

Before Things...

Stupid. Absolutely stupid. He knew better, had readied better for things like this—well, not like *this* exactly. Never in his wildest nightmares could Hank have prepared himself for the hellishness that had just knocked at his front door.

He had seen polar bears in the tundra; granted they weren't as common in the interior as brown bears, but now and then one would wander inland. This thing, however, was unlike any polar bear he had ever fucking seen. The bear was male and its coat was as white as any other, but the growths were something he had never seen before: bulbous, pulsating and steaming. It almost seemed unnatural.

Of course, they were unnatural, who was he kidding? Some kind of infection from another animal, possibly a bear attack? Cancer caused by the petroleum facilities, maybe? Doubtful. Either way, the environmentalists were going to have a shit storm over it.

The bastard came at him so fast that he barely got away, didn't have time to grab his hunting rifle; didn't make the time. Hank had tried doubling back to give the polar bear a wide berth, hoping it would go on its way eventually, but it hadn't. Hank had been hunting long enough to know stalking tactics, and right now he wasn't the one hunting.

The days had been steadily growing shorter. Hank's watch read quarter-till-three, but the sun was already starting to set. He could feel the cold seeping into his heavy coat, but he wasn't freezing, not yet. The forest broke up the wind, and constantly being on the move helped to keep his extremities from being frostbitten. He knew these woods well, and by his reckoning he was less than a half a mile from his cabin.

Then he stopped. The hair on the back of his neck prickled and he could hear his heart beating in his ears. In the clearing, maybe a hundred yards to his direct front, was the Pooh. It stood on all fours, its head lowered. Its face was gnarled, patchy, and appeared to have flesh either missing or falling off, chunks of it hanging by thin tendrils of sinew. Pooh's breath fogged

in the chill air as it stared directly at him.

So much for the direct route back home, Hank thought.

Slowly and deliberately, Hank walked parallel of the sickly polar bear, its snout sniffing the air and following his every movement until Hank had broken their line of sight.

When Hell Froze Over

By Stephen Ribuffo

He was past the point of being tired, beyond the feeling of exhaustion. Hank was done, over it, stick a fucking fork in him. If the polar bear didn't kill him, the cold would. At least freezing to death would be his choice, if he had any choice. If Hank had believed in hell he could have held onto the cliché of its roaring fires, but he didn't. In the ending stages of hypothermia he would feel "warm" anyway.

Hank recalled one particular winter when he stumbled upon a lost hiker. She was delirious and naked from hypothermia; golly, did she have a magnificent pair of tits. The memory was a fleeting comfort in the bitter chill and howling wind.

It was eleven in the morning according to his watch, and the sun was just starting to rise. If he didn't get home in the next several hours, he would be stumbling around in the dark like a fucking asshole. God-fucking-dammit, why did dying have to take so fucking long?

Winnie the Pooh—the polar bear—had been stalking him for the last day and a half. No, stalking wasn't the correct word. Toying with him, playing him, watching from a distance for...something. It was odd, really fucking odd. And what the hell was it doing this far into the interior? Ever since that meteorite lit up the sky, the animals had been acting strange: bizarre herd migrations, birds native to the shorelines flying inward, strange weather patterns. Hank wasn't complaining at first; hunting was plentiful, food had stocked up, and he had plenty of pelts for trading.

Maybe that was it. Animals tend to go where the food goes, so perhaps it made sense that a polar bear had wandered this far inland. It had happened before on rare occasions, but

why this time? Flashes in the sky weren't all that out of place either, though granted they were far and few between, but nothing to freak out over...right?

Whatever, it didn't matter. Hank had clocked out, he was done. If Pooh wanted fresh meat, it would have to sit its unnatural ass on his carcass and thaw him out first. Hank had tried to remove his heavy coat to speed things up, but his fingers were so numb that he couldn't even operate the damn zipper.

"Can't even die right you stupid fuck," he chattered to himself.

The wind wasn't letting up, and it continued to howl through the trees, which annoyed him even further. It was like a dog that didn't know when to quit.

Dog. Shit, he was hungry. Hank liked dogs, but he was so fucking hungry he'd...no, he couldn't.

Hank turned his head so that the wind wasn't screaming into it, and damned if the howling wind wasn't actually a dog. He could hear part of him saying, "It's just a dog, who cares? Let's just stay here and sleep." Hank was stubborn, though, and he rarely took anyone's advice, let alone his own. Slowly and painfully he took to his feet and trudged through the wind and snow in the direction of the howling dog. Maybe if he was lucky it would be a hungry wolf and he could put an end to this last, pathetic chapter of his life. Better to fill the belly of an animal he liked, or whatever.

