EYE OF THE RED TSAR

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Prologue

Through blood-dimmed eyes, the Tsar watched the man reload his gun. Empty cartridges, trailing hazy parachutes of smoke, tumbled from the revolver's cylinder. Clattering and ringing, they landed on the floor where he was lying. The Tsar dragged in a breath, feeling the flutter of bubbles as they escaped his punctured lungs.

Now the killer knelt down beside him. 'Do you see this?' The man took hold of the Tsar's jaw and turned his head from one side to the other. 'Do you see what you have brought upon yourself?'

The Tsar glimpsed nothing, blinded by the veil which filmed his sight, but he knew that all around him lay his family. His wife. His children.

'Go ahead,' he told the man. 'Finish me.'

The Tsar felt a hand gently slapping his face, the fingers slick with his own blood.

'You are already finished,' said the killer. After that came the faint click as he loaded new cartridges into the cylinder.

Then the Tsar heard more explosions, deafening in the cramped space of the room. 'My family,' he tried to shout, but only coughed and retched. He could do nothing to help them. He could not even raise an arm to shield himself.

Now the Tsar was being dragged across the floor.

The killer grunted as he hauled the body up a flight of stairs, cursing as the Tsar's boot heels caught on every step.

Outside, it was dark.

The Tsar felt rain against his face. Soon afterwards, he heard the sound of bodies dumped beside him. Their lifeless heads cracked against the stony ground.

An engine started up. A vehicle. A squeak of brakes and then the slam of a tailgate coming down. One after the other, the bodies were lifted into the back of a truck. And then the Tsar himself, heaved on to the pile of corpses. The tailgate slammed shut.

As the truck began to move, the pain in the Tsar's chest grew worse. Each jolt over the potholed road became a fresh wound, his agony flashing like lightning in the darkness which swirled thickly around him.

Suddenly, his pain began to fade away. The blackness seemed to pour in like a liquid through his eyes. It snuffed out all his fears, ambitions, memories until nothing remained but a shuddering emptiness, in which he knew nothing at all. . .

Siberia, 1929

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 the 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 grey ran through his long, dark hair and his beard grew thickly over windburned cheeks.

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

Soon he was on the move, 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. Everyone assumed he would be dead within the year.

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 recognisable 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 rumours surrounded him – that he was an eater of human

flesh, that he wore a breastplate made from the bones of those who had disappeared 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 the cold but a silence so complete it seemed to have a sound of its own – a hissing, rushing noise – like the noise 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 lustre of gaberdine, 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 far 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 young 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 man 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 on to each forearm of the man's *gymnastiorka* 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 odour 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 had 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 feeling 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 reached 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 open 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 smell of his own unwashed body. 'What is your name?' asked Pekkala.

'Kirov.' The young man straightened his back. 'Commissar Kirov.'

'And how long have you been a Commissar'

'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 some 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 standard military issue except for the fact that its handles were made of brass instead of wood.

Pekkala took out the gun and held it 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 disc, as wide across as the length of his little finger. Across the centre was a stripe of white enamel inlay, which began at a point, widened until it took up half the disc 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 disc, 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.

He was born in Finland, in a time when that country was still a colony of Russia. He grew up surrounded by deep woods and countless lakes near the town of Lappeenranta.

His father was an undertaker, the only one in that region. From miles around, people brought their dead to him. They jostled down forest paths, carrying the bodies in rickety carts, or hauling them in sledges across the frozen lakes in winter, so that the corpses were as hard as stone when they arrived.

In his father's closet hung three identical black coats, and three pairs of black trousers to match. Even his handkerchiefs were black. He would allow no glint of metal on his person. The brass buttons which came with the coats had been replaced by buttons of ebony. He seldom smiled, and when he did, he covered his mouth like a person ashamed of his teeth. Sombreness was a thing he cultivated with the utmost care, knowing his job demanded it.

His mother was a Laplander from Rovaniemi. She carried with her a restlessness that never went away. She seemed to be haunted by some strange vibration of the earth which she had left behind in the Arctic where she had spent her childhood.

He had one older brother named Anton. On the wishes of their father, when Anton turned eighteen he departed for Petrograd to enlist in the Tsar's Finnish regiment. For Pekkala's father, no greater honour could be won than to serve in that elite company, which formed the personal cadre of the Tsar.

When Anton boarded the train, his father wept with pride, dabbing his eyes with a black handkerchief. His mother just looked stunned, unable to comprehend that her child was being sent away.

Anton leaned out of the window of his railway carriage, hair neatly combed. On his face was the confusion of wanting to stay, but knowing that he had to go.

Pekkala, then only sixteen years old and standing by his parents on the platform, felt his brother's absence as if the train had long since departed.

