

II

Passengers slept twelve to a room on the Trans-Siberian Railway, stacked in swaying bunks. Madison had the top bed, perhaps so that his Soviet companions would know if he tried to escape at night. The other passengers included Mongolian peasants with live chickens and goats, refugees of all races fleeing the Japanese in China, and grizzled Siberian trappers. The smell was a complex mixture of sweat, unwashed wool, garlic, ginger, alcohol, urine, and cigarette smoke. At night a fiddle or accordion would play, a vodka bottle would travel up and down the bunks, and someone would sing in the dark. As Madison listened to the Russian, Romany, Yiddish, Kazakh, and Azeri songs, he stared out the window at a landscape whose very monotony impressed him. For days all he saw were scrubby pines: none more than ten feet high, and widely spaced across the snowy ground. Once, however, the train sped past a camp with barbed wire fences, watch towers, and wretched souls chopping stone blocks. Madison was glad for his suicide pill, which he had inserted very late one night.

He awoke one morning to see sublime, snow-capped mountains: the Urals. On the other side of the pass, they entered dense forest; but soon villages grew more common, then cities. Signs indicated that they were approaching Moscow. The train stopped at a little, unmarked suburban station and Marta called for him. He, Marta, and Starobin were the only passengers who disembarked; everyone else pulled aside fearfully, averted their eyes, and let them pass. On the platform, a dozen Soviet soldiers had been posted as sentries. Marta and Starobin led Madison to a black car with tinted windows. They climbed in and drove away. It was impossible to see anything outside.

When they stopped and the doors opened, Madison saw that they had reached a quaint wooden cottage with a high peaked roof. A birch and alder wood surrounded the house, starting just beyond a picket fence. He followed Marta to the front door, with Starobin behind. Marta told him: "This is your dacha. Very posh. Your neighbors are mostly Party bigwigs. I must tell you, please do not leave the garden without permission. Do you understand? This development is guarded by a full battalion of elite Interior Ministry troops. They are here to keep people away, but they also have

instructions to keep you *in*. The rule is, shoot on sight, no questions. Sorry about all that."

The lintel was made of carved and painted wood. Marta opened the door to reveal comfortable rooms with exposed beams above, thick carpets below. A pot-bellied stove had been lit and there was black bread and fish on the table.

"Make yourself very comfortable." Marta lit the wick under an ornate samovar. "Comrade Iulya, a nice babushka once you get to know her, will come every afternoon to clean and prepare your dinner. There are clothes and such in your bedroom upstairs. You will also need material for your work. I will come twice a week and you can request books, documents, information."

"My work," said Madison: "what exactly is it?"

Marta found tea cups in the kitchen and returned to the living room to wait for the samovar to boil. Starobin took up a position by the door, where he remained during the conversation that followed.

"In Mongolia," Marta said, "I alluded to Hitler's Operation Arcana. Most of our files on that subject are upstairs in the study. We have withheld only what is absolutely required by state security. We want to know what it's all about."

"If I figure it out, what will happen to me?"

"We will be most grateful. We will send you anywhere you like -- Berkeley, Mongolia, the French Riviera. We will arrange a reasonable reward, financial or otherwise. Meanwhile, you will learn something interesting, solve a puzzle, and at the same time hurt Hitler. You are not, unfortunately, a friend of the great proletarian revolution. But we know about your good work against Mussolini in Ethiopia, so apparently our enemy is yours too. Here's a chance to strike at fascism using skills that very few men possess. At least, very few men who aren't working for Hitler."

"And if I fail?"

She smiled brightly. "You won't."

So he got to work, carefully reading the files and taking copious notes. When Marta came to see him after three days, he told her that he was making progress.

"What do you need?"

"A pipe, preferably corncob, and excellent tobacco."

"Fine."

"Whatever Woolf has written lately: Virginia Woolf. I need diversion."

"Of course. I do not know this author, but we can get you whatever you want." She wore a Western dress in a floral print, with a high waist, the hemline at her knees, and a wide lace collar. They were drinking tea by the stove. Madison said: "I also need some reference works for this project. Specifically, the Bible -- both testaments -- in Hebrew, the Septuagint Greek version, the Vulgate, Luther's German translation, and the Revised Standard. Got that?"

