

Pekkala Book 3

TREMBLING FIRE

SAM EASTLAND

**BORODOK LABOR CAMP
VALLEY OF KRASNAGOLYANA
SIBERIA
SEPTEMBER 1939**

In a cave, deep underground, lit by the greasy flame of a kerosene lamp, the man knelt in a puddle, his empty hands held out as if to catch drops of water which fell through the cracks in the ceiling. He was badly wounded, with deep cuts across his chest and arms. The home-made knife with which he had attempted to defend himself lay out of reach behind him. Head bowed, he stared with a look of confusion at his own reflection in the puddle, like a man who no longer recognized himself.

Before him stood the shadow of the killer who had brought him to this place. "I came here to offer you a reason to go on living," he said, "and this is how you repay me?"

With fumbling and blood-smeared fingers, the man undid the button on his shirt pocket. He pulled out a crumpled photograph of a group of soldiers on horseback, dense forest in the background. The men leaned forward in their saddles, grinning at the camera. "They are my reason for living."

"And now they will be your reason for dying." Slowly, the way people sometimes move in dreams, the killer stepped behind the man. With movements almost gentle, he grasped the man by his short and dirty hair, pulling his head back so that the tendons stood out in his neck. Then he drew a knife from the folds of his clothing, cut the man's throat and held him like a lover while his heart bled dry.

"Pokryshkin!" The voice of Joseph Stalin exploded through the wall.

In the adjoining room, Stalin's secretary sprang to his feet. Pokryshkin was a short, round-faced man, bald except for a fringe of grey which arced around the back of his head and resembled the wreath of a Roman emperor. Like his master, he wore trousers tucked into black calfskin boots and a plain mandarin-collared tunic in precisely the same shade of brownish-green as the rotten apples two neighborhood bullies, Ermakov and Schwartz, used to hurl at him from their hiding places along the young Poskrebyshev's route to school.

Since the war had broken out, one month before, there had been many such outbursts from the man Pokryshkin referred to as Vozhd. The Boss.

On September 1st 1939, as part of a secret agreement between Germany and Russia, buried in a peace treaty signed between the two countries and known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Germany had invaded Poland.

Justification for the invasion had been provided by a staged attack on a German customs house called Hochlinde, as well as on the Gleiwitz radio substation. Thirteen inmates from Oranienburg Concentration camp, believing that they had been chosen to take part in a propaganda film, designed to improve relations between Germans and the Poles, were trucked towards Hochlinde under cover of darkness. They were dressed in Polish Army uniforms. The inmates had been convinced that they were to enact a meeting between German and Polish troops, somewhere in the forest on the border between the two countries.

The plot of the film would be simple. At first both sides, mistrusting of the other, would draw their weapons. For a moment, it would seem as if a gunfight might actually break out. But then the men would recognize their common ground as human beings. The guns would be lowered. Cigarettes would be exchanged. The two patrols would part company and melt back into the forest. On completion of the film the inmates had been promised that they would be sent home as free men.

As they neared Hochlinde, the trucks pulled over and the prisoners shared rations with a squad of SS guards accompanying them. Each prisoner was also given what they were told would be a tetanus shot, as a matter of standard procedure. The syringes were not filled with tetanus vaccine, however. Instead, the men were injected with Prussic acid. Within minutes, all of them were dead.

Afterwards, the bodies were loaded back onto the trucks and the convoy continued to the vicinity of Hochlinde, where they were dumped in the woods and their corpses shot with German weapons. The corpses would later be exhibited as proof that Polish soldiers had launched an attack on German soil.

Meanwhile, at the Gleiwitz radio station, which had been vacated two weeks before, an officer of the SS named Naujocks, with the help of a Polish speaking German, interrupted regular radio transmission to announce that Gleiwitz was under attack by Polish troops.

Within hours, German planes were bombing Warsaw and, on the following day, German panzers rolled across the border.

Two weeks later, in accordance with the secret clauses of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Russian army began its own invasion from the East.