When the train had passed out of sight, Pekkala's father put his arms around his wife and son. 'This is a great day,' he said, his eyes red with crying. 'A great day for our family.' In the time that followed, as his father ran his errands around town, he never forgot to mention that Anton would soon be a member of the regiment.

As the younger son, Pekkala had always known he would remain at home, serving as an apprentice to his father. Eventually, he would be expected to take over the family business. The man's quiet reserve became a part of Pekkala as he assisted in the work. The draining of fluids from the bodies and replacing them with preservatives, the dressing and the managing of hair, the insertion of pins in the face to achieve a relaxed and peaceful expression – all this became natural to Pekkala as he learned his father's occupation.

It was with these expressions that his father took the greatest care. An air of calm needed to surround the dead, as if they welcomed this next stage of their existence. The expression of a poorly worked body might appear anxious or afraid, or worse, they might not look like the same person at all.

It fascinated Pekkala to read, in the hands and faces of the

departed, the way they'd spent their lives. Their bodies, like sets of clothes, betrayed their secrets of care or neglect. As he held the hand of a teacher, he could feel the bump in the second finger where a fountain pen had rested, wearing a groove into the bone. The hands of a fisherman were stacked with calluses and old knife cuts which creased the skin like a crumpled piece of paper. Grooves around eyes and mouths told whether a person's days had been governed by optimism or pessimism. There was no horror for Pekkala in the dead, only a great and unsolvable mystery.

The task of undertaking was not pleasant, not the kind of job a man could say he loved. But he could love the fact that it mattered. Not everyone could do this, and yet it needed to be done. It was necessary, not for the dead but for the memories of the living.

His mother thought otherwise. She would not go down to the basement where the dead were prepared. Instead, she stopped halfway down the basement stairs to deliver a message or to summon them for dinner. Pekkala grew used to the sight of her legs on those steps, the round softness of her knees, the rest of her body remaining out of view. He memorised the sound of her voice, muffled beneath a lavender-oil-scented cloth she held against her face whenever she entered the basement. She seemed to fear the presence of formaldehyde, as if it might seep into her lungs and snatch away her soul.

His mother believed in things like that. Her childhood on the barren tundra had taught her to find meaning even in the smoke rising from a fire. Pekkala never forgot her descriptions of the camouflage of a ptarmigan hiding among lichen-spattered rocks, or the blackened stones of a fire whose embers had burned out a thousand years before, or the faint depression in the ground,

visible only when evening shadows fell across it, which marked the location of a grave.

From his mother, Pekkala learned to spot the tiniest details – even those he could not see but which registered beyond the boundary of his senses – and to remember them. From his father he learned patience and the ability to feel at ease among the dead.

This was the world Pekkala believed he would inhabit, its boundaries marked by the names of familiar streets, by tea-brown lakes reflecting the pale blue sky and a saw-toothed horizon of pine trees rising from the forest beyond.

But things did not turn out that way.

The morning after the commissar's visit, Pekkala set fire to his cabin.

He stood in the clearing while the black smoke uncoiled into the sky. The snap and wheeze of burning filled his ears. The heat leaned into him. Sparks settled on his clothes and, with a flick of his fingers, he brushed them away. Paint buckets stacked by the side of the cabin sprouted dirty yellow tongues of fire as the chemicals inside them ignited. He watched the roof collapse on to the carefully made bed and chair and table which had been his companions for so long now that the outside world seemed more dreamlike than real.

The only thing he had saved from the fire was a satchel made from brain-tanned elk hide and closed with a button made of antler bone. Inside lay the gun in its holster and the book and the unblinking emerald eye.

When nothing remained but a heap of smoking beams, Pekkala turned and started walking for the trailhead. In another moment, he was gone, drifting like a ghost among the trees.

Hours later, he emerged from the pathless forest on to a logging road. Cut trees were stacked ten deep, ready for transport to the Gulag mill. Strips of bark carpeted the ground and the sour reek of fresh lumber filled the air.

Pekkala found the car just as the commissar had promised.

It was a type he had not seen before. With rounded cowlings, a small windshield and a radiator grille that arched like an eyebrow, the machine had an almost haughty expression. A blue and white shield on the radiator grille gave the car's make as 'Emka'.

The car doors were open. Lieutenant Kirov lay asleep on the back seat, his legs sticking out into the air.

Pekkala took hold of Kirov's foot and shook it.

Kirov gave a shout and clambered into the road. At first, he recoiled from the bearded ragman who stood before him. 'You scared the hell out of me!'

'Are you taking me back to the camp?' asked Pekkala.

'No. Not to the camp. Your days as a prisoner are over.' Kirov gestured for Pekkala to get in the back of the car. 'At least, they are for now.'

