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"WHOEVER DESTROYS A SINGLE LIFE HAS DESTROYED THE ENTIRE WORLD."

DON'T STAND OUT. That's what Anya's *babushka* has always told her. Keep to yourself, and don't cause trouble. But their family is about to lose their home, and Anya isn't about to stand around and do nothing. Her best option is working with the tsar's henchmen, who offer an easy bargain: money in exchange for helping them capture a dragon—which Anya isn't even sure exists. With magic on their side, it seems like a pretty easy deal.

But in this tale of mayhem and magic, other fantastical creatures abound—as do tyrannical rulers, violent Vikings, and Russian folk heroes—making Anya question everything she thought she knew. As secrets are revealed and loyalties tested, she'll have to make the most difficult decision of her life: save her family or save her friends.

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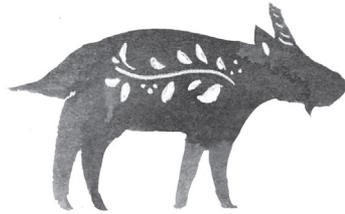
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CHAPTER ONE

ANYA WAS NOT a good goatherd. The sun had barely broken over the trees as she pulled Zvezda back to the barn by his horns for the third time. The stupid goat had broken his leg two weeks earlier, and Anya's grandfather wanted him to stay in the barn and rest for at least a month. But the goat had chewed off his splint and, apparently bored with the comfort of the barn, pushed through the doors and followed Anya out to the onion fields.

Her grandfather, Dyedka, sat in the barn on a stool and milked a goat. When Anya pulled the door

open, all the goats swiveled their heads toward her, and Dyedka said, “Back already?”

She shoved Zvezda inside. “Can you make him stay?”

Dyedka shrugged. “He’s not my goat.”

“They’re all your goats,” Anya said.

He shook his head. “That one’s yours. He doesn’t listen to me, either.”

“But you have animal magic, Dyedka.” Zvezda nibbled on her dress, and she pushed him away. “You’re a bad goat!”

Dyedka patted the goat he was done milking on her rump, and she walked away. He turned his head to Anya so he could study her with his good eye. He had lost his other eye, plus both of his legs at the knee, in a past war against the tree people—who Anya was disappointed to find out weren’t actually people made of trees but just people who lived in the forest—before she had been born. He had wooden legs that he got around on with the help of his walking stick, which leaned against the wall nearby.

Another goat stepped in front of him and bleated, ready to be milked. Dyedka scratched the top of her head and said to Anya, “You know no one is allowed to use magic, Annushka.”

She snorted and watched the line of goats waiting patiently to be milked. “You’re using magic,” she said. The goats didn’t behave this well for anyone but Dyedka and Papa, because both of them used animal magic.

Dyedka nodded. “Because I’m old and missing too many things. The tsar makes his laws in Kiev, but they don’t always apply to us out here away from the cities.”

Anya quoted a sentiment she’d heard a lot in the village when people decided to break the law: “‘God is far up high, and the tsar is far away’?”

“Exactly.” Dyedka milked the goat. “Besides, magic won’t solve all your problems.”

She wouldn’t know. Anya still didn’t have the ability to see the threads that were the key to performing magic. She was hoping that ability would make its appearance in a month, when she became a

bat mitzvah. If she was old enough to be responsible for all her own actions, she was for sure old enough to use magic, right?

Zvezda nibbled on her dress again, and she pushed his head away. This time he didn't let go as easily, and she groaned at the sharp *rrrrrip* of her dress tearing.

"Zvezda!" She grabbed at the torn fabric. "Now I have to harvest the onions *and* bake challah *and* mend this before sundown."

"Just mend it tonight," Dyedka said.

"It's Shabbat, Dyedka."

He shrugged as he milked the goat. "I don't remember all your rules."

She pushed Zvezda at the milling herd in the barn. Talking about Shabbat rekindled her urgency to get the onions brought in from the field so Mama could take them to the Friday market. If she didn't sell enough onions, they wouldn't be able to get the fish they needed for dinner, and they wouldn't have enough to eat that night and the next day.