Even though the obliteration of Polish forces had been virtually guaranteed from the beginning, the slightest setback - a temporary withdrawal, a mistimed attack, supplies sent to the wrong location - sent Stalin into a rage.

And that rage fell first upon Pokryshkin.

“Where is he?” Stalin’s muffled voice boomed from behind the closed doors of his study. “Pokryshkin!”

“Mother of God,” muttered Pokryshkin, the sweat already beading on his forehead. “What have I done now?”

The truth was, Pokryshkin knew exactly what he had done. He had been dreading this moment for a long time and now, it seemed, his crimes had finally caught up with him.

On being made Stalin’s personal secretary, the highest appointment a man like Poskrebyshev could ever hope to hold, the first thing he had done was to forge documents of transfer for Comrades Schwartz and Ermakov, the two bullies on whom he had sworn to take vengeance one day. Stamped with a rubber facsimile of Stalin’s signature, the documents ordered the immediate dispatch of these two men, one an electrician and the other a roof tiler, from their home town in a cozy suburb of Moscow to the port of Archangel, high in the Soviet arctic. There, construction had begun to transform the frozen wasteland around the port into a modern military base for Soviet Navy personnel and their families. The construction was

expected to take many years. In the meantime, conditions for the workers on this project would be primitive in the extreme.

Why such documents would have emerged from the office of Stalin himself was a question nobody would ever dare to ask. This was the perfect symmetry of Pokryshkin's revenge, executed more than 30 years after the events which had set them in motion.

In the weeks and months that followed the transfer of Ermakov and Schwartz to the arctic, Poskrebyshev would often stop in at the meteorological office in the basement of the Kremlin and inquire about weather in Archangel. Thirty below. Forty below. Even fifty below, on occasion. The worse the conditions, the more convinced Poskrebyshev became that there was indeed justice in the world for people like himself, a thing which had seemed impossible back in those days when the rotten apples, pulpy and reeking of vinegar, had splattered against him by the dozen.

At first his scheme had seemed foolproof but, as time went by, Poskrebyshev came to realize that there was no such thing. He resigned himself to the fact that, sooner or later, he would be found out.

The double doors flew open and Stalin burst into the outer office.

In this waking nightmare, it seemed to Poskrebyshev as if Stalin, dressed in his brownish-green tunic, had transformed into one of those apples so expertly thrown by Comrades Schwartz and Ermakov.

"Where is he?" screamed Stalin, as he marched up to Poskrebyshev. "Where is that black-hearted troll?"

“I am here, Comrade Stalin,” replied Pokryshkin, his eyes bulging with fear

Stalin’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I am here, Comrade Stalin!” shouted Pokryshkin, his voice raised to a shout of blind obedience.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” asked Stalin, resting his knuckles on Pokryshkin’s desk and leaning forward until their faces were only a hand’s breadth apart. “I am looking for Pekkala!”

“You have found him,” said a voice.

Pokryshkin turned and saw Pekkala standing in the doorway to the outer office. Neither he nor Stalin had heard him enter the room.

Pekkala was tall and broad-shouldered, with a straight nose and strong, white teeth. Streaks of premature gray ran through his short dark hair. His eyes were greenish brown, the irises marked by a strange silvery quality, which people noticed only when he was looking directly at them. He wore a knee length coat made of black wool, with a Mandarin collar and concealed buttons which fastened on the left side of his chest. His ankle-length boots, also black, were double-soled and polished. He stood with his hands tucked behind his back, the shape of a revolver in a shoulder holster just visible beneath the heavy cloth of his coat.

Stalin’s anger dissipated as suddenly as it had appeared. Now a smile crept over his face, narrowing his eyes almost shut.

“Pekkala!” he said, growling out the name. “I have a job for you.”

As the two men disappeared into Stalin’s office and the door closed quietly behind them, the residue of fear in Pokryshkin’s brain was still too strong to let him feel relief. Later, perhaps, that would

come. For now, all he experienced was the luxury of drawing in breath, and an overpowering curiosity to know the weather forecast for Archangel.

Stalin, sitting at his desk in a leather-backed chair, carefully stuffed his pipe with honey-colored shreds of Balkan tobacco.

