

The Pull

by Austin Gunderson

25 March, 1947

As Hugh Conrad slogged across the ice—toting a rifle, pickaxe, and contraband British mine detector that did nothing to lessen his chances of sinking straight through snow into some bottomless crevasse—the thought which had become his grudging mantra over the last week resurfaced.

“*This* isn’t archaeology!”

“That’s just ’cause *you* ain’t no archaeologist,” groused a voice from behind.

“Shut up, Miles. Nobody asked you.”

“Maybe if somebody had,” said Miles Cornwall, “we wouldn’t have walked in a *circle* the past hour.”

Hugh turned on the shorter man, irate. “We haven’t—” Then he saw it. “Uh.”

“Yeah.” Miles jammed his spade in a snowdrift and leaned against its handle, a snide grin breaking through his fatigue.

The mountain of ice on which they stood might’ve been a plain for all they could tell. Langjökull glacier was a world unto itself. Shapeless drifts rolled away in all directions, their crests carved off by a wind so severe it impelled Hugh to glance up every so often to confirm Flying Fortresses weren’t roaring by overhead.

But the sky was clear. As fair and clean as a window into some realm of celestial light. There were no planes. Indeed, within the week there would be no more American planes anywhere in Iceland. The troop withdrawal was nearly complete. Only a handful of NCOs, maintenance techs, and cleanup crews remained stationed at the airfield.

And then there were the scavengers. Like Hugh.

And maybe others, too.

The little red flag fluttering frantically on a ridgeline ahead certainly bespoke an unknown presence. It looked fresh, emphatic. Like a drop of blood from a wounded animal.

Hugh had crossed blood trails before. In trackless snow, one drop—one datum—could indicate any vector; it took a pattern to unnerve him. And this wasn’t the first such drop they’d seen that day.

He only *wished* they’d been walking in circles.

“This is all wrong,” he muttered. “The lay of the ice was different before. This flag’s on a flat stretch. It can’t be the same.”

“Admit it, Huey, you couldn’t have done worse blindfolded,” said Miles, rolling his neck. “Time for me to take the lead.” The mustache he’d cultivated since the war’s end flopped around

pretentiously. It was a travesty, that growth; it made an otherwise formidable man look like a ninny. Try as Hugh might, he couldn't figure out why anyone would start shaving only to stop before the job was done.

"Yeah?" he retorted. "Then you get to carry *this*." Shrugging out of the haversack that held the mine detector's battery, Hugh thrust it and the unwieldy plate-on-a-pole to which it was wired toward Miles, who opened his arms by reflex even as Hugh spun back to face the flag. By the time Miles had recovered from the imposition of additional weight, Hugh was already halfway up the slope.

"Hey!" Miles shouted. "You can't pass off the gear *and* take point! Get back here!"

Hugh let the protestations fade beneath the clanking of the skis against his back. The surrounding terrain was sinking away, a new vista expanding as he climbed. To the west, he could see the lip of the icecap where its sheer flank fell toward the floor of the Kaldidalur—the Cold Valley, a wasteland of stone-spangled white. To the north, frigid mountains marched away.

And here, at his feet, there fluttered a warning. A triangle of red cloth tied to a wooden stake—as sure a sign of competition as any foreign banner. Smith's men didn't use red flags as route markers. The ones Hugh had been issued were green.

Which means someone else is out here. Searching.

Hugh turned a slow circuit, pushing back his hood to widen his field of view. The wind skirled and plucked at his snow-white parka and tousled his close-cropped blond hair. A barren wasteland stretched to the horizon. But away in the distance, in the direction from which they'd come, he thought he caught a flash of red.

Up came his rifle. It was a sniper-issue M1, augmented with a powerful scope. He shoved its stock into his shoulder and peered through the aperture. A moment's lateral drifting through whiteness brought the red flash into focus. *Yeah, that's the first flag, alright. And where there's two, there's gotta be a third.*

Hugh whipped around, scanning the opposite horizon as Miles' ranting rose above the wind: "... coulda shot me, you yahoo! What the hell you think you're ..."

But Hugh wasn't listening anymore. He'd spotted the third marker.

"Miles! Shut and hurry up, in that order!"

"So that's how it is, huh? Orders? Well, you can take your bullshit brass and shove it up your ... wait." The other man stopped abruptly behind Hugh. "You're just pissed about the girl, aren't you?"

Hugh gritted his teeth. "This has nothing to do with Inga. We're not alone up here. This is a flag trail. Could be those Russians we saw back in Reykjavík."

"You really thought she'd just up and leave, didn't you?" A note of pity had entered Miles' tone. "That was never gonna happen, Huey. You shouldn't take it personal."

Hugh rounded on Miles, nearly clipping the man in the face with his skis. "We are *not* discussing Inga! We need to follow this trail without being seen. If they've marked their route, they might've found something. And there'll be no backup from Smith if we get sniped by some sentry!"

"Whoa, man. No wonder you ditched this thing." Miles hefted the mine detector and its battery pack, which he hadn't yet strapped on. "That chip on your shoulder must weigh twice as much again. Anything else I can take off your hands?"

Hugh glared icicles at Miles, who merely cocked an eyebrow. Then Hugh slumped.

Dammit, now is not the time for this. “It’s complicated, okay?”

“Hey, I get it, man. I’ve been there. ‘No’ is like a knife in the gut.”

Hugh turned reflexively, giving the horizon another scan. “But she didn’t say no, Miles. That’s the problem.”

“What, her brother try to beat you up again?”

Hugh snorted. “If I wanted to, I could change that chump’s mind so fast it’d make his head spin.”

“If you wanted ...” A beat. “Wait ... I thought you *liked* the girl!”

“I do, Miles. I do.” And he did. *Too much. Damn those ice-blue eyes!* He squeezed his own eyes shut, shaking his head as though to clear it after a plunge in the frigid sea.

