

NORDA

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Kristoforo had expected the ice walls to be just that, walls. You climb them and you're on the other side.

Conventional wisdom held that there was nothing on the other side. The walls represented the end of the world, beyond which lay only the void. When Espero told him what she'd read in the old books about the world being round, he'd laughed at first. But eventually, when she'd shown him how to interpret the passages in long-dead languages, he'd come to believe.

Still, nothing in any old book could have prepared any of them for the expanse of ice and snow that extended before them, to the horizon and beyond.

"Are you sure?" he asked Espero. "Are you sure there's anything out there? The ice looks like it goes on forever."

"It's summertime, so once we get over the permanent ice cover, the coastal regions should be snow-free."

Coastal regions. The ocean. That was something Kristoforo simply could not imagine. Espero said it was like Lake Renaskiô, but so vast that one could not walk all the way around it in a year of years, nor see the other side, even with a spyglass.

And that was not the end of it. Espero said—and she had shown him the maps on which she based her outlandish assertions—that beyond the ocean lay other lands, hundreds and thousands of kilometers across, that had once been filled with all manner of fantastic plants and animals. There had been people, too, more people than Kristoforo could ever imagine. Perhaps there still were.

It was the look in Espero's eyes that had convinced Kristoforo, more than any worm-eaten books or yellowing maps. When she talked about the vastness of the world, they brimmed with childish wonder, something Kristoforo hadn't felt since boyhood, when he used to climb the birch behind his house and look down at the rooftops like a bird in flight. He would give anything to feel that wonder again, even abandon his beloved orchards to follow her across the icy waste.

“But how far to reach the end of the ice?” he asked, though she had briefed everyone on the expected distances many times before they left home.

“Perhaps six hundred kilometers,” she said, “depending how much the ice may have melted.”

Six hundred kilometers. That could take weeks. Months even. Luckily, Espero had convinced Johano de Danjeløj, son of the famous caravaner, to at least pretend to believe her theory, and he had procured twelve of the syndicate’s hardest ponies and outfitted them for a long voyage. Long-distance trade was his syndicate’s specialty, but even its caravans had never traveled such a distance—some five times the span of the known world—and certainly not over a plain of solid ice.

Johano came up beside them, raising his spyglass to his eye to survey the ice as if he were the one leading the expedition. “Well,” he said, as if the ice hadn’t produced in him the same primordial fear of the unknown as in Kristoforo, and even Espero, though she tried valiantly to hide it. “Shall we go?”

Out on the ice, it was as cold as the coldest days of winter back home, even though the sun was high in the sky.

The party made poorer time than they had hoped, for even with studded shoes, the ponies could not move as quickly over bare ice as over solid ground. The ice was a vast plain of blinding white, and utterly featureless, but it hid deep crevasses filled with snow. These were not impassable, for the loose snow was only a few feet deep, the hard-pack underneath able to bear the travelers’ weight, but made for treacherous footing for the ponies.

Not four days into the trip, one of Johano’s animals broke an ankle in one of these crevasses and they had to put it down. The poor animal moaned and thrashed until Severo put a bullet in its brain, then it just flopped down in the blood-stained snow, where it would presumably remain forever. There were no animals to scavenge the dead flesh out here on the ice, and the bitter cold would soon freeze it so thoroughly it would likely never rot. Weeks later, as rations ran low, the travelers would wish they’d butchered the unfortunate animal, but at the time no one had the stomach for horsemeat.

That left eleven ponies to pull the six sledges, which carried their tents, extra clothing, fuel and rations of biscuit, jerky and dried fruit. The food had been selected to keep in the cold and be edible after defrosting with the

travelers' body heat. They had packed a few more substantial meals as well, freeze-dried but easily reconstituted with a little boiled water in camp. It was simple fare, boring after the first few days, but it kept their bellies full.

There were six of them: Kristoforo and Espero, the architects of the expedition; Johano and his wife Nikolasino, its financial backers; Severo the hunter; and the lovely Fatino. No one knew much about Fatino, except that she represented the Syndical Confederation. No one could say why she insisted on joining the expedition, and she was not forthcoming with that information, but she was a hard worker and good company, so no one complained.