There was no chair on the other side, so Pekkala had to stand while he waited for the man to complete his ritual.

During this time, the only sound in the room was the dry rustle of Stalin's breathing as he held a match over the pipe bowl and coaxed the tobacco to burn. Once this had been accomplished, he waved the match and dropped the charred stick in a brass ashtray. The soft, sweet smell of the tobacco drifted about the room. Finally, Stalin spoke. "I am sending you back to Siberia."

The words struck Pekkala like a slap in the face. At first, he was too shocked to reply.

"Although not as a prisoner," continued Stalin. "Not officially. There has been a murder in your old camp, Borodok."

"With respect, Comrade Stalin, there must be murders in that place every day of the week."

"This one has caught my attention." Stalin seemed preoccupied with the ashtray, moving it from one side of his desk to the other and then back to its original place. "Do you remember Colonel Kolchak?"

"Of course I remember him!"

Stalin's words threw Pekkala back to a dreary, rain-soaked night in March of 1917, just before the Tsar stepped down from power.

He was woken by the sound of horses passing on the gravel road outside his bedroom window. During his years as Special Investigator for the Tsar, Pekkala had lived in a small cottage on the grounds of the Imperial estate, known as Tsarskoye Selo estate, on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. Living near the old Pensioners' Stables, Pekkala was used to the noise of horses moving by, but not at this time of night.

Peering through the curtains, Pekkala glimpsed a shadowy procession of wagons, three in all, and each one weighed down by 25 wooden boxes with rope handles which resembled ammunition crates.

One of these wagons had split a wheel, dumping its cargo. Now soldiers milled about, stacking the heavy boxes at the side of the path. Other were busy trying to remove the wheel so they could rig it with a spare.

Pekkala climbed from his bed, opened the door and stepped out into the dark.

"There you are!" said a voice. "Sorry to have woken you."

Pekkala turned to see a tall man, wearing the close-tailored uniform and slightly bow-legged gait of a cavalry officer. His face was fierce and thin and dominated by a rigidly waxed mustache. Pekkala instantly recognized Colonel Kolchak, a man whose social standing in the ranks of Russian nobility, combined with an utter ruthlessness of character, had won him favor with the Tsar.

Finding Kolchak here, amid all of these boxes, Pekkala suddenly realized what he was looking at. Now that the Revolution

had begun, the Tsar's gold was being evacuated to a place of safety. The task had been given to Colonel Kolchak who, in the company of 50 hand-picked men, would transport the treasure to Siberia.

Kolchak's intention was to follow the route of the Trans-Siberian railroad and link up with his uncle, Alexander Vassilyevich Kolchak, an admiral in the Tsar's Pacific Fleet in Vladivostock. The admiral was forming an army of anti-Bolshevik forces. Rumors were circulating that he planned to declare independence for the whole of Siberia.

The order to begin transporting the gold should have been given weeks, if not months before, but Pekkala had seen for himself that, in spite of all the warning signs that the Revolution would soon overwhelm them, the Romanovs had chosen to believe such a thing was impossible. Now, Revolutionary Guards were in control of St. Petersburg and it was only a matter of time before they advanced on Tsarskoye Selo.

"Heading out?" asked Kolchak, as he shook Pekkala's hand.

"Soon," replied Pekkala. "All I have to do is pack my bag."

"Traveling light," remarked Kolchak. He was trying to sound jovial, but the anger at this delay penetrated his voice.

"Not so for you," replied Pekkala, as he glanced at the wagons.

"No indeed," sighed Kolchak. With a sharp command, he sent the two good wagons on ahead, remaining behind to oversee the repair of the third.

Another hour passed before the broken wheel had finally been replaced. As two soldiers heaved the crates back onto the wagon,

one of the rope handles broke and the box slipped from their hands, spilling its contents of gold ingots onto the ground.

“Damn you!” Kolchak shouted at the soldiers. Then he turned to Pekkala. “I am supposed to bring all this to the other side of the country. How can I possibly accomplish my task if these carts can’t even make it off the grounds of the Imperial estate?”

