

SAM EASTLAND

THE RED COFFIN

**INSPECTOR PEKKALA
THE EMERALD EYE
BOOK TWO**

As the motorcycle crested the hill, sunlight winked off the goggles of the rider. Against the chill of early spring, he wore a double-breasted leather coat and a leather flying cap which buckled under his chin.

He had been on the road for three days, stopping only to buy fuel along the way. His saddlebags were filled with tins of food he'd brought from home.

At night, he did not stay in any town, but wheeled his motorcycle in amongst the trees. It was a new machine, a Zundapp K500, with a pressed steel frame and girder forks. Normally he could never have afforded it, but this trip alone would pay for everything, and more besides. He thought about that as he sat there alone in the woods, eating cold soup from a can.

Before camouflaging the motorcycle with fallen branches, he wiped the dust from its sprung leather seat and the large teardrop-shaped fuel tank. He spat on every scratch he found and rubbed them with his sleeve.

The man slept on the ground, wrapped in an oil cloth sheet, without the comfort of a fire or even a cigarette. The smell of smoke might have given away his location, and he could not afford to take the risk.

Sometimes, he was woken by the rumble of Polish army trucks passing by on the road. None of them stopped. Once he heard a crashing in among the trees. He drew a revolver from his coat and sat up, just as a stag passed a few paces away, barely visible, as if the shadows themselves had come to life. For the rest of the night, the man did not sleep. Tormented by childhood nightmares of human shapes with antlers sprouting from their heads, he wanted only to be gone from this country. Ever since he crossed the German border into Poland, he had been afraid,

although no one who saw him would ever have realized it. This was not the first time he had been on such a journey, and the man knew from experience that his fear would not leave him until he was back among his own people again.

On the third day, he crossed into the Soviet Union at a lonely border check point manned by one Polish soldier and one Russian soldier, neither of whom could speak each other's language. Both men came out to admire his motorcycle. "Zundapp," they crooned softly, as if saying the name of a loved one and the man gritted his teeth while they ran their hands over the chrome.

A few minutes after leaving the checkpoint, he pulled over to the side of the road and raised the goggles to his forehead, revealing two pale moons of skin where the road dust had not settled on his face. Shielding his eyes with one hand, he looked out over the rolling countryside. The fields were ploughed and muddy, seeds of rye and barley still sleeping in the ground. Thin feathers of smoke rose from the chimneys of solitary farm houses, their slate roofs patched with luminous green moss.

The man wondered what the inhabitants of those houses might do if they knew their way of life would soon ending. Even if they did know, he told himself, they would probably just carry on as they had always done, placing their faith in miracles. That, he thought, is precisely why they deserve to be extinct. The task he had come here to accomplish would bring that moment closer. After today, there would be nothing they could do to stop it. Then he wiped the fingerprints of the border guards off his handlebars and continued on his way.

He was close to the rendezvous point, racing along deserted roads, through patches of mist which clung to the hollows like ink diffusing in

water. The words of half remembered songs escaped his lips. Otherwise he did not speak, as if he were alone upon the earth. Driving out across that empty countryside, that was how he felt himself to be.

At last he came to the place he had been looking for. It was an abandoned farm house, roof sagging like the back of an old horse. Turning off the road, he drove the Zundapp through an opening in the stone wall which ringed the farm yard. Overgrown trees ringed the farmhouse, their thick trunks sheathed with ivy. A flock of crows scattered from their branches, their ghostly shapes reflected in the puddles of the farmyard.

When he cut the engine, silence descended upon him. Removing his gauntlets, he scratched at the dried mud which had splattered on his chin. It flaked away like scabs, revealing a week's growth of stubble beneath.

Shutters hung loose and rotten on the windows of the farmhouse. The door had been kicked in and lay flat on the floor inside the house. Dandelions grew between cracks in the floorboards.

He set the Zundapp on its kick stand, drew his gun and stepped cautiously into the house. Holding the revolver down by his side, he trod across the creaking floorboards, gray light filtering through the slits between the shutters. In the fire place, a pair of dragon-headed andirons scowled at him as he walked by.

"There you are," said a voice.

The Zundapp rider flinched, but he did not raise the gun. He stood still, scanning the shadows. Then he spotted a man, sitting at a table in the next room, which had once been a kitchen. The stranger smiled, raised one hand and moved it slowly back and forth. "Nice motorcycle," he said.

The rider put away his gun and stepped into the kitchen.

