

A Note on Names: The names in this are (with a few notable exceptions, including the main character) Russian and follow standard Russian pronunciation rules and naming conventions (with a few twists). Characters all have a given name, patronymic, and surname, plus a short-form nickname and sometimes diminutive/pet names. So, for instance, Aleksandr Artyomovich Okhotnikov might be politely referred to as Aleksandr Artyomovich, called Sanya or Sasha by friends, and any of the above plus Sashenka by family.

Excerpt:

My mother told me never to trust a rich man.

She said that when she flew about the house, snatching dried herbs from the rafters and slicing roots on the table with her wicked knife. She said it, her ropy muscles bulging as she threw her shoulder into her pestle, as she pulled her sleeve across her mouth to wipe away the blackberry wine dribbling down her chin.

But when we went to town to trade her powders for the many things I needed that she could not make herself, she held her chin in the air, and when the village folk called her a filthy whore and me a dirty little bastard, she clutched her silk shawl with the swordfish embroidery high up on her shoulders. When we got home, she'd fly around the house again, now crying that my father would never allow anyone to treat her this way, that if he were still alive, he would have slain them all where they stood, how could I let them speak to her that way, how dare they speak to the mother of Vyacheslav Semyonovich's son like that.

"Yuyu," she'd say, rubbing the pad of her wine-slick thumb on my sticky forehead. "Iyu Vyecheslavovich Ony. Know your name. Your father was a great man and a terrible man. A powerful volshebnik, a drunk, and a lecher. What are you going to be? Yushka. Tell me." And she'd shake my shoulders, and I'd cry and say I would be a great volshebnik, or I'd laugh and say I'd be a drunk and a lecher.

And she'd fly around the house no matter what I said and throw her mortar across the room and break my toys in her hands and tear at her hair, and I'd tear around after her, screaming to the point of giddiness, stomping on her silk shawl. We'd scream and tear until we tired ourselves out,

and in the evening she'd slap warding talismans over the door and windows and grind chalk and dried masharoot into a fine powder. While I crouched in the doorway, she went into our clearing and scattered the powder at the treeline, encircling our little one-room hovel and our empty chicken coop and sparrow cage in a thin white line, her fingers like a ghost's.

She couldn't sleep until the house was enclosed, until she'd prowled the perimeter looking for gaps while the sun became a distant memory in the sky.

"Yuyu," she'd say, drawing the blanket up to my chin and kissing my forehead, "you're going to be just like your father."

I was eight when Knyaz Aksana's men came and took me from my mother. Aunt Aksana didn't even come herself, which, in retrospect, is a bit insulting, but that's a boring story and not the one I'm telling. I came to Whitecap Palace and became Iyu Aksanevich, and I lived there for eight years until I was sixteen and it was time for my mandatory military service in Gorakino. I should have gone the year before, but Aksana didn't want me going without Semchik, and, precipitously though he may have grown in the past year, he had been a small and weak child, so she certainly wasn't going to send him a year early. Really, me being a bastard and not anywhere in the proper line of succession, I needn't have gone at all, but Aksana said if she was spending all this time and money educating me then I wasn't getting off without doing the hard work. I thought I was doing plenty of hard work in Khorizova, learning with which utensils I was not allowed to clean my ears (all of them), but I knew that military service in Gorakino meant prowling the mountain border of the Sundered Lands and hunting ghosts, so I was not too offended.

Semchik and I arrived with a cadre of minor cousins pledged to Aksana, most of whom thought they were better than the bastard of a disgraced and dead knyazhich, and some of whom were probably right.

I thought I was prepared for the mountains. Where I grew up with my mother was the kind of hilly where you could see out to the sea from the high points. Compared to Whitecap City, which sat on Khorizova's gentle coast, it was downright rugged. When I first saw mountains on the horizon on the way to Gorakino, I thought we would be there within a day.

A week later when we got to the Watchman's Palace—more like a fortress, but then they were, as they were always so quick to point out, the only thing standing between us and being overrun by ghosts from the Sundered Lands—I felt ready to die already. The altitude made me sick, and I wanted to lie down and be somewhere it wasn't snowing in the middle of spring.

So, when a couple of boys stopped us in front of the towering wooden gates, I was fresh out of patience.