Well, it wasn't a wolf; Hank found that revelation oddly bittersweet. It was a sled dog, a sled dog still strapped to its harness. It was hard to tell exactly how long the dog had been there, but judging from the bloodied snow and dog corpses, it had been long enough. The dog straddled the body of its musher, the man's brain matter now frozen chunks of red and gray. No doubt the other sled dogs had tried eating their master before this alpha had decided otherwise. Another mystery it seemed: the Iditarod wasn't for another three months, and they weren't anywhere close to the race trail. Alpha didn't appear to be a racing breed either; sledding, sure, but not racing. Looking at the toppled over sled Hank could see the musher had stocked up for a long haul; not even Iditarod racers packed like this. That meant he was going for a trip...a long one. But where, and why?

Alpha seemed friendly enough, but when Hank went to check the musher's body the mutt began to growl. Hank raised his chapped and blistered hands.

"Fair enough," he said to Alpha as he stepped back.

Hank felt it hard to believe that he had stumbled upon this scene, and wondered if he was going delirious. If the deer jerky he managed to find amongst the wreckage was a hallucination, it was very convincing. As Hank helped himself to the spoils, he could hear Alpha whimpering. The dog sat with his head cocked to one side, tail wagging.

"If I let you off that harness, are you going to eat me?"

Alpha barked.

It took some doing, but Hank finally managed to fumble the mutt from the harness. The sled dog knew just where to go and began pulling and biting through a sack from the wreckage where his former master stored the dog food. While Alpha ate, Hank helped himself to the dead musher's gear. Maybe it was the cold, but the issue of grave robbing didn't weigh on his conscience.

Hank began to wonder whether he would have killed the man to steal his clothes had he still been alive.

Whatever, the dead musher didn't need them anymore. The dead man's gear was a few sizes larger than Hank, which was a good thing; more room, more air, which in turn meant more warmth. The parka jacket and bib pants had seen some use but were comfortable in spite of the blood. The arctic boots stunk to high heaven, and it wasn't until Hank removed his boots that he saw the extent of his frostbitten toes. Some of them were probably beyond saving. He desperately needed to start a fire, and once he had the use of his hands again he'd do a more detailed search of his injuries and the wreckage.

It was a long and painful process, but a necessary one to get the fire going. Hank had to sacrifice a few essential first-aid items to start the fire, and even then it was only adequate, but better than nothing. His fingers and toes ached, and his face itched something fierce; a good sign that blood was flowing. Alpha had curled himself under Hank's knees while Hank had his exposed feet extended toward the fire. It was amazing how mutual survival could bring two species together.

Alpha's ears perked up at a distant sound, but he didn't stir. Even the dog had given up being intimidated by Pooh. It was crazy to think, but Hank had a feeling Winnie was toying with him. He could feel it in his bones, and that scared the living shit out of him. This wasn't fucking normal... why not just fucking eat him already? Hank began to wonder if maybe Pooh had orchestrated this whole thing: killing the musher, having him find him... no, now he was just desperately trying to make sense of things. Nothing made sense. It was all just—for fuck's sake everything hurt, he almost preferred the numbness.

After about a quarter hour, the pain was bearable enough for Hank to move. He rummaged around the pockets of the parka and found a small pocket knife, a piece-of-shit army can-opener, a ruined and illegible book—for whatever fucking reason—and a picture. He assumed it was a picture of the man's family: a wife who was holding a newborn, and a little girl. A charming little family, if you like that kind of shit, but it was the spat of smeared blood that caught Hank's attention. It wasn't from the man's recent accident, he was sure of that. Again: more questions and not nearly enough answers.

As the sky began to brighten, Hank had his fill of the makeshift camp. He got his things together and made one more pass through the wreckage. If his reckoning was correct, his cabin was only a quarter day's travel, so he could always come back later for anything that he wasn't able to carry. He still wasn't a hundred percent, so he only took a canteen of water, some rations, and, thankfully, a .44 magnum revolver. Hank spun the cylinder, and it zipped until it clicked to a stop. He pulled back the hammer and placed it back in its leather holster that wrapped around his shoulder. It wasn't his thirty-ought-six, but it was better than nothing, and he felt a little more at ease having it with him. Alpha's whining stopped him. Looking back, the dog seemed hesitant to leave, shifting its gaze nervously between its former master's frozen corpse and Hank.

