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Aksinya: Enchantment and the Daemon

by

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The dank stone room was filled with shadows. Every corner oozed darkness. Within a pentagram that was encompassed by a circle stood a slight young woman. Fat yellow beef-tallow candles marked the points of the pentagram and weakly illuminated only the area around her. A brazier of incense filled the room with the scent of myrrh along with an underlying smell that was indeterminate, but left a taste of blood in the mouth. The woman was dressed in a black gown that was much too large for her. Beautiful hand made lace cascaded down the front of the dress and decorated the sleeves. Thick velvet competed with black satin to form a perfect attire to greet a Tsar, but certainly not a commissar. The gown fell loosely away from the woman's thin chest and small breasts. It looked odd draped on her body, like a girl playing dress-up from her mother's closet. But this gown obviously came from the closet of a princess.

Aksinya, the woman within the pentagram, squinted across the dark cellar. She was barely eighteen and much too thin for her age. She was petit; that was a polite way of saying small. And underdeveloped, that was a polite way of saying she didn't yet appear much like a woman. Aksinya's hair was dark brown and silky and beautiful, bound up in a long braid, but her face

was plain and Russian, so Russian. Her voice was soft and sometimes too shrill. When she was excited it rose in strength and pitch, so she never sounded very mature or well mannered.

Aksinya stood in the middle of the pentagram. She held a book in one hand, and the bodice of the dress in the other. It kept falling away from her chest and although there was no one to see, she felt uncomfortable and underdressed when it did. She squinted across the cellar again and focused back on the book. She knew the words and the pictures in the book by heart. She had memorized them long ago, but still she sought them like an anchor against the storm she was about to release. In the dark—she hadn't thought about how dark it would be, she could barely read the text. Finally, she took up an extra taper from the floor and lit it from the closest candle. She had to hold the taper in one hand and the book in the other, which almost completely revealed her chest, but that couldn't be helped now.

Aksinya read from the book. The words weren't Russian, her mother tongue, and they weren't the French of the Russian Court. They weren't the Greek their priest pounded daily into her head. The language was Latin. She had studied it secretly for years. She had memorized all the Latin books she had found hidden in the unused guesthouse at the back of the estate. With nothing else to do, she had spent every free moment teasing out the secrets of these books for just this moment. Aksinya was tired of being nothing and being helpless. She intended from this moment forward to never be helpless again.

She read the ponderous Latin from her book. The cover was black, and a pentagram was worked into the ancient leather. The book was old, ancient. The pages were yellowed with age. In spite of that, the pictures and words were perfectly preserved as if time inside it had been slowed to a stop. The words of the book were dark and evil. Aksinya knew them well. She knew their meanings. She forced her lips to form them, but this wasn't the first time she had

forced her lips to make these dark words. For years and years she spoke them. She manipulated the world through them. She made the world obey her with these ancient words. She let her mind flow to the word—sorcery. Aksinya made magic. She had taught herself from the dark books she found, and here and now, she made the most horrible of magic.

Her words called out an entreaty. She beckoned as gently and as enticingly as she could. She spoke carefully and pronounced the words exactly. She learned that early. She had a scar on her leg and cheek that had come from these dark words not pronounced correctly. She would not make that mistake again.

The words flowed from her mouth. They filled the cellar like the incense and the faint illumination of her tallow candles. Their volume rose to a crescendo, and Aksinya cried out. Her words rang in the space. They reached out, and magnified. They echoed as though she stood at the edge of a great precipice instead of in the dark cellar of an old guest house.

As though a fit seized her, Aksinya's body began to sway and her words jumbled a little. She fought to keep them straight and perfect. They were a frenzy from her lips and she almost screamed them out. She held them in her mind perfect and pure and exact. She didn't realize the book lay at her feet across her cross decorated bookstand, and the taper sizzled on the cold stone but still the words flowed from her lips. They were like a black song. They were like a horrible solo that called deep into the earth rather than up into the heavens.

At once, Aksinya felt the strength sucked from her body. She felt her power burst out, and along with her voice and the incense and the paltry light, it entirely filled the space. That was the sign she looked for. The sign was always the same when she said the words correctly. She locked her knees and would not let herself fall. That would be the worst. She mustn't falter, not now.

