

Fear is a funny thing. Too much of it and you'll run and hide and your life won't be worth a damn. Not to your fellows, I mean. Can't speak for God. But too little of it and you won't live long enough to do anything useful either. You'll speak your mind to power and get shitcanned, or break cover and get your head blown off. Gotta have just the right amount of fear. Just a pinch. Just when it counts.

That night in Yellowknife, I got caught lacking.

The guy was *soft*, I tell you. Small, thin, *dainty*. Hands like porcelain. Three-piece suit under his parka. Red ascot. Had these big ol' spectacles, half as big as his face, made him look like an owl. Not a big barn owl. You know, one of those little burrowing owls, the ones that always look bug-eyed like they're choking on mouse. Hadn't seen anything like him since uni. Couldn't have been anything like him within a thousand miles.

So anyway, he name-drops my father and now I'm checking the exits. Nothing seems off. Barkeep's washing glasses in the back. Bald Charlie's drooling on his table like every other night that week. There's some miners in the corner chewing the fat. Nothing suspicious for a Thursday half an hour before closing. Nothing but this *dandy* who'd plunked himself down at my elbow like he damn well owned the place.

I'm not feeling like an interview, lemme tell you. Not after the day *I'd* had. So I get right to the point. If you're looking for the old man, I say, I can't help you. Haven't seen him in twenty years.

To that he says nothing. Just slurps at a shot glass and grins like the mouse finally went down. So of course he's got me then, and after a minute I have to turn and ask him what the hell he's up to. And only then does he spring the trap.

Says he knows where the old man is.

I get a lot of inquiries, you know? Lotta condolences too. People either pick at the scar or try to salve it. Dad had a lot of friends and they're all devoted to his memory. Of course none of it rubbed off on *him*. The loyalty, I mean. The *concern*. You'd think it'd die down after all this time, but hope springs eternal or some shit. I can't even escape it in this dive bar at the ass-end of the earth.

But Owlface hasn't asked a question; he's made an offer. That's new. That puts me on high alert.

The barroom isn't large. Eight steps will take me to the entrance. Or I can hop the bar and get out through the kitchen in the back. Weapons are plentiful. There's the .357 magnum on my hip, the shovel tied to my pack by the door, twin pickaxes flanking the moose-head over the mantel. I left my elephant gun back at the inn with Smith. That's ten minutes' slog through a blizzard. That's not great, although thirty seconds is all it'll take me to vanish in the whiteout. But that would mean running and like I said I'm deficient in the fear department.

Low visibility cuts both ways, of course. It's not that I don't *know* there could be thirty goons thirty seconds away without anyone the wiser: I just don't care. I like my chances.

So I tell Owlface it ain't surprising he knows my dad's whereabouts when my dad's so tight with his mom. That gets a chuckle outta him, but I've timed the punchline so it lands right as he tips up his glass and then he wheezes for like a full minute. I'm feeling better, feeling like I got a handle on this situation. Then he sticks a hand in his pocket and out comes the photograph.

It's not my father. I thought for a moment it would be and my heart almost stopped, but it's just a picture of a page from a book.

I take it, but don't look at it yet. I'm watching his lips. They twitch like he's stifling a sneeze. He's triumphant. Thinks I've taken his bait.

He's right.

The book is *Shadows of Xiongnu*. An old favorite of my dad's. I recognize it because I read it when I was still trying to figure out where the hell he'd gone. Also, the title's printed right at the top next to the page number. But that's not the bait. The bait's scribbled in the margin.

It's dad's chicken-scratch alright. You can tell he wrote in a hurry: the lines bunch up and slant down to hug the edge. But what he was trying to say is anyone's guess. *The sum of rich and poor. The difference of light and dark. The aim of high and low. The cause of lush and stark. Baraan Kurgan, southeast antechamber.* Then some Chinese gobbledegook and a glyph I've never seen before. A raised palm emitting dark rays in all directions.

I have to admit it's my father's handwriting. There's no point trying to throw Owlface off the scent. If he can track me down in a place like that, he's not fooling around.

But neither am I.

So I tell him he needs me more than I need him. It's obvious he can't decipher the riddle, and thinks I can, and maybe he's right, but he's already on my bad side by knowing all about me without returning the favor. To be fair I think he'd introduced himself when he first sat down, but honestly I wasn't paying attention till he started talking about dad. Did I mention how badly the dig had been going? Wasn't in a convivial mood.

Anyway. You're not looking to help me, I say. You need *my* help. So lay it all out. Who you are, who you're working for, what you're after, what it's worth. Everything.

He hems and haws and gives me this spiel about a department of antiquities, an old wooden tablet from a lost archive in Inner Mongolia, a research assistant foraging the Syracuse University Library, marginalia that just happened to lead to my father and through him to me, blah blah blah. By this point I'm losing my patience. I stand up.

His right hand twitches to his side and his eyes flick to the door. Now I know he's strapped and has reinforcements waiting. My fingers start itching like they always do. I'm actually hoping he makes a move. But I figure I should give him one last chance. It doesn't have to be this way, I say. You can live. Your friends outside can live. All you gotta do is stop lying. Tell me what you're really after.

Owlface blinks. He literally blinks like an owl, real slow. Then he nods and spills the beans. I sit back down.

He says he didn't lie, but there's more to it. There always is.

His shot glass clacks down on the bar, empty. At that moment I get a weird feeling, like a door just shut in my face. Like a whole world of possibilities is now closed to me. Like I have to turn quick, go a new direction blindly. Can't really explain it. Have to admit it rattles me though.

His right hand plunges into his parka, to the pocket over his heart, the one that held the photo. When he pulls it out the walls come alive.

I jump outta my seat. My gun's in hand, pointing at everything. The miners in the corner are up too, hollering and knocking over chairs. They make for the door and charge outside without stopping to shut it behind them. Snow blasts in sideways. Barkeep busts out of the back, cussing up a storm of his own and trying to reach the door. He slips on the snow-slick and cracks his head on a table and joins Bald Charlie in dreamland.

There's shadows sliding all over the interior of the tavern. Big swathes of sharp-edged

blackness just jerking every which way, cast by nothing at all. Like we're hemmed in by a squad of invisible men. It's all I can do to keep myself from ventilating the place even further.

After a minute of hopping and ducking I recognize the ugliest shadow as my own. In fact now I see that every shape on the walls is coming from either me or Owlface. Familiar outlines warped and smeared across the logs and rafters. Nothing else leaves a mark: not the barstools, the bar, the empty bottles on top, nothing. Not even the gun in my hand. I get ahold of myself then and the dark shapes settle. But what's *casting* them?

Nootzguerel, says Owlface. The Unseen Light. That's when I finally notice what he's got in his hand.

It's a point-cut crystal about the size of a magnum round, black as a hole in space. As Owlface raises his hand and splays his fingers the crystal sticks to the middle of his palm. Looks creepy as hell but he's just pinching the thing in the folds of his soft skin. You can tell he's done this before.

A shadow crawls up the wall behind him and splits into five long tendrils. And then I understand.

The crystal's casting the shadows, though it itself remains dark.

I holster my gun, step over the barkeep, and shut the door. Nice theatrics, I say, but that thing better not be radioactive.

He laughs and drops his voice to a whisper. There's no need for secrecy—we're the only conscious people present—but he's got the theatrical bit in his teeth now and can't help himself. He tells me it's an ancient Oriental magic, a source of incredible power for those who knew its secrets. And he's right. I mean, just think about it. With an invisible light that casts visible shadows from living flesh you can project a signal without giving away your position, or distract an enemy while you sneak by. It's a ready-made, long-distance fake-out in your pocket. I know it works 'cause it'd just worked on me. I retake my seat.

He says there's only a few shadowstones left in the world today, but ancient records tell of hundreds. A lot are supposed to have been buried alongside a great Xiongnu warrior, but of course the grave was lost thousands of years ago. Guess that sort of thing happened a lot in nomad empires. Like squirrels with nuts, those guys.

He says my father searched for many years to find that grave, and that he was very close when he vanished. He says the group he works for has my father's journals, his sketches, his letters, even his ticket stubs from near the end. He says they know everything dad knew... *except* the meaning of that riddle.

You don't know anything, I say. Just a bunch of trivia. You haven't found the grave.

He gives me a strange smile then. Oh but we have found it, he says. The stone itself showed us the way. But it's locked.

It's locked? The hell does that mean?

He says I'll find out if I help them. Says the answer to the riddle will open the grave.

I sit quietly for a minute. This tale's so absurd it has the ring of truth, and I don't like it. Whoever these people really are, they've been looking for my old man a long time and only came to me now, as a last-ditch effort after hitting a brick wall. How'd they get dad's notes? His *letters*? The library story's bullshit: dad wouldn't have left such a big clue out in the open for anyone to find. They lifted the riddle from a book in his personal collection. Not the copy *I* read, obviously. Dad had owned several, and I'd picked up the most dog-eared one. Gotta say, it

doesn't feel good to learn that total strangers were more thorough in their investigation.

The more I think about it the worse it feels. These guys deliberately went behind my back. There's no way in hell they could've gotten access to dad's old stuff through the front door without my knowing. The trustee would've told me. No, he would've *asked* me. They had to have broken in. But they were good. They left things exactly how they found them, took only photographs. No one else knows what they know, or that they know it. No one but me.

That's because they need me. But *I* don't need *them*. And I certainly don't *like* them.

So I flick a quarter over my shoulder at the barkeep on the floor, uncork a whiskey bottle, pour myself a shot, down it, and drop my empty glass into Owlface's. Then I look him square in the face and tell him to go to hell.

He offers me money then. So much money it impresses *me*. Shoulda opened with that. Then I might not've had time to think clearly. But now it's too late. I turn him down again.

A shadow comes into his eyes. I don't know how else to describe it. The crystal's still there in his upraised palm, and it seems like his eyes take on the same blackness—dead and ghoulish like a barn owl. He moves his palm to cover his mouth and now the three holes in space form a triangle before his face. Peepers and beak.

Then he drops *your* name. We have her, he says. Unless you cooperate you'll never see her again.

The black triangle makes a tempting target. I swing for it first, and that's my first mistake. Owlface is ready. He tips his head out of the way and sticks a knife in my left thigh.

Believe it or not I've been caught with my pants down a few times and lemme tell you, this is one of them. Fortunately I haven't misjudged the guy *completely*: it's a weak blow and doesn't go in very far. Just far enough to wake me up.