“Right on time,” said the man. Set on the table in front of him was a Tokarev automatic pistol, two small metal cups, each one not bigger than an eggshell. Beside the cups stood an unopened bottle of Georgian Ustashi vodka, a blue-green color from the steppe grass used to flavor it. The man had placed a second chair on the other side of the table, so that the rider would have a place to sit. “How was your trip?” asked the man.

“Do you have it?” said the rider.

“Of course.” The man reached into his coat and pulled out a bundle of documents which had been rolled up like a newspaper. He let them fall with a slap onto the table, raising a tiny cloud of dust from the dirty wooden surface.

“That’s everything?” asked the rider.

The man patted the bundle reassuringly. “Full operational schematics for the entire Konstantin Project.”

The rider put one foot on the chair and rolled up his trouser leg. Taped to his calf was a leather envelope. The man removed the tape, swearing quietly as it tore away the hair on his leg. Then he removed a stack of money from the envelope and laid it on the table. “Count it,” said the Zundapp rider.

Obligingly, the man counted the money, walking the tips his fingers through the bills.

Somewhere above them, in the rafters of the house, starlings trilled and clicked their beaks.

When the man had finished counting, he filled the two small cups with Vodka and lifted one of them. “On behalf of the White Guild, I would like to thank you. A toast to the Guild and to the downfall of Communism!”

The man did not reach for his cup. “Are we finished here?” he asked.

“Yes!” The man knocked back his vodka, then reached for the second cup, raised it in salute and drank that too. “I think we are finished.”

The rider reached across and picked up the documents. As he tucked the bundle into the inside pocket of his coat, he paused to look around the room. He studied in the canopies of spider webs, the puckered wallpaper and the cracks which had wandered jerkily across the ceiling like the growth lines on a skull. You will be home soon, he thought to himself. Then you can forget this ever happened.

“Would you care for a smoke?” asked the man. He laid a cigarette case on the table and set a brass lighter on top.

He stared at the stranger, almost as if he knew him from someplace before but could not remember where. “I should be going,” said the rider.

“Maybe next time,” smiled the man.

The rider turned away and started walking back towards his motorcycle.

He had gone only three paces when the man snatched up his Tokarev pistol, squinted down the line of his outstretched arm and, without getting up from the table, shot the rider in the back of the head. The bullet tore through the rider’s skull and a piece of his forehead skittered away across the floor. He dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Now the man rose to his feet. He came out from behind the table and rolled the corpse over with his boot. The rider’s arm swung out and his knuckles struck against the floor. The man bent down and removed the documents from the rider’s pocket.

“You’ll drink now, you fascist son of a bitch,” he said. Then he took the bottle of vodka and emptied it out over the rider, soaking his head and

shoulders and pouring a stream along the length of his legs. When the bottle was empty, he threw it away across the room. The heavy glass slammed against a rotten wall but did not break.

The man stashed the money and the documents in his pocket. Then he gathered up his gun, his little cups and his box of cigarettes. On his way out of the house, he spun the metal wheel of his lighter and when the fire jumped up from the wick, he dropped the lighter on top of the dead man. The alcohol burst into flames with a sound like a curtain billowing in the wind.

The man walked out into the farmyard and stood before the motorcycle, trailing his fingers over the Zundapp name emblazoned on the fuel tank. Then he straddled motorcycle and lifted the helmet and goggles from the place where they hung on the handlebars. He put on the helmet and settled the goggles over his eyes. The heat of the dead man's body was still in the leather eye pads. Kick-starting the motorcycle, he drove out onto the road and the Zundapp snarled as he shifted through the gears.

Behind him, already in the distance, a mushroom cloud of smoke rose from the blazing ruins of the farmhouse.

Officially, the Borodino restaurant, located in a quiet street just off the Bolotnia Square in Moscow, was open to the public. Unofficially, the owner and head waiter, a gaunt-faced man named Chicherin, would size up whoever came through the front door, its frosted glass panes decorated with a pattern of ivy leaves. Then Chicherin would either offer them a table or would direct the patrons down a narrow unlit corridor to what they assumed was a second dining room on the other side of the door. This would take them directly into an alley at the side of the restaurant. By the

time they realized what had happened, the door would automatically have locked behind them. If the patrons still refused to take the hint and chose to come back into the restaurant, they would be confronted by the bartender, a former Greek wrestler named Niarchos, and ejected from the premises.

