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Opening extract from

The Winter Horse

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Much of this old story has been gathered together like the many fragments of a broken vase. The pieces do not always fit as best they might, and indeed it's quite possible that several of them do not belong here at all. It cannot be denied that the story has many holes and could not withstand much scrutiny. Historians will object—as they always seem to do—and say there is no real evidence that the old man and the girl who are the story's hero and heroine ever really existed. And yet if today you were in Ukraine and dared to put your ear into the wind or perhaps took a trip across the steppe and listened to the deep voices of the bison, the whoop of the cranes, or the laughter of the Przewalski's horses, you might learn that about the truth, the animals are never wrong; and that even if there are some parts of this story that are not exactly true, they could *be, and that is more important. The animals would surely say that if there is one truth greater than all of the others, it is that there are times when history must take second place to legend.*

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It was during the summer of 1941 that, to a man, the management of the State Steppe Nature Reserve of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic ran away. Before he drove from the reserve in his shiny black limousine, Borys Demyanovich Krajnik, who was the senior manager, ordered Maxim Borisovich Melnik—who looked after all the animals on the nature reserve—to run away, too.

"The Germans are coming," he'd told Max. "Their armies have attacked and invaded the Soviet Union without warning. They've already taken the great city of Kiev and they will be here soon. Perhaps as early as next week."

Krajnik was emptying his desk and packing his bags while he was speaking to Maxim Borisovich Melnik and seemed to be preparing to leave.

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"But I thought the Germans were our allies," said Max, for much had changed in Ukraine since 1919.

"They were, that's true. But now they're not, see? That's just politics. Doubtless they're after the oil fields of the Crimea. For their war machine. Look, Maxim Borisovich, all you need to know now is that the Germans are fascists and when they get here, they will kill you. Of course, in time our own Red Army will defeat them, but until this happens, you should definitely leave the reserve."

"But where shall I go?" Max asked Krajnik.

"That's your problem, Comrade. But my advice is to go east, towards our own forces. Go east as quickly as you can. However, before you can leave, there's an important order I'm giving to you. Very important. It comes from the central committee."

Max was astounded that the central committee of the Communist Party even knew he still existed, let alone that they had given him an important order. He couldn't help smiling at the very idea of this.

"An order for me? What is it, Comrade?"

"The committee orders you to slaughter all of the animals on the reserve."

"You're joking, Borys Demyanovich. Or perhaps the committee is joking."

"The central committee doesn't make jokes, Maxim Borisovich."

The smile disappeared from Max's old bearded face

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as quickly as it had arrived. He rubbed his neck thoughtfully; it always seemed to hurt a little when the subject of killing an animal came up.

"Kill all our animals, you say?"

"All of them."

"What—the zebras? The ostriches? The llamas?"

"Yes, Comrade."

"Including the Przewalski's horses?"

"Including the horses."

"For goodness' sake, why?"

"To stop them from falling into enemy hands, of course. There's enough meat walking around this reserve to feed a small army. Deer, goats, bison, horses, chickens—they're all to be shot. I'd help you myself but, er … I've some important orders of my own. I'm urgently required in Kharkov. So I have to leave today. Now. As soon as I've finished talking to you."

"But I couldn't kill our animals, Comrade," said Max. "Some of them are very rare. So rare, their species might even become extinct. Not only that, but some of them are my friends."

"Sentimental nonsense. We're fighting a war, d'you understand? And our people are the ones who are facing extinction. The Germans mean to take our land and destroy all of us so that they can live on it. So, if I come back and find that you haven't carried out my orders, I'll call the secret police and have you shot. You've got a rifle. Now use it."

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"Very well," said Max, although obviously he had no intention of killing any of the animals; besides, he rather doubted that Borys Demyanovich Krajnik was coming back any time soon. "I don't like it, but I'll do as you say, Comrade."

"I don't like it any more than you, Maxim Borisovich, but this is a patriotic war we're fighting. We're fighting for our very survival. It's the Germans or us. From what I hear, they've already done some terrible things in Poland. So you would do well to be afraid of them."

And with those words, Krajnik drove away, as quickly as he could.

Max went outside the house and walked back to his simple cottage on the edge of the steppe.

The reserve of which he now had full charge was a hidden, enchanted place that consisted of a zoological park and an open territory of steppe covering more than three hundred square kilometres. A wild, desolate-looking region, it is mostly open grassland and largely treeless except for pockets of dense forest growing near rivers and lakes. The steppe is famous for being as bare as the palm of a man's hand, where there abides but rain and cold in winter and baking sun in summer, but in truth, the weather is more unpredictable than that.

Max did not think he would miss Krajnik very much. One of the reasons the old man was so fond of the reserve was that people like Krajnik were seldom encountered: there were just six small villages in the

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reserve and the nearest city, Mykolaiv, was more than three hours' drive away. Max thought that was just as well, since the whole idea of a nature reserve is to provide a sanctuary from men, where animals can exist without being put to work or hunted for food. In spite of what Krajnik had said about the Germans, the old man had high hopes of them being a real improvement on the Ukrainian Soviet government. And he did not think this hope was unreasonable.

For one thing, it was a German, not a Ukrainian or a Russian, who had loved animals enough to create the sanctuary at Askaniya-Nova. That same German—the baron Falz-Fein—had been the only man ever to show Max any real kindness. Everything he remembered about the Germans at Askaniya-Nova persuaded Max that if they did turn up and try to kill the animals, he could reason with them. After all, he could speak German, although it had been many years since he'd needed to. And so the first thing he did when Krajnik departed from Askaniya-Nova was not to shoot any of the animals but to return to his cottage and look for the German dictionary and grammar book that the baron had given him on his birthday more than forty years ago. And since he had only one small bookshelf with the Bible, a long poem called *Eugene Onegin* and *The Game of Chess* by Savielly Tartakower, Max quickly found these books and started to reacquaint himself with the complexities of the German language.