"Stay," she said to Zvezda.

He blinked. “*Myah.*”

Anya slammed the wooden barn doors shut, and as she took a step away, she heard Zvezda bleat inside.

“Oh no, you don’t!” She backed against the barn doors and held them closed. Nothing happened. Maybe Zvezda was finally going to stay—

Thump! The door shuddered as the goat rammed it with his head.

Anya rolled her eyes. Maybe not. “Stay there!”

She heard Dyedka laugh. Papa would have known how to make the goat listen, and he would have helped her. But Papa was gone. The tsar’s conscription officers had come through months ago and taken inventory of every able-bodied man in the village. Now they were all away fighting against the forces of Sultan Suleiman to the south.

Zvezda bleated again and bumped the door with his head.

Anya scowled. “If I catch you out of the barn again, I’ll break your other legs!” She wouldn’t really. Dyedka had said Zvezda was her goat, and she supposed that was true. Even though he was annoying,

she still liked him, and he seemed to like her. She had named him for the star-shaped black smudge on his white face, ignoring that he was a boy and “Zvezda” was a girl’s name. He was a goat. He didn’t know he had a girl’s name.

Zvezda snorted from inside, as if challenging her threat.

Anya stepped away from the door, waiting to see if Zvezda would escape. The shadows of his little goat legs moved back and forth under the barn door. He bumped the door again with his horns, the dull thud less enthusiastic than before.

With an open palm, Anya smacked the wood of the door.

The goat stopped pacing, letting out a little bleat.

Anya grinned and hurried east toward the road. She passed her family’s tiny home: sturdy wood and stone with a half-tidy garden of potatoes, radishes, and leeks around the front and left side. The rest of the house was covered with rosebushes so thick, they looked as though they would crush the house at any moment. But they wouldn’t. Anya’s blind

grandmother, Babulya, whose snores managed to reach Anya as she made her way to the road, made sure of that. Papa's side, the Kozlovs, had animal magic. But Mama's side had plant magic.

The onion fields on the other side of the road were the most in need of harvest. Onions were best gathered in the cooler morning, but if Zvezda kept delaying her, it would be midday before she finished.

As soon as her feet hit the packed dirt of the road, a bleat from behind made her halt. She turned, shoulders slumped with resignation, and stared Zvezda in his black-smudged face. The little white goat flicked his tail and stared at her, then bleated again.

Anya sighed and knelt. Zvezda stretched his neck out and sniffed her nose.

"Listen to me," Anya said. "You can come, but you have to behave. Mama needs the onions done. She's already got enough to worry about. She doesn't need this, too."

Zvezda continued sniffing. Anya envied the goat just then. He didn't know about the war that took

the men and boys from the village, or understand the magistrate's tax hike. He especially couldn't see how battling the magistrate wore Mama down the same way fat wore the edge off a blade.

Anya trudged across the road, and Zvezda limped a step behind her. They reached the half-full onion cart. Anya pulled a clump of stalks up, bringing an onion out of the dirt, and she tossed it at the cart. The bulb bounced in.

Zvezda chewed on the side of the wooden cart while Anya went about her chore. She moved farther into the field and pulled another onion up.

"Do you think I can make it from here?" she asked him.

Zvezda grunted from where he gnawed.

"Watch me," she said, and threw the onion overhand in his direction.

The bulb hit the far edge of the cart and then bounced onto the pile of onions inside. Anya shot her arms above her head.

"Yes!" she hollered.

Zvezda bleated loudly.

“I told you I could do it!” Anya pointed at the goat. “You naysayer.”

“*Myah*,” Zvezda said.

Anya grinned to herself as she reached for another onion stalk. She saw and heard the serpent coiled within the stalks at the same time, and she yelped as she jerked her hand back. The serpent struck at her retreating fingers, snapping shut on empty air where her hand had been a moment before.

Anya stumbled backwards, tripping over the uneven dirt and landing hard on her behind. Her fingers tingled from the near miss.