Marta nodded when she had finished scribbling.

"I need the *Zohar* of Moses de Leon: the earlier the edition, the better. John Pistorius' *Artis cabalisticae*, volume one, 1587. Guillaume Postel's *Absconditus clavis*, the vanished key, 1547. Robert Fludd's *Summum Bonum*, 1629. In fact, any and all of Fludd's works, please. I'd like to see the *Tarot of the Bohemians* by Papus. Finally, Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbala denudata*, 1677. These are primary sources. In addition, please get me Gershom Sholem's latest scholarly work. And I need the histories of Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Batuta in Arabic or a Western translation -- either is fine."

"Is that all for now?"

"No, I also need some information. Are the Germans doing any archaeological work around the south shore of the Caspian Sea, specifically in the Elburz Mountains?"

"We'll find out."

"Thank you. Secondly, your Russian emigrés seem to be especially interested in spiritualism. Madame Blatavsky, the founder of the Theosophists; Gurdjieff -- these people are the world's leaders in their dubious field."

"We know all about them. They are frauds, aristocrats living abroad on the plundered wealth of Soviet peasants. They are wanted criminals, not emigrés."

"Whatever they are, they will know the answer to my question. Who is the best gypsy Tarot reader in Europe? I don't mean the best-paid or the most popular in the tea-and-crumpet set. I mean the one whom the other Tarot readers admire. The one with the most learning."

"Our informers will tell us, and I will tell you. By the way, how do you like your dacha? Caviar, borscht, snow beneath the birches -- this Russia is not so bad, is it?"

"It's pleasant enough for a jail. You know, you promised to show me the skaters in Gorki Park. Can you take me there? I used to skate pretty well."

She studied her teacup. "Not for now. Maybe someday."

"Just between us -- no lies -- how do you rate my chances of getting out of here alive?"

She pointed at the ceiling, shook her head, and put her lips to her mouth. Then she said, "You will always be well treated by the Soviet People, who understand hospitality and friendship." She rose and walked to the door.

"See you soon then, Comrade Captain."

"See you soon." She spoke in an ordinary voice, but as she spoke she grabbed his arm and looked intently into his eyes. She mouthed the English words: "You'll be all right. Count on me."

The next time she came, she arrived in a long black car with a chauffeur. An older man in a uniform followed her up the path and opened the door for her.

"This is Comrade Sasha," she said.

As Madison shook the man's hand, he noticed that the badge on the front of his cap had a blue enamel background. That made him an NKVD general -- someone whom very many people must fear. But Sasha said in English, "How do you like my Marta?" He looked like a grandfather with twinkling eyes.

"She's the best jailor a man could want."

Sasha smiled. "I came here because we would like a progress report, and I didn't want Marta to have to repeat it all to me. Shall we sit down? Iulya will be here soon with sturgeon; let's drink vodka and talk."

The chauffeur made several trips from the car with armloads of books. Meanwhile, Madison, Sasha, and Marta sat by the stove and shared a bottle of fine vodka that Sasha had removed from his jacket pocket.

"What have you found so far?" Sasha asked.

"You first," said Madison. "Tell me why you're all so anxious about the stuff in those files."

"Fair enough," said Sasha. "You probably realize by now that Hitler and many of his associates are mad about the occult. The SS is partly a secret society; even the swastika is supposed to have occult properties. This much does not interest us. It's foolishness. In

fact, we were rather cheered when he started a secret institute to study kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, Tarot, and so on -- what a waste of money that he could be spending on tanks."

"I agree."

"But then everything changed. The cranks from the Nazi Party were shifted to the sidelines and sober military people got interested. The budget increased dramatically, and so did the level of secrecy. We knew roughly who was involved in this project -- you've seen the names in the files -- but not the nature of their work. It seemed to involve linguistics, archaeology, and folklore as well as the usual magical mumbo-jumbo. If the German General Staff believed in this project, we had to take it seriously too. We needed someone who was learned in all these fields; someone who could also fend for himself in our world -- the secret world. You were the man."

