

# Anika



*Prologue*

1672 A.D.

Northeast of Moscow

THE FRIGID AIR clawed at the little girl’s bright green eyes. Loose strands of hair fluttered behind her, long and red, the rest tucked into the oversized knit jacket she’d stolen from the town prior. Her teeth clattered violently behind her black scarf as legs she could no longer feel fought through snow just past her knees. The snow had soaked through the last of her three pairs of leggings and four pairs of socks. Traversing an empty street would have been difficult; by now, she doubted she could make it past this field.

She looked up past the biting wind, toward the point in the distance where the pure, endless white of the skies and earth were spattered with brown spots. The brown wasn’t getting much bigger, and she wondered in the back of her mind if she was, in truth, spotting the tops of trees over a hill or maybe an abandoned settlement.

She wondered, how long had she been out here? For a long time — a long, long time — she had wiggled her mitten- covered fingers every now and then from deep within her warm pockets, curious to see how much more sluggish they’d grown. When she could no longer unclench her fists without pain, she’d stopped trying. That was hours ago.

As it had so many times in hours past, her mind wandered far from here. She could feel, even smell, the warmth of a fire; she could taste stale bread and preserved fruit. Nothing lofty, nothing special. Right now, she could hardly even remember her mother’s features, much less yearn for her embrace. Had it really been so long?

Her eyes felt moist, and soon she could feel the heat of fresh tears on her cheeks. They left cold in their wake, the frozen sky rushing to taste her wet skin. Shoving her face against her arm, she pressed her scarf up higher until it blocked half her vision. Her breath, rank with ketosis, felt thick and sweet against her face, but at least it was somewhat warm.

Warm? She could still feel her face. That was good, though she wasn’t sure how much it was worth when her arms were almost as numb as her legs. Hunger had come and gone; thirst was almost forgotten. A calm, yet empty feeling had settled in their wake, a subtle reminder that she was on a timer altogether separate from the cold. Even should the sun grant her warmth and comfort, she might still starve.

Beneath the snow, her foot caught a large stone. She didn’t feel the strike, or the tug that followed, and when she went sprawling forwards it was a complete surprise. No sooner than her hands left her pockets, her face struck the snow and the world of white enveloped her. But where hard ground should have been, she kept falling, then rolling, tumbling down and down and lower still.

Her body lurched to a halt. Pain assailed her, overcoming even the numbness in her legs to manifest as a dull throb. She opened her eyes and cold snow assaulted them. They snapped shut, and through the pounding pain in her skull she struggled to figure out how far she’d fallen, how deep the snow here was.

Her chest heaved, the frozen air burning her lungs as panic set in. She tried to feel through the snow for the frigid air, tried to find the cotton sky through the endless white that embraced her. But the cold had robbed her of her senses, stolen everything short of her eyes and ears.

Frigid fingers broke through what she thought might be the surface, though between the cold and the mittens it was hard to tell for sure. Yet where hope might have been, a sense of helplessness sunk deep within her core. She couldn’t move her legs, anymore. How was she supposed to pull herself up, if she couldn’t even move her legs? There was nothing to grip, no way to climb out. Even if she could, town — if it was a town at all — was still so far away. She couldn’t walk anymore. She was done. She would suffocate in the snow, and she would never be found.

She closed her eyes, a small smile tugging at her lips. At least she wouldn’t struggle, anymore. It had been so long, so very long since she hadn’t had to fight. And considering what she’d escaped from so many times — being burned alive, hung, stoned, or worse — this really wasn’t that bad. It was actually kind of comfortable, as if the snow itself was warmer than the air outside. As a final gesture of resignation, she forced her slow, numb fingers back to her pockets, where the snow might melt around her hands and they might find some hint of warmth.

In moments, exhaustion took her.

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A Memory; A Dream:

“Well, I don’t know which I’d rather.

Blind, deaf, or dumb? None of em’s easy.”

The shop was empty, save for her mother.

For what purpose they’d arrived, she didn’t know.

“I think mute would suit you, Brother.

Mother never listened, Father still doesn’t,

and you never have an opinion, anyway.”

Had the voices belonged to the shopkeepers?

Truthfully, it didn’t matter.

“I have opinions, asshole. I just don’t spend

my time mulling over stupid fears. Though

I can tell you, I’d rather be all three than

the Devil’s Own.”

Her mother had stopped, then.

The jar in her hand began to tremble.

“I wouldn’t. I’d rather be dead. If that little

girl was mine, I’d’ve left her in the woods,

for all our sakes.”

