

## PART ONE



### Chapter One: THE DRAGON

...Staring with fiery eyes, breathing flame and smoke, shaking the wilderness with its roar, and sweeping away its tracks with a tail of fire—the dragon flew.

It was not from Chinese fairy tales or Tibetan pagodas. It rose from somewhere in the thundering center of the "land of wonders," flying out of the black hell of the land of man-hunters. It sped over the vast Ural Mountains... through the thick forests of Siberia... across the grim Lake Baikal... through the wild ridges of Transbaikalia... over the Stanovoy Range, twisting between rocks and peaks. High in the sky, scattering sparks and a foul smell, it flew on and on through the endless night.

...It glowed over canyons... twisted over abysses... whistled in a spiral over wild cliffs and suddenly vanished deep underground. Like a fire-eyed worm, it plunged with a grinding crash into the chest of rocky mountains, drilling through them with lightning speed. It disappeared... and then suddenly burst out from underground far away like a hellish monster, shaking the night with laughter. It flashed its fiery eyes, shrieked madly, and, wagging its tail like a comet, flew on and on...

The cliffs parted like shadows. Pine and fir trees ran away in fear, scattering in all directions. A startled moose froze in a clearing, paralyzed with terror, then bolted away, breaking its legs and tearing its skin, running as fast as it could into the unknown.

And echoes chased into the distance like mountain spirits—scattering through the hills, leaping into canyons, hiding in the thickets... Behind them flew the dragon.

This was no fictional monster from naive Chinese tales, nor the legendary dragon of the Dalai Lama. No, this was a real, the only real, true dragon—the biggest and most terrifying of all. Neither the heroes of old nor Saint George himself could defeat it. On steel paws, with a fiery belly and an iron mouth, it roared as if it had just escaped from hell.

Sixty boxcars—sixty joints in the dragon's body. At the front, the fire-eyed head—a giant two-eyed cyclops—the powerful "I.S." (Joseph Stalin) locomotive. At the back, another powerful "F.D." (Felix Dzerzhinsky) locomotive. A searchlight on the tender acted as a long fiery tail. Beside every car stood a row of bayonets. The dragon was bristling with them like a hedgehog... no, like a dragon! And it charged forward with a metallic grind.

Sixty joints of the dragon—these were sixty reddish coffins, and each was full of swallowed victims, full of the living dead. Through barred windows, clusters of flickering eyes looked out sadly—looking through the darkness toward a lost world, toward a country filled with sun, a Fatherland filled with the laughter of childhood and youth cut short too early, where mothers... families... and wives remained. Clusters of eyes flickered and flew into the black darkness, into the abyss. The dragon's belly was stuffed to the brim with them. The cyclopean "I.S." pulled them, and the demon "F.D." pushed them from behind.

In reality, this was a *prison transport*, a "death train"—a transport of the OGPU-NKVD.

### **The Dragon.**

It rushes without stopping, clattering with iron paws, carrying the doomed, the hopeless, and the tortured. It wants to carry them into the unknown so that no one knows where or why—to the edge of the world, into non-existence. And there is no hero to save them... No one will ever rescue them, and no one will even hear a word about them. Night. A black, endless night.

The trees shrink back, running away. The dragon devours everything in front of it with its eyes and sweeps its fiery tail behind—shining on the tracks and the thickets, checking the trail: is anyone escaping?

Sometimes a shot rings out... then another. A guard imagines a betrayal or an escape, and he screams piercingly, firing blindly at the moving shadows of trees and poles.

Even though no one could jump out alive at such a mad speed, and even though no one could break out past such guards and locks, still... the guard must be "vigilant." This is his "matter of honor and glory," his "matter of courage and heroism."

Or perhaps he is afraid himself; perhaps he feels uneasy on the tail of this devilish comet, and he encourages himself by shooting into the black, treacherous night, at the flashes behind him, into the mess of moving shadows.

Kilometers fly by—tens... hundreds... thousands. Forests, deserts, mountain ranges, and countless rivers and dark lakes disappear behind. Bridges, signals, and tunnels roar past. Everything falls back. But the dragon keeps flying—into the unknown, forward, into the black Siberian night, to the edge of the world. It crosses meridians. It draws a giant curve along the 49th parallel, marking it with fiery sparks like a comet. It strikes the black haze with its tail, breathing out smoke and stench, and it roars, it roars...

No express train travels like this; only this prison transport, this strange death train—the special NKVD echelon. It is one of many such trains; they rush at a mad pace through the deep night and through even deeper Siberia, wrapped in mystery... Not just any mystery, but a state secret. Surrounded by bayonets and equipped with searchlights, they rush into a secret as dark as Siberia itself.

Fantastic and real, they are the strange parts of a terrifying legend—the mysterious legend of disappearing souls.

At certain points, the train stops. For a moment, a short moment. Then workers run along the roofs, jumping from car to car, tapping the iron with sticks—is anything broken?! Any sabotage?! Others run along the sides, tapping the walls—is a board loose anywhere?! Has an enemy from the inside tried to escape from the law and order of the state?!

For it is their "matter of glory and honor," a matter of their "courage," to deliver this transport to its destination—to that abyss that was formed somewhere, which for years has been filled with human bones and souls, and yet can never be filled.

And then, the transport commander runs along the train. He starts near the "I.S." locomotive and, with his head tilted back, looks anxiously from car to car, searching for something. He runs past the long line of grim, hermetically sealed red boxes—the ones labeled "for forty people or eight horses"—and finally stops at a middle car. He catches his breath for a moment. Then, looking up at the barred window, he calls out commandingly to the cluster of flickering eyes and pale faces that are pressed against the bars like paper.

