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KATASTROPHE



GRAHAM HURLEY

KATASTROPHE

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An Aries Book

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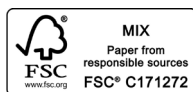
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events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
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À Danielle
notre prof inestimable

‘The purpose of propaganda has never been to instil convictions, but to destroy the capacity to form any’

– Hannah Arendt

January 1945.

Just occasionally, one of the guards would arrive under cover of darkness with a tiny morsel of rotten venison, wrapped in newsprint. He was a Ukranian, Borys. He had a distinctive cough, a rasp deep in his throat, and if you had the ears for it you could hear him coming. Werner Nehmann had the ears for it, and also the luck to occupy one of the tier of wooden bunks nearest the door.

The cough. Then the dry squeak of snow beneath the approaching boots.

The *Vory*, the gangster *zeks* who ran the hut, were playing cards beside the stove and never lifted their heads. They didn't have to. They knew that the offering was for them, settlement for yesterday's use of the strangling towel on the hated ex-NKVD *zek* who'd complained about the tiny splinters of soap in the bathhouse once too often. Little Nehmann, the Georgian with the crooked smile, would play the postman, meet the guard at the door then bang it shut seconds later, keeping the icy wind at bay. Then would come the moment when he deposited the ten grammes of weeping venison carefully beside the fan of cards on the quilt the *Vory* used as a table. One or two of the faces would glance up, watching Nehmann as he stepped away. Not

with a shaving or two of the meat, but with the soiled sheet of newsprint.

Next day, the paper dry, he'd return from the mine and stamp the life back into his sodden feet and hoist himself up to the top bunk where the freezing air was a degree or two warmer. He was still in his working clothes – cap, padded coat, pea jacket, felt trousers. He'd sleep like this, his hands thrust between his thighs, trying to conjure warmth from the icy darkness, but for now he listened to the chatter of the *Vory* while he used a carefully torn length of newsprint to roll himself a cigarette.

His fingers, swollen from hunger and hopelessly bent from a year and a half at the unforgiving end of a shovel, took a while to coax every last shred of tobacco into place, but then he lay back, the cigarette between his ruined fingers, enjoying the anticipation of the struck match, the tiny flower of flame and then the harsh bite of the *makhorka* tobacco. Not just that but also the taste of the printing ink from the news sheet.

Had he tried to make sense of the columns on this page of the paper? Of course he had. One of them listed the output of tractor parts from a factory in nearby Magadan. Another celebrated the performance of a Shostakovich symphony at the concert hall in distant Novosibirsk. Did he believe a word of either story? *Nein*. But that wasn't the point. The point was the tang of printer's ink on the very tip of his tongue.

Did he invent this taste? Was it just another of the fictions that had sustained him for most of his working life? And in any event, did it matter? Of course not. Anything, he thought. Anything to mask the sour camp breath of sweat and old clothing, of the thin *kasha* that was never warm enough, of jerking awake like an animal night after night, disturbed by the faintest noise, his hair already frozen to the roughness of the filled sacking that

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served as a pillow, his ear instantly tuned to the howl of a wolf beyond the treeline.

Everything happened very slowly in the Gulag, he told himself. But even last year's news, the knowledge that something out there in the real world had happened and been recorded, kept him sane. First you invent a story. Then you see it into print. And then, if you're very, very lucky, you get to smoke it.

One of the *Vory*, the oldest, had abandoned the card game for the brief comforts of his concubine. The *Vory* called him 'Zoika'. He was young, no more than a boy. He had the body of a ghost and he occupied the bunk below Nehmann. He offered a range of talents and in spring, for some reason, his keeper celebrated the melt by auctioning shares in Zoika to anyone with enough tobacco. Now, in the depths of Nehmann's second Siberian winter, there was no sharing and by the time the *Vory* had noisily finished and rejoined the card game, Nehmann's cigarette was nothing more than a wet stub. He looked at it a moment, then let his hand dangle over the side of the bunk. Moments later, the stub had gone.

'*Guten Appetit*,' he murmured. The little waif would eat anything.



Nehmann's war had come to an abrupt end in Stalingrad, almost exactly two years ago. With the city in ruins, and the Russians accepting the surrender of General Paulus' Sixth Army, 91,000 German troops stumbled into captivity. One of them, taken prisoner in a church, was Werner Nehmann.