What Kristoforo could say was that the sex ratio was no happenstance. He had made it clear to everyone involved that the dangers of the outside were entirely unknown, and that there was a good possibility the expedition would be unable to return home for years, or perhaps ever. Therefore they would travel as pairs—humans and ponies alike—prepared to turn their voyage of discovery into one of colonization should the situation warrant.

Two days after the pony's death, it became clear that its surviving partner could not pull a sledge alone. They removed all the fuel and comestibles from the sledge and packed them into makeshift saddlebags for the pony to carry, but the sledge itself would have to be abandoned, and with it the sixth tent and stove.

Johano would share a tent with his wife going forward, though it was only just big enough for a single person to sleep comfortably. Kristoforo would have volunteered to share with Espero, and Johano would likely have preferred her company or Fatino's to his own wife's, but there was decorum to observe even this far from civilization. The matter was not even discussed, except for Kristoforo's admonition not to steam up the tent too much or they would regret it in the morning. He was only half-joking, for they'd found that the stoves had to be kept at a low heat, just barely above freezing, or everything in the tent would get damp overnight and freeze once they were outside again.

By the end of the third week, all had grown accustomed to the routine. Rise at 00h00, which would be sunrise in the spring, but provided a purely arbitrary start time during these months of twenty-four-hour sun. Dress, feed ponies, cold breakfast, pack up sleep sacks and then stoves and tents, then march until 05h00 with two short breaks. Set up camp, feed and water ponies, hot supper, and then sleep. But the routine, the close quarters and the lack of measurable progress was getting to everyone.

Johano and Nikolasino bickered non-stop, and because they were perpetually annoyed with each other, they bickered with everyone else, too. Espero's assurances that they were getting closer to the coast, which had done so much to keep spirits high in the first week, were met with cynicism by week three. No one had ever been away from home for this long, not even Johano, and without notable landmarks, no one could be sure they weren't just wandering aimlessly on the ice.

Espero assured them that the compass she carried was accurate, and that as long as they followed the N arrow they would not stray from their path, but what had seemed like solid science back home now seemed like dangerous speculation. "Our homeland is not at the south magnetic pole," she explained. "The magnetic pole is in the ocean, but we are traveling to the opposite coast, directly away from the pole, so a northerly magnetic heading will keep us on course." Johano and Severo, who had the most practical experience with overland travel, merely scoffed. They had always navigated using landmarks and terrain features.

Toward the end of the month, when they could see the bottom of the ration crates but not the end of the ice, the whole party was at the end of their ropes, but Johano and Severo were on the edge of open mutiny. All six travelers had rifles, for Espero had read that there were dangerous beasts along the coast, but only Severo had any experience shooting, or so they thought.

It was, ironically, on the day of La Festivalo de la Paco that the two men made their move. They had risen at 09h90, along with Nikolasino, and retrieved the others' rifles from their sledges, since, in the absence of any animal threat, no one had bothered keeping their weapons close at hand. After everyone had woken and broken camp, the three mutineers pointed their rifles at the others.

Johano, who had fixed his aim on Kristoforo, spoke first. "We are turning around," he said. His tone was matter-of-fact, as if he were addressing apprentice teamsters on one of his caravans, but his expression betrayed his anger, his readiness for violence. "We are not prepared to die on this endless ice."

"We can't turn around," Espero retorted, heedless of Severo's rifle pointed at her chest. "We are hundreds of kilometers from home. We don't have enough fuel or rations to make it back."

“And whose fault is that?” Severo snarled. “You told us we would be over the ice wall by now.”

Kristoforo had kept silent, but his mind was working. He would not allow these fools to destroy what he and Espero had worked so hard for. They would cross the ice or die trying. He backed away, toward his sledge. He knew without looking that his rifle would be gone, but he knew exactly where he kept his ice axe.

Espero hadn't moved. She was explaining how she'd estimated the distance, though the mutineers clearly didn't want to hear it.

Kristoforo wondered if Fatino would join in the call to turn back, tipping the scales more than the rifles already had, but just as he glanced in her direction she dove to the ground and came to her feet behind her own sledge, with some kind of weapon in her hand. She fired a single shot in the air.