I plant my right boot on his barstool and shove off backward, pulling my piece and getting off one shot before the floor smacks me in the back of the head. His knife spins into my gun hand at the same instant and I lose my grip. Barstools scatter like ninepins. Gun's gone, don't know where to. I'm trying to get to my feet. Left boot keeps slipping on blood. Owlface is writhing on the floor, maybe gutshot, who knows. He's dropped his shadowstone. There it is, spinning like a top on the floor beside me. I pocket it without thinking. And then the door bursts open.

Boots pound the floorboards and men in parkas pile through. There's at least five of them, but I can't afford to wait around and count. Can't get to my pack now either. Gotta move or I'm a dead man.

I lob a barstool in their direction and lunge for one of the pickaxes over the mantle, but somebody slams into me and I end up grabbing the moose-head instead and pulling it right off the wall. It's huge and heavy as hell and falls like a calving iceberg and crushes the other guy to the floor. One of the big flat antlers snaps off at my feet.

Moose gotta have insane neck muscles, lemme tell you, but in that moment I'm high on adrenaline and don't even feel the weight. The thing's as big as a Roman shield and that's how I use it at first. I lower my shoulder and plow into the advancing column. That puts some guys on the floor. Then I figure out the antler spikes are good for stabbing. That puts some guys outta commission.

By this time the tavern's feeling crowded. There's a lot of these guys, and it's only a matter of seconds before one gets a clean shot at me. So I scoop embers outta the fireplace with

the antler and fling them in the air, then duck around the bar into the kitchen and through the guys piling in the back. As soon as I'm outside I point myself in the direction of the inn and take off into the whiteout.

But now I'm leaving a blood trail. My left leg's a big red paintbrush. They'll be after me before the storm wipes my tracks. I can't outrun them, can't hide from them, and now I'm weaponless and can't fight them. I finally overcome my fear deficit.

And right then's when you find me.

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Hugh Conrad blew out a long sigh and sank back against his seat cushion. For a long minute the only sounds were a metallic rattle of the curtains' pull-cord against the glass, the snore of the old Chinese man slouched in the compartment's crosswise corner, and the endless rumble of the tracks beneath.

The scar running between Hugh's left eye and chin emerged like a streak of war paint from the shadow of his fedora. Beneath the window's gleam, the mud plastered to his brown, calf-length coat and boots made them appear black. How long had it been since he'd changed? Since he'd seen the inside of a tub? Six weeks had passed since the ambush in Yellowknife, and this was the first chance he'd had to tell the story in full. *Crazy to think this mission's just begun.*

After escaping the tavern and making it back to the inn, he'd had to convince Dr. Smith to lend him the muscle necessary to retake his plane. The Ford Trimotor parked at the settlement's sole airstrip would've been impossible for Owlface to miss and had to be approached with caution. Upon securing Smith's grudging approval to abandon the dig and borrow a few friendly goons, Hugh had found his aircraft serving as impromptu storm shelter for three men who, transfixed by the yawning double barrels of a Westley Richards .577 elephant gun, kept repeating some shit about getting lost on their way to the local mine. They'd been left in Smith's none-too-gentle care.

Then it'd been south via Edmonton, Calgary, Williston, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Syracuse to the Conrad family estate in the rust-hued Adirondacks where snow was still a premonition. He'd found his father's study seemingly undisturbed and the old groundskeeper scandalized by the thought of intruders. Nonetheless, close inspection revealed uneven deposits of dust upon the bookshelves, and, buried deep within the *newest* and *freshest* copy of *Shadows of Xiongnu*, the lightly-penciled riddle that'd stumped Owlface so badly. There was even a bright red ribbon marking the page.

There were other notes on other pages, including an address in Inner Mongolia. After copying these, Hugh had slipped the book back onto the shelf. A puzzle piece long hidden in plain sight.

Then it'd been west via Chicago, Omaha, and Seattle to a freighter bound for the Far East across the recently-pacified Pacific. Incessantly rough seas had kept Hugh confined to his cabin and his face confined to a bucket for two weeks, until the grimy port of Tientsin smelled in contrast like heaven on earth. The US Marine detachment there had been flabbergasted to have to deal with anyone traveling *into* China's interior: this was October of 1947, and their job was to get people *out*. The war between Chinese nationalists and communists was heating up now that the Empire of Japan had been crushed. The People's Liberation Army was raiding trains and

tearing up railway tracks all over Manchuria, but the line through Peiping to Paotow on the Yellow River remained open. North of Paotow, across the jagged Yinshang Mountains which now paraded past the compartment's right-hand window, lay the arid Mongolian plain—ancient stomping grounds of the Xiongnu nomads.

A soft fabric swish pulled Hugh's attention forward to the present. Nora Forseth had draped one leg over the other, and was straightening her navy blue dress. Anyone else looking at her in that moment might've mistaken her carefully blank expression for indifference, but Hugh recognized it as the mask she donned to conceal deep concern. He also knew she wouldn't be able to contain said concern for very long, so in the interim he allowed himself to enjoy the arc of her ear, the uptick of her nose, the curve of her neck, the wayward hairs straying from her thick blond braid. The brim of her felt hat hid her eyes by design: she wouldn't reveal them until she'd finished formulating the forthcoming complaint.

A soft cough from the compartment's fourth and final occupant interrupted this reverie. "Belated question," said Everett Larken, tipping the homburg hat off his brow, "but you *do* know the answer to the riddle, yes?"

Hugh shut his eyes and groaned inwardly. *Here we go.* Everett was a friend from the war. He'd been a captain in Army Intelligence when Hugh Conrad, a hard-charging-yet-inexperienced first lieutenant, first met him beneath a gutted farmhouse in Normandy. Over the subsequent month they'd bonded under fire. But by the time of their reunion last year Everett had become a different animal entirely. It was less that he'd been promoted and more like he'd dropped off the chain of command onto an orthogonal catwalk nobody else knew about. He was strictly plainclothes now, all suit coats and patent leather shoes, and at thirty-seven—ten years Hugh's senior, albeit six inches shorter—he cut a rather distinguished figure.

Whenever talk turned toward Everett's own doings it seemed to lose its way and end up on other topics, but based on the frequency with which their paths continued to cross Hugh had become convinced the other man was his government handler. An irritating realization made even worse by the fact that Hugh looked *forward* to their increasingly-implausible encounters. Everett was knowledgeable and observant and didn't tend to get in the way, despite his bad habit of poking holes in Hugh's ad hoc plans. But three weeks ago, when he'd materialized on the Seattle wharf and informed Hugh he'd booked an adjacent cabin, the pretense of chance had been discarded forever.

Hugh still wasn't sure how he felt about that. One thing he did know: he didn't appreciate a *third wheel*.

"I'll figure it out," he replied at length. "They wouldn't have come to me if they hadn't thought I was the only one who could solve it."

That tipped Nora over the edge. "Oh you'll *figure it out*, will you? Is that what you thought when you attacked the man who said he'd kill me if you didn't cooperate? That you'd *figure it out*?" Her azure eyes flashed from under her hat brim.

Hugh rolled his own. "Well I *did*, didn't I? I guessed he was bluffing and I was right."

"That's not the *point*," she shouted. "You could've been *wrong*!"

"If I'd done as they wanted you'd have never seen me again," he replied coolly. "The tavern would've been empty when you got there, no sign left, tracks erased by the storm. Barkeep would've been up by then, but whether he'd even remember seeing me after that nasty concussion is anyone's guess. Then you would've looked for me at the airstrip and come up

empty. There weren't any new planes there when we left, so that's not how Owlface snuck his little army into town and it's not how he would've gotten me out.

"He would've brought me here. And I would've solved the riddle for him. And then he would've had me killed." He turned his gaze to the serrated cliffs outside. "Out there. Past those hills. On the open steppe. Where no one would ever know."

Nora said nothing. She'd reverted to careful blankness.

"We're north of the Great Wall now," said Everett. "Off the edge of the old maps. For millennia this was a land of barbarians. Not just primitive raiders, you know; vast hordes of horsemen, hundreds of thousands strong. Every few centuries they'd sweep out of deepest Asia to conquer everything. The Mongols who overthrew the Song Dynasty, the Huns who brought Rome to its knees, the Xiongnu who ravaged China from its very beginning, they all came from *there*." He jerked a thumb out the window.

"And now," he continued in a hiss, "the barbarians are *back*. They go by a different name and fly a different flag, but make no mistake: they'll come out of that desert with no less ferocity than in ancient times. Very soon they'll come. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe today. So if you care about anyone seeing *any* of us again, Hugh, I suggest you *crack that riddle*." He sat back, crossed his legs, and cracked open a little notebook.

"I *said* I'll figure it out," muttered Hugh. *Damn you Everett, the last thing I need is a nanny. If you don't think I can do it, why not just hop the next train back? It wasn't my choice to drag you along.*

A slim hand on his knee swept such thoughts from his mind. "I'm glad you guessed right," Nora murmured with an upward twist of her lips. "You always do."

Hugh's answering smile didn't reach his eyes. "So far, sweetheart. Don't count your riches while they're in the ground."

"You know I'm not in it for the money," she said, settling back and recrossing her legs. "The Greenland job set me for life. Thanks to you."

At that, Hugh's eyes succumbed to his grin. *He* knew what she was in it for. Nora reflected the grin blindly and he basked in her radiance, letting their dirty and dangerous surroundings drop from his attention. But no exchange was too intimate to evade interruption by the *third wheel*.

Everett cleared his throat. "So what are *you* in it for, Hugh? You left Canada like a bat out of frozen hell. Why not just stay put, sic the Mounties on your Owlface, finish that job for Smith? Why the godawful rush?"

Hugh's grin vanished like the train's shadow as the land beyond the window fell away into an upland valley. The tracks' rumble shifted timbre. A trestle bridge groaned between them and a precipitous gulch.

"I have my reasons," said Hugh cagily. "But what about *you*? What makes you drop everything to match my pace? I assume you had a lot of balls in the air. And like you said, I moved quick. As much as I fascinate you I doubt you jump just 'cause I do."

Everett shrugged. "My contacts told me you'd swung by Syracuse. That's not something you'd do for a small-time payout. You've told me how you feel about the place."

Hugh's eyes narrowed. "Your contacts notice anyone *else* swing by?"

Everett shrugged again. "They don't catch everything."

"I wonder. Your eyes got all big when I was telling the story just now, but something tells

me you've seen one of *these* before."