Technically, he wasn't a soldier at all but a journalist, working for Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda. This distinction was lost on the Soviet arresting officer who handed him over to an NKVD apparatchik, who took one look at Nehmann's

stolen greatcoat, and his Russian leather boots, and promptly assigned him to one of the work parties digging out foundations for a primitive war memorial.

This was to be raised on one of the cliffs overlooking the still-smoking deathscape that had once been Stalin's city beside the Volga, and in this respect – as in so many others – Nehmann was lucky. He'd suffered no wounds. Neither had he succumbed to frostbite, or dysentery, or the multiple outbreaks of typhoid that had crept into dugout after dugout as the German advance stalled. On the contrary, thanks to his comrade in arms, a gruff *Abwehr* spy hunter called Wilhelm Schultz, he'd been generously fed and watered, a blessing that earned him murderous looks from the endless lines of ravenous prisoners he passed at dawn every morning as his work party, bent against the driving snow, struggled up the bluff towards the memorial site.

By the time the excavations were done, it was early spring. Nehmann's last glimpse of Stalingrad was late in the afternoon of a cold, grey day. He stood briefly in the last of the daylight, the sweat cooling under his tunic, awaiting orders from the piratical Kazakhs who served as escorts. The city lay beneath him, as pale and still as a corpse, not a hint of movement, and he remembered lifting his head in time to catch a single shaft of sunlight on the far horizon where the city gave way to the interminable steppe. He was looking west. Berlin was thousands of kilometres away. Should he give the Kazakhs the slip? Should he start walking? Might there be an alternative to sleeping on the bare earth, surrounded by coils of barbed wire, aware that his luck was fast running out?

The answer was no. Next morning, along with hundreds of other prisoners, the Kazakhs shipped him across the river, marched him to the railhead and threw him into a cattle wagon. For the next eight days, it was standing room only, the prisoners

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huddled together for warmth, peeing through gaps in the planked floor as more of the steppe rolled slowly past. The journalist in Nehmann wanted to find out about these broken bodies. He asked questions the way most men drew breath. His curiosity was instinctive, ungoverned, insatiable. Where had they come from? What did they make of the last three months? What next for the Führer's all-conquering armies? But these whispered enquiries, however deftly he dressed them up, fell on deaf ears.

Once a day the train would stop. The door slid open and unseen hands tossed loaves of black bread into the stink of the cattle wagon. There was a bucket or two of water as well, but Nehmann had counted eighty-seven heads at the start of the journey and the food and water was never enough. Dawn on the third day revealed three corpses, all of them still standing, denied even the space to collapse. With rough impatience, a huge Sergeant from Saxony managed to force the door open. All three men were stripped of anything remotely useful – clothing, boots – and rolled onto the trackside. No one said a word, no muttered prayers of farewell, and not for the first time Nehmann understood the vast indifference of death. It went, he thought, with the landscape. These men had simply given up, surrendering to hunger, and disease, and the rank bitterness of defeat. Three naked corpses and the featureless steppe were a perfect fit.

Towards the end of the journey, Nehmann fell to thinking about Schultz. In so many respects, in the madness of Stalingrad, they'd been made for each other. With his tiny team, Schultz had commandeered parts of a bus station as *Abwehr* field headquarters. The building gave them shelter and a degree of warmth, and down in the basement he'd been happy to find room for Nehmann, newly arrived at the front.

Pre-war, in Berlin, the name Stalingrad had meant nothing, and it was here that the two men had first got to know each

other: Schultz the fast-rising star from Army Intelligence, part street brawler, part poet; Nehmann, the little Georgian genius rumoured to have the ear of Joseph Goebbels. They shared an appetite for beer and schnapps in a certain kind of bar, for tradeable gossip from the bedrooms of the Nazi elite, for women with class, and appetite, and a sense of humour, for anything – in short – that punctured the strutting self-importance that went with ministerial office on the Wilhelmstrasse. Long before the war had got properly underway, they'd agreed that the Thousand Year Reich was one of God's sillier jokes, destined for an early grave. Not that anything in peacetime Berlin had ever prepared them for this.

Schultz and Nehmann had been arrested together in a church on the eve of Paulus' surrender. Outside, it was nearly dark. Both men were facing a line of heavily armed Soviet soldiers, and both expected to be shot. Instead, on a grunted order from the officer in charge, they were searched and then separated. Nehmann had a last glimpse of Schultz as he was pushed towards a waiting truck. The big *Abwehr* man shook off his escort and threw Nehmann a glance over his shoulder.