Nikolasino raised her rifle to her shoulder, but couldn't fire, whether due to mechanical malfunction or lack of nerves Kristoforo would never know. But in the split-second Johano and Severo had turned their weapons on Fatino, Kristoforo was able to grab his axe and charge at Johano.

Johano fired a shot that struck the ice in front of Fatino's sledge, and was working the bolt to reload, when Kristoforo tackled him. They both fell to the ground and grappled for a few seconds, Johano trying to swing his rifle in the close quarters, Kristoforo trying to control Johano's flailing limbs with his one free hand. It was no use, he knew. There was no way out of this without bloodshed. He raised the axe over his head to deliver the killing blow, but Severo's voice stopped him.

“Drop it or I'll kill her,” he said.

Kristoforo knew “her” was Espero, who had not taken cover at all. He had seen Severo drop a wild hen in flight from hundreds of yards away, so he had no doubt the hunter would not miss a human target at point blank range.

“Drop yours or I'll kill *you*,” shouted Fatino from behind her sledge. “This is an automatic pistol. It holds sixteen rounds and shoots as fast as I can pull the trigger. You might make one shot, but I'll shoot you to pieces before you can chamber another round.”

As the seconds passed, Kristoforo let his eyes flit over to Severo, whose own gaze oscillated between Fatino peeking around the rear of her sledge and Espero standing motionless in the open.

“Look,” Espero called out, her tone urgent but controlled. Moving nothing but her eyes, she directed Kristoforo’s attention to the sky behind him.

Ensuring he had Johano pinned down tightly enough to risk a glance, Kristoforo turned his head in the direction she’d indicated.

A bird was soaring high overhead. It was not a chicken or pigeon, or poultry of any kind, nor one of the gulls that nested around Lake Renaskiô. It was bigger than any bird Kristoforo had ever seen, and pure white except for the black tips of its enormous wings.

Kristoforo returned to the task at hand, but even Johano was looking at the bird from his prostrate position. “Is that...?”

“A seabird,” Espero said, the wonder in her voice tempered by the certain knowledge that she was right. “An... albatross.”

No blood was shed that day. After sighting the albatross, there was no more talk of turning back. They would later learn that albatrosses fly for thousands of kilometers, never landing, even sleeping in the heavens, and that sighting one was no guarantee the sea was within reach. But in their ignorance, they took hope and persevered, following Espero and her N arrow wherever they might lead.

The would-be mutineers went sheepishly about their business, pretending the confrontation had never happened, and neither Kristoforo nor Espero felt it would be in the group’s best interest to call them on it. Only Fatino felt the need to explain her role in that day’s events.

“A few members of the Syndical Confederation have always known about the things you have discovered in your studies,” she told Espero. “Not everything, for few are scholars such as you, but the basics. The knowledge has been passed down since we first settled our land.”

“I could find nothing in the library about the time of the first settlement.”

“The founders wanted to create a new world, free from the injustices of the societies they came from. They chose the most remote part of this remote continent for their settlement, and used powerful explosives to blast a vast crater through the ice cap. The ice would keep us safe from rising temperatures, and from the war raging outside. Many would-be settlers never

reached our homeland, but those who made it abandoned their old nationalities, their religions and languages and cultures, every distinction that made one man raise his fist against another. The new world would not repeat the errors of the old.”

“So why keep books at all? Why permit this expedition?”

“There has always been danger that the outside world would one day intrude upon our own, and some argued that we should keep such records for the day when we might need them. It is not our way to coerce, to forbid, to punish. If someone like you discovered the old books, and someone like Kristoforo organized an expedition, it is your right. Anyway, we should have some intelligence of the outside world, for our own peace of mind.”

“So what intelligence do you hope to find across the ice, Fatino?”

“Me? I hope we find nothing at all.”

A few days later, on the third of Ventoso of the year 212, the party climbed down off the ice sheet onto a grassy plain. Nearby, a stream bubbled up from somewhere below the ice, and they followed its course through this new land.