On a dreary afternoon in March, with clumps of dirty snow still clinging to the sunless corners of the city, a young man in a military uniform entered the restaurant. He was tall, with a narrow face, rosy cheeks and a look of permanent curiosity. His smartly tailored gymnastyrka tunic fitted closely to his shoulders and his waist. He wore blue dress trousers with a red line of piping down the outside and knee-length black boots which glowed with a fresh coat of polish.

Chicherin scanned the uniform for any sign of elevated rank. Anything below the rank of captain was enough to qualify a soldier for a trip down the corridor to what Chicherin called The Enchanted Grotto. Not only did this young man have no rank, he was not even wearing any insignia to denote his branch of service.

Chicherin was disgusted, but he smiled and said, "Good day," lowering his head slightly but not taking his eyes off the young man.

"Good day to you," came the reply. The man looked around at the full tables, admiring the plates of food. "Ah," he sighed. "Shashlik." He gestured towards a plate of fluffy white rice, on which a waiter was placing cubes of roast lamb, onions and green peppers, carefully sliding them from the skewer on which they had been grilled. "Has the lamb been soaked in red wine," he sniffed at the steam which drifted past his face, "or is it pomegranate juice?"

Chicherin narrowed his eyes. "Are you looking for a table?"

The young man did not seem to hear. "And there," he pointed.
"Salmon with dill and horseradish sauce."

"Yes, that's right," Chicherin took him gently by the arm and steered him down the corridor. "This way, please."

"Down there?" the young man squinted into the dark tunnel of the corridor.

"Yes, yes," Chicherin reassured him. "The Enchanted Grotto."

Obediently, the young man disappeared into the alley.

A moment later, Chicherin heard the reassuring clunk of the metal door locking shut. Then came the helpless rattle of the door knob as the young man tried to get back in.

Usually, people took the hint, and Chicherin never saw them again. This time, however, when the young man reappeared less than a minute later, still smiling innocently, Chicherin nodded to Niarchos.

Niarchos was smearing a grubby-looking rag inside glasses used for serving tea. When Niarchos caught Chicherin's eye, he raised his head with a short, abrupt movement, like a horse trying to shake off its bridle. Then, very carefully, he set down the glass he had been polishing and came out from behind the bar.

"There seems to be some kind of mistake," said the young man. "My name is Kirov, and..."

"You should go," Niarchos interrupted. He resented having to come out from behind the bar, and lose the pleasant flow of daydreams as he mindlessly polished the glasses.

"I think..." Kirov attempted once more to explain.

"Yes, yes," hissed Chicherin, appearing suddenly beside him, the smile having evaporated from his face. "Some kind of mistake, you say. But

the only mistake is your coming in here. Can't you see that this is not the place for you?" He glanced out over the tables, populated mostly by jowly, red faced men with grizzled gray hair. Some wore olive brown gabardine tunics bearing the ranks of senior commissars. Others had civilian clothes, of European cut and good quality wool, so finely woven that it seemed to shimmer beneath the orchid-shaped light fixtures. Sitting among these officers and politicians were beautiful but bored-looking women, sipping smoke from cork-tipped cigarettes. "Listen," said Chicherin, "even if you could get a table here, you doubt you could afford the meal."

"But I have not come to eat," protested Kirov. "Besides, I do my own cooking, and it looks to me as if your chef relies too heavily on his sauces."

Chicherin's forehead crumpled in confusion. "So you are looking for a job?"

"No," replied the young man. "I am looking for Colonel Nagorski."

Chicherin's eyes widened. He glanced towards a table in the corner of the room where two men were eating lunch. Both of the men wore suits. One was shaved bald, and the great dome of his head looked like a sphere of pink granite resting on the starched white pedestal of his shirt collar. The other man had thick black hair combed straight back on his head. The sharp angle of his cheek bones was off set by a slightly pointed beard cut close against his chin. This made him look as if his face had been stretched over an inverted triangle of wood, and so tightly that even the slightest expression might tear the flesh from his bones.

"You want Colonel Nagorski?" asked Chicherin. He nodded towards the man with the thick black hair. "Well, there he is, but..."

"Thank you," Kirov took one step towards the table.

Chicherin took hold of his arm. "Listen my young friend, do yourself a favor and go home. Whoever sent you on this errand is just trying to get you killed. Do you have any idea what you are doing? Or who you are dealing with? "

Patiently, Kirov reached inside his jacket and removed a telegram, the fragile yellow paper banded with a line of red across the top, indicating that it had come from an office of the government. "You should take a look at this."