"Announce yourselves and your purpose," the shorter one said, and I rolled my eyes.

Semchick stuttered out something too quiet for even me to hear. Perhaps I shouldn't have interfered, but I was meant to be Semchik's right hand, and if I didn't intervene we might be out here for hours. I leaned over and whispered, "Speak up," in his ear, then gave him a little shove between the shoulder blades.

He stumbled, and the short boy snorted, and I resolved to get that little rat-faced shit on his own and push him down the mountain later.

Semchik cleared his throat and said in his still-cracking voice, "I am Semyon Aksanevich Moryakov. I am here from Khorizova with..." and then he listed out a long series of names of our compatriots, during which I studied the boys at the gates, looking for any hints of mockery or impatience (even as I myself jiggled my leg and shivered absently).

The short one with the ratty face was chock-a-block with both, but the taller one had no facial expression on at all, which I found even more discomfiting. He stood still as a statue, hands held behind his back. When the wind disturbed his braided hair it flowed behind him like waves in a dark river. His face looked like a rock carving worn smooth by years in the shallow part of that river.

He looked like he took things very seriously. He looked like he could recite every rule currently enforceable in Gorakino and a great deal of the archaic ones, too. We, I had no doubt, would not get along. I made that judgment, and then Semchik said something that drew my attention back: "...and Iyu Aksanevich Ony, my first cousin. We are here to serve." He bowed, the rest of us bowed, and the boys at the gate bowed back, and then, finally, they let us in.

That day, I didn't do much more than gorge myself on an alarming amount of goat meat and down mug after mug of the dark beer they brewed up in the mountains.

Semchik couldn't stop shaking next to me, and I couldn't tell how much was the cold and how much was the nerves. Either way, I recommended he drink more, but Semchik was worried about making a bad impression, and tipping his mug up over his mouth did not produce the soothing effect I'd hoped it would. It mostly just splashed beer all down his front, which made him both colder and even more concerned about making a bad impression, and which made me feel bad. So I set about finding other ways to solve his shivering problem.

Behind the high table stood a tall, wide stone hearth burning with a fire I could barely see for the long row of fur-draped, braided Okhotnikovs, each grimmer than the next, obscuring it.

"Look." I nudged Semchik. "Let's go up there."

"Up there?" The color drained from his face. "Why?"

"First of all, it'll be warmer by the fire, and second of all, maybe once you talk to them and see they're just normal human beings, you won't be so nervous."

"I don't think we're supposed to go up there."

"Why not? All the big, official speeches are done, most of the eating is done, it's just drinking and milling around now. They're drunk by now, so it's really the best time to do it."

"*You're* drunk."

"Unless they're angry drunks, but probably not. I mean. Probably not."

"I don't know..."

"C'mon, I'm cold, too." I grabbed his arm and dragged him after me.

The two boys from the gate were off-center from the fire, but they were the only two faces I recognized, and the two nearest to us in age, so I made a beeline for them. If I noticed sour looks on their faces, it wasn't until words were already coming out of my mouth. "Hello! I'm Iyu, and this is my cousin Semchik—sorry, Semyon Aksanevich."

"We know your names," the little rat-faced one said.

"That's an impressive memory you have. I think we know yours, too, but you never formally introduced yourselves, and since we're gonna be here for a while, and you're our age, so you'll probably be hunting with us, I thought it would be good to—"

The rat-faced one looked at Semchik. "Why is he talking to us?"

"Uh..." I could feel the heat from Semchik's face even over my shoulder.

"I just explained why I'm talking to you," I said, making sure my smile didn't falter.

"Why is *he* talking *for* you?"

"He—he has a big personality..."

I was glad he didn't say that louder.

"And you let him call you Semchik?" Ratty scoffed.

I glanced at the one with a face like a river rock, but he was staring past us, face completely without expression.

"Well, he's my first cousin, so..."

"He's a bastard."

I laughed. Loudly. I didn't know why, but it was my first reaction. The men and women around us turned to see what the commotion was about. "I think that might be the quickest someone's brought it up upon meeting me. Well spotted!"

"Filipp Artyomovich! What's going on down there?" A large man I knew to be Knyaz Artyom said, leaning forward to peer at us, his critical eye lingering on me.