In a series of jerky turns, Kirov reversed the Emka and began the long drive back to the settlement of Oreshek. After an hour of slipping and bumping over washerboard road, they emerged from the forest into cleared countryside whose openness filled Pekkala with a nameless anxiety.

For much of the drive, Kirov did not speak but kept an eye on Pekkala in the rear-view mirror, like a taxi driver worried about whether his passenger could pay the fare.

They passed through the ruins of a village. The thatched roofs of *izba* huts sagged like the backs of broken horses. Bare earth showed through the coating of old whitewash on the walls. Shutters hung loose on their hinges and the tracks of foraging animals studded the ground. Beyond, the fields lay fallow. Stray sunflowers towered over the weed-choked ground.

'What happened to this place?' asked Pekkala.

'It is the work of counter-revolutionaries and profiteers of the so-called American Relief Administration who infiltrated from the West to pursue their economic sabotage of the New Economic Policy.' The words spewed out of Kirov's mouth as if he'd never heard of punctuation.

'But what happened?' repeated Pekkala.

'They all live in Oreshek now.'

When they finally reached Oreshek, Pekkala looked out at the hastily built barracks which lined the road. Although the structures appeared new, the tarpaper roofs were already peeling. Most of these buildings were empty and yet it seemed as if the only work being done was the construction of even more barracks. Workers, men and women, stopped to watch the car go past. Masks of dirt plated their hands and faces. Some pushed wheelbarrows. Others carried what looked like oversized shovels piled with bricks.

Wheat and barley grew in the fields, but they must have been planted too late in the season. Plants that should have been knee-high would barely have reached past a man's ankle.

The car pulled up outside a small police station. It was the only building made from stone, with small barred windows, like the beady eyes of pigs, and a heavy wooden door reinforced with metal strapping.

Kirov cut the engine. 'We're here,' he said.

As Pekkala stepped out of the car, a few people glanced at him and quickly looked away, as if by knowing him they might incriminate themselves.

He walked up the three wooden steps to the main door, then jumped to one side as a man in a black uniform, wearing the insignia of Internal Security Police, came barrelling out of the station. He was hauling an old man by the scruff of his neck.

The old man's feet were wrapped in birch-bark sandals known as *lapti*. The policeman pitched him off the steps and the old man landed spread-eagled in the dirt, sending up a cloud of saffron-coloured dust. A handful of corn kernels spilled from his clenched fist. As the old man gathered them up, Pekkala realised that they were, in fact, his broken teeth.

The man struggled to his feet and stared back at the officer, speechless with anger and fear.

Kirov set his hand on Pekkala's back and gave him a gentle nudge towards the stairs.

'Another?' boomed the policeman. He took hold of Pekkala's arm, fingers digging into his bicep. 'Where did they dig this one up?'

Six months after Pekkala's brother left to join the Finnish regiment, a telegram arrived from Petrograd. It was addressed to Pekkala's father and signed by the Commanding Officer of the Finnish Garrison. The telegram contained only five words – PEKKALA ANTON RUSTICATED CADRE CADETS.

Pekkala's father read the fragile yellow slip. His face showed no emotion. Then he handed the paper to his wife.

'But what does that mean?' she asked. 'Rusticated? I've never heard that word before.' The telegram trembled in her hand.

'It means he has been kicked out of the regiment,' said his father. 'Now he will be coming home.'

The following day, Pekkala hitched up one of the family's horses to a small two-person cariole, drove out to the station and waited for the train to come in. He did the same thing the next day and the day after that. Pekkala spent a whole week going back and forth to the train station, watching passengers descend from carriages, searching the crowd and then, when the train had departed, finding himself alone again on the platform.

In those days of waiting, Pekkala became aware of a permanent change in his father. The man was like a clock whose mechanism had suddenly broken. On the outside, little had altered, but inside he was wrecked. It did not matter why Anton was returning. It was the fact of the return which had changed the neatly plotted course he had laid out for his family.

After two weeks without word from Anton, Pekkala no longer went to the station to wait for his brother.

When a month had gone by, it was clear that Anton would not be returning.

Pekkala's father cabled the Finnish Garrison to inquire about his son.

They replied, this time in a letter, that on such and such a day Anton had been escorted to the gates of the barracks, that he had been given a train ticket home and money for food, and that he had not been seen since.

Another cable, requesting the reason for Anton's dismissal, received no reply at all.

By this time, Pekkala's father had withdrawn so far inside himself that he seemed only the shell of a man. Meanwhile, his mother calmly insisted that Anton would return when he was ready, but the strain of holding on to this conviction was wearing her away, like a piece of sea glass tumbled into nothing by the motion of the waves against the sand.