'Tante Gerda,' he growled. 'First through the door buys the drinks.'

Tante Gerda was a bar in Moabit, much favoured by those few Berlin scribblers who still refused to take the Nazis seriously. For once, Nehmann struggled to reply and by the time he opened his mouth, Schultz had gone.

*

The journey from Stalingrad finally came to an end. Nehmann had been counting. Four days on his feet. Four days without a shit. Four days when his brain had slowly given up the battle to make sense of what was going on. More dead bodies. More

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sips of icy water from the circulating tin mug. More whispered rumours that so and so, the thin guy pinioned in one corner of the cattle truck, would be lucky to make it through.

The train juddered to a halt. Mother Russia, thought Nehmann, could stretch no further east. Beyond here, the train would surely topple off the edge of the known world and end up in the sea. Men outside were shouting. The wooden door was pushed open and the faces peering up recoiled at the pile of more naked bodies readied for disposal. Nehmann was a Georgian and his real name was Mikhail Magalashvili. He spoke Russian, understood the Cyrillic alphabet, but staring out at the trackside sign in the marshalling yard, he was none the wiser. Krasnoyarsk? Where on God's earth was that?

It was the dead of night. Open trucks took them through the deserted city centre, the bald tyres whispering on the packed snow, the driver lurching left and right to avoid the bigger potholes, the prisoners still on their feet, every back turned to the bitter wind. Already, on the dig in Stalingrad, the Russians had taken to calling them '*zeks*'. Nehmann had heard the term before and knew what it meant. '*Zeks*' were the cast-offs on whom the Revolution depended for the latest Five-Year Plan. '*Zeks*' dug canals, felled trees, tamed hostile stretches of the taiga, burrowed into the frozen earth in search of precious minerals. '*Zeks*' fed the great industries evacuated east of the Urals, safely removed from the German onslaught. Another name for '*zeks*' left nothing to the imagination. '*Zeks*' were camp dust.

Nehmann still thought they were close to the ocean, but he was wrong. The journey went on for six more days. Every four hours the truck would stop. Bread would appear from nowhere, and huge buckets of a thin, cold, buckwheat gruel called *kasha*, and guards would gesture for the men to exercise, drive the cold from their bones, empty their bladders or their bowels in the

frosted roadside tussock. This small improvement on the days and nights in the swaying cattle truck sparked brief exchanges of conversation, and on the last night Nehmann found himself beside a gaunt figure who must have been in his fifties. He had a Moscow accent, and the delicate gestures of someone used to a life indoors.

It was the middle of the night. The road had narrowed and now it wound upwards into the mountains. The endless pine trees were mantled with snow that feathered in the slipstream as the truck rumbled past. The sky was cloudless, brilliant with stars, and many of the men gazed upwards, their eyes moist in the icy wind. The old man beside Nehmann lifted a weary arm.

‘The Dipper,’ he murmured. ‘It’s in the wrong place.’

Nehmann followed his pointing finger. The man was right. The Big Dipper was the constellation of the Great Bear, Ursa Major. Nehmann had grown up in the Caucasus, and on nights like this, perfect visibility, his father’s thick finger would often trace the tell-tale outline from star to star. The Great Bear, he warned, was Russia. The Red Army had only recently crossed the mountains and pitched their tents in Tbilisi, their presence visible on every city street. The image of the Bear over Georgia had stayed with Nehmann ever since, an astral placard, proof that Communism had terrible consequences, but those stars had always been in the north, high over the mountains. Now, it was down near the horizon, no less impressive, no less portentous, but mysteriously rehomed. God again, he thought grimly. Capricious. Forgetful. Tidying the Dipper into a corner of the night sky where it didn’t belong.

*

That first year, 1943, was Nehmann’s first taste of the region they called Kolyma. His first camp lacked even a name, and his

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first hut, like all the huts that followed, had been thrown up in a hurry. Every plank in the four walls had made an enemy of its neighbour. There were gaps everywhere, a nightly invitation for winter to make itself at home among bodies desperate for sleep. Warmth from the single stove never reached beyond the nearest tiers of bunks, and in any case the wood had always run out by mid-evening.