When he opened them, it was to meet Miles’ blank stare. “She won’t leave,” admitted Hugh, “but she didn’t say no.”

Understanding lit Miles’ face. “And you ...”

“I ...” Hugh looked away. Why was this so hard? Why couldn’t he just make up his mind? “I don’t think I can do that,” he said quietly.

For a minute the only sound was the rasping of the wind. Then Miles nodded slowly, gripped Hugh’s shoulder, and trudged off in the direction of the third marker.

###

The camp was a stain on the landscape. Dark tents clustered about a sinkhole roughly twenty feet in diameter—a glacial moulin, entrance to the underworld. Ropes radiated thence like urchin spines to terminate at portable winches. Well-bundled figures trudged to and fro. Some toted sacks, some rifles. No flag fluttered overhead, but Hugh knew that if there’d been one, it would’ve scowled as scarlet as those that had marked the path.

Their competitors were Soviets.

Hugh passed his rifle wordlessly to Miles, who squinted through its scope. They lay on the crest of a low ridge, up to their shoulders in the fresh snow that had erased all previous tracks. The wind swooped down from behind them and screamed into the dell ahead. A bad position from which to hunt animals, but perfect for spying on humans loath to stare into a storm.

Unfortunately, humans weren’t the only occupants of this camp. There were also dogs. A whole sled team of them, chained to a line running between stakes driven into the ice on the far side of the moulin. Even at this remove they looked restless. Siberian Huskies possessed an infernal sense of smell.

Smith had mumbled something about competition, and he’d obviously taken precautions to arm and even to camouflage his men, but what Hugh was looking at now chilled him in ways the elements never could. An operation this big atop a glacier this remote implied a level of logistical sophistication he hadn’t been expecting. *The commies had to have found this spot days ago to lug all their stuff out here unobserved. Either that or they’ve got a small army stashed down that hole.* He’d counted twenty-four of the fur-hatted goons thus far.

Beside him, Miles slowly lowered the rifle. “What,” he hissed, “are we *looking* for?”

A black box, thought Hugh instantly, roughly four feet by two feet by one foot, sealed on three sides with iron locks, and emblazoned on top with an eight-tailed dragon. But the answer he knew wasn’t enough anymore. Although it was bad form to ask too many questions in this

line of work, Hugh wasn't so compliant that he'd risk his life over what might be nothing more than some millionaire's travel trunk that'd taken an unscheduled plunge from a plane.

As it so happened, he *had* asked a few extra questions this time. And all he'd gotten from Smith was an eye-roll and some superstitious nonsense about 'the power to turn a man against the hunger in his heart.' Apparently, some tribe in the Hindu Kush venerated the suitcase's contents. *A likely story. If I'd lost my luggage, I'd probably spin a similar yarn just to get more eyes on the ice.*

"Whatever it is," Hugh muttered aloud, "I hope they enjoy it. Time to go." He scooted backward down the slope.

Miles seized his arm. "Wait. Isn't that ...?" He trailed off, pressing the scope to one eye.

In that moment, a sickening premonition struck Hugh like a gale-force gust. His stomach dropped. *Don't say it ... don't say it ...*

"It's the girl," Miles said.

Even though he'd braced himself, Hugh still froze. "You're mistaken," he croaked.

"Mmm ... nope. That's her alright. Same blonde braids, same breakneck gait, same rack ..."

Hugh shut his eyes. This couldn't be happening. It had to be one of Miles' sick jokes.

"She's even wearing those same boots, the ones you got her from the ... hey, whoa now! *That was intimate!*"

Lunging up out of the snow, Hugh snatched the rifle and shouldered Miles aside. The other man's complaints were buried beneath the blood thundering through Hugh's ears. Unfortunately, he'd lost Miles' place. As Hugh swept the scope over the camp, Miles' whispered bitching faded back in.

Hugh cut him off. "Where is she?"

"Toward the back left, I told you! Over by the dogs. She just skipped up to some guy and gave him a peck on the cheek, okay? Don't shoot the messenger."

Hugh was about to retort that it wasn't Miles he wanted to shoot, but then he saw her and the thought flew from his head.

Inga Finnursdóttir. Even under that bulky coat, still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

But why is she here? And who brought her?

The recipient of her affections was nowhere to be seen. *Must've ducked into one of those tents.* In front of the girl, and partially obscuring her, sheets of heavy canvas strained against the wind. *Can't tell which ones are occupied; they're all in motion.*

But so was she. Hugh jerked his scope back up to track her as she strode rightward, toward the sled dogs. She stopped and stared at them from just beyond their reach. It was then Hugh noticed they were all facing in his direction, bouncing up and down on forepaws as their mist-spewing muzzles stabbed the sky. The wind was so strong he hadn't even heard their howls.

Inga turned and looked right at him.

Hugh froze. *Those eyes ...*

They burned into him like frostbite, like a sweet pain that confirmed he was alive, an elixir of fear and longing. Rarely had it tasted so strong. He could actually sense her scent wafting through some neurological back alley. *She sees me. Knows I'm here!*

But then something caught Inga's attention and she glanced aside, breaking eye contact—

if that's what it had been. Hugh closed his eyes and sank down into the snow, clenching and unclenching his fists, letting the adrenaline dissipate.

"Hugh, look!" Miles grabbed at the rifle. "Gimme that. Something's happening!"

Hugh released his grip, flopping onto his back. The graying sky bayed into his face as fiercely as any dog. *She has to have seen me. Has to know I'm here. I should run. Get away before they come for us.*

But he no longer wished to leave. Not now that he'd seen her.

The Soviets were competitors in more ways than one.

"They've found something!" exclaimed Miles. "They're pulling something outta that pit!"