From somewhere under his coat Hugh produced the shadowstone. As soon as it cleared his collar, three black head-and-shoulders silhouettes leapt up against the walls. The old man sawing logs in the corner was slumped like a sack of rice, so his bald head only grew a thin, dark halo in counterpoint to his lustrous hanfu robe. The passing hills appeared to dim, but that was probably due to a cloud.

This was the first time Hugh had brought out the crystal since Nora demanded to see it that night in Yellowknife. Carrying the thing on his person was bad enough; handling it was an emergency measure. It crept him out. He revealed it now only because he wanted to gauge Everett's reaction.

"Nootzguerel," whispered the older man. His gaze slipped past the stone itself to fasten on Nora's shadow. "Incredible."

Hugh snorted, too unnerved for the moment to snark at Everett's obvious familiarity. "What's so incredible about shade?"

"It's not the shade." Everett's voice had sunk, thickening as though he dreamed. "Don't you see? It's not what you can *see*; it's what you *can't* see. The cause, not the effect. It's nootzguerel, the hidden revelation, the Unseen Light. A new form of radiation! A new frontier of science. Once we've cracked the riddle in that rock, just imagine what will become possible!"

"One riddle at a time," groaned Hugh. The reverence in his friend's inflection had him rattled. With a flick of his wrist the crystal returned to his pocket.

Everett blinked, then scowled. A darkness seemed to pass across his features. Hugh tensed. *Dammit you spook, don't you go rogue on me. I didn't drag you out here to cave your face in, but I can! Just you try me!* For a full minute no one spoke. Nora shrank against the window almost imperceptibly, sliding her handbag onto her lap and popping open its clasp. The train reached the far end of the bridge and its rumble felt suddenly less resonant. Rumble rumble. The curtains' pull-cord rattled the glass with a new cadence now that the grade had steepened. Tap tap tap.

Rumble rumble. Tap tap tap.

Rumble rumble. Tap tap tap.

With a swiftness that made Hugh jump, Everett whirled upon the old man in the corner, seizing him by the robe-front. But the old man was faster still. Sliding all the way off his seat, he kned Everett in the groin, wove a hand through his forearms, and twisted him sideways, slamming him into the door. A half-dozen blink-quick strikes to the throat and Everett lay gaping.

Hugh sprang to his feet before Nora could draw the pistol from her bag. Flinging himself into the air, he drove his substantial weight, shoulder first, into the old man's midsection. Hugh's adversary was a foot shorter, and maybe half his weight, and barely impeded his momentum. Together they flipped over Everett's prone body and smashed straight through the sliding wooden door, sprawling in the passageway outside. Up and down their train car other doors slid open to disclose alarmed faces.

The old man jabbed Hugh in the stomach and squirmed out from under him, rolling to the opposite wall and leaping up in front of its windows just in time to get felled by Hugh's sweeping leg. With a *crunch* he struck the deck. Hugh lunged, tackled, bore down, and then the fight was over. The old man wheezed haltingly as his cheek pressed the floorboards beneath

Hugh's elbow. "Stay down, you rodeo clown," grunted Hugh through clenched teeth.

"He was already asleep when we boarded at Kalgan," observed Nora as she took up a covering position and flicked her skirts away from a .38 revolver held at the hip. "There's no way he could be a plant." Hugh glanced up to see her scanning the car's other doors as they closed softly one by one. These passengers, Chinese and Westerner alike, wanted no part in a squabble between strangers—especially one that had already blown over.

"No," rasped Everett, clutching at his neck. He stumbled through the shattered door to level a baleful finger at the old man. "He *is* a plant. He kept snoring when Nora yelled, then stopped when I got quiet. He was awake the whole time. He heard *everything*. Search him!"

Like a screw under pressure suddenly snapping free from rust, the old man *spun* to face upward, stabbed two fingers into the soft flesh under Hugh's jaw, and exploited the shock to plunge a bony hand inside Hugh's coat, seize the shadowstone, and fling it down the aisleway. Hugh was too numb to yell, but Nora's yelp cracked a few doors open again. The crystal struck a closed door, bounced once off the floor, and skittered to a stop a few feet before the car's rear door.

"Alright, you asked for it," growled Hugh. Planting a knee on the old man's chest, he reared up and slammed a fist into his left temple. The man slumped, apparently out cold. Hughs slapped him a few times to make sure he wasn't faking, then rose haltingly and leaned against the wall, massaging his neck.

"Very smooth," said Nora. "Now he can't answer our questions."

"When he comes to he's all yours, sweetheart." Hugh stumbled down the aisle and bent to retrieve his rock, then froze.

"What's wrong?" asked Nora quietly. Everett glanced up from frisking the old man.

"That must've been some kinda nerve he hit," mumbled Hugh. Still stooping, he slowly waved the crystal in front of his face, then passed his left hand before his eyes. "I... I'm seeing double, or... Hey Ev, c'mere and look at this."

Everett was at his side in an instant and saw a dark diamond shape shifting along the wall below the train car's south-facing windows, precisely tracking the movement of the shadowstone in Hugh's hand. It was, in fact, a shadow itself, but one that pointed the wrong way. The light slanting through the windows ran the other direction and struck the opposite wall.

Hugh shared a look with Everett, then slowly stood. The shadow on the wall slid up, up, up over the sill and onto the pane, forming a neat little prism where sunlight went to die. The surrounding window gleamed golden, showing off its smudges, but not in one place. Like a hole had been punched in the glass.

Outside, a high crag blocked the sunlight and turned the crystal's shadow into a darker patch of dimness. But it was still there, still as inexplicable as ever. Both men glanced at the opposite wall to find its woodwork devoid of secret light sources. They glanced around to find their own shadows stretching away from the stone as expected.

Hugh raised it, turning it in his fingers, staring at its misdirected shade upon the glass. "This thing's like a light bulb," he said, drawing out the words. "So when does a light bulb cast a shadow?"

Snatching off his hat, Everett passed a hand over his widow's peak. "In the presence of a greater light."

Hugh looked north. The adjacent compartment blocked his view, but beyond it—past the

train, past the upland valley, past the Yinshang range, high on the desolate steppe—something immense had just given itself away. “But wait, that means...” Hugh looked west—back up the aisle, the direction in which they were headed.

Nora was also looking west, and not in idle curiosity. Her posture had tensed. She gripped her revolver in both hands. Something had tripped her wires.

What’s wrong? What’d I miss?

The window-wall afforded them a clear view forward as the tracks straightened after skirting a cliff to the left. Now that the mountain was backing off a little, Hugh noticed the network of gray undergrowth flooding down between its boulders like a wooly avalanche. *Lotta cover up there.* Directly ahead, at a distance of maybe a quarter mile, another trestle bridge spanned a deep ravine.

But the bridge only made it partway before disappearing in a column of smoke.

Hugh shut his eyes. “Aw shit. Commies.”

“*Ambush!*” screamed Nora over her shoulder. “Hugh, we got thirty seconds!”

Hugh’s fist swallowed the shadowstone as his eyes snapped open. “Unscheduled stop. Everyone grab your bags!”

The whole train shuddered as the conductor finally woke up and engaged the emergency brake. Hugh lurched forward and blundered into reeling passengers as they tumbled out of intervening compartments. A racket of panicked Mandarin crashed against his ears. Nora ducked through the splintered door and reappeared wearing her oilskin haversack and dragging Hugh’s, which she heaved in his direction. Its coiled rope with grappling hook clanged against the floor. *Good thing we packed for a trek.* They’d also stowed three trunks full of equipment in a luggage compartment, but those were now a write-off.

A crush of fleeing bodies had rendered the exit inaccessible. Hugh stuffed the crystal into his coat and, instead of shouldering his bag like his companions, raised it overhead to smash out one of the windows.

But at that moment the window shattered on its own. Flinders from the opposite wall showered the back of his head as a bullet punched through the wood.

“Down! Get down, dammit!” Hugh tackled Nora to the floor as suppressive fire from the hillside blew out the entire wall of glass. Wails of pain pierced the continuous shriek of metal on metal as the train ground down the brake. Less than twenty seconds remained.

“The right side, we’ll have to get out that way,” he bawled in Nora’s ear.

“You’re crazy! It’s a sheer drop out there!”

“No choice sweetheart.” He propelled her through the busted door into the compartment they’d just vacated, shoved Everett after, and was about to follow when a shout from Nora brought him up short.

“Hugh, the old man! We have to get him out!”

For two whole seconds Hugh Conrad crouched motionless in the breach, struggling to not care about the fact that there’d be no living with her if he turned his back on this one random goddamned Chinese spy.

“Hugh, please! We can’t just leave him!”

“Dammit all to hell,” he spat. Then, much louder: “Don’t worry about him, just get that damn window open!” Grabbing the old man under the armpits, Hugh hauled him into the room, flopped him over his left shoulder, and rose with a growl.

By then the window was open, and Everett had one leg flung over the sill. Nora glanced back at Hugh, relief shining in her eyes.

The train ran out of track. Down it plunged into empty space. Up rose the little company. Hugh found himself suddenly unburdened. The unconscious old man hadn't weighed much to begin with; in freefall he weighed nothing at all.

Time seemed to slow. It always did when Hugh was about to die. He couldn't move any faster, but it did gave him one last chance to *think*.

The train careened through smoke toward a latticework of beams. The saboteurs had blown up only a narrow section of bridge, maybe a hundred feet wide, and the intact structure on the far side loomed ahead. A huge wooden joist, splintered like matchwood, emerged from the gloom to swing for their car and miss. Whoosh.

Oh God. I'm not ready to meet you. Dammit, I wouldn't even know what to say.

With his right hand Hugh reached back to slip the coiled rope off the side of his haversack. With his left he reached above to wrench the curtain down. Its bronze rod tore away from brackets on the wall, narrowly missing Everett's skull. The pull-cord was sucked skyward through the window and lost.

"Grab hold!" bellowed Hugh as he shouldered his friend aside and heaved himself onto the sill. A thundering wind blasted his hat from his head and the words from his lips, but he couldn't afford to care whether the others had heard; the whole of his thought was bent now upon a tree-thick crossbeam rushing up toward them. In two seconds it would pass.

Hugh passed the back half of his rope to his curtain-draped left hand, gripped the grappling hook in his right, and hurled it overhand across the gap.

The crossbeam roared past.

The hook snagged it and held fast.

The rope hissed away; it wouldn't last.