Curled up in the aching cold in his bunk, Nehmann would sometimes open one eye and watch a fellow *zek* creep across the rough wooden floor and settle a stolen potato in the embers of the stove. The mouldy pebble of starch would offer a couple of barely cooked mouthfuls at the very most, but the *zek* would stay beside the stove for hours, standing guard, his gaze fixed on the tiny mound of cooling ash. Occasionally, when the guard arrived before dawn to bang his hammer on the hanging rail to ready the hut for another day's work, the *zek* would still be there, his patience a testament to hunger and perhaps optimism. Even then, Nehmann knew that the harsh metallic clang of the hammer, steel on steel, would stay with him for the rest of his life. It was implacable. It brooked no argument. In the muddle of lightly fevered dreams that served as sleep, it elbowed everything else aside.

Nehmann's first working party, twenty souls, took him away from the camp and up into the mountains. An hour or so on the ice-crusted muddy path and he was looking at one of the patches of bare snow among the pine trees worn thin by a winter of the hardest labour. Whether by axe or a rusting two-man saw, cutting down trees drained starving bodies of their last gramme of energy. Then, in the chill sunshine of early spring, the shadows would lengthen, and the guards would check their watches, and the *zeks* would muster to drag the fallen trees back down the mountain. The guards, duty bound to be back in camp in time

to attend their late-afternoon propaganda sessions, would urge their charges to still greater efforts, the stripped tree trunks on their shoulders as they fought for balance on the packed snow.

Because he was a recent arrival and something of a novelty, Nehmann always seemed to end up with the heaviest end of the tree, and he quickly learned to skip sideways on the steeper corners of the path, all too conscious that a fall – with the crushing weight of the tree on top of him – would probably be fatal. This little circus manoeuvre seemed to work, and to his quiet satisfaction others in the work party began to copy him.

Back in the hut, he found himself talking to a political prisoner from Leningrad who'd made an enemy of powerful elements in the Party. A professor of literature from the State University, he'd brought both logic and passion to the pointless, self-serving *Obkom* committee debates that – in this man's account – often lasted until daybreak. In the end, as he'd half expected, he'd paid a terrible price for his honesty and his talents, falling foul of Article 58 of the regime's penal code, but even now he didn't seem to care.

'Maybe I should have watched where I put my feet,' he told Nehmann. 'Much like you, my friend.'

There were other moments, too, when the numbing shocks of camp life began to lift, and Nehmann sensed the possibility of light in the darkness. The felling area in the mountains was surrounded by stands of dwarf cedar. The first time Nehmann laid eyes on them, they lay prone, half covered in snow, yet more victims of the pitiless winter. Then, one dark, cloudy morning, one of the little trees roused itself, animal-like, shaking the snow from its branches. How and why this happened was a mystery but within minutes, as Nehmann watched, other dwarf cedars sprung to attention. Nehmann's laughter attracted the attention of one of the older *zeks*, a former mayor from a Moscow suburb,

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another of the camp's Article 58 politicals. He struggled across through the drifts of thick snow and told Nehmann that spring was only days away.

'They know,' he gestured at the little trees. 'Don't ask me how, but they do.'

Nehmann, a journalist to his fingertips, trusted no one, but the next morning there was a flicker of heat in the sun and when they made it up the mountain to the felling area, every dwarf cedar was on parade. Nehmann, who'd loved conjuring tricks all his life, was delighted. More to the point, when the ex-mayor presented him with a handful of cedar nuts, he slipped them into his pocket. He loved the smoothness of the nuts between his fingertips, and the sight of them reminded him of another kind of bean, back in a previous life, when the sound of the grinder, and the taste of fresh coffee, were pleasures he'd been foolish enough to take for granted.

*

Never again. In the Gulag, food dominated everything. Basic rations boiled down to meagre helpings of pea soup, buckwheat *kasha*, pearl barley so tough it was known as 'shrapnel', and bread that would put a stopper up your arse for five days. Just getting by on a diet like this, especially in winter, was near-impossible, but to eat better – under the quota system – you had to work harder. Nehmann had no trouble following this logic but meeting a decent quota meant having enough food in your belly, at which point any sane man would start looking for ways of cheating the system.

The hut's orderly, that first spring, woke up one morning to find a dead body in the bunk below. The man had died in the night but the orderly kept the news to himself until the day's rations had been delivered. That way he got double rations for

the day, trading half of the dead man's allowance for tobacco, and everyone agreed that providence had smiled upon him. This incident made a profound impression on Nehmann, who began to ponder ways in which he, too, might profit from a little free enterprise.

