minutes afterward.

The other one offered us the hospitality of his home, and as we followed him I found myself wondering if his wife was particularly attractive. One must try to follow local customs, after all.

Our host's home was a snow-covered mound that concealed the large, semi-rigid tent beneath. Bernard found himself in the company of their dog pack, so we left him outside. Once inside, our host introduced himself as Ommu; the other two were his brother Tamun and his son Daniel. Ommu offered us maggots, as I had feared, and since Victor declined the offer I was forced into having some. Morianna they seemed to mostly ignore, no doubt because we were men and she was only a woman. Only in their eyes, of course.

I did not enjoy it much, but smiled to cover a shudder and handed them back, complimenting him on his maggots and manners in equal measure. I am glad we had decided on this stratagem beforehand; this way we would not have to entirely subsist on maggots when in company.

We asked him some questions about any strange occurrences in the area, and he showed us a frozen pheasant to match ours. He also made a few comments about the strange things he and his family had seen to the north; strange lights in the sky for the most part.

Our discussion was interrupted by what sounded like a pitched battle outside. No sooner had we determined the source that we dashed outside to see our fears realised. Bernard had obviously had a discussion of his own with the pack leader that had descended into a fight. Bernard looked almost content as he stood over the bodies of four dogs, one noticeably larger than the others. He only had one noticeable injury, a bite on the shoulder. The other dogs kept well back.

Ommu was understandably upset, and demanded repayment. Since we did not have enough bearskins to trade, it was suggested that perhaps Bernard could father some more

dogs, as he was obviously a premier animal. Since it was the only thing we really had to offer we agreed, and Ommu allowed us to put our tent up next to his.

The next day Victor suggested that perhaps we could use a dog sled; we could put our gear on it and he could push it, making it easier for us. When Victor suggested it to Ommu his price was even more skins than for the loss of his dogs, so Victor offered him one of our 'magical' heater/stoves. Once the device was demonstrated, Ommu settled for two of them for a sled and five dogs. We declined the dogs, but took three reindeer carcasses instead.

That concluded, Morianna directed Bernard to do his duty. After a minute or two of trying to explain the situation to him (both easier and harder than it sounds) he got the idea, and I would swear he gloated at the other dogs before he got down to it.

When he had consummated the deal we said farewell to Ommu and set off north. Ahead lay some rough territory, beyond which lay mountains. Perhaps three days of travel away was a pass through those mountains, and on the navimap the area was bright orange with a red heart.

Our sleep the first night was disturbed by a sensation of Power that tickled the spine and made my skin itch. Something major had occurred somewhere and we had felt the aftershock.

The journey was long, tiring and, of course, cold. Rather monotonous too. If it had gone on any longer I do not know how I would have coped without some form of entertainment. This sort of weather is usually only good for one thing, but there was no time or opportunity for it here.

We finally reached the pass and moved down it until a large golden barrier stopped us. It was about twelve feet tall and apparently made of solid gold. It had a door in the centre, and was covered in intricate carvings that suggested clouds and birds over a landscape similar to the tundra we had travelled through. It also emanated an aura of intense magical power.

Victor knocked on the door and, surprisingly, hurt his hand through his thick furred mittens. Morianna had Victor lift her up so she could stand on his hands and look over the wall. I do not know if she saw anything over it but her questing hands were prevented from reaching over the top by an invisible barrier that continued up where the gold wall stopped.

With that avenue a failure, Victor discovered a doorknocker the shape of a bird in flight and used it. He stepped back as the door opened to reveal a figure dressed in some form of armour, apparently made from leather and strips of (presumably) tough wood. The front of the helmet was shaped like an exaggerated human face, with a wide, half-open mouth set in a grimace. A pair of eyes could just be seen through the eyeholes.

He (?) asked who wished to enter, and Victor answered for himself. He was then asked if he was worthy, but when Victor asked what he meant exactly the figure returned within and closed the door. I then gave it a go, but repeating Victor's question got (predictably) the same response. The Morianna tried it but said she was worthy; naturally she was let in. However, Bernard was not allowed to enter because he was not capable of answering the question. When she said she would wait, something odd happened; either the wall moved away down the pass so she was outside again, or she was moved outside. It was hard to tell which it was as it happened so fast.

Victor suggested that we bypass the problem of Bernard by using our Trump cards, so he knocked, said he was worthy and was let through. After a short interval I felt the cold sensation that heralded a Trump contact and accepted it. Victor looked back at me from beyond the barrier, and once I reached out to touch Morianna (who was holding on to Bernard's fur and the sled) he pulled us through the contact to stand beside him.

We were still within the pass, bordered on both sides by mountains, so we continued on. After a few minutes Victor unexpectedly vanished. He just disappeared as if he had never been, leaving the sled behind. We looked around us for some sign of him or what had occurred, and when I turned to Morianna to ask her opinion she ignored me and continued looking around more frantically. Presumably I had vanished too, but remained where I was, only unseen and unheard. Was Victor in the same circumstances?

Then the situation was made worse by Bernard suddenly going insane, running around at maximum speed looking for something. I guessed that to him at least Morianna had vanished into some close plane of existence, as I appeared to have done. I could still see and hear Morianna, of course, but he could not and she could still not see or hear me, or

Bernard either now. Then Bernard ran into me and knocked me down, so we were in the same place at least.

Morianna had wandered off a short way, and appeared to be calling out, probably to the three of us lost ones. But as I sat down on a rock to rub my knee it all vanished to be replaced by a deep, black void. I apparently still sat on something, though whether it was the rock or I just floated in apparent nothingness I could not say. I could not really see myself either; it was all but pitch black.

With nothing else to do and no frame of reference, I remained 'seated' and just cleared my mind. The situation reminded me somewhat of the stories of magical initiations and enlightenment trials I had read of long ago, so I emptied my kind of everything using a meditation technique I had learned in the Rosey Cross.

I do not know how long I sat there, but I soon became aware of some Power about me in the void. I looked 'up' to see something that resembled the Pattern floating above my head. I do not know if it was produced by my meditation or came from an outside source, but I concentrated on it as the only visible thing in the void. It quickly focused and became a clear image of the Pattern, rather as it had in my mind when envisioning in my mind for the purposes of metal defence.

No sooner had it become completely clear that I felt a hand on my shoulder and Morianna's voice calling out my name. I looked up to see Morianna standing over me next to an old, wrinkled, bald man in a loincloth sat on the rock. I just fell over backwards and lay there while she explained the situation.

The old man was the next gatekeeper; all but one of those who entered had to face a personal test, even Bernard. If the remaining one were to pass through the gate without the others, those others would be lost forever. I had found my own way back, but the others had yet to do so.

We waited for about three hours before we turned once more to the Trumps. Morianna used her simple Trump of Bernard and it was not long before he seemed to explode out of the image onto Morianna. Many a frenzied sniffing and licking went on as I Trumped Victor. He was totally exhausted and I practically had to drag him bodily through the contact.

He collapsed and after a few minutes told us how he had suddenly found himself surrounded by thick fog without his gauntlets or Trumps. He then heard the throaty roar of some terrible beast followed by a woman's scream. He thought it was Morianna and so he tried to pursue the beast through the fog; he did so for several hours, both for him and us, to no avail. Just as his strength went he received my contact.

We dragged ourselves over to a small stream nearby that the gatekeeper gave us directions to and rested for a couple of hours before we continued onwards.