Hugh rolled onto his stomach. Sure enough, small figures, dark against the snow, were pouring from tents to converge on the moulin. There they pressed together so tightly he couldn't tell what was going on. He squinted, shading his eyes against the glare. The cloud front that'd been sliding in over the past hour furnished a menacing backdrop from which the scene below leapt in relief. Slantwise sunlight transformed the ice sheet into a starfield, glittering off the points of Soviet guns and grappling hooks and ... was that a *flamethrower*?

"What *is* this?" Hugh asked darkly.

Miles scowled, then handed back the rifle. "See for yourself."

At first Hugh saw only a wall of shapeless trench coats. But then the crowd parted to make way for something big. Six men bearing a black trunk like a bier staggered through the gap. The trunk's size matched Smith's description, but the way its porters strained seemed totally disproportionate. A solid load of gold bullion could hardly have offered more resistance.

What are we looking for?

With a sudden jerk the scene lurched away. Miles had grabbed Hugh's collar, was pulling him down, shoving him face-first into the snow. Hugh tensed by reflex, then willed his limbs to loosen. His friend wouldn't seize him without cause.

"Ten o'clock," hissed Miles in his ear. "Two men. Rifles. Hundred yards."

So they've finally decided their dogs aren't crying wolf.

Hugh twisted, but saw only tousled snow. Miles had dragged him several feet back from the ridgeline, and was already making tracks down the incline—one track, to be specific: the garbled furrow of a desperate bellysurfer. Hugh tightened his grip on the rifle and plunged after, skirting the spade and mine detector that Miles had discarded. The exhumation equipment had outlived its utility, and would no more betray their presence now than would the snow-sign they'd left everywhere.

But could they get away fast enough to avoid a firefight?

No. There's no chance.

The sudden certainty stopped Hugh cold. His instinct, swayed by Miles' flight, urged his body forward, but his mind retook control. He rounded on the ridgetop, pulling his pickaxe from its loop on his pack.

Miles was halfway down the slope by now. He'd be a distant figure by the time the sentries saw him, but see him they would, the instant they crested the ridge. Which would give Hugh just the diversion he needed. *Have to be quick.* The rifle might cow them, but only if they'd passed his position and presented their backs. Failing that, the pickaxe would have to suffice at close range. If he could get the drop on these goons without alerting the camp, a clean

getaway might become possible. He couldn't fire first. Everyone would hear *that*.

He scrambled back up the ridge, stooping low, unslinging his backpack and discarding his skis so his weapons could swing free. Behind him Miles fell away. Before him peril drew near.

And the wind howled over all.

Crouching, then crawling as he neared the ridgeline, Hugh listened in vain for human sounds. He dared not poke his head above the snow, even for an instant. As he approached the shallow depression from which he and Miles had scanned the camp, his internal tripwires quivered. Only moments remained before the men would be on top of him.

Rolling onto his side, he scooped snow over himself off the banks of the sniper's nest. Not true concealment, but sufficient to grant him an advantage—that one precious second in which the mind of his opponent would have to reorient, spinning without traction like a bald tire in the rain. That was the difference between life and death: one second. Hugh spasmed and kicked, wedging himself up against the drift.

And then something moved in his peripheral vision, and he fell perfectly still.

Except for his chest, which rose and fell like a piston in the supercharged lull. Fortunately, the wind deluged all sound. If Hugh had shut his eyes, he would've been able to imagine himself *inside* a Flying Fortress.

But he didn't shut his eyes. They remained fixed upon the ragged edge of sight, where a dark shape jutted up against the slate-gray sky. Having crested the ridge, it didn't advance. It just loitered there like some slack-jawed gawker.

Hugh began to sweat. *C'mon c'mon, make your move. What's the matter? Can't you see Miles? Don't you care that someone knows you're here?* His knuckles whitened on the axe haft.

And then, as he lay cramped and unmoving in that shallow trough of snow, a terrible suspicion seized him. *My breath. Can they see it? Is it rising like smoke from a chimney?*

The skulking figure shifted, turning toward him. And finally a new sound overcame the wind. A sharp *clack* and *thunk* mere feet behind his head.

It was the sound a rifle bolt makes as it rams a round into the chamber.

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Hugh stumbled forward, grabbing at the man to his right and getting a face-full of rifle butt for his trouble. He went down like a ninepin in the hard-packed snow. The man who'd shoved him chuckled. In Russian.

"Vstavay," he snarled over the din of the dogs. "Get up, spy." He stalked toward the nearest tent and would've stomped on Hugh's hand if Hugh hadn't snatched it away. Hugh rose slowly, glaring at the man, who yanked open the tent's flap and disappeared from sight.

Hugh turned, massaging his left cheek where he'd been struck. It ached as though it'd been split open, but the skin was smooth. *Well, not smooth, exactly. It's been too long since I shaved.* He grimaced at the Russian who'd struck him, but the man couldn't even be bothered to crack a cruel grin. He just leveled that rifle expressionlessly.

Hugh's own rifle was still up on the ridge. He'd left it buried in his nook and knocked extra snow over it as he rose, hands in air, thinking he might get a chance to grab it again. But after forcing him to abandon his pickaxe, remove his parka, and turn out all his pockets, these

two guards had frogmarched him down the slope and into the middle of the camp.

Men and a few women dressed indistinguishably in heavy trench coats had paused their scurrying long enough to rubberneck, alarm evident in their eyes. *They don't know how many of me there are.* At one point Hugh thought he'd glimpsed Inga through a gap between tents, but then the snarly guard had shoved him in the back and the moment had passed.

Hugh was going to deck that snarler before this was all over, but right now he just wished the man would come back. Although the other guard couldn't have been out of his teens, his eyes had a deadness to them that Hugh recognized—a stasis which wasn't world-weary so much as world-wasted. This boy had seen too much, too soon. The furry earflaps on his hat hung in sodden torpor—as though they'd absorbed the sadness that should've been his, or as though he'd spent the afternoon crawling under the snow like a weasel hunting mice. And maybe he had. Maybe that was how he'd gotten the drop on Hugh.