Once they were away from the ice, the air was warmer than anything they’d ever experienced at home. The land was greener, too, covered with grass and small bushes, and here and there a tree, of varieties no one had ever seen, though Espero recognized some from her books. The albatross was gone, but other birds soared and fluttered overhead, occasionally diving into the stream or the tall grass to emerge with fish or rodents between their beaks. A little way downstream, a tribe of flightless birds—penguins, Espero called them—frolicked in the stream, but they all hopped out and scattered in panic when a large mammal made its appearance and began snapping at them.

“Seal,” said Espero.

Not one to miss an opportunity, Severo shot the beast, and they dragged it back to the little camp they’d set up a few hundred meters from the edge of the ice sheet, which was as far as the ponies could pull the sledges on dry ground. The meat was richer and fattier than anything they had ever tasted at home.

The travelers stayed in camp for a week, hunting, foraging for berries and roots among the tall grass, and simply resting from their trek over the ice. When they saw smoke on the horizon, though, they knew it was time to move.

“Could that be volcanic?” Kristoforo asked Espero. “Wildfire?”

She shrugged. “I only know what I’ve read in books written hundreds of years ago in a language I can barely understand.”

They transferred whatever they could into saddlebags and left the rest—most of the tentage and stoves, along with their skis and extra clothing—hidden under oilskins in the sledges. Then they set out along the streambank toward the source of the smoke.

The natives saw the travelers first, or rather, their dog did, and it set to howling.

“Keep moving,” Kristoforo said. “They know we’re here, so we might as well get close and say hello.”

They approached the natives’ camp slowly, each traveler with his or her rifle slung over one shoulder, not threatening but readily accessible. Hundreds of woolly, goat-like animals wandered around the single tent.

Outside the tent stood a teenage boy with a rifle in his hand. He shouted a stream of unintelligible syllables.

“I think he is speaking Hispana,” said Espero. “I don’t know it.”

“Try whatever language you do know, then.”

Espero opened her mouth and began to speak slowly, haltingly, first in her own tongue and then in a language Kristoforo had seen in her ancient books but never heard spoken aloud.

“Do... do you speak... English?”

He didn’t, but he seemed to recognize the attempt at communication. He spoke again in Hispana, but more slowly this time, then he pantomimed placing his rifle on the ground, though he did not actually let go of the weapon for a moment.

Slowly, Kristoforo and Espero set their own rifles down and backed away. The others followed suit.

The boy beckoned for them to come closer.

What followed was the strangest conversation Kristoforo had ever experienced, the boy speaking Hispana, the travelers Nia Lingvo, and Espero trying to speak Angla though no one else could understand her. The boy, whose name was Miguel, was astonished that the travelers had come over the ice, but hardly more astonished than they were that his family lived many kilometers away in a place called Nueva Mendoza, and that hundreds of people lived there.

“Nobody is supposed to live here,” Espero whispered. “That’s what the books say. Just a few scientists in temporary camps.”

“How old are your books, though? People must have moved in since they were written.”

She was silent. Throughout the journey, she had been the expert, confident in her knowledge even when everyone doubted. But now she was as lost as the others.

“Ask him if Nueva Mendoza is on the coast,” Kristoforo said.

After she’d asked in Angla and Nia Lingvo, repeating her question with different wording, Miguel finally shook his head.

“No,” he said. “San Juan Bosco.” He held a hand up, his thumb and forefinger about a centimeter apart. “Nueva Mendoza.” Then he held up his other hand and widened the distance between them to about half a meter. “Juan Bosco.”

The shepherd boy led the travelers to Nueva Mendoza, a jumble of ramshackle dwellings of wood and aluminum surrounded by pens holding sheep and poultry. There were a few people in the streets, some of whom greeted Miguel effusively and inquired about the strangers.

The travelers had not been in town for more than ten minutes before they were surrounded by men in dirt-brown uniforms, armed with a kind of rifle Kristoforo had never seen before. Having left their own rifles and most of their gear in a cache outside of town, and surrounded by hundreds of strangers, the travelers knew better than to resist.

The uniformed men took them to a brick building with a small office on one side and an open bay on the other, separated from the office by an iron grate. In the corner, an old man lay asleep, while two younger men sat on a

bench chatting until the newcomers were ushered inside and the grate closed behind them.