“Wolves might raise the little monster as

their own. I’d have drowned her.”

The jar fell. Glass shattered everywhere.

Her mother took her arm, turned,

and dragged her out of the store.

\* \* \*

She felt warm. So very warm. Even... comfortable? Was that possible, out here in the snow? Or was she dead? A bright green eye cracked open. Everything was black. An attempt to roll her head to the side ended as soon as it began. Her neck hurt. Throbbled, even, to the point of moistened eyes. Now that she thought about it, so did everything else, but the heat was so tremendously welcome that she was hard pressed to care.

“We can’t keep her here, Gala!”

The other eye snapped open. She blinked. The soft male voice she'd heard — middle- pitched, almost feminine — was no dream, no hallucination. Her fingers clenched. Her mittens were gone. Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no, no. She needed those. She reached for her pockets, only to realize they weren't there. These weren't her pants; they were soft, dry, and warm. Panic sunk so deep in her belly she felt she might vomit. She felt the ground below her, took in the air, anything to silently grasp some concept of where she'd gone. She was on a blanket, she realized, and there were more blankets piled over her body. She could smell fire.

“What are we supposed to do, then, Alyosha?” a second voice shot back, quiet in volume yet high in pitch, like an overgrown rodent. “Push her back into the snow? She would have died, you know that! You're the one who found her!”

Oh no, please no, not this. She felt her stomach above the hip, inches from where her hands had been. Her jacket and undershirts were gone, changed for something clean and dry. They knew. No, no, no no no no *no no nono NO. They knew*. Please, no. She took a deep, quiet breath, trying to steady herself, forcing herself to think about the situation. ‘Gala’ and ‘Alyosha’, they'd called each other — pet names. So they were married, alone, and —

“I know, I know,” the man breathed, as though admitting defeat. “God help us, Gala, I know. But what can we do, now? The whole village knows she is here, what she is, who found her. This is on us, now. If she... if, God forbid, she attack someone, this is on us.”

The whole village?! Choking down a horrified squeak, the little girl bit down on her lip, choosing iron blood over sound. She didn't want to draw attention. She needed to hear this. To know what it was they intended to do. They wouldn't say it to her face — never to her face, not alone. She might curse their souls, eat their children, or hunt them down and devour their still- beating hearts. No, it took a mob to confront her, and by then it was too late.

“It is. It is absolutely on us,” the woman agreed, yet without a hint of fear in her obnoxious voice. “We are responsible for her, now, for not having slain her in the snow. But God has given us this village, Alyosha. He's rewarded our faith with shelter, our tenacity with good crops. Why, then, should he bring Death, much less in the guise of a little one?”

“I just... I wish I'd known before we brought her here, or I might have —”

“No,” the woman's voice calmly interrupted. “No, you wouldn't have. We both know that, weighing child's eyes against demon's scale, you would have chosen the child. So would I.”

“I...” the man started, only to sigh deeply. “Yes. You... you are right. It really makes no difference, does it?”

“We have a son, Alyosha. This is who we are. Now, wake her. She needs to know she is safe.”

The little girl held her breath and shut her eyes. Her first instinct to cover her hands with her back, but that left her feet, and they'd seen her shoulders and forearms and back and neck and thighs anyway, and... and what? What was the difference? They already knew. The trial had already begun. Best, then, to pretend she'd been sleeping.

No, no, *no*.

The blankets over her face fell away. She opened her eyes slowly, as though waking. The blinking came natural, her eyes adjusting to the light. In a moment, she was face to face with the man — her rescuer, evidently, but quite possibly her end despite his words. He was thin with sunken cheeks and eye sockets, bags beneath them revealing far more than lost sleep. His beard was scraggly, half- grey and half- brown, with soft, baby- blue eyes. There was kindness in them, but just as much fear, and in her experience human beings tended to act on the latter before the former.

She sunk down, terrified. A small sound crackled out of her throat, and she wasn't sure if she'd been trying to greet him or trying to cry.

The man smiled slightly, mixed emotion on his face. “Thank our Lord, you live. We had been worried; you were nearly frozen when I found you.”

To his right appeared another face, just as thin, but with long brown hair and brown eyes. The woman had small, pointed features, leaving her as mousey in appearance as she was in voice. “Poor thing. You are blessed, you know. Our son had run off to hide and play past his bed time, and we had thought he'd wandered into the snowy fields.”