The man looked less like he wanted to pull that trigger, and more like he didn't care one way or the other.

This is not good.

Hugh grinned mechanically. He eased a hand up toward the front pocket of his knit sweater, then froze. The guard had tensed and brought his dominant eye in line with his iron sights.

“Easy there, c-c-comrade,” stuttered Hugh. *Damn this wind.* What had been an aural shield twenty minutes earlier was now a razor slicing through abruptly-insubstantial clothing. He slipped two fingers into his pocket and drew forth a pack of Lucky Strikes. “It's share and share alike with you c-c-commies, right? Well, I g-got enough for us b-both. You got a light?”

At last an emotion flickered over the man's face. Hunger. A need too strong to suppress.

Gotcha, you prick. Now watch this.

Pinching the pack between his index and middle fingers, Hugh slowly extended it toward the other man. The man's dead eyes refocused, tracking the proffered bait. The muzzle of his rifle sank ever so slightly. No acting was required for Hugh's hand to shake like a threadbare leaf in a stiff breeze.

When he dropped the pack, it was actually an accident. He wasn't quite ready yet. *Shit!*

The guard's eyes fell with the cigarettes.

Hugh recovered—twisting his body out of the line of fire, lunging forward, bringing his hands up, reaching for the gun. The guard, startled, clenched the trigger by instinct. Hugh felt the heat of the muzzle-flash on his cheek.

And then he was grabbing the barrel and wrenching it up, driving a boot into the man's shin. The man's grip relaxed and Hugh brought the rifle back down with both hands, punching him in the face with the butt of his own weapon. *Feels good, doesn't it?*

The guard let go and fell backward. It'd take a few more knocks to remove him from the fight, but Hugh was already out of time. Everyone in camp would've heard that boom. Hugh himself couldn't hear a thing. *And I thought the wind was deafening.*

He needed to get away *now.*

Leaving the silent guard to crumple silently, Hugh spun and sprinted.

Straight into the fist of the snarly guard. The world winked out.

###

“You are Smith’s man, yes?” The voice seemed garbled, as though transmitted through water rather than air. Hugh shook his head, blinking. Where was he? And why was it so dark? He opened his mouth but nothing came out. *Weird*. He concentrated, tried again.

“What?” he managed. His own voice sounded strange to his ears.

“*Dolzhen li ya povtoryat’ sebya?* Smith. You work for his bidding, no? Tell me, *negodyay*, he pay you good?”

Hugh’s surroundings were materializing in his vision. Kerosene lamp. Small table atop folding legs. Icy floor, swept of snow, sheening. Knotted ropes, biting. Gray walls, breathing.

A tent. I’m in one of the tents.

“I hope he pays good. If not, you are idiot. I do not make offer to idiot.”

Hugh squeezed his eyes shut, then snapped them open again. The small space sprang into focus.

It was just the two of them: Hugh, tied to a folding chair, facing this Russian he’d never seen before. The depth and murkiness of the man’s voice belied his diminutive stature. Even standing at the table, with his ratty beard lit from beneath, he barely overtopped Hugh’s head.

Hugh grunted, flexing, testing the knots. “Boy, am I lucky you’re a discriminating sort. I worked so hard to get here, I’d hate to think it was all for nothing.”

Ratbeard blinked, slowly. “You are ... how you say ... comedian?”

Hugh barked a laugh. The ropes were wet and the knots expert, but the chair creaked under his weight. If he could manage to tip himself over and hit the ice just right, something might splinter. “That’s right. A regular Bob Hope here. Though you’re not so bad yourself with that deadpan schtick. Of course, with your, uh, stature ... you’d have to be more of a Chaplin. How’s your slapstick?”

“Slap ... stick?” The man was squinting at him now. Not the sharpest sickle in the commune, obviously.

“Yeah, you know, can you take a punch? Fall off a cliff? Get sawn in two and run over by a freight train? Can you do that for me please?” Hugh was rambling now, his mouth an open sluiceway from his brain as he shifted his weight and felt the chair waver. *If I can just get a hand free and overpower this little man, I can take his hat and coat, find Inga, and get her out before they know we’re gone. She’ll come; she’s probably trying to get to me right now. She probably got shanghaiied and forced to play the part of local guide.* He twisted his wrist against the wood. *Now if I can just get my hand around to the other si-*

“*Medved, vkhodit’!*” called the little man.

Hugh froze as a giant stooped through the tent flap. His beard was a nest of frost, his eyes wrinkled slits below his black fur cap, his massive mitts clamped on a tiny-looking submachine gun with a big drum magazine. His breath filled the confined space with condensation.

“Offer can wait,” said Ratbeard. He reached up to caress the stock of the giant’s rifle, then pointed gleefully at Hugh. “Slap ... stick!”

The giant grinned.

Oh shit.

With two steps, the big man loomed above him. Hugh ducked to avoid getting smashed a second time across the bridge of the nose with a rifle stock. Pain seared his temple as the butt’s edge gauged his scalp. He looked up with burning eyes only to get backhanded in the side of the

head. The world rattled.

With effort, Hugh's eyes refocused on Ratbeard. The dirty little commie didn't even need to bend at the waist to get level with Hugh's face.

"Is funny, yes?" said Ratbeard. "Slapstick."

"Not worth the ticket price," gritted Hugh. Was that blood running into his eyes, or was he just going blind? "Your girly assistants are getting old. When's the main event?"

Ratbeard sneered. "Metaphor is old. Joke is over. I know you are not idiot. You work for Smith. Smith is stupid, but is not idiot, that hire man without brains. I make offer now. You accept or die."

The giant stepped back, flicking the charging handle on his submachine gun with a *crack*.

With a flash Hugh's alertness returned. *Shit shit shit. Too businesslike. Gotta get him mad again.* He blinked furiously and his vision cleared; it had only been blood in his eyes after all.