Wrapping both hands in drapery, he seized the line in viselike fists. His arms jerked up and nearly tore from their sockets. His body was wrenched from the window and sent spinning slantways through space. Below him the train car fell away, but it'd barely shrunk to half its size before colliding with the mountain. Thousands of tons of iron and steel smote an immeasurable mass of granite and flew apart like a child's toy. The metallic shriek and boom nearly blew out Hugh's eardrums. Dust and shrapnel billowed up to meet the smoke.

Thank God. He rescheduled our meeting.

Into the trestle forest Hugh swung. Beams emerged from the murk on either hand like giant trees. But then the human pendulum passed its pivot point and arced back. It was all downhill from there.

As Hugh's focus relaxed and expanded he noticed two things. The first was that he was slipping. His fists were already growing hot through the curtain's heavy fabric as he slid faster and faster. Shivered crossbeams swiped at him as his lifeline spun. If he didn't hit the ground soon he was going to run out of rope.

The second was that there was a pair of arms locked around his waist, and another around his neck. Fortunately the latter were thinner, more feminine, else they would've already asphyxiated him. Also, the old Chinese spy was somehow still slung over his shoulder. That explained why his grip was failing: he bore the weight of four.

"Hang on sweetheart," Hugh wheezed. "We're gonna make it."

"You know me," she squeaked in his ear, trying in vain to keep the terror out of her voice. "I'm a ride-or-die kinda gal."

"And I'm just along for the ride," interjected Everett, swiveling his face so it wasn't smashed against Hugh's stomach. "I'd like to get off at the next stop, thanks very much."

"Noted," said Hugh. It was difficult for him to see, but his rope's end appeared to be rapidly approaching. Beyond that, fresh smoke from mangled train cars obscured all sight. The ground could've been any distance away. In a few seconds they would know.

"Hey, it was good knowing you both," said Hugh. "See you on the other side."

"*What?*" shrieked Nora, but before she got any further the rope ran out. Four bodies tumbled into empty air.

Twenty feet later, they struck bedrock.

"Get up, get up!" Hugh yelled, shrugging off the old man, staggering to his feet, and hauling Nora upright. "Train's still comin'! *Move!*"

The world was a cauldron of gloom. Dust surged up as giant metal coffins pelted down. The rocky ledge shook like a beaten drum, each successive car landing an ever-more-deafening blow. And they just kept coming. It hadn't been a short train.

Remarkably, aside from a gravel-riddled gash on his left forearm, Hugh felt uninjured. Unfortunately, this was because his fall had mostly been broken by low-hanging Everett. The formerly-distinguished figure lay twisted on his side, mouth gaped in an inaudible scream.

Shoving Nora ahead of him into an avenue bordered by upright trestle struts, Hugh plodded after, dragging the insensate old man with his left hand and the incapacitated G-man with his right. Only after the mountain had ceased to thunder and the ringing in his ears had swelled to engulf all sound did he stop and drop to his knees.



With a detention of breath the stillness was complete. Not even a breeze caressed the rocks or ruffled the bare-limbed brush. In the chill of impending winter all insects had retreated deep. No cricket broke the silence.

The darkness was less complete: a river of stars snaked overhead, bounded by cliffs and glittering so bright it seemed unnatural not to hear babbles and splashes. Perhaps it had frozen over.

A rustle of cloth and twigs, a soft intake of breath, and a question at once gentle and harsh: "Why are we really here?"

Hugh Conrad turned to gaze at Nora Forseth. In the starlight only the edge of her cheek and chin emerged from the void cast by her hat—a hat she'd retained in midair through use of a chin strap. Hugh's distaste for such reminders of army life was gonna dent his budget yet again. But the price of a new fedora was nothing compared to that of the prized elephant gun he'd abandoned in the scramble to detrain. He'd been trying not to think about that.

A night and a day had passed since the ambush. A night and a day of anguish. After evading commie bullets and navigating loose talus the trio had crossed the upland valley and made their way northward into a canyon of the Yinshang, guided by the shadowstone's unnatural shade. Of course the problem with such a navigational aid was that one couldn't use it at night, but Hugh wouldn't have marched through the dark even if he'd been following a compass

needle. He now had a cripple to tend.

Everett, despite a broken right ankle, had insisted on accompanying them. Hugh would've rejected this outright if he'd had somewhere to leave the man. But with the Red Army swarming these hills, chances were slim that a well-dressed Westerner could remain hidden at even the remotest cottage with the most welcoming host. To simply knock on a door carried risk: Everett might speak passable Mandarin, but he had no contacts in this backwater, and, as everyone knew, the Revolution enjoyed its greatest support in the countryside.

So Hugh, after immobilizing Everett's ankle with beam-splinter splints bound by curtain strips, had scavenged two longer wooden shards, whittled a crosspiece-notch in each, lashed wooden handles to them with Nora's rope, and presented his friend with crutches.

The old Chinese man they'd propped against a rock. He was snoring for real by the time they left.

The subsequent trek had been straightforward for Hugh, strenuous for Nora, and excruciating for Everett. His noble refusal to utter even the smallest complaint meant he gradually ceased to speak at all, and his companions, rather than deriving inspiration from such stoicism, found themselves beset by apprehension.

"Hugh." Nora laid a tentative hand on his arm and repeated her question. "Why are we doing this? If we'd just followed the tracks west we could've been in Kweisui by now. We could've found a doctor."

Hugh glanced back down the canyon. They'd wandered no more than a quarter mile in search of brushwood and already their campfire's light had been blotted out by cliff-walls. He smiled. Everett would be safe till they returned so long as he stayed awake. It wasn't just commies they had to worry about out here: there were also wolves.

"Kweisui would've taken us out of our way," he replied. "We would've been delayed for days, and by the time we started again the commies might've conquered the whole province." Facing north, he pointed toward the peaks looming dark against stars like a dragon's lower jaw. "This thing we're searching for, this grave, it's out *there*. It's the last chance I'll get to find out what happened to my father."

"So *that's* what this is about," Nora muttered. She fell silent for a minute, but Hugh knew she wasn't finished so in the meantime he picked up more sticks.

A huff of pent breath announced the next salvo. "I don't get it. I thought you hated your father."

"I hate that he *left*," snapped Hugh, infusing the words with more force than he'd intended. "I'd only hate *him* if he left by choice. That's why I have to know."

"You told me he *abandoned* you, that it was *his* fault your mother—"

"I know what I said!" Hugh's shout subsided to a whisper. "But I don't want to believe it."

"Did you love him, then?"

"He loved *me*." Hugh's voice cracked and he looked skyward. "When I was little he used to pitch us a tent in the sheep field on summer nights and we'd sleep under the stars. He'd sing to me when he thought I was asleep." The memory was too much; Hugh swallowed heavily and shut his eyes. Points of light glittered on his cheeks.

Nora dropped her sticks with a clatter and gripped his arm. "I'm sorry... sorry I said anything."

"No, it's okay," he choked out. "The way I talk, I don't blame you for thinking he was a bad father. But he wasn't. He was a good father. That's why it hurt me when he..."

"I'm sorry," she repeated inanely. *Of course you are*, thought Hugh. *Everyone always is. What else is there to say?*

"What'd he sing?" she asked. "On summer nights, when he thought you were asleep?"

Damn. Had to ask, didn't I? "Oh nothing you'd know. Just some silly song he made up."

"He made up a song just for you?" Nora tilted her face up toward his, releasing it from the shadow of her hat. Starlight glistened in her liquid eyes.

Hugh's throat worked noiselessly, then he nodded.

"Do you remember it?"

Hugh squeezed his eyes shut, hard. Then he swiped a sleeve over them, sniffed loudly, and adjusted the bundle of brushwood under his arm. "We'd better be getting back. Don't wanna make Everett worried."

Nora bent wordlessly to gather her sticks, then followed Hugh down the barely-discernible goat path, stumbling only occasionally. The world beyond their footfalls felt dead, as though they two were all that remained of mankind. As though their every step bore immense consequence.

And beneath this silence, words were now running faintly through Hugh's mind—hard words sung softly long ago. They rose in volume as he hiked, until in the dark seclusion of the cold and quiet canyon they seemed more real than sight.

And then his lips formed them, and his breath bequeathed them life.

*"The wind blows from the gray-cloaked north
Until my bones are chill.
Yet evermore though gale shall roar,
My heart beats for you still.*

*You warm me when I cover you,
You carry me in my arms,
You give my soul the peace it seeks,
While I guard you from all harms.*

*The dust rises from the green-veiled east
In testament of hooves.
And evermore through wanderings sore,
You keep me rich in loves.*

*You bless me when I pay your way,
You fill my coffers dry.
You're the cause of my loss in trade,
Worth more than I can buy.*

*The sun shines from the gold-crowned south
Reminding me of youth.*

*So evermore till death's bright door,
I'll share with you the truth.*

*You sap my strength to give it back,
You run ahead and after.
Your increase portends my end;
I welcome it with laughter.*

*The waves roll from the red-rimmed west
When at last our paths must part.
Then evermore from that far shore,
I'll wait for you, my heart.*

*You bear my legacy onward,
You live through me in you.
You've taken all I have to give,
And proven my aim true."*

Hugh had begun the first verse in a whisper, reached the fifth with something resembling verve, then sunk into a half-sob at the end. Now he trudged ahead with shoulders hunched.

"That was beautiful," ventured Nora.

"It was a *lie*," spat Hugh. "And if I ever find him I'll shove those words right back down his throat."

To that Nora said nothing. They walked on in silence for some time, their fingers clutching scraggly bundles, the night chill working deeper.

Hugh welcomed it. It felt good against his hot rage. The truth was, those backyard camping trips had been the only occasions he'd seen his father for more than a day at a time. The old man would disappear for months on end—running out without warning and returning without preface. The truckloads of exotic artifacts he brought back had sparked in Hugh a lifelong taste for the arcane, and now, after twenty years, the son saw in himself the same restless tendencies as the father.

But I'd never start a family just to leave it behind.

Nora was a nice girl, and nice to have along on a trip like this, but Hugh couldn't allow himself to pursue the relationship any deeper. The desolate rim of the world was no place for children, and a deserted home no place for a mother. Hugh had been six when his father failed to return. And six months later he'd been orphaned.

He killed mother. He drove her to it. If he hadn't left she'd still be here. And if he's still alive, he needs to face the music. He needs to know what he did. Deep within Hugh's psyche, embers of loathing long dormant suddenly flared up.

A whiff of smoke preceded the golden glow that flickered into view as they rounded a great black crag. Below them in a little hollow overhung by boulders, Everett would be guarding the fire and nursing his leg. Further down the canyon there was only darkness.