"Nothing," Ratty said. "I'm just not sure why this bastard thinks he can talk to us."

The knyaz's gaze settled back on us. "Semyon Aksanevich. I trust your mother is well."

"Yes, Knyaz Artyom," Semchik said, voice quavering.

"Iyu Aksanevich. You're Vyacheslav Semyonovich's son?"

"Yes, Knyaz Artyom," I said, belatedly remembering my manners when Semchik pinched me.

"I knew your father. He was a strong-willed man."

"Thank you, Knyaz Artyom," I said, though I wasn't sure it was a compliment.

He nodded. "Since you will be here for two years, you should know my youngest son, Filipp Artyomovich. Next to him is my nephew, Aleksandr Artyomovich. You should also know the order of things. Semyon Aksanevich, step forward." He did, promptly. "Now, Iyu Aksanevich, you step back." And I did, with less certainty. "That is how you should stand," the knyaz said. "Behind him, on his right-hand side. You're dismissed."

Semchik would not talk to me.

I suppose I had embarrassed him a little bit, but I was the one who had been truly embarrassed, and you didn't see me sulking about it. He told me (sulkily, when I managed to pry words out of him at all) that was because I was completely shameless, and I couldn't argue with him about that.

"Perhaps I'm not allowed to argue with you at all, anymore," I said, casting a glance back up at the high table.

If Semchik said anything, I didn't hear it, because the boy with the face like a river rock—Aleksandr Artyomovich, Knyaz Artyom said—caught my eye and held it. I almost thought he smiled, but no, his facial expression—or lack thereof—never changed.

Maybe there was something wrong with him, personality-wise?

Chapter 2

The next day, our training began. Parties from Veliko and Tsura, and even a small one from Akassiya had all arrived before us, which caused further worry for Semchik, but Khorizova was further away than any of those places, even Akassiya.

Ratty was looking more pompous than ever that day, pleased as a peacock, probably considering the previous evening a great victory for him. It was just as well. He seemed like a person who needed to seize whatever small pleasures he could in life.

A tall, bright-faced woman was training us, and I was surprised to learn she was Yelena Artyomovich, Aleksandr Artyomovich's sister. I had heard of her from Dasha, who praised her martial talents highly. Dasha had come back from Gorakino just months before we left, meaner and tougher than ever, and Aksana was bursting with pride, but only when Dasha wasn't looking. With gentle, wayward Aksya and sweet, anxious Semchik, Aksana needed a child to take after her.

Yelena brought all of us newcomers to an arena, on the side of which was piled a small mountain of dead ghosts.

"One a piece," she told us cheerfully, breath collecting in a sparkling cloud. "Let's see how well you know your Tajna."

The goats radiated with dead energy I could feel even across the arena. When I got my hands on one, it was still warm under a layer of hoarfrost beginning to accumulate in its fur. Slaughtered this morning, just for us.

"This myortva *must* last you," Yelena shouted above the chattering crowd. "If you cannot control it properly, we do not have thousands of goats just waiting around to be slaughtered. And I hope you enjoy goat meat, because that is all you'll be eating."

I bent close to my goat's coat and closed my eyes. I dug my fingers into its hide and drew out its myortva, the feeling like liquor up my veins, cold and hot at once until it pooled in my chest, flared, and then calmed, settling unobtrusively behind my ribcage.

Servants in the same brown as the Okhotnikovs and their Artyomovich cousins, but conspicuously without the greens and braids, came and took the goats' empty corpses away to be hung and butchered, smoked or dried or taken fresh to the kitchens to be cooked today. What an end to come to, when just yesterday they'd been climbing stumps and butting heads and staring with those calculating rectangle eyes. In Khorizova, I rarely needed anything bigger than a salmon. Fishes seemed easier. Less like us.

That day, and many others that followed, we ran fast as the wind through those spiny Gorakino trees, ran our swords through sacks stuffed with straw, dove our fists through solid wood planks, jumped and did not come down for seconds long enough it felt like flying. We sent out myortva as violence only once, only to ensure that we could, on another unfortunate group of goats. This time, the servants herded them into the arena still living. Trotting, bleating, chewing errant mouthfuls. They left the same as the others had, after we harvested their myortva, too.