Kristoforo looked around, terrified. There was nothing like this at home, but he knew it was a prison. The others looked as frightened as he felt: Johano and his wife, Severo, even Espero. Fatino was nowhere to be seen.

How had she evaded capture? Kristoforo had not seen her escape, and neither had their captors, apparently. She'd been with the party when they first reached Nueva Mendoza, but Kristoforo couldn't say when he last distinctly remembered seeing her. The others seemed to be reaching the same realization, but no one said anything.

A few minutes later, another uniformed man, perhaps the leader of the group, came up to the grate and addressed the travelers in a strange language, different from Hispana. Kristoforo only recognized the word "*English.*"

Espero responded in her halting Angla, and she and the man exchanged words for several minutes before he walked away.

"What is going on?" Kristoforo asked when he was out of earshot.

"The Hispanoj and the Angloj are at war," she said.

"War?" Kristoforo remembered the term from Espero's lessons about the outside world, but he could not wrap his mind around it. Apart from schoolboy fights and the near-mutiny on the ice, he had no experience with violence.

"Yes," she said. "They are fighting over land for their crops and sheep. The soldiers think we are spies for the Angloj."

They were in prison for two days, the boredom and fear punctuated only by fruitless interrogation by the soldiers, before they got their chance to escape.

Early in the morning, when the early autumn sun was barely over the horizon, there was a rumbling, crashing sound, like thunder, but each clap shook the building like an earthquake.

"*¡Los ingleses!*" shouted one of the native prisoners.

The travelers had learned enough Hispana by then to understand what that meant. The Angloj were attacking. War had come to Nueva Mendoza.

The handful of soldiers who always lounged in the office throughout the day rushed out to join the fight, leaving only one of their number to guard the prisoners. When they'd been gone a few minutes, the outside door squeaked open, letting in a shaft of morning sunlight. The remaining soldier squinted and got up to close the door, but then there was a single gunshot and he toppled over backward.

It was Fatino. She searched the dead soldier for the key to unlock the grate, deflecting Kristoforo's questions with, "Not now."

Once she'd unlocked the grate, she led the travelers through the mostly deserted streets, taking care to stay out of the view of the soldiers running here and there, until they reached the spot where their gear was stashed. The local prisoners had disappeared.

As shells exploded around them, the travelers half ran, half crawled until they'd put a kilometer between themselves and Nueva Mendoza, and taken cover behind a low ridge overgrown with brush.

"Where were you?" Kristoforo asked Fatino once they were out of immediate danger. "What is happening?"

"The Confederation asked me to protect you," she responded. "To protect all of us. This world is no place for our people. We have to go home."

They all nodded, except Espero.

"We can't just run back to our hole," she said. "There's a whole world out here, and we can't pretend it doesn't exist. Hasn't the Confederation done that for long enough?"

Scared as he was, Kristoforo knew she was right. The world wouldn't go away just because they closed their eyes. His people had tried that once, hiding away in their polar paradise, protected from hunger and war by vast expanses of ice, but no more. He faced Fatino, staring her down, ignoring the pistol she pointed at his chest.

There was a loud whine in the sky behind him, and Kristoforo couldn't avoid looking over his shoulder to see what it was.

High in the air flew some kind of vehicle, birdlike in shape but clearly artificial.

It was Espero who spoke, naming the strange object. "It's an... airplane."

The airplane circled over Nueva Mendoza, releasing little black droppings that fell to the ground and exploded in balls of red flame.

Only Fatino spoke. "Let's go home."

Kristoforo closed his eyes.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jibril Stevenson graduated from the University of Puerto Rico more years ago than he cares to remember and, after a couple decades in government service, is currently pursuing graduate studies in linguistics. He lives on the East Coast with his wife and children, a lizard, an aging guinea pig and a brand new kitten. His short fiction has appeared in *Toyon Literary Magazine*, *New Maps*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Frontier Tales* (as Gabriel Stevenson), and elsewhere. Look for him at jibrilstevenson.wordpress.com or @jibrilstevenson on Twitter.