"Wait a minute," whispered Nora. "Let's surprise him."

Hugh paused, then spoke without turning. "What."

"Let's test out the crystal, see if it works on him!"

"Are you trying to cheer me up?"

"This isn't about *you* ya big lug. If we can send a shadow *through* the fire to the opposite side and get him to look that way, we'll know it works as a diversion."

"Yeah? Who you planning to divert?"

"Oh you know. Bad guys."

Hugh finally turned around and caught a glimpse of her thin grin under the hat brim. *Damn. It's a good night to be a good guy.* Every minute with this girl brought him that much closer to replicating his father's folly, and only hardened his resolve to avoid it.

He sighed and allowed himself a half-smile in response. "Fine, let's do it. But keep your head down. Ev's no dummy; he'll have *his* head on a swivel."

Creeping down along the goat track until only a head-high heap of boulders stood between them and the hollow, the two laid aside their brushwood and listened intently. A faint crackling floated on the air. Hugh glanced back at Nora—whose smirk had grown positively *impish*—then got down on hands and knees to peep around the edge. Everett sat near the fire with his busted foot propped on a rock and his gun in his lap. His notebook rested open atop the gun, and that's what held his attention.

Perfect. Hugh nodded to Nora, who picked a pebble and lobbed it over the hollow into the rocks on the far side. *Clack!*

Pulling the crystal from his coat and holding it behind his back, Hugh stepped into the open.

Instantly his shadow loomed huge and threatening against the boulders and pine-boles opposite, seeming for all the world to have originated somewhere between them and the fire.

Everett thought so too. Nora's pebble had drawn his attention to that exact spot, so the apparition achieved full effect. With a savage yell he flung aside the notebook, whipped up his revolver, and fired three blasts directly into Hugh's shadow before Hugh could draw breath to shout. Echoes boomed back from the bluffs like thunder out of the earth.

"Ev, wait, stop, it's me!"

Everett swung around and Hugh hit the dirt. "Don't shoot! It's just us!"

"The hell you playing at? I oughta blow off one of your legs, make us even!"

Hugh rose slowly—hands visible, grin sheepish. "Better make it the left one. Then we can tie ourselves together and each do only half the walking."

"Yeah, why didn't I think of that? It'd make everything easier." The gun hovered between them, then abruptly sank. Everett laughed. "That crystal really works! Can't believe I spooked at shadows. I wouldn't have—*agh!*"

Suddenly remembering his discarded notebook, Everett lunged sideways to snatch it from the fire. Too late: the pages sloughed off and flaked away. Blood drained from his face until it appeared as hoary as ash, but the eyes he raised to Hugh burned like live coals.

Hugh cleared his throat. "Uh, about that fire. We gotta put it out now. If there's any commies around they'll be trying to figure out where those gunshots came from."

"Dammit!" exclaimed Nora, kicking her brushwood bundle.

The journey to the summit was a descent into agony. For two more days the trio clawed their way up cliffs and crawled over tortured stone. The terrain became too steep for Everett to keep his footing, so he lashed his crutches to the sides of his pack and waited for Hugh to ascend each new rock face, lower a rope, and haul him up, hand over hand, while he scrabbled for leverage with one foot. It was grueling work for both, but more physically demanding of Hugh. By the end of the fourth night from the ambush he'd devoured all his C-rations and begun requisitioning Everett's, waving off the latter's protests with hazy assurances of abundant grouse hunting on the steppe above.

As for Nora, it was all she could do to keep her pack on her back. Reasonably fit but no athlete, not strong enough to hoist Everett nor quick enough to aid Hugh without tripping him up, she watched with growing agitation as the men struggled on and on, their gasps and groans the only sounds beside the wind's wailing and the shriek of an occasional jay. Mountaineering hadn't featured on their itinerary, but fortunately they *had* planned to procure horses in Paotow before crossing the Yinshang through a *proper* pass, so she'd packed trousers. Which now had holes in both knees.

At least she could keep an eye out for the commies who never came.

So it was that when at last they crested the highest ridge around noon on the fourth day, the first thing they did was collapse as though dead.

The wind bore down now as though trying to ward them off. From the stark hinterlands of deepest Asia it screamed—sharp as a blade, scathing as ice. “How f-far now?” stammered Nora as she huddled under Hugh's arm. “The s-shadow t-tells us where to go, but n-not how far. It c-could lead to Siberia!”

Hugh gave her a squeeze and shook his head. “Soon. Soon we'll find it. I have a good feeling.”

The north slope of the Yinshang was gentle compared to its southerly escarpment. By evening they'd left behind bare rocks and stunted pines to enter a world of grass. And as the sun kindled the featureless western horizon, Hugh's good feeling proved correct.

He was walking ahead with steps abbreviated from weariness rather than the benevolence of days prior. Tawny grasses swished about his knees and a steady wind swept the hair from his face. He'd tied the crystal to a bit of rope which hung around his neck to dangle at his back. Nora followed a few paces behind, keeping track of the diamond shadow bobbing on her chest. Every so often it would sidle off and she'd correct Hugh's course. Everett, stumping heavily on his crutches, brought up the rear.

“Left,” said Nora, and Hugh made the adjustment. “Uh, right,” she called again.

Affirmed in his trajectory, Hugh kept walking.

“Right, I said right!” Nora's voice had risen.

Jeez, do I have to acknowledge your acknowledgment now? “Yeah, confirmed, roger, ten-four.”

“No, *turn* right! God!”

Hugh chuckled. “Nodded off, did ya?” He angled to the right.

“Wait... Hugh, stop.”

That directive was clear enough. Hugh stopped and turned. “What's wrong?”

“I...” Nora looked up, bewildered. “I don't know where it went.”

Hugh's weariness fell away as he came fully alert. He stood up straighter and turned

slowly, unbuttoning his coat and flipping it open to clear a path for his gun-hand. "Spread out," he said quietly. "We just passed it."

The surrounding prairie appeared as empty as a church on Monday. Except for a slight rise ten yards to the left, nothing stood out. Not a tree, not a boulder, not even a weed higher than the knee-deep seed-head sea. Hugh began edging toward the hillock, but Everett got there first.

"Hey," Everett shouted, "there's a hole! Someone's been digging!"

Hugh arrived a second later. The hole was two feet deep and its freshly displaced soil had been spread evenly all around so it wouldn't show above the grass. At the bottom was a black, two-foot-wide stone which looked for all the world like a manhole cover. A deep seam, recently gouged clean, circumscribed this portal.

Hugh landed on it. A minute vibration ran upward through his boots—a slight give betraying empty space beneath. Crouching, he brushed the surface. It was smooth as porcelain. He pulled the crystal around to his front and held a hand above it.

On the center of his palm rested a jet black shadow.

A chill traversed Hugh's spine. Standing so his head and shoulders overtopped the grass, he again surveyed the darkening horizon. Nothing.

Not a stalk or blade out of place.

"There could be an army out there," he murmured. "Lie down in this stuff and you're invisible."

Everett cleared his throat. "I can stay outside," he offered. "Invisibility's easy if you lie still, but try to sneak up and you break the spell."

"Unless you've got a gun," said Hugh. "Then you can just shoot."

Everett swallowed and nodded.

"We go in together," said Hugh. "Nora, shovel."

She dropped her pack and dug out a small entrenching tool. Hugh traded the crystal for it, jammed it into the manhole's seam, and *leaned*.

With a grinding *crunch*, the portal tipped up. There was no blast of wind, no awful smell, no emission of spectral light. The stone lid must've weighed nearly two hundred pounds. Nora climbed down and tried to help Hugh wrestle it off its setting, although she just got in the way. Eventually he heaved it out of the hole.

Emptiness now yawned between their feet. Hugh extracted an angle-head flashlight from his bag, thumbled the switch, and peered down.

Someone had left a ladder in there.

"Look sharp," he said, yanking out his magnum. The other two pulled their pieces and held them at the low ready.

With his flashlight in one hand and his gun in the other, Hugh descended into darkness. The stepladder was of sturdy modern construction—obviously a recent addition. Hugh imagined Owlface waiting for him in the gloom and shuddered. *Burrowing owl indeed.*

As his head dropped below the edge, the wind, so long a constant, abruptly shifted from howl to moan. It played over the lips of the manhole like a dismal flautist mourning the dead. Hugh's neck hairs stood on end. He swept his surroundings with light. It was a small room with black, concave walls that curved down from the hole to a perfectly level floor. At one end, a dark arch gaped upon a void.

Glancing up, Hugh saw his companions framed by a sky of abyssal blue. Everett's hair

wisped off his scalp like antennae as he hunched over his crutches. Nora's hair strayed fetchingly from under her hat as she stood rigid and alert. They gazed down intently, faces hidden in silhouette. It was a striking image, though glimpsed briefly, and something in Hugh's gut told him to remember it. That he'd *want* to remember.

They regrouped in the antechamber and then pressed on. The dark arch led to stairs, and the stairs led down, down, down to a deeply-recessed door in a second, larger chamber. The wind's moaning could no longer be heard. All three had their flashlights out now. They goggled the walls in wonder and, more practically, confusion.

"This isn't Xiongnu work," whispered Everett. "This is... well, I've no idea what this is."

It was like no ruin *Hugh* had ever explored, that was for sure. Everything in this mausoleum was made of the same black stone. The blocks were huge and evenly-cut, and though smooth as glass they reflected no light. But the door was stranger by far. Above its smooth rectangle exhibiting neither handle nor hinge, just barely within Hugh's tiptoed reach, a row of four slots stared down from an angled lintel. Each displayed a Chinese glyph engraved on a white stone square. The squares were set back an inch or so from the lintel's surface, and edged with hairline gaps. They looked as though they could be pushed like buttons.

Nora's hushed voice seemed irreverent in the stillness. "What was that riddle again?"

Hugh spoke in a normal tone that resounded like a gong. "The sum of rich and poor. The difference of light and dark. The aim of high and low. The cause of lush and stark."

"Four answers," muttered Everett, "and four inputs. But how does it work?"

Hugh reached up and prodded the left-hand square. Nothing, not even a wiggle. He tried the others in turn and nearly fell over in shock when the rightmost square slid down and away in response to the slightest pressure. It was replaced by a rapid succession of other glyphs which flashed past the slot, accompanied by a clicking, groaning trill from deep within the rock, before slowing and eventually settling on a symbol that reminded Hugh of a duck.

Thunk. Sonorous echoes multiplied and died.

"Chinese is read from right to left," observed Everett drily.