Aleksandr Artyomovich, I noticed at once, did not participate. He had already been doing this a year, I learned, and he did not need the practice.

In our days training, Ratty was like a terrier, moving in violent bursts—fast and decisive, but graceless. Not that I had ever terribly prized grace, having very little of it myself. It pained me to admit that I was much like Ratty when it came to using myortva, though I liked to think I was better at conserving it (on scant evidence, but still, I liked to think it). Semchik was strong, bless him, having grown almost six inches over the past year, and thoughtful, but almost as wishy-washy as he was in conversation. I was glad we were going on our hunts in pairs. Perhaps he was capable, but I still felt he needed me. I'd feel better after I saw how he did on the first hunt.

Aleksandr Artyomovich, on the other hand, was something of a quandary to me. He never moved more than he had to, but when he did, it was like you could have your eyes on him one moment, then lose him entirely the next, only for him to turn up again somewhere totally different. When you did catch him moving, he seemed languid, almost slow, lazy. You might even think he was concerned about not disturbing that perfect braided hair. But Yelena was not shy about yelling at those of us who were slacking off—a common occurrence among our spoiled group of knyazes' children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. More than once she'd slapped me across the back of the head for being late or distracted or wasting myortva, and I knew she did not play favorites with the Artyomovich children because I'd seen Ratty get the same treatment. But only once did I catch her chastising Aleksandr Artyomovich (something about letting her do the teaching. I hadn't seen whom he was trying to teach. I never even saw him with anyone but Ratty). So there must have been some method to the madness.

Sofya Ivanovich and Nikolaj Ivanovich Ozero, the twins from Tsura, said that he was too good to practice with us, and they did not mean it as a compliment. Chabas Lvovich of Akassiya thought that he might be mute, and while I stopped to consider whether I had ever heard him speak, one of the minor Aksanevich cousins said, "He can talk. I heard him say 'no' once."

The night before we were to go out to the borders and hunt the ghosts, I couldn't sleep. I was too excited. And too curious. We'd be away from the Watchman's Palace for a week, and I still knew so little about it. If I got in trouble now, I reasoned, it would give the Okhotnikovs time to forgive me while I was gone.

This would only worry Semchik, so I waited until he was asleep, until as many people as could be asleep in the barracks were (darling Semchik slept easily, bless him). Then I slipped out, whispering, "latrine," to Chabas because her eyes were open when I passed her bunk. She did not

respond, and I was distracted wondering whether she slept with her eyes open and whether she could teach me how to do it until I found myself outside the library.

The palace—fortress, compound—was silent in the middle of the night, but torches still burned in their brackets outside the doors.

The library had not been my particular goal, but I did spend some time in the library at Whitecap Palace. My mother taught me to read from a few beat-up tomes of history and storybooks I later concluded she must have gotten from my father (who had taught her to read in the first place was a question I did not even know to ask back then). She read to me to calm me down, to calm both of us down, and when I came to Whitecap, the library reminded me of home. It was one of the few places I could be alone, and nothing reminded me of home more than being alone.

I was the farthest from home—either home—I'd ever been. The doors were locked. If they hadn't been, I might have just poked my head inside and walked away. Instead, I dropped down and peered into the keyhole. This was a little trick I'd been working on back at Whitecap. It required a lot of control, which, as I believe I've already stated, was not my strong suit, but it was a dead useful trick if you could get it right, and it barely wasted any myortva at all. I pressed myortva forward like a little puff of air, the tiniest punch on the tumblers, and I heard them turn. Success, and a little rush, just about the same size as that puff of air but enough to make me smile and stifle a laugh.

Inside, the library was dark, so I took one of the torches with me. It was so quiet, and cold outside the weak ring of heat emanating from the torch, but the air was calm and dry, the walls coated with sturdy leather-bound books, all so solid, stable.