There were a couple of dozen horses in the camp. They were used to haul logs and Nehmann knew that they were even more vulnerable to the Siberian winter than *zeks*. And so Nehmann made it his business to keep his eye on the oldest beast, which was beginning to shiver and gasp for breath. Temperatures that week froze your spit before it hit the ground, and late one afternoon word went around that the horse had collapsed. In his home town, as a fourteen-year-old, Nehmann had worked in the local abattoir and still remembered how to butcher a carcass.

After dark, he borrowed a knife from one of the *Vory* on the promise of choice cuts, slit the animal's throat and then opened its belly. The *Vory*, ever suspicious, joined him beside the steaming carcass, gazing at the rich spill of intestines, then dipped his little finger with its long nail into the warm soup of blood and guts. That night, before the guards came, Nehmann had time to slice off parcels of meat, which he hid in nearby drifts of snow. The rank stench of the opened beast brought wolves into the camp that night and they feasted on the remains of the horse, but a handful of Nehmann's cache of precious protein survived and the episode won him a quiet round of applause from his fellow *zeks*. The camp authorities were less impressed. Three days later, Nehmann was transferred.

*

Gold had never much featured in Nehmann's life, but this never-ending war was full of surprises, and a day in the back of yet another truck took him and dozens of other *zeks* north

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along the Kolyma Highway. The highway, built by *zek* labour years before the Great Patriotic War, was also known as the Road of Bones. Nehmann had first come across the phrase only weeks before and was struck by the neatness of Soviet thinking. First you laboured day and night to build this gravelled highway. Then you died of exhaustion and became part of its foundations.

The new camp was a ninety-minute trudge across the green sprawl of the taiga to the gold mine. An army of *zeks*, now helped by American-supplied bulldozers, had taken a huge bite out of the hillside above the River Kolyma. The innards of this vast quarry looked like a child's painting, crude daubs of heavy greys and blacks, glistening from the overnight rain. Half close your eyes, Nehmann thought, and you might be looking at the remains of a gigantic fire, left to cool overnight. Slurry the colour of ash. *Zeks* struggling with wooden wheelbarrows loaded with rock, their faces the colour of death.

The work was brutal, far worse than Nehmann's earlier dalliance with timber felling. By nine o'clock, in the first fitful rays of the sun, he would be hauling a stone-filled cart, the horse collar biting into his bony shoulders, his thighs and lower back on fire as he struggled to make it to the waterside site where the minerals would be crushed and sieved. Other *zeks* watched, passive, incurious, while he took a shovel to the stones in the cart, adding them to the pile, grunting with the effort, the taste of blood in his mouth from his weeping gums. The cart empty, he'd return for another load, and then another, each journey a little slower than the last, oblivious to the laughter of the guards. Nehmann, they'd concluded, was a 'wick'. Wick meant goner.

Months went by. A prisoner of the quota system, Nehmann knew that he'd only get through by working harder, by earning

more rations, by submitting to this pitiless regime, and so he forced what remained of his body to still greater efforts until the guards began to view him in a new light. Then came the evening when he limped to the bathhouse, utterly exhausted, only to find that some camp sadist had found a full-length mirror for the use of the *zeks*.

He paused in mid-step, his cap in his hand, stared at the image in the pitted glass, took stock. The torn pea jacket, the filthy buttonless military shirt, a dirty body latticed with scratches from louse bites, rags around his fingers, rags tied with string around his feet, a mouth full of inflamed gums and loose teeth, and not a gramme of spare flesh on the scaffold of bones. Back in the previous camp, he'd learned the hard way about the dangers of losing all sense of direction in the sudden whiteouts on the mountainside. Now, eyeballing the scarecrow figure in the mirror, the feeling of panic, or perhaps resignation, was very similar. He'd lost his bearings. He no longer knew where or who he was. To grow old in the Gulag was an oxymoron. Kolyma was eating him alive.

Redemption arrived in the shape of the *zek* who occupied the bunk below him. He was an old man by the standards of the Gulag, itself an achievement, but his lungs were slowly filling with some nameless infection and he knew that he hadn't long to live. His name was Lev. During the civil war, he'd carried a radio for the Bolsheviks, and in what little time was left to him, perhaps as a legacy, he wanted to teach Nehmann Morse code. Nehmann said yes, only too happy to keep his brain alive, and tap-tapping lessons on the rough, unsanded wood of the bunks lasted late into the evening. Nehmann, to his delight, mastered the alphabet within weeks. Lev died one August evening, coughing his life away in the fetid shed that served as the camp hospital, and back in his bunk that night Nehmann tapped out a final

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message in the belief that he might still have been listening. 'Twenty-six words a minute,' he sucked at his sore knuckle. 'Thanks to you, my friend.'