“You have your work cut out for you,” agreed Pekkala.

“What you are witnessing,” said Kolchak, “is final proof that the world we know is coming to an end. Men like us must now look to our own survival.”

As the last the wagon trundled away into the dark, Kolchak climbed back onto his horse. “We must learn to be patient,” he said. “One day, we shall have our vengeance for everything these bastards are about to do with everything we love. This fight isn’t over, Pekkala.”

“And do you remember what became of the Kolchak Expedition?” asked Stalin

“I do,” replied Pekkala. “Almost as soon as the expedition was underway, Kolchak learned that an informant had reported his departure to the Bolsheviks. Guessing that Kolchak would head for the territory held by his uncle, the Bolsheviks sent their own cavalry to intercept the expedition before it reached Siberia. Once he realized that he was being followed, and since the wagons which transported the gold were slowing down his progress, Kolchak decided to leave it behind in the city of Kazan as he passed through there on his way to Vladivostock in Siberia. The gold was later removed from its hiding

place by the anti-Bolshevik forces of the Czechoslovakian Legion, who were also on their way to Vladivostock.”

Stalin nodded. “Go on.”

“In the winter of 1918, Czech Legion troops under the command of General Gaida had joined with the Admiral’s White Russian Army. In the spring of 1919, they launched an offensive against the Reds from their base in Siberia.”

“But the offensive stalled out, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” agreed Pekkala, “and by November of that year, the Admiral was forced to abandon his capital at Omsk. All through that winter, Czech and White Russian troops retreated east towards Vladivostock, where they hoped to board ships which would take them out of the country. They had captured a number of trains, some of them specially armored, and were traveling along the trans-Siberian railroad. By January of 1920, they were still nowhere near the coast. Seeing that his situation was hopeless, Admiral Kolchak stepped down from power. From then on, he was placed under the protection of the 6th Czechoslovakian Rifle Regiment, under General Janin. They became responsible for the safety of the admiral as they continued their journey to Vladivostock.

“And what happened then?”

“You know what happened, Comrade Stalin. Why are you asking me now?”

Stalin slowly rolled his hand before his face. “Humor me, Pekkala. What happened next?”

“Very well,” sighed Pekkala. “When the Czech train convoy reached the city of Irkutsk, they were stopped by armed members of

the Socialist Political Center, who demanded that they hand over the Admiral in return for being allowed to pass through.”

“And what else did they want, these socialists?”

“Gold,” replied Pekkala. “Specifically, the Imperial Reserves which were still being guarded by the Czechs.”

“And what did they do, these Czechs of the 6th Rifle Regiment?”

“They handed it over.”

“Why?”

“The Socialist Center had mined the tunnels around Lake Baikal. If they decided to blow the tunnels, the Czechs would never have gotten through. Handing over Kolchak and the gold was their only hope of reaching Vladivostock.”

“And what became of Admiral Kolchak, the Ruler of Siberia?”

“On January 30th, 1920, the Admiral was executed by the Bolsheviks.”

“And what of his nephew, the Colonel?”

“Red cavalry finally caught up with him. After a fight lasting three days, survivors of the Expedition surrendered. Among the men captured was Colonel Kolchak himself.”

By then, in St. Petersburg, on the other side of the country, Pekkala himself had also been taken prisoner by the Revolutionaries. Both men ended up in the Butyrka prison, although neither was aware of the other’s whereabouts at first.

“And, of course,” remarked Stalin, “you remember what happened at Butyrka?”

“Remember?” spat Pekkala. “Do you think I could ever forget?”

After months of torture and solitary confinement, prison guards frog-marched Pekkala down the spiral stone steps of this old fortress and into the basement. He fully expected to be shot, knowing that these caverns, which had once boasted one of the world's finest collections of wines, now served as execution chambers for enemies of the state.

Pekkala felt almost relieved that his time of suffering was almost over. In something approaching a gesture of compassion, some convicts were even shot before they reached the bottom of the stairs, so as to minimize the terror of their execution. Pekkala found himself hoping that he might merit such a speedy end, but when they reached the bottom of the stairs, the guards brought him to a room already occupied by several men who wore the Gymnastyrka tunics, dark blue trousers and knee length riding boots of State Security Troops.