"Thanks for the tip," growled Hugh. "Got any more gems to share?"

"Yes, actually." Everett was holding his head up higher. "Try doing that again."

But the rightmost square was now locked in place. No amount of shoving would budge it.

"Now try second from right." The man was having trouble keeping a smirk off his face.

The next square spun away like a carnival wheel's rim, clicking through a litany of glyphs before displaying a candlestick shape with a thud of finality. Hugh turned to Everett, arching a quizzical brow.

"This is a sequential combination lock," Everett announced. "It's solved one character at a time, from right to left. Each successive input must be correct or the intruder has to start over from square one."

"Well that means *this* attempt is shot," said Hugh. He spun the third square and watched the glyphs blink past. "I call dibs on whatever's still greasing these gears, by the way. That stuff's gotta be more valuable than all the shadowstones on earth." He swiped at the fourth square to reset the mechanism, but when it came to rest there was no familiar clunk. Instead, a high-pitched *SNAP* sent all four wheels cycling so violently they blurred. After a moment they slowed and then stopped simultaneously, leaving an entirely new glyph lineup in the slots. *THUNK!*

For a full minute no one spoke.

“Talk about losing your place,” whispered Nora.

Hugh rounded on Everett and jabbed a finger at the glyphs. “Can you read that?”

Everett pursed his lips. “This isn’t modern Chinese. It’s an ancient script. From long before the first emperor.”

“But can you *read* it?”

“Maybe. It’d be easier if I still had my *notebook*.” A flash of anger, abruptly hot like coals under ash.

Hugh raised placatory palms. “Look, we all have to adapt. You lost your book, I lost my hat. Just do the best you can.”

“Fine. But even if I translate *everything* it still won’t solve the riddle. That’s *your* job, if I recall.”

“I know,” groaned Hugh. Shuffling to the wall, he deposited his head against it with a little *thunk* of his own. “I know.”

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The next several hours passed like years. Nora produced a tin lantern and flask of kerosene from her pack so they could conserve flashlight power. The lantern’s shade had been stowed in one of their trunks and now lay smashed against a mountainside, but since the air in this tomb was perfectly still it didn’t matter: the flame stood proudly in the middle of the floor with nary a flicker to shift the shadows. Hugh fetched the ladder from the entryway to bring the glyph-wheels within reach, but then ended up wandering around with Nora while Everett used a crutch to click through the characters one by one, jotting them down in a fresh notebook. Every ten minutes or so a low *thunk* would reverberate through stone.

The sum of rich and poor. The difference of light and dark. The aim of high and low. The cause of lush and stark. The riddle had four parts, and it was now apparent that each had a one-word answer. Some of those answers seemed obvious. ‘The difference of light and dark,’ for instance, could only be shadow itself—light minus dark. And ‘the cause of lush and stark’ had to be either growth, barrenness, or some variant of either. But the remaining answers required deeper inquiry.

“Who the hell aims high and low?” muttered Hugh. “Someone who misses? A poor shot? A failure? Hey Ev,” he called, “you know the glyph for ‘failure’?”

“Afraid not,” came Everett’s hollow voice. “I did see one for ‘neglect,’ though.”

“Shit,” said Hugh. “That doesn’t fit. Neglect’s something that sneaks up on you. Nobody *aims* for it.”

“Maybe it’s the other meaning of ‘aim,’” suggested Nora. “You know, like ‘goal’ or ‘purpose.’ What could be the purpose of high and low?”

“Or better yet, what defines those parameters? High and low in relation to what?”

“Something we can’t see,” she said. “Something big. Something right there in the middle.”

The lantern flame shone in Hugh’s eyes as he met hers. “Something that’s being avoided. You’ve gotta divert around it, evade it, escape it. Hey Ev, you got one for ‘escape’?”

“I’ll keep an eye out.”

Thunk.

One part of the riddle remained. It galled Hugh that they couldn't test the veracity of any answer until they'd solved them all. 'The sum of rich and poor' was an oxymoronic concept. Two opposites simply cancelled each other out. You couldn't *be* both rich and poor, so either it meant 'middle-class' or was talking about something other than money, in which case it could mean practically anything.

"Dammit," Hugh hissed, "why couldn't he have just left the *answers* in that book? Why'd he have to *encode* it?"

"If he hadn't," said Nora, "Owlface would've opened this door a long time ago, with you none the wiser. But your father didn't want that. He wanted it to be *you*. He wanted *you* to be here, now, in this place. He wrote that riddle for *you*."

Hugh slumped against the wall. "He wrote it for himself, because he loved keeping secrets. Whatever insight I might have is accidental. He would've never intentionally included me in his schemes. It gave him a sick pleasure to keep others in the dark."

"I don't think so," said Nora softly. "That doesn't sound like the man who made you that song."

"Yeah? Maybe you missed the part where he only sang it when he thought I was *asleep*. That song was for *him*, not me. He was singing to *himself*. Singing his own praises. Just like this shitty riddle. It's just a private paean to his own cleverness."

Nora shook her head. "You bless me when I pay your way? You fill my coffers dry? You're the cause of my loss in trade, worth more than I can buy? Those aren't the words of someone thinking about himself. He loved you, Hugh; you admitted as much."

Hugh opened his mouth to rebut, then went very still. "Say that again."

Nora drew herself up and lowered her head until her eyes flashed from under her hat brim like cold stars under cloud. "I said it once and I'll say it again: your father loved you, Hugh Conrad, whether you like it or not!"

"No. No, not that part. The song, Nora, the song!"

She took a half-step backward. "You, uh, you fill my coffers dry?"

Hugh stared at her wordlessly, fear and longing wrestling over his face.

SNAP clickclickclickclickclick THUNK!

"Everett!" shouted Hugh, whirling toward the door. "Wait! On the first wheel, is there a glyph for 'child'?"

"I believe I saw one." He consulted his notes. "Yes, I did. It can also be translated 'son.'"

Hugh swallowed heavily and swayed in place. The bottom had dropped out of his world and he felt weightless, unburdened. "*I* was the cause of his loss in trade," he rasped, "worth more than he could buy. *I* was the sum of rich and poor. He *did* leave that riddle for me."

Everett was scrolling the glyphs. He'd developed a deft touch with the crutch over the past few hours, and now he used it to keep the rightmost wheel rolling, rolling, rolling so it didn't settle and lock until the engraving of a happy little stick figure slid into view.

𐄂 *Thunk.*

It didn't take long to locate the glyphs for 'shadow,' 'escape,' and 'growth.'

𐄃 *Thunk.*

𐄄 *Thunk.*

𐄅 *THUNK!*

With a blast of stale air, the great door groaned ajar. Shadows danced madly on the walls as the lantern flame went wild.

Hugh shouldered the door open fully and they passed through with guns drawn and flashlights blazing. What they found would upend recorded history.

The chamber beyond was spherical, roughly a hundred feet in diameter, and constructed from the same matte-black, silk-smooth stone as the passageway outside. Three floors segmented it at vertical intervals of thirty feet. Each was split radially by eight cutouts that ended just shy of the center, where a column containing a spiral staircase descended from the top level to the base. The cutouts were offset from floor to floor such that someone leaning over an edge above could drop a penny on the head of another person standing below—an amusement Hugh denied himself more than once after the trio got comfortable and spread out.

The chamber was also segmented concentrically. Great blackstone ribs arced longitudinally from apex to nadir in two nested layers like a skeletal Russian doll, passing alternately through cutout space and solid floor, dividing each level into an inner, middle, and outer ring. All these gaps and chasms allowed a single point of light to throw the entire chamber into shadowy tumult. As Nora ventured to and fro with her lantern, the curving walls and buttresses were imbued with surreal fluidity.

Hugh let himself drift as though dreaming. Wonder gripped him—a spell he'd thought broken since childhood. Time seemed of no account in this crypt that had withstood eons with perfect structural integrity. Every angle was sharp, every surface clean. Perhaps the shadowstones halted history. Maybe they could even turn it back.

Hugh lost himself in might-have-beens.

Eventually he found himself before the back door. That was the name they'd given to one of three exits—the others being the 'front door' through which they'd initially entered the top floor, and a sort of trapdoor or drain plug at the very bottom of the stairwell column, beneath the lowest level. The back door was nestled in the far wall of the middle floor. Like the others, it was topped by a four-part combination lock; unlike them, it had an additional slot at upper right that contained an unmarked square. Everett had speculated this could be pushed to change the code.

But Hugh wasn't interested in the mechanism's function. What had drawn him back here was something only he had seen the first time—something so out-of-place he'd dismissed it as a figment. But there it was again: a little red ribbon protruding from under the door. *Now where have I seen something like that before?*

He knelt, setting his flashlight down. Only a few inches of fabric were showing. He reached out hesitantly, half-expecting it to get sucked back in like a mocking tongue at his touch. But it didn't. It felt soft and pliable. It was real.

And that's when he remembered.

It'd been in his father's study. In *Shadows of Xiongnu*. The page with the scribbled riddle had had a bookmark just like this.

This is it. The next breadcrumb.

Hugh seized the ribbon to pull it out and it crumbled to dust in his fingers.

Leaping to his feet, he spun the glyph-wheels to input the code: 𐍂 𐍆 𐍇 𐍈.

THUNK! The door popped inward, and Hugh wrenched it wide open.

A slab of bare rock returned his stare.

No. No, not again. No, damn you, NO!

Hugh touched the rock. Pressed it. Pushed it. Hit it. Kicked it. Battered his shoulder against it.

Nothing. No give. Not even the slightest budge.

Sinking to his knees, he studied his hands in the flashlight beam. Their bloodied contours sparkled with ribbon-dust.

He stared at that dust for an instant or an age before the shadows started writhing on the wall and Nora's voice echoed softly from behind. "Well that's disappointing. We'll be on the bridge when you're finished."

Hugh shut his eyes and kept his tongue from evil.

The area where the trio reconvened was the most unsettling of all. On the top floor, at the head of the spiral stair, a sort of console stood on a semicircular dais that faced away from the front door. It did remind Hugh of a ship's command deck. Six white button-blocks queued up on its surface. They were engraved with—from right to left—a double arrow pointing up and down, a rightward arrow, a leftward arrow, a solid circle, a circuit of short rays, and a narrow V-shape. The trio hadn't dared to touch them.

By the time Hugh finished clumping up the stairs, he'd regained his composure. The lantern light plucked the others' faces from darkness and cast a golden pool at their feet. As Hugh emerged, his shadow loomed hugely on far-flung ribs and walls.