One day, when Anton had been gone almost three months, Pekkala and his father were putting the finishing touches on a body scheduled for viewing. The father was bent over, carefully brushing the eyelashes of the deceased with the tips of his fingers. Pekkala heard his father breathe in suddenly. He watched the man's back straighten, as if his muscles were spasming. 'You are leaving,' he said.

'Leaving where?' asked Pekkala.

'For Petrograd. To join the Finnish regiment. I have already filled out your induction papers. In ten days, you will report to the garrison. You will take his place.' He could no longer even call Anton by name.

'What about my apprenticeship? What about the business?'

'It's done, boy. There is nothing to discuss.'

One week later, Pekkala leaned from the window of an east-bound train, waving to his parents until their faces were only pink cat licks in the distance and the ranks of pine closed up around the little station-house.

Pekkala looked the police officer in the eye.

For a moment, the man hesitated, wondering why a prisoner would dare to match his gaze. His jaw muscles clenched. 'Time you learned to show respect,' he whispered.

'He is under the protection of the Bureau of Special Operations,' said Kirov.

'Protection?' laughed the policeman. 'For this tramp? What's his name?'

'Pekkala,' replied Kirov.

'Pekkala?' The policeman let go of him as if his hand had clamped down on hot metal. 'What do you mean? *The* Pekkala?'

The old man was still on his knees, watching the argument taking place on the steps of the police station.

'Go on!' yelled the policeman.

The old man did not move. 'Pekkala,' he muttered, and as he spoke blood trickled from the corners of his mouth.

'I said get out of here, damn you!' shouted the policeman, his face turning red.

Now the old man rose to his feet and started walking down the road. Every few paces, he turned his head and looked back at Pekkala.

Kirov and Pekkala pushed past the policeman and made their way down a corridor lit only by the gloomy filtering of daylight through the barred and glassless windows.

As they walked, Kirov turned to Pekkala. 'Who the hell are you?' he asked.

Pekkala did not reply. He followed the young commissar towards a door at the end of the corridor. The door was half open.

The young man stepped aside.

Pekkala walked into the room.

A man sat at a desk in the corner. Other than the chair in which he sat, this was the only piece of furniture. On his tunic, he wore the rank of a commander in the Red Army. His dark hair was neatly combed and slicked back on his head with a severe parting which ran like a knife cut across his scalp. The man kept his hands neatly folded on the desk, poised as if he were waiting for someone to take his photograph.

'Anton!' gasped Pekkala.

'Welcome back,' he replied.

Pekkala gaped at the man, who patiently returned the stare. Finally satisfied that his eyes were not playing tricks on him, Pekkala turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

'Where are you going?' asked Kirov, running to catch up with him.

'Any place but here,' replied Pekkala. 'You could have had the decency to let me know.'

'Let you know what?' The commissar's voice rose in frustration.

The policeman was still standing in the doorway, looking nervously up and down the street.

Kirov placed a hand on Pekkala's shoulder. 'You have not even spoken to Commander Starek.'

'Is that what he calls himself now?' replied Pekkala.

'Now?' The commissar's face twisted in confusion.

Pekkala turned on him. 'Starek is not his real name. He has invented it. Like Lenin did! And Stalin! Not because it changes anything, but only because it sounds better than Ulyanov or Dzhugashvili.'

'You realise', blurted the commissar, 'that I could have you shot for saying that.'

'Find something you couldn't shoot me for,' replied Pekkala. 'That would be more impressive. Or, better still, let my brother do it for you.'

'Your brother?' Kirov's mouth hung open. 'Commander Starek is your brother?'

Now Anton emerged from the doorway.

'You didn't tell me,' said Kirov. 'Surely I should have been informed.'

'I am informing you now.' Anton turned back to Pekkala.

'That's not really him, is it?' asked the policeman. 'You're just kidding me, right?' He tried to smile, but failed. 'This man is not the Emerald Eye. He's been dead for years. I've heard people say he never even existed, that he's just a legend.'

Anton leaned across and whispered in the policeman's ear.

The policeman coughed. 'But what have I done?' He looked at Pekkala. 'What have I done?' he asked again.

'We could ask that man you threw into the street,' replied Pekkala.

The policeman stepped into the doorway. 'But this is my station,' he whispered. 'I am in command here.' He looked to Anton, silently appealing for help.

But Anton's face remained stony. 'I suggest you get out of our way while you still can,' he said quietly.

The officer drifted aside, as if he were no more than the shadow of a man.

Now, with his eyes fixed on Pekkala, Anton gave a nod towards the office down the corridor. 'Brother,' he said, 'it is time for us to talk.'