In addition, Pekkala glimpsed a barely human figure cowering naked in the corner. The man's whole body was a mass of electrical burns and bruises.

This man was Colonel Kolchak.

The sentence was read out by Commissar Dzugashvili, the same man who had been responsible for Pekkala's weeks of interrogation.

In the final seconds of his life, Kolchak called out to Pekkala. "Inform his majesty the Tsar that I told them nothing."

Before the last word had left his mouth, the NKVD men opened fire. The concussion of the gunfire was stunning in the confined space of the cell. When the shooting finally stopped, Dzugashvili

stepped forward, stuck the barrel in Kolchak's right eye and put another bullet into Kolchak's head.

It was Dzugashvili who sat before Pekkala now. Joseph Dzugashvili, who had changed his name to Stalin - Man of Steel - as was the fashion of the early Bolsheviks.

“You know, Pekkala, memory can be deceiving. Even yours.”

“What do you mean?”

Stalin puffed thoughtfully at his pipe. “The man you thought was Colonel Kolchak, the man I also thought was Kolchak, turns out to have been an imposter.”

Although Pekkala was surprised to hear this, he knew it did not lie beyond the bounds of possibility. The Tsar himself had half a dozen look-alikes, who took his place at times of danger and who, in some cases, paid for that occupation with their lives. For someone as important to the Tsar as Kolchak, it did not seem unlikely that a double had been found for him as well.

“What does this have to do with the murder at Borodok?”

“The victim was a man named Isaac Ryabov; a former captain in the Imperial Cavalry and one of the last survivors of Kolchak's Expedition still in captivity at Borodok. Ryabov approached the Camp Commandant with an offer to reveal information about the whereabouts of Colonel Kolchak in exchange for being allowed to go free. But somebody got to him first.”

“Ryabov might well have known where Kolchak was hiding twenty years ago, but the Colonel could have gone anywhere in the

world since that time. Do you honestly think Ryabov's information was still accurate?"

"It is a possibility which I cannot afford to overlook." Stalin removed his pipe and laid it in the ashtray on his desk. Then he sat back and touched his fingertips together. "Do you suppose Colonel Kolchak has ever forgiven the Czechs for handing over his uncle to be executed?"

"I doubt it. From what I knew of Kolchak, forgiveness did not strike me as being one of his virtues. Personally, I think the Czechs had no choice."

"I agree," said Stalin, "but as far as Colonel Kolchak is concerned, the legion's job was to protect his uncle, not to mention the gold. Whether every last one of them died fulfilling that duty would be irrelevant to a man like him."

"And how do you know what he thinks?"

"I don't," replied Stalin. "I am only telling you what I would think if I were Colonel Kolchak. And I am also telling you that when a man like Kolchak gets vengeance in his brain, he will set fire to the world before he can be satisfied."

"Even if Kolchak can be found," said Pekkala, "surely he does not pose a threat. He is only one man, after all."

"I take no comfort in that. One person can still be dangerous. I know, because I am only one man and I am very dangerous. And when I see in another man those qualities which I also recognize within myself, I know that I cannot ignore him. We have a strange alliance, Pekkala. In our thinking, we are opposites in almost every way. But the one place where our ideas intersect lies in the struggle

for our country to survive. It is the reason you did not die that day in the basement of Butyrka prison. But Kolchak is not like you, and that is why I put him to death, or attempted to, anyway.”

“If this is simply a vendetta against a man you tried and failed to kill, send one of your assassins to find him. I could be put to better use on other cases.”

“You may be right, but if my instincts are correct that Kolchak poses a threat to this country...”

“Then I will bring him to justice,” interrupted Pekkala.

“And that is why I’m sending you, instead of somebody else.”

