



## ARGAMAK

*I* decided to join the ranks at the front. The division commander grimaced when he heard this.

“Why the hell d’you want to go there? If you let your mouth hang open for a second, they shoot you point-blank!”

I held my ground. And that wasn’t all. My choice fell on the most active division, the Sixth. I was assigned to the Fourth Squadron of the Twenty-third Cavalry Regiment. The squadron was commanded by Baulin, a Bryansk factory metalworker, who was a mere boy. He had grown a beard to inspire respect. Ash-blond tufts covered his chin. In his twenty-two years, Baulin had let nothing ruffle him. This quality, found in thousands of Baulins, proved an important element in the victory of the Revolution. Baulin was hard, taciturn, and headstrong. The path of his life had been decided. He had no doubts about the rightness of this path. Deprivation came easy to him. He could sleep sitting up. He slept pressing one arm against the other, and when he woke, his path from oblivion to full alertness was seamless.

One could expect no mercy under Baulin’s command. My service started with an unusual omen of success—I was given a horse. There weren’t any horses in the reserve stables or with the peasants. Chance helped. The Cossack Tikhomolov had killed two captured officers without authorization. He had been instructed to take them to the brigade headquarters, as enemy officers could give important information. Tikhomolov did not take them there. It was decided that he would

be tried before the Revolutionary Tribunal,\* but then they changed their minds. Squadron Commander Baulin came up with a punishment much harsher than anything the tribunal could have inflicted—he took Tikhomolov's stallion Argamak away from him, and sent Tikhomolov off to the transport carts.

The agony I had to suffer with Argamak was beyond what a man can endure. Tikhomolov had brought his horse from the Terek, where he was from. The stallion had been trained in the Cossack trot, that specific Cossack hard trot—dry, violent, sudden. Argamak's stride was long, extended, obstinate. With this devilish stride he carried me off, out of the lines, separating me from the squadron. I lost my sense of direction, roamed for days on end looking for my unit, ended up in enemy territory, slept in ravines, tried to tag along with other regiments but was chased away by them. My horsemanship was limited to the fact that in the Great War I had served with an artillery unit in the Fifteenth Infantry Division. Most of the time we had spent sitting on ammunition carts; we rarely rode out on raids. I didn't have an opportunity to get used to Argamak's cruel, bounding trot. Tikhomolov had bestowed on his horse all the devils of his downfall. I shook like a sack on the stallion's long, dry spine. I rode his back to pieces. Sores appeared on it. Metallic flies preyed upon these sores. Hoops of baked black blood girded the horse's flanks. Bad shoeing made Argamak trip, his hind legs became swollen at the breeching strap and turned elephantine. Argamak grew thin. His eyes filled with the fire one sees in tortured horses, the fire of hysteria and obstinacy. He no longer let me saddle him.

"You've liquidated that horse, four-eyes!" my platoon commander said.

The Cossacks said nothing in my presence, but behind my back plotted like plunderers in drowsy treachery. They didn't even ask me to write letters for them anymore.

The cavalry took Novograd-Volynsk. In a single day we had to cover seventy, eighty versts. We were getting close to Rovno. Rest days

\*The Revolutionary Tribunals were the organs of military justice representing the Revolutionary Military Council. They investigated crimes committed by military personnel and dealt with prisoners of war. Revolutionary Tribunal detachments were present in each army division and brigade.

were annulled. Night after night I had the same dream: I am riding Argamak at full trot. Campfires are burning by the roadside. The Cossacks are cooking food. I ride past them, they don't even look up. A few call out a greeting, others don't even turn around, they're not interested in me. What does this mean? Their indifference indicates that there is nothing unusual in my horsemanship, I ride like everyone else, there's no reason for them to look at me. I gallop off and am happy. My thirst for peace and happiness was never quenched in my waking hours, which is why I dreamed these dreams.

There was no sign of Pashka Tikhomolov. He was watching me from somewhere on the fringes of the march, in the bumbling tail of carts crammed full with looted rags.

"Pashka keeps asking what's with you," my platoon commander said to me one day.

"Why, he has a problem with me?"

"It looks like he does."

"I reckon he feels I've done him wrong."

"Why, you reckon you didn't do him wrong?"

Pashka's hatred followed me through forests and over rivers. I felt it on my hide and shuddered. He nailed his bloodshot eyes on my path.

"Why did you saddle me with an enemy?" I asked Baulin.

Baulin rode past, yawning.

"Not my problem," he answered without looking back. "It's your problem."

Argamak's back healed a little, then his wounds opened up again. I put three saddlecloths under his saddle, but I could not really ride him, the wounds weren't healing. The knowledge that I was sitting on an open wound made me cringe.

