

*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.*





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.

“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

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.”

“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

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.

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."

“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

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

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

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."



**M**AX WAS NOT THE only person at Askaniya-Nova who was fond of the wild Przewalski's horses. A girl had been hiding in the woods at the edge of the steppe for some time, and although she had, like many girls, loved horses as long as she could remember, for some reason that even she could not easily have explained, the wild Przewalski's horses made friends with her. This was just as well since she had no human friends. Her family were all dead, and the few people who inhabited the scattered villages in the region drove her away from their doors because they were afraid—afraid that if the girl was arrested by the Germans, then they might also be arrested. The girl understood this and did not blame them for shunning her; she forgave them for it and told herself she would probably have done the same, although as this story proves, this was clearly not the case.

The girl's name was Kalinka. Her father had kept big Vladimir cart horses for his business, and she had made friends with them. But her relationship with the wild horses at Askaniya-Nova—she had no idea they were called Przewalski's horses—was different. She supposed it had something to do with their intelligence and their curiosity. These animals were unusually clever and possessed a childlike playfulness that she had never before seen in horses. And perhaps, as outcasts themselves, the horses saw something similar in Kalinka; at least that's what she imagined. It's a strange thing, the human heart, right enough, but that's just as true of horses, and wild horses in particular.

Kalinka had awoken early one morning, after spending the night wrapped in a ragged blanket under a cranberry bush, to find one of the horses—a mare—standing over her. Instinctively she knew that, although the horse was wild, it wanted to make friends.

“Hey,” she said. “How are you? Are you after these cranberries? Help yourself. I've had more than enough of them. Too many, probably.”

Kalinka sat up, stroked the horse's nose, and let the animal smell her, recognizing that horses can quickly tell almost all they need to know about a person from her scent. At the same time, this made her frown, for she recognized it had been a while since she'd had a wash.

“Maybe that's why you're not afraid,” she said, stroking the mare's nose. “Because I must smell as much of an

outcast as you are. Maybe it's just soap and civilization that makes animals distrust humans."

She frowned again as her stomach rumbled loudly.

"Sorry about that," she said. "The cranberries are tasty enough, but they don't make much of a meal when you're as hungry as I am."

The mare nodded with what looked to Kalinka like sympathy.

"You wouldn't happen to know where I could get something to eat, would you?"

The mare nodded again, turned around, and looking back at Kalinka as if inviting her to follow, walked on and led her about a kilometre or two away to a blue-painted cottage beside a small lake. The mare sniffed the air carefully as though weighing if it was safe, and then snorted, which Kalinka took as the all-clear to approach the place.

The front door was not locked, and quickly Kalinka went inside and glanced around the one neat room.

"This is nice," she said. She especially admired a handsomely framed oil painting that was leaning against the wooden wall. It showed the veranda of a large white house with lovely garden furniture and flower beds and a beautiful lady in a long white dress. It reminded Kalinka of summers gone and—she hoped—summers yet to come.

"I dislike doing this," she said, taking some bread and cheese for herself and an apple for the mare. "But I dislike starving even more."

When she came out again, they both returned to the cover of the woods and ate the food she had stolen from the blue cottage. Previously she had stolen only from the Germans, which—given that they stole from everyone else—didn't seem wrong at all; but it was very dangerous, and Kalinka had no doubt of what would have happened to her if ever she'd been caught.

Later on, the mare took Kalinka to some of the other wild horses, and she spent the night sleeping between the warm bodies of the mare and her stallion as if she'd been their own foal.

“That was the best night's sleep I've enjoyed since I was at home,” she told the mare and the stallion when she awoke. “Thank you. I'm grateful to you. My old coat and blanket are getting a bit threadbare, I'm afraid. The wind blows straight through the holes.”

The stallion turned and galloped away with what seemed like indifference, but the mare stayed. And because Kalinka had nowhere else to go, she decided to keep the horses company for another day or so.

Which soon became one week and then two.

The wild horses didn't mix with the other animals at Askaniya-Nova, and a longer acquaintance with them revealed to Kalinka that they were very different from the horses she had known before. The first time that one of the wild horses chased and fetched a stick like a dog was a revelation to her. They loved to play hide-and-seek, and they were fond of practical jokes: she lost count of

the occasions on which her hat was snatched from her head and made off with, or a handkerchief nibbled out of her pocket with a stealth that would not have disgraced a competent thief. In the few moments Kalinka tried to find some privacy in the bush or behind a tree, she often found herself disturbed by a horse playing peekaboo. It was at times like these Kalinka was convinced that the wild horses of Askaniya-Nova were almost capable of laughter. Which was more than she could have said of herself. She seldom smiled, and she never laughed. After what she'd been through, it didn't seem she had anything to laugh about.

Certainly, the horses were extremely vocal. The lead stallion made five basic types of sound—the neigh, nicker, whinny, snort and squeal—of which there was a wide range of subtle variations. After a while, Kalinka calculated that the horses were capable of making at least six different kinds of snort, and it was soon apparent to her that the horses could communicate with each other on what was a fairly sophisticated level. This enabled the small herd to work like a pack of dogs. Scout horses were sometimes dispatched by the lead stallion to look for better grass, and the same stallion quickly made the rest aware when his nose told him that wolves were close—although these knew better than to risk attacking the horses. This was hardly surprising, as Kalinka saw how the horses could be very aggressive with each other. She herself was bitten on a number of occasions—painfully,

on the behind, when she bent over. She understood this was meant to be a joke, although it was not a joke she found very funny—and sometimes she was even kicked. Kalinka soon recognized that the wild horses were resourceful to the point of being devious: she saw them unlatch gates, steal food, ambush rival zebras and even count. The horses were extremely fast. They also possessed keen senses of smell, hearing and sight—much keener than her father’s horses’ and probably as keen as those of any wolf.

They were a little peculiar to look at, however. The mare who had first befriended Kalinka was no more than one and a half metres high at the withers and had a thick, short neck and a low-slung belly. The head and the curved, almost semicircular neck were darker than the horse’s body, and a dorsal stripe ran from the stiff, brushlike mane along the broad back to the tail. She possessed no forelock. Her muzzle was pale and the strong legs striped like a zebra’s, but the most striking difference from the domestic horse that Kalinka noticed was the short-haired, almost furry tail, which was more like a fox’s brush or a sable’s pelt. Kalinka soon formed the opinion that this strangely furry tail helped explain the wild horse’s demonstrable cunning.