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Opening extract from
Oksa Pollock: the Last Hope

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PROLOGUE

A BOY WOULD HAVE RULED OUT ANY POSSIBILITY, destroying their last and final hope.

Pavel Pollock jumped up and, in an attempt to mask his agitation, leant over the cradle where a tiny baby girl lay sleeping. His daughter. Everything now hinged on his little girl—he knew it—and the thought was already eating him up inside. Gloomy joy filled his heart and yet his eyes were shining with happiness at becoming a father. He turned to look at his wife, blinking away a few tears. Marie Pollock smiled back at him. Would he ever learn to be less of a worrier, she wondered. Less anxious? Deep down, though, she knew she loved him just the way he was.

Suddenly a cry from the cradle made them both jump: their baby girl had just expressed herself with surprising force. Eyes wide open, she was trying to prop herself up on her little arms, but despite her fierce determination, her head with its dark, silky curls kept falling back onto the pillow. Her father went over and picked her up, his heart thudding.

“Is this okay? Am I being too rough? I’m not hurting her, am I?” he asked his wife, frowning with concern.

“Don’t worry, you’re doing fine,” she replied easily. “Well, look who’s here! Hello, Dragomira!”

Everything Pavel’s mother’s did had a touch of exuberance and today was no exception: hidden behind the largest bunch of flowers they’d ever seen, Dragomira was also carrying a variety of bulky bags in every colour, overflowing with gifts—bags she dropped as soon as she laid eyes on the baby in her son’s arms.

“Oksa!” she cried. “You’re awake, my little treasure! I’m so happy!” she exclaimed to Marie and Pavel, kissing each of them in turn.

“Hmmm, I think her nappy needs changing,” remarked Pavel, horrified at the thought.

“I’ll deal with it!” volunteered Dragomira. “If you don’t mind, Marie, of course,” she added, with an imploring look.

A few seconds later, little Oksa was wriggling on the changing table while her gran wrestled with her sleepsuit. Pavel stood beside her to watch, careful not to miss a thing.

“Oksa... our last hope,” murmured Dragomira almost inaudibly.

Pavel shuddered and his face darkened with annoyance. He allowed his mother to finish dressing the baby, then asked her firmly to follow him into the corridor of the maternity hospital.

“Mum!” he hissed angrily through his teeth. “You couldn’t help it, could you? You just couldn’t stop yourself! If you think I didn’t hear you—”

“Hear what, my dear Pavel?” asked Dragomira, her blue eyes gazing deep into her son’s.

“I know exactly what you’re all thinking! But you’re basing your hopes on a very slim chance. You might just as well rely on the wind!”

“But ships rely on the wind to sail across the sea,” continued Dragomira in a low voice. “We’ll never give up hope, Pavel, never.”

“You’re not taking my daughter there,” insisted Pavel, placing heavy emphasis on every word as he leant against the wall. “I won’t let you, so get that into your head! I’m her father and I want my daughter to have a *normal* upbringing. As normal as possible anyway,” he added, correcting himself, looking strained.

They glared at each other silently in the corridor, ignoring the passing nurses and patients in dressing gowns who stole glances at the pair as they locked eyes, each of them trying to convince the other. It was Dragomira who broke the tense silence:

“My dear son, I love you deeply but you mustn’t forget that you’re bound to our land, just as we are. And whether you like it or not, Oksa

is too—and there’s nothing you can do about that. If there’s even the slightest chance we might be able to return home, you know very well we’ll grab it with both hands. We owe it to those who stayed behind, those who’ve been living in the grip of Evil since the Great Chaos!”

“Mum,” replied Pavel, finding it hard to hide his resentment, “I have huge respect for you, but I won’t allow it. You have no idea what I’m capable of doing to keep my daughter out of all that. We have to forget. It’s too late now. It’s over.”

“I’m afraid fate is stronger than all of us, Pavel,” concluded Dragomira with a firmness that surprised even her. “There’s no point tearing each other apart, because fate will decide for us, make no mistake.”

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MULTILEVEL MOBILIZATION

SOME TWELVE YEARS LATER. BIGTOE SQUARE. LONDON. Oksa squeezed between the removal boxes to reach the window of her room. She raised the blind and pressed her nose against the cold glass. The square was filled with activity that morning, and she watched the comings and goings for a moment with a doubtful expression, then gave a deep sigh.

“Bigtoe Square... I’ll just have to get used to it,” she murmured, a faraway look in her slate-grey eyes.

The Pollock family—first, second and third generations—had left Paris for London a few days earlier on what appeared to be a sudden whim by Pavel Pollock. After hours of secret meetings which had been off-limits to Oksa, her father had made a formal announcement with his customary solemnity: for the past ten years, he’d held the coveted job of head chef in a renowned restaurant, but now at long last he had the opportunity to open his own restaurant. In London. This small detail had been added so casually that Oksa had suddenly wondered whether she’d heard correctly.