I always gravitated to histories (as opposed to the long, philosophical treatises on the proper use of Tajna that Nikita Aksanevich was always pestering me to read), and that was good because the Watchman's Palace library was short on philosophy and long on history. When her tongue was loosened by yasno and there wasn't anyone else around, Aksana said the Artyomoviches were practically barbarians, that having their land constantly under threat of ghost-invasion had made

them incapable of progressing past the barest essentials of a society because all of their energy went into surviving. They were only literate so they could point to where all their stupid rules were written down, she laughed. And write down rules they certainly did. Books and books of them, long lists of archaic laws like how weddings were not to be conducted at a certain time of year because some old knyaz had his daughter marry and then die in that season. (Aksana said they would make dying against the rules if they could.)

Not interested. Maybe if her husband poisoned her on their wedding night and her spirit came back to haunt him. I gravitated to histories; I gravitated to horrible histories. Things with a villain. Khorizova's library had a book on a war that happened hundreds of years ago, before the ghosts overran the Sundered Lands and our ancestors moved over the mountains, and I'd read it three or four times. Zhdan Groznyj was a volshebnik from a city called Kirilo. He wasn't a knyaz or a knyazhich or even a minor cousin, he was the son of a priest, but he must have had a volshebnik's blood because he learned to use myortva. First, he won fame because of his skill. He wasn't the strongest, or the fastest, but his myortva, the myortva he could wring from a single chicken was like nothing the world had seen before or since (according to the book). It even said he was the first to use myortva to heal. And then, it said, he started studying dark magic. This was over the course of the war, the specifics of which were not important to me. The specifics of the dark magic were, but of course, they didn't talk about that. This wasn't an instruction manual, and there was a reason it was forbidden. Anyway, Zhdan Groznyj won the knyaz of Kirilo the war, but by that point, the cat was out of the bag about his dark magic. It didn't matter what title the knyaz had, it didn't matter how much money he had, the knyaz could not control Zhdan Groznyj. And I can't even remember the knyaz's name now. I bet the knyaz saw into the future. I bet he saw me, thinking about Zhdan Groznyj and not knowing his name, and he couldn't handle it. The book said the knyaz had to stop Zhdan Groznyj before he brought darkness over all the world, before our land sundered, before the ghosts swarmed into our streets and fields and bedchambers. I remembered that quotation from

the book: "Into our streets and fields and bedchambers, the darkness will come." He killed Zhdan Groznyj, and there the story ends. Zhdan Groznyj never saw it coming. He trusted a rich man.

I never believed it. I never believed that unremarkable knyaz could've killed the greatest volshebnik in the world so easily.

So I went hunting for books about Zhdan Groznyj. Maybe they had a better end to the story here. But, not knowing anything about how the library was organized, it was not a simple process. I'm sure there was some book of rules on library organization in the stacks, but I'd have to know the rules in the rules book before I could find the rules book. A true conundrum.

I stalked the shelves with the torch, pulling out books and letting them fall open in my hand. Most of them, I didn't read a word before I shoved them back into place. Then: *A History of Source Magic*. I wasn't sure what that meant, but the book fell open to an illustration of a man pulling another man—a dead body, head lolling to the side and tongue out—up with strings.

I held the torch closer to see what the small text under the illustration said—

The torch was snatched out of my hand.

I spun, clapping the book shut and, inexplicably, hiding it behind my back.

In the torchlight, his river-rock face was still smooth. "What are you doing?"

I grinned. "I knew you weren't mute."

"You shouldn't be holding torches up to books."

"Ohhh. I'm sorry." I tapped the book against my back. "Silly me."

"Put the book back."

"Oh? This thing?" I produced it from behind me as though I were surprised to find it there.

He glanced down, and I tried to put it back before he got a look at the title.

"How did you get in here?"

"Me?" I put my hand on my chest. "The door was open."

"It was not."

"How do you know?"

He did not answer.

I should have just stopped there. "I opened it."

"You stole the keys."

"No. No," I said, putting my hands out in front of me. "I did it with myortva." I couldn't help it; I was proud of that trick.

"You wasted myortva."

"I didn't waste it. I used it to get in here." My smile had no effect on him, so I made it brighter.

His lips flattened and turned down at the ends. He looked me up and down, and I focused on looking as small and innocent as possible. We were the same height, but I slouched so he could look down on me. When he was done with his appraisal, he nodded and said, "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" I asked as he turned to walk away. I didn't follow.

"We're going to speak to Yelena Artyomovich."