"We'll come back," Hank said. "I promise."

Alpha pawed at the stiff.

"I have a shovel at home; we'll come back and bury him." Gee whiz, the dog was touchy.

The mutt seemed to be musing it over, looking between the two of them. Both of whom were dead men, Hank mused. He began to trudge through the snowy woods and Alpha, having made his choice, trotted along beside Hank.

It seemed things were finally looking up. It had been four hours since Hank had last seen Winnie. Compared to the polar bear, Hank was in infinitely better shape. Large patches of its white fur either had large, welt-like knots forming atop one another or were completely exposing muscle and bone. And it was bigger than before. Alpha was fed up as well, barking and snarling incessantly at Pooh, and it wasn't until Hank had fired the revolver in the air that the mangled beast turned and went in the opposite direction.

It was a welcome relief as he watched the bear trudge away into the woods. The last half of his hitch to the cabin would be easier on his nerves, and if he reckoned correctly they would be coming over the frozen lake on the south side of the cabin. Home. It almost seemed like an odd notion, given the recent circumstances.

The wind had died down considerably, and the overcast sky began to drop popcorn-like flurries that covered the ground in shimmering coats of snow. Snow crunched under Hank's boots as he and Alpha cleared the woods and stepped onto the frozen bank of the lake behind his cabin. It was a goodly-sized lake, frozen over and snow-covered, that a winding river emptied into from the sea. Fishing was plentiful, and every so often, if he were lucky, Hank would manage to trap a crab or two that had wandered in from the ocean. His home was just over five-hundred yards away, and he was glad to put this whole mess behind him. Finally having room to run, Alpha took off across the ice, sliding every so often until his paws took traction on the slick, frozen water. Hank took his time; no need to break an ankle or wrist this close to home.

Home....He took the photograph of the musher's family from the parka pocket and looked at it again. Hank knew nothing of the musher or his family; they could all be dead for all he knew. Hell, they might not even be his family. Hank wasn't sure why he felt it, wasn't sure

why he cared, but for whatever reason he felt compelled to find this family. Maybe it was because, technically, the musher saved his life. Maybe it was because Hank had come almost inches away from death himself. Maybe it was the fact that he had no one and, if he had, he would want those that cared for him to know. Maybe the snow was making him sentimental. Maybe he just wanted some fucking answers.

He sighed. Hank had no idea where to start...but Alpha did. And that was something.

He felt it then, that particular prickling at the back of his neck, about the same moment Alpha began growling. Hank wasn't surprised when he turned around and saw Winnie staring at him from the far bank of the lake. That hadn't bothered him. What bothered him was how a bear managed to outwit and bamboozle him. Pooh bear was too big for the woods; the trees were obstacles, they would have made it awkward to weave in and out to pursue a chase. And it wanted a challenge. Was that why it had allowed Hank time to gather himself? No fun in an easy kill, but it wasn't stupid either. Get him out in the open, where it had the advantage.

Shit, it was fast. Like...stupid fast, and eerily silent. Pooh barreled on all fours towards Hank, the only sounds coming from it its grunts of exertion, breath clouding in long trails as it ran.

Nowhere to go.

Hank saw Alpha dart past him toward Winnie. Stupid dog. There was nothing Hank could do; Alpha was a goner.

Everything seemed like it was dragging. And it was quiet. Really fucking quiet. That's what scared him.

Hank didn't even remember pulling the revolver from its holster, but he was looking down the sights now. The only thing he could focus on was the blood from Alpha's gaping wound arching out over the ice. Pooh had made quick work out of the poor mutt and was now continuing its stampede at Hank. Click, click, click, click, click, click, click... No way could there be that many misfires. Pooh was closing. Hank chanced a glance at the revolver—goddamn snow and ice caked over the firing pin. He frantically continued to press the trigger. Click, click, click—it fired. Missed. There was Pooh. Fuck.

Hank was facing down on the ice next thing he knew, with a strange notion that he was

not where he was previously standing, a searing pain in his side, and a terrible fire in his chest. Why was he so tired? Wait, fits of gasping and coughing—no blood, a good sign—and a surge of adrenaline made him alert as he fought in erratic gasps to breathe. Where was the revolver? Gone. Shit. Winnie?

He turned around, immediately regretting the movement as a sharp fire shot through his left side. And there was Winnie...towering over him on its hind legs. He was bigger and uglier than Hank had ever seen him. Blood—not his—was smeared all over what was left of its white coat. Its flesh was green and sickly, hanging in patches or missing completely. Its face and body was twisted and deformed.