"How lucky for me. But look, how do you know this isn't just a huge screen for something totally unrelated -- a rocket program, for example? Maybe the military took over a crackpot occult organization, fired everybody, and turned it into a secret weapons research outfit."

"We're working on that angle separately. It seems very unlikely. So, assuming that they're really interested in the occult, what do you think they're up to?"

Madison lit his new corncob pipe and puffed for a minute or two. Iulya had just arrived with a basket of fish, so he asked, "May I speak in front of her?"

"Of course," said Marta. "She's NKVD."

"All right. In a nutshell, I think the Nazis want to know the true names of things." He paused like a good lecturer to let that sentence sink in. "The stuff in this stove right here isn't really *fire*, or *fuego*, or *Feuer*; those are just arbitrary sounds. It has a real name, and if you know it, you can control it -- or so the Nazis apparently believe. This is quite a common idea, actually. Let me give you an example. According to the ancient Hebrews, God created the world by speaking. He called things into being simply by saying their names. In that sense, the whole universe was His book; His word and the world were one."

Madison went to a side table and picked up a thick, leather-bound book. Opening it, he said, "Presumably Adam knew the true

names too, for it is written: 'And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.' When Adam and Eve were tossed out of paradise, they lost complete control over nature, so they must have forgotten the names of things. But, according to kabbalistic lore, the angel Reziel gave Adam a book with many true names in it, and this made him fairly powerful again.

"In fact, people were so wise and happy that they got together at Babel and started to build a city to the sky. At that time, according to Genesis, 'the whole world was of one language, and of one speech.' But God didn't like what he saw: 'And the LORD God said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.'"

Madison repeated the last phrase: "'and nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.' It must have been quite a language that they spoke. But God didn't want people to be this powerful, so he said to himself, 'Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' He made them ignorant of Adam's tongue and gave them ordinary languages. Now they were very weak -- so wretched that God took pity on them. On Sinai, He revealed the true language once more, but this time only to Moses. Moses reserved the power of names to a chosen few, the wisest among the Jews. By the time he died, he had written down the true names of everything, including God, but he hid them in code."

Marta was taking notes while Sasha smoked and looked at the fire. Madison continued: "Let me explain how the code works. Everything in the universe can be expressed with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the ten first numbers. I suppose that much is true, and if you stop to think about it, it's sort of magical. The letters can also be given numerical equivalents, which means that the numbers must be fundamental. The system of numbers is full of strange coincidences which hint at an ultimate unity. For example, there are twenty-two Hebrew letters; there are also exactly twenty-two regular shapes that can be inscribed within a circle -- from the triangle to the circle itself. Ultimately, all

numbers can be factored to one, which is God.

"In any case, if you understand numbers, you can decode the books that Moses wrote -- the first five books of our Bible. For example, replace the Hebrew words with their numerical equivalents, and then substitute other words of the same value. Then you can see Moses' true meaning. In particular, you will discover that God's true name -- which is abbreviated in the Jewish Bible as YHVH -- must really have seventy-two letters, for that is the numerical value of the abbreviation, known as the tetragrammaton. If you pronounced the full seventy-two letters, you would have awesome power.

"Or here's another method: treat words as acronyms. The very first word in Genesis, *Bereshit*, means 'in the beginning.' It also stands for the Hebrew words meaning 'He created the firmament, the earth, the heavens, the sea, and the abyss.' Using this method, the whole Bible can be unpacked. Finally, you can replace letters with their equivalents in alternative alphabets, such as one that runs backwards instead of forwards. By endless combinations of these methods, you can slowly discover the real names of things. This is the essence of kabbalah."

"What you're saying is fairly clear," said Marta, looking to Sasha for support, "but why would the Nazis believe in Jewish mysticism? They're anti-Semites, remember?"

"Actually, I'm not at all surprised," said Madison. "Fanatical hatred is very often accompanied by a strong belief in the powers of the enemy. In America, Negroes have developed a religion similar to Haitian voodoo, called hoodoo. Ninety-five percent of Negroes don't believe in it; most have never heard of it; and the few who do practice it treat it as a religion, not a form of witchcraft. You know who does believe in it? Racist rural whites. They're convinced that an old Negro lady can leave a chicken head by the crossroads and they're dead. The same could be true of Nazis, who clearly fear the secret, evil powers of the Jews."