"Don't see why it matters. My friends will find us whether I sign with you or not."

Ratbeard shrugged. "By time friends get here, only thing they pull from moulin is body of stupid American. Or you can accept offer. Which is, you work for Kagovich now. For me."

Hugh arched his eyebrows as much to keep his sliced forehead from leaking into his eyes as at the revelation of his adversary's name. "So what, you running out of volunteers to lug you around on their shoulders so you don't have to sprain your neck staring up at people?"

Kagovich sighed. "*Medved, yeshche raz.*"

The bear of a man slid his safety bolt home, reversed the rifle in his hands, and moved in. *There, that did it. Round two. Ding, ding, ding.* Hugh braced for impact.

He wasn't ready. The buttstock sank into his kidney like an iron wedge into a log. An unconscious groan bled through clenched teeth. The tent rotated. He was falling. Kagovich's head tilted like that of a curious bird. A bird in need of a bath.

The shock of splitting wood disrupted the dream. Hugh landed hard on the left arm of his chair. Shards lodged up and down his arm. His free arm.

His arm was free.

Grabbing one of the tentpoles, Hugh shoved off and spun around on the burning ice like a child's top. His shoulder struck the giant's leg and he reached up, wrapping his splinter-spined forearm around a calf as thick as a tree before its owner could react. With a growl Hugh bore down, leveraging the leg against his shoulder, buckling it, toppling the Russian bear-man straight into his boss. Kagovich's yelp cut off suddenly as he was buried. The submachine gun, safety still on, clattered to the wall.

Go go go! No time to untie.

Hugh, his body still bound to a wooden frame, began dragging himself across the glacial surface toward the wayward gun. Stretch, dig, pull. Stretch, dig, pull. Scrape, scrape, scrape. Pain seared him, and blood sprang from his lacerated arm to slick the ice. He had only moments. A roar rose from behind.

At the same instant he reached the rifle, something wrenched his chair backward. Snatching the gun, Hugh hugged it against his chest, popped the safety off, and curled a finger under the trigger-guard.

The flash of automatic fire lit up the tent like a Christmas tree. The thunderous report compressed all sound to a ringing whine. The two Russians leapt away in either direction—knocking over the table, snuffing its lamp, rolling and blundering their way out of the canvas

enclosure, leaving Hugh momentarily alone.

And trapped. God damn it.

As he lay there on the ice, in the dark, clawing at knots with the fingers of his free hand, a sudden *awareness* impressed his senses: this floor to which his own freezing blood had already adhered his cheek was but a small patch of something awesome and immense—a river of rime that spread for miles and plunged who-knew-how-deep into the bowels of the earth. Langjökull glacier was older by far than the people of this land—older than Odin and Thor. Its coldness consumed his flickering heat. He was an ant, and all his efforts naught but petty scurrying.

And yet ... for all its enormity, this glacier—this very ground on which he lay—seemed suddenly small. There was something close at hand that outweighed it. Something that was somehow *larger*. An object even more ancient. Hugh could *feel* it. It was very near. It tugged at his consciousness like magnetic north drawing a lodestone.

Great, now I'm delirious. Losing too much blood. Gotta get away.

“Slapstick!” shouted a muffled voice from somewhere outside. “Throw out gun and I let you live!”

Shit shit shit. Hugh shook himself from his weird reverie, tearing furiously at the knots that restrained his right arm. “I’m stuck!” he yelled. “Come back in and help me out!”

“That is ... how you say ... shit of horse! Goodbye, Slapstick! *Tovarishchi, strelyat'!*”

A thunderous hail of bullets pelted through the canvas, loosing little shafts of light to brighten the shard-spray of impact. Hugh flattened himself against the ice, untying the final cord that bound his right arm in place. Above him his folding chair shattered into flinders.

Almost as soon as it'd started, the deluge of lead was spent.

The thunder, however, continued. The Russians were still firing—just not at Hugh.

A new threat. They're pivoting to a new threat. Miles! Miles is back! It has to be him. He must've recovered the rifle and started sniping from the ridgeline!

Hugh Conrad kicked his legs free from the kindling that moments before had been a chair, tore his cheek from its pool of frozen blood, and rose on unsteady legs. *Gotta get away before those thugs flank Miles.*

But first, gotta get the girl.

Shaking off the last of the ropes, Hugh crouched by one of the tent walls that didn't look like Swiss cheese and lifted its bottom edge. Only white snow and the gray of other tents met his eye. *Perfect.* He slipped under the canvas, rolled to his feet, and ducked away through Tent Town while the roar of suppressive fire deadened his footfalls.

No one barred his passage through the maze of wind-ruffled canvas. The whole camp must have converged on Miles' position by now. The noise of their weapons overwhelmed the wind, which sliced like a scythe through Hugh's thin sweater.

He'd tried not to think too hard about Inga, about what she was doing here, but now speculation began to balloon in his brain. That the two of them had ended up on the same patch of backcountry ice seemed too implausible not to suspect. Had she already known of his mission on that first day when he walked through the door of her family's shop and saw her sitting by the window? He'd been careful not to tell her about Smith or about the man's objective, but had she been appraised by others? Or deduced it on her own? *She could've. She's smart enough.* Was that why they'd hit it off? Because she wanted to access his papers? Was it she who'd summoned the Soviets?

With a violent shake of his head, Hugh cut off conjecture. *There's no way Inga's in on this. She's tied to this land—rooted in place. She'd never give her allegiance to some fly-by-night treasure-hunting expedition. She'd never serve a foreign power. That's what makes her so damn difficult.*

No, these commies grabbed her as a local guide. She's in just as much danger as I am.

I gotta get her out.

He emerged into the open a short distance from the moulin, which yawned before his feet like the den of some monstrous beast. Beyond it, sled dogs bayed and strained against their leads. Above it, powder roiled off the farther ridgeline—stark white against a blackening sky.