At least it wasn't the knyaz. "Wait a minute, Sasha! Let's not be hasty. Are you going to wake her up to tell her you found me reading? Well good, she'll see how studious I am."

"I'm going to tell her you broke into our library, wasted myortva, and were out past curfew. And my name is Aleksandr Artyomovich." He made a face, for the first time.

I tucked that soft spot away for future reference. "Wasted myortva! Aleksandr Artyomovich, no more than you would get from a weed!"

"All myortva is precious," he said. "Something died for that, and it is disrespectful to use it for amusement and criminal activity."

"Crimina—so, you've never used myortva on anything that wasn't completely necessary." I scoffed.

"No," he said, without so much as a moment's pause. "Come." Still holding the torch in one hand, he grabbed my wrist with the other.

“You don’t have to manhandle me!” I said, but I let him drag me out of the library. What was I going to do, fight him? Use up even more myortva? The other Okhotnikovs would find out, anyway. “You’re hurting me. Ow! What are *you* doing out of bed? You should be asleep, too! Slow down, you’re going to break my wrist!”

“Be quiet,” he said once, and when I kept complaining, he stopped responding.

Yelena, when she was training, slept in a room attached to the barracks, and Aleksandr Artyomovich felt no compunction about banging on her door in the middle of the night.

“You’re going to wake everyone up and then everyone will be tired on their ghost hunt, and then they won’t be able to defend themselves, and they’ll die, and ghosts will invade Gorakino, and it will be your fault.”

“It will be your fault,” he said, and I laughed, because drawing him into indulging that fantasy felt like a victory.

Yelena was mussed and confused when she opened the door (I could not imagine Aleksandr Artyomovich bleary-eyed. He probably slept completely still, on his back, with his hands folded on his chest and his braids still in. His eyes probably popped open as soon as the sun’s rays lit the sky), and it took her a moment to understand what he was doing as he listed my crimes.

When he got to the bit about me wasting energy, her eyebrows furrowed, and I felt I had to cut in.

“It was only a tiny bit. Only as much as you’d get from a weed,” I repeated, though it was really more like the energy you’d get from a handful of beetles or a baby mouse. You couldn’t get any myortva from a weed.

“He broke into the library with it.”

“He broke down the door?” Yelena’s eyes widened.

“No! I just opened the lock.”

Her horrified expression morphed into one of bemusement and then curiosity. “Really? That’s quite clever—”

“Yelena Artyomovich.” His voice was almost pouty.

“What, Sashenka? It is. It’s still wrong.” She looked at me, trying to put on an appropriately stern face. “Even if it is clever, I’ve made it perfectly clear that myortva is *not* to be wasted. You will need every bit of it on the border. There is less life there than you may be accustomed to in Khorizova, and hence, less death and less myortva. A small amount of energy could be the difference between life and death.”

“I apologize, Yelena Artyomovich,” I said, bowing.

“Moreover, if a door is locked, it is locked for a reason, Iyu Aksanevich.”

“Yes, Yelena Artyomovich.”

“What were you doing in there, anyway?”

“I couldn’t sleep, and I like libraries.”

“You have full access to the library during daytime hours.”

“I prefer libraries when they’re empty.”

“Now that sounds like you, Sashenka.”

His expressionless face grew vaguely dark, but I was too distracted by relief that Yelena did not appear to be taking this as seriously as he was to take too much notice. I should have known. Yelena corrected me frequently, but she seemed to like my spirit.

“What were you doing up and about that you caught him there, anyway? I’ve told you, you are not responsible for disciplining *my* hunters, of which you are one, it seems I must remind you.”

“I saw a torch missing outside the library.”

“And why were you not in your bed?”

His jaw tightened, and he did not respond.

“Right. Well, Iyu Aksanevich, you knowingly broke the rules, and there are consequences for that. How can I trust you to follow the rules that keep you, your partner, and all of our lands safe if you cannot even follow the rules here under supervision?”

“I would never let anything happen to Semchi—Semyon Aksanevich,” I said hotly.

“Hm. I think to be safe, you shall have another partner. Aleksandr Artyomovich, this will be the perfect opportunity for you to make sure he follows the rules to a T.”