Husky

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Dad came in with a swirl of steam, shook off the snow, and carefully placed a cardboard box on a chair. Delighted, Ruslan wrapped his arms around the soldier's neck, and his father smiled mysteriously:

"Take a look at what I've brought you..."

"I don't need anything, I love you more than anyone in the world and I've been waiting for you for so long."

But Dad was already opening the box, and the boy peeked inside. Ruslan's eyes widened:

"Who is this?" the boy jumped up, hugged Dad, then Mom, and reached for the furry bundle.

"A husky."

"What's its name?"

"Think of one yourself!"

"Let's call him Jack!"

"Jack! Come to me! Jack the husky! Jump!" By spring, they were running around the yard, chasing chickens, trampling Mom's flower beds and vegetable patches. The clumsy puppy had transformed into a smart, agile dog that could jump over fences, catch balls, bring back sticks, and amusingly hide among the rose bushes.

He was fiercely independent and cunning. Jack would sit by the gate at a distance, ignoring everything, but as soon as it creaked, he'd dart out into the street and race along the yards to the fields and forest. Then he would return.

When Dad came home for the weekends, he would get up early, dress in khaki, lace up his boots, and run alongside Jack under the pines by the edge of Koryvmazove Ravine. Jack happily leaped over logs Sashko had placed as obstacles, ran beside or ahead on command. Amid the singing of chickadees and the calls of cuckoos, they paid no attention, preferring to crouch or jump. After morning runs through dew-drenched grass, they would return home soaked, dusty, exhausted, but content.

"Again, you went jogging and didn't wake me up?" Ruslan pouted.

"You're grown-up now, you've started school. And for Jack, this is school. He can't skip it," Dad explained.

Oksana would scold them a bit but welcomed them with warm water and fresh pancakes. She had to wash not just her husband but the massive husky too. Both would snort with pleasure. The dog looked formidable and large but was gentle and affectionate in nature. Minutes later, he'd be rolling on the rug with Ruslan in the sitting room. Jack seemed tireless; playing with the boy was his favorite pastime.

Oksana vividly remembers her anxiety when, in winter, her son would "harness" Jack to a sled and race down the street like a whirlwind.

"Dad said that in the north, these dogs pull big sleds for hundreds of kilometers. Don't worry about me."

"In the north, there are no cars," his mother would sigh.

Jack would look at the woman with intelligent eyes, tilt his head from side to side, and... smile. He understood everything.

One week, Dad arrived unexpectedly and urged Mom to pack.

"Just the essentials. Documents, underwear, toothbrushes..." he repeated.

"Jack, into the car!" Ruslan commanded. They went to nature often.

"Cancel that!" Dad ordered. "Jack stays home!"

"Stays home?!" the boy exclaimed in surprise.

"He doesn't have the proper documents," Dad said quietly. "No sturdy leash, and most importantly, no muzzle."

"You'd take me without him? I could stay with Jack. I'm not going without him!" For the first time, the boy contradicted his father.

"We'll leave him with Grandpa," Dad reassured.

"Grandpa has a weak heart, he doesn't understand Jack. And the dog doesn't obey Grandpa."

Oksana clasped her husband's hands pleadingly:

"What can happen to us? Who needs us? Nobody will harm us. There won't be any occupation. Besides, we have such a defender! And home is where the walls are protective."

Ruslan didn't grasp much of his parents' conversation but genuinely supported his mom.

But in a few days, the terrifying explosions and destruction of neighbors' homes revealed the sinister nature of the war of aggression with the Russians. They sat trembling in the cellar, hearing tanks rumbling down the neighboring street, seeing buildings near the train station ignited like torches. Ruslan's world turned upside down during the war, but his mom was with him, and loyal Jack sat beside them.

When the shelling ceased, the orcs' "cleanup" raids began. Armed soldiers stormed into homes, yelling loudly, taking away devices, searching for nationalist supporters.

When they saw the husky in their yard, they hesitated, then aimed guns at the dog. Jack sniffed the boots and calmly walked back into the house. The foreign soldiers didn't even inquire about the Ukrainian nationalists. They grabbed the dog and dragged him into their vehicle.

Caught by surprise, Jack didn't resist, didn't growl. They tied him up tightly, threw him onto the seat, and drove off.

"Mom! They stole the husky. They've taken away our beloved friend," Ruslan cried. "Do something! You're an adult. Can't you fix this?"

Oksana just stroked her son's head and shoulders, trying to hold back her own tears. Guns are one terror; drunken soldiers, an even greater disaster. She couldn't imagine how to stop the marauders.

"Don't cry, Ruslanchyk. He'll come back," she tried to comfort him, not believing her own words.

And Jack did return after ten long days of occupation. Prisoners who managed to escape the Russian captivity told stories of the husky. The dog refused to eat, sometimes only sipping water. He had closed his eyes, not reacting to prodding. They had dismissed him completely—let him die, they thought. They had even removed the chain, for he had grown thin and lost his former beauty and strength.

One day, when the invaders were already drunk and the captives awaited their next torture, the dog took a running leap and jumped over the fence. The guards didn't immediately understand what had happened, where the officer's "gift home" had gone. By the time they circled the fence, the husky was long gone. Or maybe he had cleverly hidden in the ruins.

The captives exchanged looks, each pondering the dog's intelligence. Though it was cold, they were sometimes kept in the yard, locked in a barn at night, scarcely warmer inside. Not taking advantage of the chaos would have been foolish. Initially, they mimicked the husky, pretending to sleep. And when the nearest and solitary guard peeked over the fence searching for the husky, two captives seized him, dragging him by the legs, while the third grabbed the weapon that had fallen from the orc's hands. They tied the invader with the chain used for the husky, gagged him with his glove, and tossed him into the barn.

Through the open gates, they dashed outside with the gun. Not a soul around, but where to run? Blindfolded, they had been brought here, not knowing in whose territory they were. The first clear thought was to hide well in different places. A grove to the left, a field to the right, and then a ravine. They split into three directions, then lay low.

Erratic gunfire rang out minutes later as the dog bounded by the field in large strides. Near the forest, he stumbled and fell. Enemy soldiers burst into laughter, jeered for a while, and boasted of their sharpshooting. Meanwhile, the captives were horrified—the brave dog had been killed.

Once the gates closed, the husky rose and ran to the forest. "What a clever creature," thought the fugitives, and headed in the direction where the heroic dog had gone.