An unarmed man stood by the dogsled, upon which had been lashed the great black trunk from the pit. He took one look at Hugh's weapon and fled toward the camp like an awkward, bulky rabbit. The dogs lost all semblance of discipline. Half of them surged toward Hugh, snarling, and half backed away, shrugging and snapping at their harness. They hopped and howled like wolves, but the pack unity that would've allowed them to move had departed with their driver. And Hugh let the man go.

For there, motionless in the canine maelstrom, like an elegant statue rising untouched from a rubble-heap, stood Inga.

When she saw him she did not light up. She did not wave her arms or come running to fling them around his neck the way she did whenever they met at the old barn in secret. Instead she raised one steady finger and pointed straight into the hole.

She thinks I need saving. That's sweet.

A few ropes still trailed into the frozen blackness. Hugh could rappel down and hide himself at the heart of this mountain of ice. Inga would go with her captors and escape when they weren't looking. She would return to bring him out again. By then he would've lost half his toes to frostbite, but at least he'd be alive. She'd nurse him back to health. Then they could settle down together and raise some curly-horned sheep and nice plump children once the commies had quit the island.

Or not.

Skirting the sinkhole and ignoring the dogs, Hugh strode up to Inga. And even amid this wind, he found he still had breath in his lungs left to catch. Her eyes glinted like icicles in the sun, her fair cheeks flushed in counterpoint to her fright, and her rich flaxen braids swung like pendulums at her back.

"No, no, no," she said as she shook her head. "No, you cannot be here. He will kill you. You must leave. Run!"

"Come with me," said Hugh, catching her around the waist. She pushed against him, but he held on tighter. "We can get away. We can make it. But we have to go now!"

"I cannot," she whispered, looking up at him. A wild light had entered her eyes—a desperate confusion. "They would kill *him!*"

Hugh blinked. And suddenly he remembered what Miles had seen from the ridgeline. Inga had kissed a man, he'd said. Suddenly Hugh's jealousy, like indigestion, surged up into his throat. "*Him?*" He released her and she sprang back. He hadn't meant to yell.

"They have Emil!" she sputtered. "He works here. I brought him supper!"

Emil Finnursson. Her eldest brother. The man whose hatred had forced Hugh to meet with Inga in secret, in that decrepit, rotted, splinter-festooned barn. The man who didn't see in

Hugh an ally, or even a human being, but merely an avatar of the *Ástandið*, the Situation—a foreigner who’d seduced his kinswoman. Americans had fallen out of favor on this ungrateful island. Emil was the one man in Iceland who wanted to cave in Hugh’s skull even more than did these commies.

Hugh groaned beneath a flood of mingled relief and dismay. “Where is he?”

She raised a finger again, and this time it trembled. “There,” she said. Hugh spun.

Emil outpaced a squad of Russians as they poured from between tents to the right of the moulin. The whites of his eyes stood out above his beard, and his boots drove into the snow. They’d entrusted him with a rifle, which he held too casually at his side. “*Inga! Skrefi i burtu frá Ameríku!*”

“*Nr!*” she shouted, striding past Hugh. “*Setja niður byssuna!*” Hugh raised an arm to block her and she shot him a frigid glare.

“No time to talk,” he grunted, grabbing her arm and towing her backward toward the sled, giving the dogs a wide berth. Behind Emil, the Russians began spreading out, forming an arc. The thunder of Soviet guns had lessened, and in the relative quiet a mocking voice rang out.

“Ah, Slapstick! I did not know you fancy yourself magician also! But disappearing trick, she need work.”

Hugh reached the sled and dove behind it, yanking Inga down. As his shoulder sank into the snow, the strange feeling of *proximity* returned like a physical blow. A pull, a pulse, an electric charge. He felt it throbbing in his bones. His brain.

It was coming from the trunk.

“Oof!” Inga landed on top of him with a *whoosh* of air and went sprawling in the snow, then wrenched her arm from his grip and slapped him full in the face. “He is my *brother!* I can talk to him!” She stood upright—arms held stiffly at her sides, fists clenched. Hugh groaned, shaking his head, trying to reorient himself. *There’ll be no reasoning with her now.*

But Kagovich didn’t know that. He didn’t know her at all. So when her lips parted to declaim who-knew-what complaint, his sharp command cut her off like a clamped hand: “Emil, shoot stupid American.”

“Good,” said Emil. His voice carried clearly over the glacial wind. For the sound of suppressive fire had now ceased, realized Hugh with a chill, and the Iclander’s bolt action pealed like a bell.

No. Wait.

Emil’s gun came up.

Not here, not now.

Emil shoved his stock into his shoulder.

Don’t make me do this.

Hugh rose to a crouch, shouldering his own weapon.

Not in front of her.

Hugh lowered his head to bring it in line with his sights. But then an explosion of movement jerked his eyes to the left: Inga was charging her brother.

She can’t stop him. They’ll kill her first.

Hugh’s eyes flicked back to Emil in time to see him falter, distracted. The Iclander’s muzzle dipped as he tracked the girl whose bulky coat billowed as she floundered through intervening drifts.

I have the drop on him. I can end this. One shot. One shot and her argument won't be with him anymore.

Hugh squinted, crushing his cheek against his stock. The iron sights aligned. *Breathe. In, and out.* His trigger-finger tightened. All he had to do was pull.

And then he froze.

Can't do it. Not here, not now. Not in front of her.

Inga had nearly reached Emil when Kagovich shot her.

As the girl went down with a bloodcurdling scream, Emil roared and spun, sweeping his muzzle across the Russian line in search of a guilty party. And at least a dozen Russians opened fire as one.

Scarlet sprayed from Emil's body as though all its gaskets had burst.

God ...

In unison, the dogs went berserk—surging away from the thunder. The sled lurched forward.