Chicherin snatched the telegram from his hand.

All this time, the bartender Niarchos had been looming over the young man, his dark eyes narrowed into slits. But now, at the sight of this telegram, which looked to him so frail that it might at any moment evaporate into smoke, Niarchos began to grow nervous.

By now, Chicherin had finished reading the telegram.

"I need that back," said the young man.

Chicherin did not reply. He continued to stare at the telegram, as if expecting more words to materialize.

Kirov slipped the flimsy paper from between Chicherin's fingers and set off across the dining room.

This time, Chicherin did nothing to stop him.

Niarchos stepped out of the way, his huge body swinging to the side as if he were on some kind of hinge.

On his way to the table of Colonel Nagorski, Kirov paused to stare at various meals, breathing in the smells and sighing with contentment or making soft grunts of disapproval at the heavy-handed use of cream and parsley. Arriving at last beside Nagorski's table, the young man cleared his throat.

Nagorski looked up. The skin stretched over his cheekbones looked like polished wax. "More pancakes for the blinis!" he slapped his hand down on the table.

"Comrade Nagorski," said Kirov.

Nagorski had turned back to his meal, but at the mention of his name he froze. "How do you know my name?" he asked quietly.

"Your presence is required, Comrade Nagorski."

Nagorski glanced towards the bar, hoping to catch the eye of Niarchos. But Niarchos's attention seemed completely focussed on polishing tea glasses. Now Nagorski looked around for Chicherin, but the manager was nowhere to be seen. Finally, he turned to the young man. "Exactly where is my presence required?" he asked

"That will be explained on the way," said Kirov

Nagorski's companion sat with arms folded, gaze fixed, his thoughts unreadable.

Kirov couldn't help noticing that although Nagorski's plate was loaded down with food, the only thing set in front of the bald giant was a small salad made of pickled cabbages and beets.

"What makes you think," began Nagorski, "that I am just going to get up and walk out of here with you?"

"If you don't come willingly, Comrade Nagorski, I have orders to arrest you." He held out the telegram.

Nagorski brushed the piece of paper aside. "Arrest me?" he shouted.

A sudden silence descended upon the restaurant.

Nagorski dabbed a napkin against his thin lips. Then he threw the cloth down on top of his food and stood up.

By now, all eyes had turned to the table in the corner.

Nagorski smiled broadly, but his eyes remained cold and hostile. Digging one hand into the pockets of his coat, he withdrew a small automatic pistol.

A gasp went up from the nearby tables. Knives and forks clattered onto plates.

Kirov blinked at the gun.

“You look a little jumpy,” smiled Nagorski. Then he turned the weapon in his palm so that the butt was facing outwards and handed it to other man at the table.

His companion reached out and took it.

“Take good care of that,” said Nagorski. “I’ll be wanting it back very soon.”

“Yes, Colonel,” replied the man. He set the gun beside his plate, as if it were another piece of cutlery.

Now Nagorski slapped the young man on the back. “Let’s see what this is all about, shall we?”

Kirov almost lost his balance from the jolt of Nagorski's palm. “A car is waiting.”

“Good!” Nagorski announced in a loud voice. “Why walk when we can ride?” He laughed and looked around.

Faint smiles passed across the faces of the other customers.

The two men made their way outside.

As Nagorski walked by the kitchen, he saw Chicherin’s face framed in the little round window of the double swinging doors.

Outside the Borodino, sleet lay like frog spawn on the pavement.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Nagorski grabbed the young man by his collar and threw him up against the brick wall of the restaurant.

The young man did not resist. He looked as if he'd been expecting this.

"Nobody disturbs me when I am eating!" growled Nagorski, lifting the young man up onto the tips of his toes. "Nobody survives that kind of stupidity!"

Kirov nodded towards a black car, its engine running, pulled up at the curbside. "He is waiting, Comrade Nagorski."

Nagorski glanced over his shoulder. He noticed the shape of someone sitting in the back seat. He could not make out a face. Then turned back to face the young man. "Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Kirov. Major Kirov."

"Major?" Nagorski let go of him suddenly. "Why didn't you say so? Now he stood back and brushed at Kirov's crumpled lapel. "We might have avoided this unpleasantness." He strode across to the car and climbed into the rear seat.

Major Kirov got in behind the wheel.

Nagorski settled back into his seat. Only then did he look at the person sitting beside him. "You!" he shouted.

"Good afternoon," said Pekkala.

"Oh, shit," replied Colonel Nagorski.