A Cossack from our platoon, his name was Bizyukov, was Tikhomolov's countryman from the Terek, and he knew Pashka's father.

"His father, Pashka's father, he breeds horses for fun," Bizyukov told me one day. "A rough rider, sturdy. He comes to a herd, he picks out a horse on the spot, and they bring it to him. He stands face-to-face with the horse, his legs planted firm, glares at it. What does he want? This is what he wants: he waves his fist and punches the horse right between the eyes—the horse is dead. 'Why did you finish off the

horse, Kalistrat?'—'I had a terrible desire for this horse, but I wasn't fated to ride it. The horse didn't take to me, but my desire for this horse was deadly! He's a rough rider, let me tell you!'

And then Argamak, who had survived Pashka's father, who had been chosen by him, fell into my hands. How was this to end? I weighed many plans in my mind. The war had released me from other worries. The cavalry attacked Rovno. The town was taken. We stayed there for two days. The following night the Poles pushed us out. They engaged us in a skirmish to get their retreating units through. Their maneuver worked. The Poles were covered by a storm, lashing rain, a violent summer storm that tumbled onto the world in floods of black water. We cleared out of Rovno for a day. During the nocturnal battle we lost Dundic, the Serb, one of our bravest men. Pashka Tikhomolov also fought in this battle. The Poles attacked his transport carts. The area there was flat, without any cover. Pashka lined up his carts in a battle formation known only to him. It was, doubtless, how the Romans lined up their chariots. Pashka had a machine gun. He had probably stolen it and hidden it, for an emergency. With this machine gun he repelled the attack, saved his possessions, and led the whole transport to safety, except for two carts whose horses had been shot.

"What do you intend to do with your best fighters, marinate them?" they asked Baulin at headquarters a few days after the battle.

"If I'm letting them marinate, there must be a reason, right?"

"Careful, you'll run into trouble."

No amnesty was proclaimed for Pashka, but we knew that he was coming back. He came wearing galoshes on his bare feet. His toes had been hacked off, ribbons of black gauze hung from them. The ribbons dragged behind him like a train. In the village of Budziatycze, Pashka appeared at the square in front of the church where our horses stood tied to the hitching post. Squadron Commander Baulin was sitting on the church, steps, his feet soaking in a steaming bucket. His toes were rotting. They were pink, the way steel is pink before it is forged. Tufts of young straw-blond hair tumbled over Baulin's forehead. The sun burned on the bricks and tiles of the church. Bizyukov, standing next to Baulin, popped a cigarette into Baulin's mouth and lit it. Tikhomolov, dragging his tattered train behind him, went up to the hitching post. His galoshes shuffled. Argamak stretched his long neck and neighed to

his master in greeting, a quiet, rasping neigh, like that of a horse in a desert. Pus coiled like lace between the strips of torn flesh on the horse's back. Pashka stood next to the horse. The dirty ribbons lay still on the ground.

"So that's how things stand," the Cossack said, barely audibly.

I stepped forward.

"Let's make peace, Pashka. I'm glad the horse is going back to you. I can't handle him. Let's make peace?"

"It's not Easter yet, for people to make peace," the platoon commander said from behind me, rolling a cigarette. His Tatar trousers loose, his shirt open over his copper chest, he was resting on the church steps.

"Kiss him three times, Pashka,"\* mumbled Bizyukov, Tikhomolov's countryman, who knew Kālistrat, Pashka's father. "He wants to kiss three times."

I was alone among these men whose friendship I had not managed to win.

Pashka stood in front of the horse as if rooted there. Argamak, breathing strong and free, stretched his muzzle to him.

"So that's how things stand," the Cossack repeated. He turned to me sharply, and said emphatically, "I will not make peace with you."

He walked away, dragging his galoshes down the chalk-white, heat-baked street, his bandages sweeping the dust of the village square. Argamak walked behind him like a dog. The reins swung beneath his muzzle, his long neck hung low. Baulin continued soaking the reddish steel of his feet's rotting flesh in the tub.

"Why did you saddle me with an enemy?" I said to him. "None of this is my fault."

The squadron commander raised his head.

"I can see right through you!" he said. "Right through you! What you want is to live without enemies, you'll do anything not to have enemies."

"Kiss him three times," Bizyukov muttered, turning away.

A fiery spot burned on Baulin's forehead. His cheek twitched.

"You know what you end up with like that?" he said in a gasping voice. "You end up being bored! To goddamn hell with you!"

\* A manifestation of friendship symbolizing the Holy Trinity.

It was obvious I had to leave. I got myself transferred to the Sixth Squadron. Things went better there. The long and the short of it was that Argamak had taught me some of Tikhomolov's horsemanship. Months passed. My dream had become a reality. The Cossacks' eyes stopped following me and my horse.