As Stalin spoke, he slid Ryabov’s file across the desk towards Pekkala. Inside that folder would be every scrap of information Soviet Intelligence had managed to accumulate on Ryabov – everything from his blood type, to his choice of cigarettes to the books he checked out of the library. “Your investigation is to be conducted in the utmost secrecy. Once you arrive at Borodok, if word leaks out among the prisoners that you are working for the Bureau of Special Operations, I will lose not only Ryabov’s killer, but you as well.”

“I may need to involve Major Kirov in this investigation.”

Stalin spread his arms magnanimously. “Understood, and the camp commandant has also been instructed to assist you in any way he can. He is holding the body, as well as the murder weapon, until you arrive at the camp.”

“Who is in charge there now?”

“The same man who was running it when you were there.”

“Klenovkin?” An image surfaced in Pekkala’s mind of a gaunt, slope-shouldered man with a black hair cut so short that it stood up

like porcupine quills from his skull. Pekkala had only met him once, when he first arrived at the camp.

Having summoned Pekkala to his office, Klenovkin did not look up when Pekkala entered the room. All he said was, "Remove your cap when you are in my presence." He then busied himself reading Pekkala's prisoner file, carefully turning the large yellow pages, each one with a red diagonal stripe in the upper right hand corner.

At last, Klenovkin closed the file and raised his head, squinting at Pekkala through rimless spectacles. "We have all fallen from grace in one way and another," he said, a resonance in his voice as if he were addressing a crowd instead of just one man. "Having just read your history, convict Pekkala, I see that you have fallen further than most."

In those first years of the Bolshevik government, so many of the prison inmates were in Borodok on account of their loyalty to the Nicholas II, that a man with Pekkala's reputation as the Tsar's most trusted servant could easily have led to an uprising in the camp. Klenovkin's solution was to place Pekkala as far away as possible from the other inmates.

"You are a disease," said Klenovkin. "I will not allow you to infect my prisoners. The simplest thing to do would be to have you shot, but unfortunately I am not allowed to do that. Some benefit must be derived from your existence before we consign you to oblivion."

Pekkala stared at the man. Even during the months of harsh interrogation leading up to his departure for Siberia, Pekkala had never felt as helpless as he did at that moment.

“I am sending you out into the wilderness,” continued Klenovkin. “You will become a tree marker in the Valley of Krasnagolyana, a job no man has held for longer than six months.”

“Why not?” asked Pekkala.

“Because nobody lives that long.”

Working alone, with no chance of escape and far from any human contact, tree markers 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.

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. His only task, besides surviving, was to mark in red paint those trees singled out for cutting by inmates of the camp. Lacking any brushes, Pekkala stirred his fingers in the scarlet paint and daubed his print upon the trunks. By the time the logging crews arrived, Pekkala would already be gone. The red hand prints became, for most of the convicts, the only trace of him they ever saw.

Only rarely was he spotted 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 long hair maned about his face, he resembled a beast stripped of its skin and left to die. Wild rumors surrounded him - that he was an eater of human flesh, that he wore a scapula made from the bones of those who had disappeared in the forest, that he carried a club whose end was embedded with human teeth, that he wore scalps laced together as a cap.

They called him the man with bloody hands.

By the time word of his identity leaked out among the prisoners, they assumed he was already dead.

But six months later, to Klenovkin's astonishment, Pekkala was still alive.

When a young Lieutenant Kirov arrived to recall him back to duty with the Bureau of Special Operations, Pekkala had been in living in the forest for nine years, longer than any other tree marker in the history of the gulag system.

Tucking Ryabov's file into his coat, Pekkala stood up to leave.

"One more thing before you go." Reaching down beside his chair, Stalin picked up a small shopping bag and held it out towards Pekkala. "Your clothes for the journey,"

Glancing inside, Pekkala saw what at first appeared to be some dirty, pinkish gray rags. He lifted out the flimsy pajama-type shirt. He recognized it now – standard prison issue. A shudder passed through him as he thought back to the last time he had worn a uniform like this.

At that moment, the door opened and Poskrebyshev walked in. He advanced two paces, stopped and clicked his heels together. "Comrade Stalin, I beg to report that Poland has surrendered."

Stalin nodded and said nothing.

"I also beg to inform you that the Katyn Operation has begun," continued Pokryshkin.