... damn ...

Kagovich pivoted from the crumpled bodies to fire upon Hugh.

... it!

Hugh leapt onto the sled as it scooted along the edge of the moulin. The wooden railing shattered inches from his right hand, and he ducked forward off the footboard to cling to the ropes that bound the great black trunk, putting it between himself and the enemy. The sled leaned precariously.

Is Miles dead? Is that why Ratbeard came to find me? Oh God ...

The dogs were throwing themselves wildly against their harness, but the trunk, like the hand of fate, pressed the sled into the snow. Bullets zipped by, and a dog halfway up the line yelped and then sagged to be borne along by iron-taut cords, its limp paws dragging through the drifts.

Gotta get to the girl. She could still be alive.

"*Gee, gee!*" shouted Hugh from his crouch. "Right! Turn right, damn you!" But these were Russian dogs, and his orders foreign to their ears. They maintained their course.

Their painfully slow course.

With a snarl Hugh hopped backward of the sled. He tripped and collapsed into the snow, then rolled to his feet. The dogs had picked up speed without his additional weight, but he still managed to outpace them as he rounded the moulin.

And unloaded his drum magazine.

Casings poured from the gun's breech, trailing smoke. The Russians scattered. Men fell, bloodied, or else flung themselves to earth. One plunged, wailing, down the pit. It was the snarly guard. The noise of his terror dwindled and went out.

Hugh was screaming something as he charged, but of what it was not even he was aware. All he knew was rage. White-hot rage at these barbarians who destroyed without thought. And fear. Stark, raw, scalding fear that Inga Finnursdóttir would never rise again.

The drum was empty and the barrel steaming like a hot spring by the time he reached her body. Casting the spent weapon aside, he knelt in the snow. Inga looked up at him.

Oh thank God.

Her bloody leg lay twisted beneath her, but the rest of her was whole. Tears had frosted

her cheeks and she struggled to breathe against the sobs.

“Emil?” she gasped.

Hugh glanced up to where her brother—or what was left of him—lay only paces away. He shook his head numbly.

Inga threw back her head and wailed. It was a cry of despair beyond mere grief or pain. A sound Hugh would never forget.

He ignored it. Grabbing Inga under her arms, he pulled her into a sitting position and then hoisted her over one shoulder, rising to stagger away. Behind him, the Russians emerged from hiding to resume their barrage. Before him, the sled was near—it leaned drunkenly, high-centered over a knob of ice on the moulin’s edge. The dogs were hurling themselves against their bonds but that anchor would not budge.

It’s still within reach. I can make it.

Bullets kicked up powder all around as Hugh somehow began to run. Snow impeded his boots, but he forced them onward—faster and faster. Inga was screaming as her wounded leg knocked against his chest, but he couldn’t afford to listen. *The sled. Have to reach the sled.*

As Hugh Conrad dove sideways under the gangline rope and behind the big black trunk, a bullet tore his face in flight. From cheekbone to chin it ripped a seam, and blood geysered out with a puff of steam. It splattered across Inga’s face as she flopped against the dogsled.

“*Hugh!*” she cried. “*Guð minn, Hugh!*”

“I’m alright,” he gritted, pressing his sleeve to his cheek. *But that’ll leave a scar.*

“Listen,” she sobbed, grabbing the front of his shirt, “you must go. Run, and leave me here! We cannot both get away.”

“Not on your life, darlin’,” grunted Hugh, craning his neck so he could bite his own sweater at the shoulder. With a jerk of his head he severed threads. Then, digging fingers into the gap, he ripped his sleeve clean off. “I don’t have a sword to loan you for your last stand.” He tilted his head so blood wouldn’t run into his mouth while he tied the cloth around the wound in Inga’s leg. It was soaked in seconds.

Inga lifted the fringe of her dress even further, drawing a long, bone-handled knife from a sheath at her thigh. “Silly Hugh,” she choked, her face twisting with what was probably meant as a smile. “You *never* had a sword. Leave now and live.” With a darker grimace she raised the knife to her throat.

And Hugh snatched it out of her hand.

“Then we will both die here!” she shouted as she shoved him away. “Is this what you *want*? Why did you come?”

Flinging out a hand to steady himself, Hugh made contact with the great black trunk.

Its immensity—its sheer *mass*—exploded in his mind until he felt like a mouse touching a mountain. It loomed above him, eclipsing an inner sky he hadn’t noticed until now. His vision dimmed. The sun cooled. The world itself fell away, or else shrank with him until it seemed a trifle. The trunk was all. *Too much.* Its crushing force bore down.

But it wasn’t impermeable, this thing, this massif of imagination. There were ... gaps. An endless warren spiraled outward. A labyrinth lined with stars. And as Hugh’s eyes pinwheeled in his skull, he saw Langjökull opened.

The snow dissolved. The ice grew limpid, as though it had, prior to this instant, been displayed in imperfect aspect. It glimmered beneath him, a crystal vessel, and the moulin

plunged like a wine bottle's neck through bulkheads of blown glass. Nebulae of hue coalesced and swelled—blues and purples and sundown golds. And at the bottom of the shaft, where the fluted funnel met fluorescent green stone and torrents of meltwater spiraled in bright darkness, the snarly guard revolved in silhouette. His limbs were splayed and slack, his motions mere accidents of circulation. But beneath him—now clear, now occluded as he turned—there shone a marbled, pastel light. Its source was a sphere, suspended in ink. A beryl in the black.

A planet.

This was delirium. *Has to be. What else can you expect when you rent your head out as a punching bag?* Yet the vision felt so imminent, so *real*. It was *right there*. Without conscious intent, Hugh found himself leaning, pushing, straining toward that ethereal glow. And outside the dream, in the still-barely-perceived realm of solid shapes and frozen borders, pain pricked his fingers as they sank into the trunk. And in that moment, that brief glimpse, that peek behind the spacetime curtain, Hugh knew he could take passage.