"Let's eat," said Sasha abruptly. He led the way into the dining room, where Iulya had laid plates of steaming soup. Once they were comfortably seated around the table, Sasha remarked: "It's sheer foolishness, I assume, to think that natural objects have true names."

Marta said, "You know, Sasha, I was trained as a physicist at

Moscow State University. But chemistry is actually a better example. In chemistry, we are taught the true names of things. Water is really H₂O. If you know this, you can control it. For instance, you can split water into hydrogen and oxygen. So what is the periodic table but a kabbalistic chart, showing the true names of elements and their mathematical relationships?"

"Yes," said Madison, warming to this topic, "but your powers are limited. I mean, you could split water into hydrogen and oxygen, but you couldn't split the hydrogen atoms, could you?"

Marta grinned at Sasha and said, "Oh no, there are limits to our powers." To Madison, she added, "I suppose that is how magical beliefs differ from science."

Sasha cleared his throat. "I must proceed on the assumption that the Nazis are up to something serious. If they're not -- so much the better. So, Dr. Brown, if you were going to retrieve the original language of man, this ideal language, how would you do it?"

"Like you, I think it's all complete foolishness. I wouldn't try."

"Let's say you *had to*."

Madison looked to Marta's face for help in interpreting Sasha's comment. But she kept her counsel, so he answered: "Very well. Logically, there are two possibilities. Perhaps the post-Babel languages have nothing in common with the original one -- not a word. In that case, we couldn't possibly understand the primary language, even if we could hear it spoken or see it written. The other possibility is that God distributed pieces of Adam's language to each of the tongues of the world. Those pieces would then have magical significance, which mystics in each culture would have discovered. In that case, all magic is the use of fragments from the original language of Adam."

Marta said, "And if you put all the fragments together, you could find the names of things."

"That's right, although a language is more than words; there's also grammar. Perhaps mathematics would somehow provide the grammar for Adam's speech."

"I take it," said Sasha, "that this Jewish thing, kabbalah, is one piece of the puzzle." He said the word 'Jewish' awkwardly, as if it embarrassed him.

"Right," said Madison, "a highly developed piece."

"What are the others?"

"Actually, they're almost infinite: the folklore and magic of each and every culture, living and dead. However, let's assume I'm a Nazi. I can rule out most of the world on the basis of my racist theory. Africans, Orientals -- they cannot possess even shards of the primary language."

"What does that leave?" said Sasha.

"The mysticism of Aryans, Jews, gypsies, and Arabs. That means kabbalah in its Jewish, Moslem, and Christian versions, plus gnosticism, astrology, Hermetism, Neoplatonism, the Tarot, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, Templar and Illuminati thought. But look, mystics have been trying to combine these systems for thousands of years. That's almost the definition of occult. People like your Madame Blatavsky spend their days finding connections between kabbalah, the *I Ching*, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and you name what else. She's just following a well-worn track, far behind Athanasius Kircher in the seventeenth century, Pico della Mirandola in the fifteenth, and so on. None of these people ever achieved any miraculous powers."

"The Nazis must be onto something new," said Sasha.

"What could it be?"

"Palaeolinguistics might have something to do with it," said Marta.

"Indeed." Madison finished chewing a bite of sturgeon. "If I had to guess, I'd say that they're trying to make a science of the occult. Perhaps, as Marta suggests, they're using the periodic table and modern math as well as esoterica. Perhaps they're trying to understand the oldest actual languages of the earth, languages like Indo-European, so that they can get close enough to the primary tongue to know where all the occult fragments fit in."

"With what results?" said Sasha.

"Look, if it works, Hitler can say, 'Russians drop dead' in the tongue of Adam and all you folks are goners. There's a word for it: omnipotence."

"What if he just got close?"

"Then he'd be playing with fire. If he wasn't struck dead trying, he could do a lot of mischief."

"You sound as if you're starting to believe in this," said

Marta with a wink.

"I'm not."

"Well," said Sasha, "there's evidence that the Nazis may be getting close."