He got right to the point.

"If this is a grave," he said, "I'm a mortician." He leaned against the console, resting a hand unnervingly close to the leftmost button-block, and looked around. "Seems Owlface lied to me about more than I thought. Ev, you haven't been forthcoming either. Time to get it off your chest."

"I... I'm as astonished as you," stammered Everett. "I knew there could be more to the story, but I never imagined..." He trailed off and gestured at everything.

"So tell me. What more could there have been?"

"Fables about the shadowstones have always involved technology. Sure, most people just interpret it as magic—fairy-tale stuff—but for those who know what to look for it's obvious the ancients found practical uses for the crystals. There's always a 'house of shadow' or a 'carriage of shadow' or some other large device that channels and amplifies the radiation. I thought there might be something like that here."

"Far cry from a grave," said Nora, nonchalantly drifting away from Everett.

Hugh cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. "So this place. What's it supposed to do?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Everett shrugged and spread his hands. "What's it look like? To my eye it looks like an observatory."

Hugh hiked an eyebrow. "Ev, we're underground."

Everett's smile seemed forced and sickly. Hugh stared at him. And in the taut pause that followed, a new voice echoed off the walls.

"It's a weapon, Mr. Conrad."

Hugh's gun-hand flinched, but it was already too late. They'd left the front door ajar for fear of getting trapped inside, and now it slammed against the interior wall to disgorge a dozen gunmen, weapons drawn. There was nowhere to hide. Within seconds the newcomers had them surrounded. "Nora, don't." Hugh's voice slapped her wrist while the .38 was still halfway out of her holster. She shot him a wild-eyed glance, then slipped the gun back in and shrank against

him.

The bristling cordon parted to make way for a small, thin, dainty man in a slightly-muddy three-piece suit. His spectacles threw back the lamplight—twin white disks. His steps were short and stiff.

“Surprised to see you up and about so soon,” said Hugh. “Thought you’d be bedridden for months after I shot you.”

Owlface tilted his head. “You mean when you fell off your barstool and blew a hole in the roof? I thought you were just drunk, Mr. Conrad. I didn’t realize you were trying to hit me!” He laughed then, a hacking wheeze. “You at least had the presence of mind to pick up the shadowstone I tossed you, I’ll give you that.”

Hugh stood still and said nothing. Nora slipped behind him.

Stepping up to the console, Owlface brushed soft fingers across its button-blocks. “That which is invisible always, always makes itself known. Even the *densest* among us,” he looked pointedly at Hugh, “cannot help but notice in the end.”

With sudden force he punched the rightmost button. A great grinding *boom* rippled down into rock—spreading out, diffusing. A sudden *lurch* sent everyone swaying. There was vibration and muffled thunder. A sensation of upward movement, slow and steady.

Owlface splayed his fingers on the console. “The Unseen Light only makes contact with that which is unseen. I wonder... do you even know what that is?”

Hugh’s mind raced. He thought back to all the shadows ever cast by the crystal—the limbs, the heads, the bodies. Only people, never things.

“The soul,” he whispered.

Owlface smiled a sharp little smile. “So you *have* been paying attention.”

“This place... it has a lot of shadowstones.”

Owlface grinned.

“It’s *made* of shadowstone.”

The grin widened.

“And it... kills people?”

Owlface threw back his head and laughed. “With sufficient volume and concentration, Mr. Conrad, the Unseen Light can punch a soul right out of a body. For a man to live, soul and body must remain united. Typically the body is excised from this symbiosis first, forcing the soul to depart. But the inverse is just as effective.”

A sudden scuffling yanked Hugh’s attention to the side. *Nora*. She was making a move, going for one of the goons. *No dammit, not now!* Hugh lurched to grab her, stop her, but it was already over. She’d ducked inside the reach of a grizzled gunman and shoved her muzzle right up under his ear.

“*Drop your guns*, all of you!” Nora screamed. “Or I’ll blow his head off. *I will!*”

“Nora,” sputtered Hugh, “you don’t... it won’t... these men aren’t *like* what you think! This doesn’t *work* on them!”

“Do they think I won’t do it? I will! *You know I will! Hugh, tell them!*” Her eyes burned bright blue like the hottest of flames, and in that moment Hugh truly believed she meant it.

And it didn’t matter.

A knife handle sprouted from the gunman’s throat like a parasitic fungus. A red fountain engulfed it, and blood sheeted his shirt. Wordlessly he clawed at his neck, staggering forward out

of Nora's reach.

Owlface was there. With dainty fingers he plucked the blade free, stepping back to let his henchman crumple to the floor. "Fool. Don't ever let someone get the drop on you like that. *Especially* not a girl." He passed the knife to another henchman, who dutifully wiped it on his pants.

The blood had drained from Nora's face as well. Rough hands seized her and tore the gun from her slack fingers. A big goon with a pointy beard pistol-whipped her across the face.

Hugh saw red. Before he knew what he was doing he'd tackled the brute out of the cordon and caved his head in against the floor. It took many hands to drag him off and pin him down. His gun was gone now too.

"I'd thought to test the weapon on you, Mr. Conrad," said Owlface in annoyance, "but your girlfriend will do just as well. You'll get the conventional severance: body first, then soul." He extended a palm and the now-clean blade was handed back.

Everett Larken, who'd stood unobtrusively by the stairwell since Owlface showed up, abruptly cleared his throat. "Kill him and the deal's off."

Hugh raised swollen eyes, blinking away blood. Everything was so muddled. Surely he couldn't have heard his friend correctly.

"He's a liability," snapped Owlface. "He's served his purpose. He'll be nothing but trouble from here on out."

Hugh met Nora's pain-glazed eyes in fruitless search of comprehension. The gash on her cheek leered at him in scorn.

"You let *me* worry about that," replied Everett. "*You'd* better start worrying about *delivery*. The Kuomintang aren't going to pay you if they have to secure the weapon themselves. And you'd better *pray* they don't feel a need to call the US Army. In that case not only won't you get paid, you'll probably end up dead. My influence only extends so far. What about yours? Why are your men all clustered in here? Watch the damn perimeter!"

"Relax, Yank. An army couldn't dislodge us now."

With a bone-jarring shudder, a huge swath of the exterior wall split open and slid back like an eyelid. Light flooded in through a forest of stone ribs—a dim predawn glow which nonetheless half-blinded those inside. Their eyes adjusted to a world that had changed.

The spherical subterranean structure had shoved itself up out of the earth into a realm of light and air unencountered for millennia. Chunks of turf slid through the opening and cascaded into blackstone bowels. The top floor was now level with the ground, and the new window gazed out upon the steppe.

And the steppe was empty no longer.

Large blocky shapes encircled them. Were those boulders, wagons, camels? No, they were tanks. Dozens of Soviet-supplied T-34 tanks, some with Russian insignia that still hadn't been painted over. And hundreds... no, thousands of men. Men in skirmish lines stretching as far as the eye could see. Soldiers in blue and gray, with ear-flap hats and bolt-action rifles. Their collective breath rose like a mist.

The Red Army had arrived.

While the structure had nosed upward, the troops outside had reacted and reformed. A hundred yards of trampled grass extended from the window to an unblinking line of large-bore cannons. *Are they waiting on orders, or just waiting to see what we'll do?* As Hugh regained his

feet, a chill slithered down his spine.

Everett turned to Owlface. "Does this thing have the juice to deal with *that*?"

"It was *built* to deal with that." Perhaps it was a trick of the stark lateral light, but the little man's eyes seemed to darken as they had at the tavern in Yellowknife. "This was an outpost of the First Great Wall, the *memory* of which inspired those crude imitations people marvel at today. In an age primeval the land now known as China had to deal with more than mere horsemen from the plains. *This* rabble won't pose a problem. *However...*" he flipped his knife in the air and caught it by the tip, eyeing Hugh, "perhaps I should *speak* with them instead. Find out what it is they want."

"We're not in a position to *bargain*," barked Everett. "We're outnumbered and surrounded. We need to eliminate the threat *right now*!"

"My my, there's no need to get *nervous*, Mr. Larken. After all, the CCP couldn't possibly make me a better offer than your well-funded nationalists, now could they? Why work up a sweat?" He smiled blandly.

With one lunging step of his crutches, Everett went nose-to-nose with Owlface. "*You* don't get to solicit counteroffers. *You will* honor our agreement. *You will* defend the weapon until the KMT arrives. *You will* open fire upon the enemy. And you will do it *now*."

The tip of Owlface's blade flicked up to press lightly against Everett's throat and force him backward toward the console. "I liked your offer, Mr. Larken. Which is why I agreed to it. But there's an old saying for times like this: an army on the steppe is worth two in Peiping. If you'll excuse me, I have terms to negotiate."

"You will *not*! You will immediately activate this weapon and clea—"

Hugh's shoulder struck Owlface in the back and his fist knocked the knife away. The smaller man pitched forward, slamming his face onto the solid-circle button-block and punching it flush with the console. From deep within the structure a grinding belch resounded, swelled, and then subsided into a static, nearly imperceptible buzz.

Before the gaggle of henchmen could decide how to react, Hugh wrenched Owlface off the console and clenched him in a headlock. Bereft of his blades, the dainty man became as pathetic as a plucked bird. "You lot breathe wrong and I'll snap his neck!" Hugh bellowed, backing toward the stairs. "Now let go of the girl!"

They let her go and she staggered across to Hugh. She looked awful, but still had enough pluck to crack wise. "Oh, so it works when *you* do it?"

"Gotta go for the right guy, sweetheart. Like you did with me."

She snorted, then winced.

"Good advice," said Everett. "I'll take it." He stepped up to the console, leaving Hugh's line of sight. Owlface tried to croak something but Hugh flexed to flatten his windpipe. "What're you doing, you rat?" he snarled without turning.

"Hugh," said Everett, "I've always appreciated how you're able to prioritize. That's all I ask of you now. I know you're angry with me, but we can't let that decide the outcome of a war, now can we?" He surveyed the button-blocks. "It appears this weapon has three settings: bubble, blanket, and beam. Blanket would have been the default: a diffusion of Unseen Light to mildly irritate the soul and keep would-be discoverers looking elsewhere. Your father must have switched it off. How he found this place *despite* the blanket I can't begin to imagine.

"The mode you just activated produces a bubble, a shield. Currently, no one can get in or

out with soul intact. There must be a whole array of reflectors bouncing Unseen Light around the outer ring. I wouldn't step past that second layer of ribs if I were you. I bet it's only there to keep people from frying themselves.