The thought blew out his remaining adrenaline like an electric shock.

He reeled backward and collapsed into the snow. Inga was still shouting, still irate, but the sound of it filtered only faintly through the thudding of his heart. *The weight of worlds ...* How such an ancient vastness fit within this little box he couldn't begin to grasp.

And I don't need to.

Deliberately he calmed himself, slowed his breathing. Nothing had changed. Inga was there—still beautiful, still bleeding. They were still trapped—still pinned down beside this godforsaken hole in the ice. Ice that was still ice. And a trunk that was still just a trunk, without so much as a fingerprint marring its surface. *Am I just going crazy? Has the panic gotten to me at last?*

Hugh glared at the big black box. Beneath the ropes that bound it in place, its faded dragon emblem looked ... *wrong*. Angled where it ought to have curved, smooth where it should've been sharp. As though its artist had hewed to an aesthetic tradition heretofore unknown. Hugh swallowed, choking back the curiosity that fairly thundered in his ears. *You're what I came for, but not what I want. You're just ballast. I'll throw you away to keep the woman I love.*

What was it Smith had said? That this thing would turn a man against the hunger in his heart?

Not today.

"We're not dead yet," he said aloud. Twisting onto his belly, he began sawing through the ropes.

The coffer throbbed as he sawed, and this, at least, was no hallucination: bullets were striking it, pummeling it from the other side, though none punched through. *Whatever's actually in here must be incredibly dense.*

Not unlike yourself.

Hugh squeezed his eyes shut, grimacing as he sliced through line after line. *Idiot! How could you hesitate to shoot? How could you be so selfish? Not out of concern for the girl. If you'd been thinking about her you would've pulled the trigger. No, all you cared about was protecting your prospects, staying in her good graces. How could you? This is your fault. Because you were weak.*

The last line snapped, zinging past his head. Hugh rose to brace his shoulder against the

great black trunk.

Never again.

Digging his boots into the packed snow, Hugh Conrad shoved with all his might. A roar erupted from his throat and blood sheeted down his neck as the vast and ancient piece of luggage—the microcosmic enormity—tilted, tipped, and then toppled off the sled. It landed on its side with a crash and slid into the pit.

The sled lurched off the ice-knob, towed by dogs now free to flee.

A howl of rage rose from the direction of the camp.

And with a desperate cry of his own Hugh scooped up Inga with both arms, stumbled madly after the departing sled, cast her onto its footboard, caught hold of its railing, and was swept away.

He glanced back once to see Russians swarming the moulin. Bullets showered the sled with powder, but, after a few thunderclaps rolled down off the ridgeline ahead, the enemy fire slackened and then ceased. Hugh looked up to see the bright figure of Miles Cornwall standing alone against an inkblot sky.

And then Hugh was on his back. All he felt was Inga's breathing, and all he heard was the wind, and all he saw was zenithal black. All the way to Reykjavík.

###

The hallway in Landspítali Hospital was cold and quiet. So quiet that Hugh could hear the nurse's footsteps for half a minute before she appeared.

"Hvað ertu að gera? You should be in bed!" The door through which she'd burst banged shut behind her.

Hugh shook his head. "I will go when her father gets here. Not before." He met the woman's glare.

She blinked, glancing at Miles where he sat beside Hugh, and then nodded curtly. "Come to me to change the bandages." The door groaned at her retreat. Hugh resumed his study of the opposite wall.

And silence settled once again.

It was Miles who eventually broke it. "So I hear Smith's off to Bolivia."

Hugh nodded. The wall was so white. If he squinted it became a glacial landscape, and those hairline cracks crevasses. And that junction of tiles a bottomless abyss.

"You joining him?" asked Miles quietly.

Hugh shrugged. "Where else would I go?"

Miles cleared his throat. "I'm taking the next freighter back to England. Got an offer from that antiques dealer we met during the war. You remember the guy?"

"Yeah," murmured Hugh. "Yeah, he wrote me too."

"Ah."

In the silence that followed, the sound of slamming doors echoed up the hallway. Hugh rose slowly to his feet, and Miles stood beside him.

Around the corner stalked a huge man in a salt-stained outfit which stank of fish. He pulled up in front of Hugh—shoulders hunched, fists clenched, beard like smoke pouring from the embers of his eyes.

With effort, Hugh met those eyes. “Finnur,” he said, standing aside. “She’s still asleep. They say her leg will heal.”

“And my son?” Finnur asked in a voice that cracked like ice. He pushed past Hugh without waiting for a reply. The door slammed shut: a knell.

Hugh remained standing long after the Iclander had gone.

“Why follow Smith?” hissed Miles, the strain in his voice no longer squelched. “What’s that man *ever* done for you?”

For a time Hugh said nothing. He just stared at the wall and its confluence of furrows as his friend shifted from foot to foot. Finally he found words.

“Did you feel it, Miles? The ... the pull? The *hugeness* of it?” *It made the world itself seem small.*

Miles turned on Hugh as though facing an apparition. “What?”

Hugh shook his head. He opened his mouth, shut it, then started again. “Somewhere ... there’s a place where I belong. Smith’s my chance to find it.”

“And the girl?”

A pause. Hugh thought of Inga. His mind’s eye lingered on her hair, her lips, her eyes. He replayed their fling. Sharp and soulful, like a last-second sunset breaking through the clouds. All the sweeter for its shortness.

She was safe now, despite his weakness, his failure. She would live, but not with him. Her family would make sure of that. In the end, neither his reluctance to pull the trigger nor his sacrifice of the trunk had done much to sate the hunger in his heart. And now within that hunger there gnawed a newfound fear.

What if what I really want is at the bottom of that pit? Or out among the stars?

“There was never any chance for us,” Hugh rasped. “This isn’t the place for me.”

And with that, he strode away down the cold and quiet corridor.