"Like what?" said Madison.

Sasha held his lips together to show that they were sealed. "State secret. Anyway, the evidence is ambiguous, but enough to make you worry."

Marta said: "Comrade Madison, I have answers to your questions from last week. The Germans are digging near Rudbar in Persia, just south of the Caspian Sea. The best Tarot reader in Europe is probably someone who goes by the name Madame Sosostriis; she lives in Paris. The books you requested are on the table. Do you have more questions for next time?"

"Just one. You folks must know who composed this anti-Semitic propaganda piece, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. It purports to be minutes from a meeting of Jewish elders who are plotting world domination."

Sasha said, "I can answer that right now. It was written by Russian emigrés in Paris around 1893, given to high officials of the Czar, and reprinted by his secret police, the Okhrana, who also murdered Marta's parents."

"Were these emigrés interested in the occult?"

"Possibly. We'll find out."

For the rest of the evening, they spoke mainly of music. Trying to ingratiate himself with the NKVD general, Madison spoke warmly of Tchaikovsky, the first Russian composer who came to mind. Sasha replied that Tchaikovsky was sentimental and melodramatic -- a clown and a fool compared to Brahms. In truth, this was Madison's opinion too, but he couldn't retract his first remarks without appearing to grovel. Marta rescued him by mentioning Tchaikovsky's chamber music -- the *Souvenir of Florence* and *The Seasons* -- which Madison could honestly say that he admired. Sasha and Marta left late, walking arm-in-arm down the path, wreathed in their steamy breath.

For the next three days, Madison worked hard, although he relaxed occasionally by listening to some Shostakovitch records that Sasha had sent him. On the fourth day, as he expected, a long black car pulled into the driveway. He opened his front door and

was surprised to see two men get out. One was a skinny bald man with glasses. The other was Starobin. They both wore black wool military uniforms and side arms.

"Comrade Alexei, welcome," said Madison.

His companion replied in Russian-accented English: "Comrade doctor, how are you? I am Colonel Trufanov. May we come in?"

"Of course. I was expecting Captain Khatchaturian."

"We too are expecting her." Trufanov smiled humorlessly. Starobin fingered the cover of his pistol holster.

Fear made blood rush into Madison's head. He asked, "How about Comrade Sasha?"

"He's *not* coming. He has been reassigned. Permanently."

"That sounds bad," said Madison. "Why don't you sit down, gentlemen. I'll be right back."

Trufanov stopped him. "Where are you going?"

"To my room. Is there a problem?"

"Not for *us*, my friend."

"Are you going to take me somewhere?"

"Indeed."

"Then I need my jacket. It's hanging in my bedroom. If you want, follow me."

Trufanov followed Madison up the creaking stairs, his boots hammering on the floorboards. Madison put his jacket on and went back downstairs.

"Will Comrade Marta be expecting to see you?" he asked.

"Oh yes," said Trufanov.

"Will I be coming back here?"

"Shut up." Trufanov struck him across the cheek. Starobin's face moved for the first time: it formed a thin smile. Trufanov said: "You'll be doing what you're told."

Madison took his blowgun out of his pocket. He placed a dart in the end and held it like a cigarette, which it somewhat resembled.

"What is that?" said Trufanov

"Just a little something for you," said Madison, blowing. A dart stuck in Trufanov's forehead and he sank wordlessly to the ground. Starobin drew his gun, but not before a second dart had hit his hand. He fell like a sawn tree. Madison took them by their boots

and dragged them into the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

Marta arrived in a second car about fifteen minutes later.

"How are you?" she said, kissing Madison on each cheek. The soft, cold touch lingered for a long time.

"I'm fine."

"Who else is here?"

"Oh, Trufanov and Starobin."

She looked frightened. "What do *they* want?"

"Why don't you ask them? They're in the kitchen."

When she returned, her face was as white as Siberian snow and she held a gun in her hand. Madison pointed up and said, loudly, "Is it time to go?"

"Yes. The Comrades would like you to drive with them. There's nothing to fear." In Russian she added, "Very well, Sergei, I'm coming."