Stalin's only reply was an angry stare.

"You asked me to tell you..."

“Get out,” said Stalin, quietly.

Pokryshkin’s heels smashed together once more, then he turned and left the room, closing the double doors behind him with a barely audible click of the lock.

“The Katyn Operation?” asked Pekkala.

“It would have been better for you not to know,” replied Stalin, “but since it is too late for that, let me answer your question with a question of my own. Suppose you were an officer in the Polish Army, that you had surrendered and been taken prisoner. Let us say you had been well treated. You had been housed. You had been fed.”

“What is it you want to know, Comrade Stalin?”

“Say I offer you a choice; either a place in the Red Army, or the opportunity to return home as a civilian.”

“They will choose to go home,” said Pekkala.

“Yes,” replied Stalin. “Most of them did.”

“But they will never arrive, will they?”

“No.”

In his mind, Pekkala could see those officers, bundled in the mysterious brown of their Polish army greatcoats, hands tied behind their backs with copper wire. One after the other, NKVD troopers shoved them to the edge of a huge pit dug into the orangey-brown soil of a forest in eastern Poland. With the barrels of their guns, the NKVD men tipped off the caps of their prisoners, sending them into the pit below. As each Polish officer was shot in the back of the head, the men fell forward into the pit, onto the bodies of those who had been killed before.

How many were there? Pekkala wondered. Hundreds?
Thousands?

By nightfall, the pit would be covered up.

Within a few weeks, tiny shoots of grass would rise from the trampled soil.

One thing Pekkala had learned, however. Nothing stays buried forever.

“You have not answered my question,” said Stalin. “I asked what you would do. Not they.”

“I would realize I had no choice,” replied Pekkala.

With a scythe-like sweep of his hand, Stalin brushed aside Pekkala’s words. “But I did give them a choice!”

“No, Comrade Stalin, you did not.”

Stalin smiled. “That is why you have survived, and why those other men will not.”

As soon as Pekkala had departed, Stalin pushed the intercom button. “Pokryshkin!”

“Yes, Comrade Stalin.”

“All messages between Pekkala and Major Kirov are to be intercepted.”

“Of course.”

“Whatever Pekkala has to say, I want to read it before Kirov does. I want no secrets kept from me.”

“No, Comrade Stalin,” said Pokryshkin, and a fresh coat of sweat slicked his palms.

The intercom button stayed on, whispering static into Stalin’s ears. “Is there anything else, Pokryshkin?”

“Why do you let Pekkala speak to you that way? So disrespectfully?” Over the years, Pokryshkin had advanced to the stage where he could occasionally express an unsolicited opinion to the Boss, although only in the most reverent of tones. But the way Pekkala talked to Stalin caused Pokryshkin’s bowels to cramp. Even more amazing to him was the fact that Stalin let Pekkala get away with it. In asking such a question, Pokryshkin was well aware that he had overstepped his bounds. If the answer to his question was a flood of obscenities from the next room, Pokryshkin knew he had only himself to blame. But he simply had to know.

“The reason I endure his insolence, unlike, for example, yours, Pokryshkin, is that Pekkala is the only person I know of who would not kill me for the chance to rule this country.”

“Surely that is not true, Comrade Stalin!” replied Pokryshkin, knowing perfectly well that whether it was true or not, what mattered was that Stalin believed it.

“Ask yourself, Pokryshkin – what would you do to sit where I am sitting now?”

An image flashed through Pokryshkin’s mind, of himself at Stalin’s desk, smoking Stalin’s cigarettes and bullying his very own secretary. In that moment, Pokryshkin knew that, in spite of all his claims of loyalty, he would have gutted Stalin like a fish for the chance to take the leader’s place.

One hour later, as the last rays of sunset glistened on the ice-sheathed telegraph wires, Pekkala’s battered Emka staff car, driven by his assistant, Major Kirov, pulled into a rail yard at mile marker 17

on the Moscow Highway. The rail yard had no name. It was known simply as V-4, and the only trains departing from this place were convict transports headed for the gulags.