

The man sat up with a gasp.

He was alone in the forest.

The dream had woken him again.

He pulled aside the old horse blanket. Its cloth was wet with dew.

Climbing stiffly to his feet, he squinted through the morning mist and beams of sunlight angling between the trees. He rolled the blanket and tied the ends together with a piece of rawhide. Then he slipped the roll over his head so that it draped across his chest and back. From his pocket he removed a withered shred of smoked deer meat and ate it slowly, pausing to take in sounds of mice scuffling under the carpet of dead leaves, of birds scolding from the branches above him, and of wind rustling through the tops of the pines.

The man was tall and broad-shouldered, with a straight nose and strong white teeth. His eyes were greenish brown, the irises marked by a strange silvery quality, which people noticed only when he was looking directly at them. Streaks of premature gray ran through his long, dark hair, and his beard grew thickly over wind burned cheeks.

The man no longer had a name. Now he was known only as Prisoner 4745-P of the Borodok Labor Camp.

Soon he was moving again, passing through a grove of pine trees on gently sloping ground which led down to a stream. He walked with the help of a large stick, whose gnarled root head bristled with square-topped horseshoe nails. The only other thing he carried was a bucket of red paint. With this, he marked trees to be cut by inmates of the camp, whose function was the harvesting of timber from the forest of Krasnagolyana. Instead of using a brush, the man stirred his fingers in the scarlet paint and daubed his print upon the trunks. These marks were, for most of the other convicts, the only trace of him they ever saw.

The average life of a tree-marker in the forest of Krasnagolyana was six months. Working alone, with no chance of escape and far from any human contact, these men died from exposure, starvation, and loneliness. Those who became lost, or who fell and broke a leg, were usually eaten by wolves. Tree marking was the only assignment at Borodok said to be worse than a death sentence.

Now in his ninth year of a thirty-year sentence for Crimes against the

State, Prisoner 4745-P had lasted longer than any other marker in the entire Gulag system. Soon after he arrived at Borodok, the director of the camp had sent him into the woods, fearing that other inmates might learn his true identity.

Provisions were left for him three times a year at the end of a logging road. Kerosene. Cans of meat. Nails. For the rest, he had to fend for himself. Only rarely was he seen by those logging crews who came to cut the timber. What they observed was a creature barely recognizable as a man. With the crust of red paint that covered his prison clothes and the long hair maned about his face, he resembled a beast stripped of its flesh and left to die which had somehow managed to survive. Wild rumors surrounded him—that he was an eater of human flesh, that he wore a breastplate made from the bones of those who had vanished in the forest, that he wore scalps laced together as a cap.

They called him the man with bloody hands. No one except the commandant of Borodok knew where this prisoner had come from or who he had been before he arrived.

Those same men who feared to cross his path had no idea this was Pekkala, whose name they'd once invoked just as their ancestors had called upon the gods.

He waded across the stream, climbing from the cold and waist-deep water, and disappeared into a stand of white birch trees which grew upon the other bank. Hidden among these, half buried in the ground, stood a cabin of the type known as a Zemlyanka. Pekkala had built it with his own hands. Inside it he endured the Siberian winters, the worst of which was not cold but a silence so complete it seemed to have a sound of its own--a hissing, rushing noise--like that of the planet hurtling through space.

Now, as Pekkala approached the cabin, he paused and sniffed the air. Something in his instincts trembled. He stood very still, like a heron poised above the water, bare feet sinking in the mossy ground.

The breath caught in his throat.

A man was sitting on a tree stump at the corner of the clearing. The man had his back to Pekkala. He wore an olive brown military uniform, tall black boots reaching to his knee. This was no ordinary soldier. The cloth of his tunic had the smooth luster of gabardine, not the rough blanket material worn by men from the local garrison who sometimes ventured as far as the trailhead on patrol but never came this deep into the woods.

He did not appear to be lost. Nor was he armed with any weapon Pekkala could see. The only thing he had brought with him was a briefcase. It was of good quality, with polished brass fittings which looked insanely out of place here in the forest. The man seemed to be waiting.

For the next few hours, while the sun climbed above the trees and the smell of heated pine sap drifted on the air, Pekkala studied the stranger, taking note of the angle at which he held his head, how he crossed and uncrossed his legs, the way he cleared the pollen dust from his throat. Once, the stranger launched himself to his feet and walked around the clearing, swatting frantically at swarming mosquitoes. As he turned, Pekkala saw the rosy cheeks of a young man barely out of his teens. He was slightly built, with thin calves and delicate hands.

Pekkala could not help comparing them to his own callused palms, the skin on his knuckles crusted and cracked, and to his legs, which bulged with muscles, as if snakes had coiled around his bones.

Pekkala could make out a red star sewn onto each forearm of the man's gymnastyrka tunic, which draped in peasant fashion like an untucked shirt halfway down the man's thighs. From those red stars, Pekkala knew the man had reached the rank of Commissar, a political officer of the Red Army.

All day, the Commissar waited in that clearing, tormented by insects, until the last faint light of day was gone. In the twilight, the man brought out a long-stemmed pipe and stuffed it with tobacco from a pouch which he kept around his neck. He lit it with a brass lighter and puffed away contentedly, keeping the mosquitoes at bay.

Slowly, Pekkala breathed in. The musky odor of tobacco flooded his senses. He observed how the young man often removed the pipe from his mouth and studied it, and the way he clamped the stem between his teeth--which made a tiny clicking sound, like a key turned in a lock.

He has not owned the pipe for long, Pekkala told himself. He has chosen a pipe over cigarettes because he thinks it makes him look older.