The little one tried to smile, but couldn't manage. They knew. They were pretending not to, but they knew, and as soon as they had the privacy they would go back to figuring out where to dump her. This would be so different if she had her clothes; she was such a good fake. Well- mannered, even learned in the ways of royal behavior. Her mother had made sure of that. And with the prohibition against free travel, most adults were so impressed by the success of her journey that they offered her respect.

The two adults exchanged glances. There was sympathy there, and concern, but under it all was unmistakable, undeniable fear, she was sure of it.

The woman spoke first. “Oh, I'm sorry! My manners. I am Galina, and this is my husband, Aleksey. You're in Valenik, though you've likely never heard of this place.”

She had. Two towns back, in a pub she'd taken shelter in for a night. A couple of old men had been whispering about this place; anyone else might not have heard, but her ears were unnaturally keen.

Not that she'd been particularly interested in what she overheard — Valenik was home to adherents to an older form of Orthodoxy, now branded heretical. Of course, old believers found the new changes in the church just as heretical, even worth being burned alive, whipped, or stoned over. It was stupid, really. Why would anyone be willing to die over something as trivial as the number of fingers used to cross themselves? It was so much easier to conform.

Rumors or not, however, she knew it best to feign ignorance about something so sensitive. She shook her head slightly, just enough to seem clueless. Why were they avoiding it? They'd undressed her. They knew.

Galina and Aleksey smiled awkwardly, as if trying to hide that this was some sort of relief. But they said nothing in return, waiting patiently for the courteous response until the silence made clear it wasn't coming. The husband finally spoke up, clearing his throat. “Forgive us if we seem... aloof. What's your name? We need it, since we haven't ever... well... you're...”

“Alyosha!” the wife squeaked, giving him a cross glance before turning back to the little one. “I'm sorry, dear. What he means is, most people are afraid of what's different. You're the first of your kind in our little town and you've caused quite the fuss. But I'm... we're sure you mean no harm. You're just a child, after all.”

‘Quite the fuss’. She was sure that was an understatement. They had found her, made a big deal out of it, and people had huddled around to see if she was okay. And then they took off her mittens, and saw what she was. It must have been panic.

She took a deep breath. There was no sense in hiding any longer. She was too weak to run, too weak to fight. Her only defense was to do exactly as she always had, and pretend she was ordinary.

Trembling fingertips slid out from under the blanket, grasping the hem. She glanced, just for a moment, at the hands of her hosts before settling on her own. Where soft flesh was supposed to be, there was scale. Talons, wicked and sharp, stood in for fingernails. Her fingers were too thick, too strong, designed by birth to maim and kill. “I am... Anna,” she croaked. It had been weeks since she'd uttered a sound. “Anna Mikhailovna Sokolov, from Borovsk. Eleven years old, but of plenty age to recognize kindness. Thank you, for your hospitality.” She wasn't entirely sure about the ‘eleven’ part; these days, it was hard to keep track. But it was in the right area. She forced a small, tight- lipped smile, hiding the teeth that weren't quite normal.

Galina and Aleksey traded glances again. The man frowned, visibly upset.

The girl's stomach tightened. Borovsk? Why had she said such a thing? She could have lied. She should have lied. Anywhere but Borovsk. Two prominent old believers, archpriest Avvakum and boyarynya Feodosiya Morozova, were being held prisoner in the monastery in Borovsk. They would, more than likely, be executed. Not only was she a monster, but she was from a city full of her hosts' enemies.

"Anika," the woman finally repeated, choosing the pet form of the name. She smiled a bit, though the sincerity was questionable. "You are welcome. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have much to discuss. The Father will need to know that you are alive and well, blessed by our Maker. There is meat, bread, and clean water on the table."

Aleksey nodded hurriedly, visibly struggling to keep his eyes on her face instead of her hands. "Y- Yes. Make yourself at home. We will return shortly."

As her hosts stood and excused themselves, the girl croaked out another thanks. 'Anika', they had called her. Her pet name.

Not since her mother had another person called her Anika. 'Anya', certainly, by most adults — it was ordinary, really, for adults to greet children by the informal version of their names. But Anika? Did that woman really feel so sorry for her that'd she'd developed an affection for her, or was she trying her best to put on a front?

Anika. As the girl sat up, her mind spun in circles around the word. It was home to so many memories, all of them tainted by age. Her mother had saved it for special occasions, used such affectionate language as a reward for the best behavior. She had been raised to be a Lady, to introduce herself as Anna, to command respect even as a child. Being a monster, she'd been told, did not mean sacrificing her dignity. After all, her mother was a boyar.