Hank saw his long shot then. The rib cage on Winnie's left side exposed the workings of the lung and heart. Hank would have to be quick. If he could just manage...

The ice lurched and cracked and angulated beneath them. Pooh had just about lost its balance when the ice splintered open behind it, and a massive pincer erupted from the icy water, sending shards of ice and frozen water everywhere. Winnie was quick, but not quick enough, and the pincer effortlessly clipped him in two at the waist. Four blue-and-purple, armored, spider-like legs, looking like sets of long and massive varicose veins, crashed into the frozen surface of the lake. Hank retreated several yards back on all fours, the beast's pincer and one leg pulling the two halves of Winnie into the icy water.

Good. A cancerous polar bear was one thing, but what the fuck was that?

Two black orbs protruded from the portal, attached to what appeared to be a spikecovered...thing. Was it a crab, a stupidly massive crab? Its pincers—no, claws—snapped at Hank as he, despite the pain, fought frantically against the ice to open space between them. Then, in the most anticlimactic fashion of intimidation he had ever witnessed, the crab-thing opened its flappy mouth, gargled, and blew bubbles at him. Its giant, orb—like eyes, like two giant—uhh...orbs?—darted around menacingly, looking for its prey. And then one exploded.

A distant gunshot sounded. Sludge the most putrid hue of orange Hank had ever seen oozed from the crab's eye stem. As the creature writhed, clicked, and snapped, the orange goo was flung everywhere before it plunged itself back into the freezing lake, leaving Hank alone



and freezing in the still air.

“What the fucking *fuck*,” he finally stammered out.

Struggling to his feet, Hank looked out through the falling snow. Just out toward the mouth of the riverbank was a lone figure. Taking a chance, Hank waved an arm in greeting to the distant person. Whoever they were, they had already proved they were a good shot, and if they meant ill will Hank would be dead before he even heard the gun shot.

It had been one hell of a day. Averted freezing death, saved from a murderous polar bear by a giant, mutated crab, only to be saved by this—person? Hank was too exhausted to be surprised.

This man, or what remained of him, looked like a walking, charred corpse. Steam was coming off of his body, and in some places Hank could see through him. His left cheek had a gaping hole, and breath fogged out of it like a train’s exhaust. His clothes were tattered, and the Kalashnikov rifle he held looked to be in the same shape as its owner.

“Uh...” Hank blinked at Bacon-face. “Hello.”

Bacon-face cocked its head to one side and spoke something that sounded like, “haloth.”

Cautiously, Hank offered his right hand to the charred person. Bacon-face seemed confused at first, but then wrapped its blackened, bony hand around Hank’s. It was like holding onto a walking battery. Hank could feel a strong tingling run through his body, despite being grounded.

“My name is Hank. Mr...?” He left it hanging there.

Bacon-face blinked—well, Hank figured he would have blinked had there been actual eyelids. It just stared at him.

“Hankth,” it breathed. Then it covered the hole in its cheek with its hand. “Hank...”

Hank found himself smiling, surprisingly.

“Right,” he said, “my cabin is just there, why don’t we get out of the cold and see to your—uh—injuries?”

Bacon-face smiled; well, tried to anyway. Hank wished it hadn’t.

It was all very surreal. Zombified bears and people, giant crabs. Hank thought he was

going crazy. Poor Alpha, he had liked that mutt. Now how was he going to find that family? The old fashion way, he mused. Maybe Bacon-face was up for a little trip. It – he?—seemed friendly enough, and he was a good shot, it would be nice to have a friend—

Hank was suddenly facing down on the ice again. A searing point was burning right through his chest. He had barely even heard the gun shot.

He coughed. Blood. A bad sign. Hank wasn't surprised, not after today; a little disappointed though. He was so close it felt as though he could reach out and touch his cabin. Given the bizarre circumstances, maybe Bacon-face was doing him a kindness. There was no telling how long Hank could last against such—nope, the crispy man was pulling off his clothes. Oddly enough, as he lay naked on the ice, Hank wasn't mad at Bacon-face. As his vision blurred and narrowed to a point, he watched the charred man walk to his cabin. Odder still, Hank's final thoughts didn't dwell on the endless questions he had. He didn't care about the flash in the sky, or why Pooh, the crab, and Bacon-face were the way they were, or even about the family picture. Hank realized he had it all wrong from the beginning: The real Winnie the Pooh wasn't a polar bear....