Now and then, the Commissar glanced at the red stars on his forearms, as if their presence caught him by surprise, and Pekkala knew this young man had only just received his commission.

But the more he learned about the man, the less he could fathom what the Commissar was doing here in the forest. He could not help a grudging

admiration for this man, who did not trespass inside the cabin, choosing instead to remain on that hard seat of the tree stump.

When night fell, Pekkala brought his hands to his mouth and breathed warm air into the hollows of his palms. He drifted off, leaning against a tree, then woke with a start to find that the mist was all around him, smelling of dead leaves and earth, circling like a curious and predatory animal.

Glancing towards the cabin, he saw the Commissar had not moved. He sat with his arms folded, chin resting on his chest. The quiet snuffle of his snoring echoed around the clearing.

He'll be gone in the morning, thought Pekkala. Pulling up the frayed collar of his coat, he closed his eyes again. But when morning came, Pekkala was amazed to find the Commissar still there. He had fallen off his tree stump seat and lay on his back, one leg still resting on the stump, like some statue set in a victorious pose which had toppled from its pedestal.

Eventually, the Commissar snorted and sat up, looking around as if he could not remember where he was.

Now, thought Pekkala, this man will come to his senses and leave me alone.

The Commissar stood, set his hands on the small of his back, and winced. A groan escaped his lips. Then suddenly he turned and looked straight at the place where Pekkala was hiding. "Are you ever going to come out from there?" he demanded.

The words stung Pekkala like sand thrown in his face. Now, reluctantly, he stepped out from the shelter of the tree, leaning on the nail-topped stick. "What do you want?" He spoke so rarely that his own voice sounded strange to him.

The Commissar's face showed red welts where the mosquitoes had feasted on him. "You are to come with me," he said.

"Why?" asked Pekkala.

"Because, when you have listened to what I have to say, you will want to." "You are optimistic, Commissar."

"The people who sent me to fetch you--"

"Who sent you?"

"You will know them soon enough."

"And did they tell you who I am, these people?"

The young Commissar shrugged. "All I know is that your name is Pekkala and that your skills, whatever they might be, are now required elsewhere." He looked around the gloomy clearing. "I would have thought you'd jump at a chance to leave this godforsaken place."

"You are the ones who have forsaken God."

The Commissar smiled. "They said you were a difficult man."

"They seem to know me," replied Pekkala, "whoever they are."

"They also told me," continued the Commissar, "that if I came into these woods armed with a gun, you would probably kill me before I even set eyes on you." The Commissar raised his empty hands. "As you see, I took their advice." Pekkala stepped into the clearing. In the patched rags of his clothes, he loomed like a prehistoric giant above the tidy Commissar. He became aware, for the first time in years, of the rank smell of his own unwashed body. "What is your name?" asked Pekkala.

"Kirov." The young man straightened his back. "Lieutenant Kirov."

"And how long have you been a Lieutenant?"

"One month and two days." Then he added in a quieter voice, "Including today."

"And how old are you?" asked Pekkala.

"Almost twenty."

"You must have annoyed someone very much, Lieutenant Kirov, to have been given the job of coming to find me." The Commissar scratched at his bug bites. "I imagine you've annoyed a few yourself to have ended up in Siberia." "All right, Lieutenant Kirov," said Pekkala. "You have delivered your message. Now you can go back where you came from and leave me alone."

"I was told to give you this." Kirov lifted up the briefcase from beside the

tree stump.

"What's in it?"

"I have no idea."

Pekkala took hold of the leather-wrapped handle. It was heavier than he expected. Holding the briefcase, he resembled a cross between a scarecrow and a businessman waiting for a train.

The young Commissar turned to leave. "You have until the sun goes down tomorrow. A car will be waiting for you at the trailhead."

Pekkala watched as Kirov went back the way he had come. For a long time, the snapping of small branches marked his passage through the forest. At last the sound faded away and Pekkala found himself alone again.

Carrying the briefcase, he walked into his cabin. He sat down on the pine needle-filled sacks which served as his bed and placed the briefcase on his knees. The contents slumped heavily inside. With the edges of his thumbs, Pekkala released the brass latches at each end.

When he lifted the lid, a musty smell wafted up into his face.

Inside the case lay a thick leather belt, wrapped around a dark brown holster which contained a revolver. Unwrapping the belt from around the holster, he lifted out the gun--an English-made Webley revolver. It was a standard military issue except for the fact that its handle was made of brass instead of wood.

Pekkala held the gun at arm's length, staring down the sights. Its blued metal glowed in the dim light of the cabin. In one corner of the case lay a cardboard box of bullets with English writing on it. He tore open the frayed paper packaging and loaded the Webley, breaking the gun so that its barrel folded forward on a hinge, exposing the six bullet chambers. The bullets were old, like the gun itself, and Pekkala wiped off the ammunition before he placed it in the cylinders.

He also found a tattered book. On its crumpled spine was a single word--Kalevala.

Setting these items aside, Pekkala spotted one more thing inside the briefcase. It was a small cotton bag held shut by a leather drawstring. He loosened the top and emptied out the bag.

He breathed out sharply when he saw what was inside.

Lying before him was a heavy gold disk, as wide across as the length of his little finger. Across the center was a stripe of white enamel inlay, which began at a point, widened until it took up half the disk, and narrowed again to a point on the other side. Embedded in the middle of the white enamel was a large round emerald. Together, the white enamel, the gold, and the emerald formed the unmistakable shape of an eye. Pekkala traced a fingertip over the disk, feeling the smooth bump of the jewel, like a blind man reading Braille.

Now Pekkala knew who had sent for him and that it was a summons he could not refuse. He had never expected to see these things again. Until that moment, he had thought they belonged to a world which no longer existed.