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It was another two weeks before the German SS arrived in trucks and on motorbikes, and took over the main house. They seemed to be in a very good mood and behaved with courtesy when Max presented himself to some of the guards and asked to see the officer in charge. Despite the pirate skull and crossbones on their hats and helmets, they weren't at all frightening to Max. They ushered him into the baron's old study, where he snatched off his cap and introduced himself to a Captain Grenzmann. With his German improving all the time, Max explained that Askaniya-Nova was a nature reserve founded by a German baron, Friedrich Falz-Fein. The captain listened patiently and declared that he was fascinated with Maxim Borisovich's story.

"Was it the baron Falz-Fein who taught you to speak German?" he asked Max.

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so."

"It was here, as a matter of fact, that he taught me. But I haven't been in this room for twenty years."

The captain smiled. "I don't mean to be rude—Max, is it?"

Max nodded.

"But you have to admit it's amusing the way you speak German, as if you yourself were an aristocrat. I mean, it's amusing given the way you look. Indeed, if you'll pardon me for saying so, it's almost as if the swan was inside the ugly duckling."

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"I hadn't thought of it like that, sir."

"What happened to him? To the baron and his family?"

"I think the baron is still living with his family in Germany, sir. But the old baroness was murdered by the Red Army. I myself was imprisoned and tortured because I had worked for them."

"And I suppose that's why you didn't run away. Because you knew you had nothing to fear from Germans."

"Yes, sir."

"And what do you do here on the estate?"

"I'm a sort of zookeeper, sir. Except that there are no cages or enclosures—for most of the animals, at any rate. One or two we keep in enclosures when we're trying to get them to breed. But most of the animals just roam around free, as nature intended."

Captain Grenzmann stood up and went to a framed map of the reserve that was hanging on the study wall.

"Show me."

Max pointed out the main features of the reserve and continued trying to ingratiate himself with the captain, if only for the sake of the animals at Askaniya-Nova.

"Well, thank you, Max. You've been most helpful. Not that it's any of your business, but we shall be here a while, I should think. My men are tired and they badly need a rest."

"Well, sir, you've come to the right place, all right. This is a great spot to recuperate."

"I'm glad to hear it, Max. You know, we've been on the

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go since June, without a break. The work has been most challenging. But this is the sort of ghetto that is more to our taste. Tell me, those three horses in the stables. Hanoverians, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine animals."

"You know your horses. Petrenko, the local party boss, often came here to ride with his daughter, sir. I used to groom for him. And to look after the tack for them."

"Perhaps you might do the same for me?"

"Whenever you like. You like to ride, sir?"

The captain allowed himself a small smile. "You could say that. I was on the German equestrian Olympic team, in 1936."

"That's wonderful, sir. You must be an excellent rider."

"Yes, I am. But not quite good enough to win anything myself. Still, Germany took all six golds, you know. Six golds and one silver."

"I'm not surprised, sir, knowing about Germans and horses. No one loved horses as much as the baron. It will be quite like old times, sir, having a German gentleman like yourself riding again at Askaniya-Nova. A real equestrian and lover of horses. That's grand, sir."

"I'm glad you think so."

"You know, it was the baron who first brought the Przewalski's horses here."

"These Przewalski's are the prehistoric horses, yes? The ones that can be seen painted on the walls of ancient

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caves by primitive Paleolithic men."

Max nodded.

"I believe I saw some of these horses at the Berlin Zoo, when I was a boy," said Captain Grenzmann. "As many as six."

Max nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, I remember them. We sold Berlin a Przewalski's stallion and mare. Berlin was very successful at breeding them. The last I heard, there were four Przewalski's in Berlin."

"You seem to know a lot about this, Max."

The old man shrugged. "I helped with the breeding programme. First I helped the baron. And then the management of the State Steppe Reserve. The horses are very rare, you know. Perhaps the rarest horses in the world."

Captain Grenzmann laughed. "Perhaps. But if you'll forgive me for saying so, I think they're rare for a very good reason."

"It's true. They've been hunted to near extinction. Like the great auk. And they're difficult to catch."

"That's not the reason I meant."

"No, sir?"

"No. I rather imagine they're almost extinct because nature just wants it that way. It's survival of the fittest. You've heard of the phrase? What Charles Darwin says, about natural selection. In the struggle for life, some species and, for that matter, some *races* are simply stronger than others. So the strong survive, and the weak

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perish. It's as simple as that."

"Oh, the Przewalski's are strong, sir. None stronger. And they're clever, too. Resourceful. Cunning, even."

"Cunning, you say?"

"Like a fox, sir. Too cunning to be domesticated, sir. I suppose that's why I'm so fond of them."

"That's an interesting comparison. But you can't deny that they're also very ugly. And certainly inferior to those beautiful Hanoverian horses."

Max was about to contradict the captain, but the man smiled and raised his hand. "No, Max, please, don't say another thing. I can see we could stay here all day talking about horses, but I have a great deal of paperwork to do. Reports for my masters in Berlin on what my special action group has been doing for the last few weeks. So if you'll excuse me. I must get on."

"Shall I saddle the big stallion for you tomorrow morning, sir? His name is Molnija."

"Yes. Please do. I'll look forward to that."

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