

The Ice Thief (Summary)

In an ice-bound realm, the crew of an ill-fated ship struggles to stay alive, and a reluctant leader discovers his humanity.

Siberia, 1919. As the Revolution rages, the navigator ALBANOV meets with the counter-revolutionary Admiral Kolchak, who currently holds the reigns of power. Albanov needs help in organizing an expedition to look for the crew of the *Pandora*. Kolchak declines to help and his guards spirit him away just before an assassin's bomb explodes. In Moscow, a man named KONRAD learns that the Arctic hero Albanov has died. Asked if he is the same Konrad who sailed with Albanov on the *Pandora*, Konrad says no. Later he burns all of his mementoes of that fateful journey.

St. Petersburg, 1912. Russia is caught up in the worldwide craze for Arctic exploration. Captain BRUSILOV recruits men for an expedition. The starry-eyed captain clashes with Albanov, his stern navigator, who is dismayed that Brusilov has picked such unqualified men, one of whom is the farm-boy Konrad. The *Pandora* sets sail with all the odds stacked against her: bad captain, bad crew, bad timing. A thief on board makes off with the passengers' trinkets. In the last port, all the officers and half the crew abandon ship. Brusilov recruits from among the shady characters hanging around the port. The passenger Nurse ZHDANKO decides to stay and take the doctor's place. She and Brusilov become lovers even as she discovers a soul-mate in Albanov. Brusilov ignores Albanov's advice and misses his chance to winter over on a peninsula. He insists they forge ahead even as the ice piles up on all sides. Soon the *Pandora* is trapped and begins to drift north with the ice pack. Brusilov is certain that the ice will melt come summer.

After a year and a half, the *Pandora* is still trapped. Cold, illness, and hunger prevail, and the moving ice bashes the sides of the ship. Albanov organizes the attempts to dig out the ship while Brusilov lies ill. Brusilov recovers his health but not his sanity. He has a sailor, Lunayev, execute a fellow sailor for stealing food. Albanov decides to leave and head south for Franz Josef Land. He begins to build a kayak and sledge. Half the crew wants to follow him. Half would rather stay with Brusilov, who insists the ship will drift west and finally break free. Albanov asks Zhdanko to come with him, but she decides to stay with the captain. On the ice, Albanov

becomes the reluctant leader of thirteen men. He is beset by fantastic visions and pines away for Zhdanko. The journey is painful and difficult. The men are starving and snow-blind. One of them disappears on a scouting mission. Albanov's strict leadership style angers Konrad, who leads a rebellion with his best friend, the poet SHPAKOVSKY. Albanov sees land in the distance. Someone steals biscuits from the common supply, and Albanov vows to execute the thief. Konrad falls through the ice and nearly drowns. He decides to make a run for land. He steals the team's best equipment and sneaks away with Shpakovsky while the others sleep. The others awaken to find they have been robbed and left for dead. The loss of manpower means they must leave one of the kayaks. They are now driven forward by the thirst for revenge. Albanov's confidant Nilsen dies before his very eyes. Albanov leads his men to land. They find Konrad and call for justice. Albanov is about to execute Konrad, but he takes pity on him. He puts him to a terrifying test, but spares his (and Shpakovsky's) life.

Cape Flora, with a camp, provisions, and (they hope) people, is within reach. The men draw lots to see who will kayak there, and who will ski along the edge of a glacier. One by one, the men die. One lies down on an ice floe and drifts away. The skiers disappear. Only Albanov, Lunayev, and the two mutineers remain. As they paddle toward Cape Flora, a storm sweeps Lunayev and Shpakovsky into the sea. Albanov and Konrad ride out the storm atop an iceberg. They huddle in a double sleeping bag and nearly drown when the iceberg breaks in two, plunging them into the sea. They reach Cape Flora and find huts. Konrad nurses the now-frail Albanov back to health. They make peace with one another. Konrad prepares for the long winter. Albanov is haunted by visions. Is he descending into madness, like Brusilov? Konrad takes the kayak to look for the missing men. He returns to find their cabin in ruins, thieves of some sort carrying off scraps of wood. Then it hits him: a ship has come, looking for wood to fire its engine. They are saved!

Back in Russia, Albanov is hailed as a hero. He marries and has a child. He becomes consumed with trying to find the *Pandora*. Konrad, on the lookout for the next good gig, becomes a Bolshevik. What will his new comrades do to him, though, if they find out how he once sabotaged his collective? He changes his name and casts off his old identity. Albanov writes a book about his Arctic ordeal, but he does not name the man who betrayed him.