“You mean... London... England?” she’d asked after pausing for a few seconds.

Her father had nodded with obvious satisfaction and, at the sight of her stunned expression, had added immediately that, of course, if his wife and daughter didn’t want to move, he’d respect their decision, even though it was a dream opportunity.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for me!” he’d stressed.

Marie Pollock hadn’t taken long to think about it: her husband had been very jumpy of late and she’d told herself that a complete change of scene would do the whole family good. As for Oksa, did she really have a say in any of this? Although she was almost thirteen, the important decisions were out of her hands. She didn’t want to leave Paris, even less France. But she’d get used to it. The main thing was that her gran and her best friend were coming with them. After all, there was no way she could live without Dragomira—her Baba!—and Gus.



After absent-mindedly watching the traffic driving around the square, Oksa turned away from the window. Hands on hips, she looked around and gave a long whistle.

“What a mess! It’ll take months to unpack everything! Such a hassle.”

In every room, umpteen boxes took up what little space wasn’t already occupied by furniture. Although there was less room here than in their Paris apartment, the Pollocks had been incredibly lucky to find a typically English red-brick Victorian house, with steps leading up from street level to the front door, a bow window and a tiny garden enclosed by wrought-iron railings through which you could glimpse the basement windows. The ground floor and first floor were occupied by Oksa and her parents and the second by her gran, Dragomira, who’d lived with them for as long as Oksa could remember. She looked up at the ceiling.

“What on earth is Baba doing?” she wondered, running her fingers through her chestnut hair. “*It sounds like she’s skipping or something! Anyway, I should probably start getting ready if I don’t want to be late,*” she thought with a start, heading for the wardrobe. Being late on her first day at school would be all she needed!



The scene upstairs where Dragomira had her apartment was much more unusual. The baroque living room, hung with lustrous bronze drapes, was in total chaos. This was the work of the mischievous magical creatures which seemed to be vying with each other to see who could make the most mess. Two tiny golden birds were lending a helping hand; after a few joyful test flights around the crystal chandelier, they were tormenting what looked like a large, frizzy-haired potato as it ambled over the crimson wool carpet, dive-bombing the creature as if they were fighter planes.

“Down with the dictatorship of the gastropods!” chanted the tiny birds. “It’s time to stop living under the yoke! We must play our part in the struggle against mollusc imperialism, my friends!”

“Hey, I might be a little short in the legs, but I’m no mollusc, I’m a Getorix! And I have fabulous hair,” it replied, puffing out its little chest and tossing its hair back to one side.

“Bombs awaaaay! Long live the liberation of oppressed nations!” shouted the birds in reply.

With these fighting words, they dropped their missiles: ten or so sunflower seeds, which bounced off the back of the Getorix.

“Talk about the oppressed,” it grumbled, picking up the seeds and munching them.

The plants, easily upset by this commotion, were wailing and writhing frantically in their pots. One of them, which was perched on an antique gold pedestal table and seemed more nervous than the others, appeared to be trembling and all its leaves were drooping.

“THAT WILL DO!” yelled Dragomira. “Look how stressed the Goranov is now.” The old lady gathered up the folds of her purple velvet dress and knelt on the floor. The terrified plant was sighing pathetically and she massaged its leaves, humming a soft tune. “If you go on like this,” she continued, eyeing the troublemakers severely, “I’ll have to send you all to stay with my brother. And you know what that would mean: a very long journey!”

These words had the immediate effect of silencing the creatures and plants. They had very bad memories of their last journey, when Dragomira had suddenly embarked on what they'd regarded as a totally ridiculous move. None of them could bear any kind of transport. Trains, boats, planes, cars—they were all demonic inventions designed to upset your stomach and make you feel sick. The birds had thrown up for almost the entire journey and the plants had nearly been poisoned by their own chlorophyll, which had curdled like off milk.

“Come on, everyone into the workroom!” ordered Dragomira. “I have to go out—my granddaughter is going to school today. Come, my Lunatrixes, I could do with some help, please.”

Two eccentric creatures in blue dungarees hobbled in as fast as they could. One was plump with a downy head and the other was spindly with a lemon-yellow tuft of hair but they shared certain distinctive features: they were short—two and a half feet tall—with pudgy faces and huge blue eyes full of kindness.

“The orders given by Your Graciousness are an everlasting pleasure. You can be assured of our support and our loyalty,” they said gravely.

Dragomira went over to the huge double-bass case leaning upright against the wall at the far end of the room and opened it. There was nothing inside. She placed her palm flat against the wooden back, murmured a few mysterious-sounding words and the back of the case immediately opened like a door. Dragomira bent down and walked in to reach a spiral staircase which led to her attic and workroom. Obediently following her, the two Lunatrixes each picked up a plant and led the way for the other creatures, which also entered the strange passageway. When everyone was in the workroom, Dragomira went back out through the case and closed it carefully behind her.