"But a bubble won't stop bullets. We need something better. We need the beam."

"You can't be serious," cried Nora. "Hugh, stop him!" Hugh shot a confused glance over his shoulder before smashing his attention back into Owlface's goons and jerking his headlock to make them jump. "Quiet, Nora," he growled.

"No! No, I *won't* be quiet! He's gonna kill men who've done nothing to us! They're just *standing* out there and he wants to shoot them with some kind of death ray!"

"Nora, they're *commies*."

"So? Does that make it okay to *murder* them?"

Hugh was getting exasperated. "They blew up our train! In case you haven't noticed, there's a war on."

"Yes, but it's not our war!" There was a scuffling and a fleshy smack. Hugh glanced back to see Nora crumple to the floor. Everett spun from her and swung a crutch overhand to strike the leftmost button—the one engraved with a V. Hugh's shout of outrage was drowned by the grinding of immense stone gears.

"You bastard!" roared Hugh. "What've you done?"

"Save your questions for the girl, you lovesick dupe," shot back the crippled man. "She's been in league with the Reds since day one. How do you think they even found this place if they weren't led here by the spy *she* begged you to save from the train? Hell, we only met him in the first place because *she* selected our compartment! Don't you remember who led the way when we boarded? It wasn't me!"

Hugh said nothing. The grinding deepened to a rumble.

Nora half-rose with a sob, cradling her head. "What's the beam leave behind, Ev? When it punches out your soul?"

"Same thing it always leaves. A shadow."

The grinding stopped and a slow *clack clack clack* like the ticking of a cyclopean clock ran through the structure's bones. Directly ahead out the window, maybe a hundred soldiers in a twenty-foot-wide swath spasmed, dropped their weapons, and either collapsed to their knees or stood swaying in place. A vast moan arose from their throats, gaining volume like the collective dismay of a crowd that simply wouldn't be appeased. Men fled on either hand, tripping over themselves to take cover behind the nearest tanks. Distant shouts and screams punctuated the din.

And then ordnance took flight.

The first shell blew out a blackstone rib. Shrapnel spun through the chamber—big blocks revolving slowly, smaller shards peppering the walls. One of Owlface's henchmen took a chunk to his midsection and vanished through a cutout in the floor.

Everyone scattered. Owlface took advantage of Hugh's distraction to squirm free of his headlock, jab him in the groin, and dash madly for the console. Everett was busy trying to swivel the ancient weapon to the left and wipe out several thousand more men and thus wasn't ready for Owlface to knock one of his crutches away, connect an uppercut to his gut, grab his gun, and shove him off the dais. But then another salvo rocked the structure and everyone lost their footing.

Hugh was coughing in the dust-cloud and casting about for Nora when a scrimmage-line

of henchmen bore him to the floor. He slugged his way upright in time to see Everett and Owlface struggling for control of Everett's pistol just inside the first rib-ring. Detaching his adherents, Hugh barreled around the dais toward his former friend. Double-crossing rat or not, Everett didn't deserve to be done in by the likes of Owlface.

Several tanks fired at once. The rear wall disintegrated. Masonry spiraled and ricocheted. The whole chamber rang like a savaged bell. Hugh was thrown forward to skid on bloodied hands and knees. He looked up to see Everett wrench the gun away and reel back, windmilling his remaining crutch. He passed between two ribs into the first concentric ring.

One moment the man was raging, grasping, striving. The next he went slack like a cut-string puppet. The gun tumbled from his fingers to vanish through a cutout. For the barest of instants Hugh thought he saw something *rise* from Everett's body like the afterimage of a flame. And then it was gone and the floor was quaking and rocks were raining and the thing that had been Everett was staggering forward, flailing and drooling and moaning.

Its eyes rolled back in their sockets. Its head lolled at the ceiling. Its limbs bent strangely, and its stomping feet carried it away from a discarded crutch.

And then Nora was there, pulling the zombie back from the edge, propping it up with an embrace. She raised pleading eyes to its face. Its chin thumped against its chest and she met its gaze point-blank.

And then her own face changed. Alarm gave way to horror. She screamed, and fell, and scuttled away on heels and elbows.

Hugh and Owlface both leapt for the girl. Hugh lowered his shoulder to ram the other man, but this time he'd abandoned the element of surprise. Owlface twitched aside at the last instant to clip Hugh's leg with a blade, but his feet got entangled in Nora as she floundered. He toppled toward a cutout, scrabbled frantically, caught hold of Nora's blouse, and dragged her with him over the edge.

The roar of shattering stonework swallowed up her scream.

Hugh's world fell away. He reeled like soulless Everett, clenching fingers upon nothing. His throat contracted yet produced no sound. Bullets and shells zinged past and exploded, their ear-splitting cracks and booms drowned by his laboring heart. *No. God, no. Not everyone. Not in one blow.*

After long seconds he broke from paralysis and stumbled forward to stare down. Thirty feet below, a body lay splayed upon the second story.

It was the hapless henchman from earlier.

Abruptly the projectiles regained consequence. Hugh dove to put the console between himself and Owlface's surviving goons. Caught between commies and cultists, he'd take his chances with whoever was further away. The tanks were still aiming high and had reduced their rate of fire, and in the lulls between dying echoes and fresh impacts he heard Nora crying for help.

Shit! The beam's still on, and it uses the first ring to rev up, obviously. She won't have any room to maneuver.

Hugh lunged over the console to smack the beam-button so it popped back up, then ducked a torrent of bullets. Slivers and sparks spurted around blackstone edges. From deep within the structure's bowels, the clacking klaxon stopped.

"Hugh, help! I'm down here!"

The shout seemed to come from many directions at once: all the holes and hard surfaces made it impossible to pinpoint. Hugh craned his neck as far as he could without getting his head aired out. Shading his eyes against the glow from the window, he peered through the surrounding cutouts. *There.* Movement between ribs on the far right. A slender figure in a felt hat, flitting from shadow to shadow.

But where was her pursuer?

Hugh swiveled. Through a different cutout, beyond Everett's body where it had fallen to its knees to wave its arms like an anemone, he could just make out a small shadow protruding from a big rib. A gunman—or knifeman—covering the stairwell's exit. An owl perched in silence, waiting for a mouse.

"Hugh! Where are you? Help!"

Doubt crushed Hugh like falling rock. What if Everett had been right? Nora *had* been first onto that train. She *had* made damn sure that spy survived. And just now she'd begged Everett to spare a commie army. Could Hugh really be certain she wasn't luring him to his death? After all, he *was* the last living obstacle to commie control of this ancient Chinese superweapon.

"Where are you, Hugh?"

He didn't answer. Something else had snagged his eye, something on the second story's far side. The door. The back door he'd bloodied himself against. The portal his father had bookmarked.

It was open. The blank slab had vanished and a tunnel led away through the rock. The risen chamber had lined it up.

He could get out. He could find his father. All he had to do was turn his back on Nora, run to the far wall, drop between levels, and leave. He could even change the locks behind him for good measure. *Easy. Like taking coinage from a corpse.*

A tank shell severed another rib, and in the ear-ringing aftershock Nora's voice had changed. "Hugh, if you're still alive... if you can hear this... just forget about me." She was quieter now and Hugh had to strain to hear, to parse the tremulous echoes. "I finally figured it out. Your father's message. He left you a message, you know. Son. Shadow. Escape. Grow.

"I was wrong. I said he wanted you to open that door, but he didn't. He wanted you to leave. To get out of his shadow. Build a life of your own. If you ever came this far, he was telling you to turn back.

"So turn back. And leave me. Make a life for yourself. A real life."

The double impact of Nora's plea alongside that of his father drove the doubt from Hugh's heart. He sagged as though struck by Unseen Light, gasping from psychic whiplash as one fear replaced another. With Nora's loyalty no longer in question, her plight once again became very much his concern. But without a gun, he had to choose between retrieving her or following his father. And the mouth of the door which had beckoned was now urging him to flee.

Hugh swallowed and gave it a curt nod. *Maybe you did care after all, even if it was too late for us.*

But it's not too late for me.

Launching himself from behind the console, he snatched the lantern and lobbed it through a cutout between the two opponents below. The henchmen again opened fire, but in the interim they'd retreated to the newly-blocked front door and were even less accurate than before. Hugh

skidded back behind cover.

“Nora!” he shouted. “You remember that night in the canyon?”

“Hugh! Oh *please* just go! Your father meant every *word* of that song! He wanted you to live your *own* life. He’d *hate* it if you threw it away just to track him down.”

“No, Nora listen!” *Dammit, not even immanent death can focus her mind.* “Do you remember the *campfire* in the canyon?”

Silence. The tanks had stopped firing. That meant troops were moving in.

“Nora!”

“Y-yes, I remember.”

“Good. On the count of three, run the play. One.”

Hugh popped up again and slammed the console’s solid-circle button.

“Two!”

He sprinted for the nearest cutout as huge gears engaged below and bullets hammered stone.

“Three!”

Tackling Everett’s soulless body, Hugh carried it over the edge. Thirty feet felt like a long time to fall. “Rest in peace, you rat,” he whispered before the second story extinguished the zombie’s misery. Hugh staggered upright, the form of his former friend having absorbed the impact.

Before him lay the lantern. It’d landed on one side but its wick was soaked so it kept burning and throwing out shadows. And Nora’s loomed huge upon the far wall, cast by something else entirely: the little crystal he’d lent her outside.

Owlface stood within that blackened silhouette. His back brushed the enclosing stones and his gun twitched to and fro, searching for a phantom. He hadn’t thought to look beyond the light.

Nora stepped up beside Hugh. Tilting her hat fully off her head, she went up on her toes to kiss him. He lifted her by the waist.

“Take the complement, Owlface,” said Hugh. “This is me admitting you’ve got a soul.”

As Owlface whirled, Hugh stepped off the nearest cutout and dropped another thirty feet to the bottom floor.

Nora screamed. The grinding rose to a crescendo.

They landed and Hugh felt pain but couldn’t afford to think about it. He dragged Nora into the stairwell and down the final flight to the drain plug.

The grinding ended in a static, nearly imperceptible buzz. The weapon was now bubbled—secure from looters without and within, including all those in the outer ring. No cries rose over the blood-thunder in Hugh’s ears, for fear and its expression were radiations of the soul.

Hugh Conrad spun the dials and heaved open the trapdoor. Accepting Nora’s support, he limped into shadow and out of shadow.