Then she gestured angrily for Madison to leave the dacha. He walked outside to Marta's car, while she followed a step behind him. She opened the back door for him and climbed into the driver seat. She drove to the bottom of the driveway, stopped, turned around, pointed her pistol at his face, and whispered fiercely, "What do you think you're doing? Are you crazy? We're as good as dead."

"Did you know they'd be here?"

"Of course not." She was trembling visibly. "What did they say when they came to the door? Were you under arrest?"

"They didn't use the word."

"I have left two murdered NKVD officers in a dascha and driven off with a foreign spy. I am a dead woman."

"Drop it. You look alive to me. What have they done to Sasha?"

"There's another purge on. He disappeared last night. I thought maybe it was nothing, he'd just forgotten to telephone. If they arrest him, I have no protection."

"Then it's just you and me, baby."

Marta began to drive at normal speed, waving papers at several sentry posts. Madison watched the back of her head, trying to guess her thoughts. Once they had reached a highway, she said: "I'm sure they have microphones in the dacha, but qualified personnel are in short supply. There may not be anyone listening.

They won't miss Trufanov and Starobin for several hours. Then they'll come to the dacha and find the bodies."

"Actually," said Madison, "Starobin and Trufanov will have alerted them by then."

"What are you talking about? They're dead, aren't they?"

"No, asleep. I stuck them with a powerful Brazilian narcotic. Right now, they're having wild dreams. They'll wake up in about three hours, and they'll be a little woozy at first, but it will wear off."

"Why the hell didn't you slit their throats, you fool?"

"I don't kill. I'm a Quaker. I don't even hurt people except in the most minimal way necessary for my own survival."

The car screeched to a halt. Marta turned, gun in hand, and screamed: "You're lying. You must be NKVD. How can you call yourself a pacifist? I know your work in Ethiopia."

"Did I ever kill anyone there? No. I'm a man of peace."

She considered this for a moment, then muttered, "I should blow your silly Yankee head off. Why didn't you tell me, so I could do it?"

"That would have been tantamount to killing them myself."

"You idiot." She stepped on the accelerator. "You wouldn't slit a couple of thugs' throats, but you've killed yourself and me."

He watched her scan the road as she drove. "What's this purge about?" he asked.

"Who knows. There were twenty-six students in my training class. The Spanish fascists killed three; one died in an accident in Indochina. Four are still alive. The rest were executed in purges."

"Some way to run a spy service."

"The paranoia is unbelievable. The boss likes it that way. He wants total control, only his handpicked few in power, and even they live in absolute terror."

"What a thing for an NKVD Captain to say."

For the second time, she slammed on the brakes and turned around. Madison ducked out of sight. She said, "I'm thinking, maybe those guys didn't threaten you so badly. Maybe they didn't come to arrest you, even. Maybe you put them to sleep so that I would have to choose: either shoot you on the spot or defect. But I'll abandon you at the first chance. And if I find out that you tried to trick me, I swear to God I'll put a bullet in your brain. I should

do it now."

"No tricks," said Madison's muffled voice.

"Just keep your head down, face to the floor, and shut your mouth."

She accelerated again, and there began a long period of driving, backing up, stopping, parking, and driving some more -- now on bumpy back roads, now on slick highways and city streets. Night came. At one point, Marta left the car briefly, saying, "Don't move." When she returned, she threw a bag into the back seat and said, "Put this over your head." He did. A little later, a door opened, he was pulled outside, lifted up a ladder, and pushed through a mass of soft material that yielded before him. He fell to the ground, which began to move.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Marta's muffled voice replied, "In an aeroplane full of Red Army uniforms. You can pull the bag off your head."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

They rattled away into the night sky and pitched and tossed for hours. Even without a bag over his head, all Madison could see was black cloth, for he was buried in a pile of woolen clothes. The plane jolted to earth on a rough runway, where they sat for a long time. A door opened and someone shouted in a language that Madison could not understand. Marta pulled the uniforms off him and said, "We can get out."

He blinked as he looked out onto an alpine valley with snow-topped mountains in the background. Sheep grazed in front of an old stone cottage, and in the distance bells rang from a domed church.

"Welcome to Armenia," said Marta.