The serpent-creature coiled again, displaying a blood-red mouth as it hissed at her. That red mouth, plus tiny curled horns on its head, identified it as a *zmeyok*, so named because people a long time ago thought they were baby dragons. But they weren’t. They were just snakes. Bothersome horned snakes that ate anything they could get their mouths around—including, local gossip said, small children.

Anya was small for her age, and this *zmeyok* was enormous.

Its body was thicker than Anya's arm, and its wide head was as big as one of her fists. A fine crest of reddish-brown fur ran along its back from its head to the tip of its tail. The sides of its face were furry, like it was trying to grow a beard, and out of this short bed of hair, its two tiny curled horns grew.

The *zmeyok* flicked a searching tongue in her direction, and its reptilian eyes focused right on her. It shifted, tightening itself into a more compact coil, looking more like it was defending territory than getting ready to leave.

Anya looked up at the field of onions behind the serpent and noted the brightening sunshine. Mama needed the onions, and Anya needed to get rid of the *zmeyok*.

Something winked in the air before her, and she squinted at it. It could have been a strand of spider silk, or it could have been something better, and more dangerous.

She struggled to find the gossamer thread again, and as she was about to give up, it flashed at her.

Magic.

Anya looked toward the road. The unspoken rule of magic in Zmeyreka—and maybe all of Kievan Rus’—was that if you were going to use it, make sure no one saw you.

That rule hadn’t ever been a big issue for Anya. Using magic was like playing a *gusli*: anyone could pick up the instrument and strum the strings, but only a talented or trained bard could make real music with it. And since Tsar Kazimir had made magic use illegal ten years ago, magic training had become extinct. The only way to use *real* magic was to have the talent for it.

Her breath caught in her throat, and her stomach fluttered. Maybe this was it, her talent emerging. Maybe it had taken being scared by the *zmeyok* to bring it out. She followed its trajectory toward its end: the ground.

Dirt magic. Elemental. She sighed. Even babies could catch a string of elemental magic and tug on it. This wasn’t her talent. But she could still use it.

She pinched the strand carefully as it shimmered close to her fingers. The ground in front of the

zmeyok rumbled, a miniature earthquake confined to a square inch. The *zmeyok* flicked its tongue out toward the trembling earth.

Sweat broke on Anya's brow. The magic was dusty and brittle, and if she put too much pressure on it, it would snap. She had to be gentle with it, and so, so careful . . .

Her finger slipped on the thread, yanking it down too hard. The thread vanished. As it splintered away, it pulled a little puff of dirt from the ground, spraying it into the *zmeyok's* eyes. The creature blinked hard and whipped its head around. It thrashed its long body along the onions. Stalks snapped. Exposed bulbs crunched as the serpent's body hit them.

The *zmeyok* turned its bloodshot eyes right to Anya. It opened its red mouth and hissed. Anya went cold, and then the cold turned to ice when the *zmeyok* burst toward her.

She scrambled to find another thread of dirt magic. The air was clear. She lifted a booted foot instead, ready to kick at the serpent before it could bite her.

“I’ll save you!” a voice called from the direction of the road.

Anya looked toward the voice, and the *zmeyok* struck at her just as a boy stumbled between them. He went careening by, and Anya heard a dull *whack* as the serpent struck the side of the newcomer’s boot. The boy landed face-first in the dirt.

The *zmeyok* hissed and struck at Anya again.

Zvezda charged with his little horned head lowered, and he slammed against Anya’s side. She yelped and ended up with a mouthful of dirt as she sprawled next to the boy on the ground.

“No!” Anya gasped, spitting out dirt as she turned toward her goat. A broken leg was one thing, but a *zmeyok*’s bite was completely different. One of the fishermen had been bitten by a *zmeyok* years ago, and the bite got infected. He had nearly lost his hand.

Zvezda brought his head up with some effort. The *zmeyok* hung on to his horn, digging its teeth in viciously. Half of its body trailed along the ground as Zvezda backed around and aimed himself at the handcart.

Zvezda charged. Just before he hit the cart, the snake released his horn and dropped to the ground. Zvezda crashed into the cart, and the *zmeyok* took the opportunity to escape. It vanished into the nearby woods, properly defeated.