The summer melted quickly into autumn. Nehmann's face, raw and swollen from mosquito bites, began to recover. Both hands had moulded themselves around the pick and the shovel and the handles of the wheelbarrow, but he watched others eating and learned to pinch the stem of his soup spoon with the tips of his calloused fingers. Writing was another challenge. He'd relied on pen and paper all his working life but now he had to wrap a length of torn rag around the shaft of the pen and the pencil to get the right purchase. The truth, he knew, was that his living hand, the right one, the one he relied on, had become a hook, an artificial limb, and there were moments of despair when he wondered about a drop of oil, or – if that failed – a crosscut saw. But then he remembered the quota system again. One-handed, he'd never earn enough food to stay alive.

And so, like every other *zek*, he simply resigned himself to the numbing routines of camp life. The six o'clock starts. The ten daily roll calls. The four questions you faced hour after hour, from guard after guard, a deliberately tireless reiteration of your place in the camp pecking order: first name? Family name? Offence? Sentence? Nehmann never fully understood the revolutionary logic that tied these four facts together, but he knew that wasn't the point. The questions were framed to make you feel utterly helpless, and unless you were stubborn enough to keep a part of your inner self well hidden, it worked.

From time to time, very occasionally, there came moments of near relief. An accident in the mine left the maintenance gang a man short and for three giddy weeks Nehmann found himself helping to lay and re-lay the heavy planks of wood that

took the weight of the wheelbarrows and the stone carts en route to the washer. There was variety in this new challenge, and with it came the opportunity to spread the physical stress to different corners of his body. The quota system was different too. Nehmann was good at the work, nimble when it mattered, and towards the end of the month, with second helpings at the evening meal, he even put on a kilo or two of extra weight. Back in Berlin, Goebbels had given Nehmann a nickname. *Der Über* was short for *der Überlebender*, but only now did Nehmann realise how prescient the Minister of Propaganda had been. *Überlebender* meant ‘survivor’.

After the planking, another assignment. Barrowloads from the mine had to be washed and sieved for the little tell-tale specks of yellow among the slurry. This, after all, was the whole point of the vast pit beside the river: to deliver gold for the Revolution. The work was horrible. You pulled rubber galoshes over bare feet and stood in the freezing water for an entire day, desperate to earn your quota. In this godless corner of Kolyma, gold was the basic unit of everything, the one elusive commodity against which you measured production, a less empty belly, a night’s sleep and the prospect of another day on God’s earth. If the sieve was your friend, you made it through. If it wasn’t, then you began to falter.

Nehmann never faltered. Not physically. Not in ways that immediately mattered. Not that summer, nor the winter that followed, nor the long year thereafter. Keeping track of the passage of time turned you into an animal. Without a watch, or a radio, or access to regular newspapers, you began to keep an eye on the passage of the seasons, of the days when the green sprawl of the surrounding taiga turned first yellow, then a briefly radiant gold. You sniffed the air like a dog, scenting hints of frost. You watched the thin daylight disappear earlier

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and earlier. In short, you became a plaything of the elements, of the weather, of the ever-changing truce between darkness and light, utterly removed from the world that had first shaped you.

Nehmann had always had a talent for introspection, for taking a good look at himself, for mustering as much honesty as he dared about his own ability to cope in any situation, but he knew that two long years in Kolyma exacted a heavy price. The curtains had closed on memories of pre-war Berlin, of the Führer's triumphant return from crushing France, of the love affair that had brought a half-Jewish pianist called Maria into his life, of the reckless *pas de deux* he'd conducted with Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, even of his friendship with Willi Schultz. Most of Stalingrad had gone too, an experience Nehmann once swore he'd never forget, and all that was left was a world of thin *kasha*, and frozen spitballs, and a misplaced Dipper that – on cloudless nights – never failed to make him feel profoundly alone.

All the stranger, therefore, to awake one winter morning much earlier than usual with a face in the darkness peering up at his bunk.

'Herr Nehmann?' His German accent was excellent. '*Kommen Sie mit.*'