A great roar filled the cellar, and she almost dropped. She didn't. Her voice rang out more clearly. A hot sulfurous wind rushed through the place and Aksinya smiled. Then she forced her face back to blandness. There was a dark flash, a scream like the sound of metal cutting metal, and across the cellar, in the corner suddenly was a shape.

Immediately, Aksinya's words changed. Their words of enticing and cajoling became those of welcoming and greeting. They leapt automatically from her lips. As she spoke, she carefully watched the shape across the room. It began to move. At first it slowly rose and fell as though it was just beginning to breathe, and then it began to grow. It unfolded like a flower, but this flower was like nothing beautiful the earth had ever seen. It was man-shaped and black. Its skin and muscles clung to it as though it was only bone and muscle without any fat at all. When it had unfolded completely, it touched the top of the ceiling, at least seven feet tall. More than two meters. Its limbs were long and at the end of its fingers were talons and of its feet were claws. They were black too. Its face was black and handsome. Fangs jutted out of its lips on the top and the bottom, but the face was aristocratic and fine. At its head were ears that lifted up points like an animal and horns at either side.

The creature was naked, and Aksinya's eyes moved almost without her control downward. There was nothing there. It was like an expurgated statue. There was nothing but a pubic bulge. Aksinya wasn't certain whether to be disappointed. She raised her hands in the final greeting and let them fall.

The creature let out a hiss.

Aksinya licked her lips. She unconsciously spoke Russian, "Hello, demon. Name yourself."

The demon slitted his eyes. His voice was a hiss only slightly slurred by its fangs, “Russian. I can answer in this tongue. Be very afraid.” He wrinkled his nose at her, “Where is your master little girl?”

“Ha, demon. I am your master.”

“My master? We shall see. Who called me?”

“I did. I demand you name yourself.”

“Little girl, I am Asmodeus. Do you know me?”

“I do know you, and I demand you obey me.”

“Who really called me?”

“I called you.”

“If you lie, you know what I can do to you.”

Aksinya stuck out her chin, “I do not lie, demon.” She began the next part of the reciting in Latin again.

As she spoke, the demon’s eyes widened, “You did call me.” He began to laugh.

Aksinya cautiously stopped speaking the dark words and asked, “Why are you laughing?”

Asmodeus scratched his nose and let out a little snort, “In all my many years, I have never been called by a girl or a woman. Only men. How old are you anyway. You are nearly breastless. Are you even past the age of accountability?”

“The age of accountability?”

“Yes, are you at least twelve with pubic hair?”

Aksinya blushed, “You, keep quiet. I called you—you have no right to insult me.”

“I have not insulted you, little girl. I only wish to know with whom I deal. If you can’t be held accountable for your sins, then I can’t have any dealing with you.”

“I am more than twelve, and I have...I have...,” Aksinya was breathing hard.

“You have pubic hair. I could ask you to prove that, you know.”

“Zatknis¹, demon. I don’t have to prove anything to you.”

“Ah, but you do, and you know it.”

“What I have to prove has nothing to do with, with, that. Listen to me demon, Asmodeus, I claim you as my servant. I called you, and you must now answer to me alone.”

“Very well, I know all that. What do you offer? Usually I get your soul out of the deal.”

Aksinya stammered, “I will not offer you my soul.”

“Why not? You won’t have any other use for it when you die. You’re certain to be in hell for what you did tonight alone.”

“That is not certain. I might have called a demon from the pit...”

“...And worked the foulest of magic.”

“Yes, that too.”

“Little girl, this is how you go to hell—didn’t your mother teach you?”

“My mother did teach me—stand back, demon, Asmodeus.”

“I was only getting closer to you.”

“There is no need until after we have made our contract.”

“Then what do you offer me, little girl? If it is not your soul, then it must be some other part of you. You know that part becomes mine forever.”

Aksinya picked up a dagger from the stone floor. She watched the demon the entire time.

Asmodeus’ eyes brightened. He smiled around his fangs. He licked his lips, “What will you offer me of yourself, little girl? Will it be your virtue perhaps? Or perhaps a body part?”

¹ Shut up!

“You know as well as I do, demon, my virtue is not a part to give but rather a quality. Have you tricked others that way?”

The demon shrugged, “Perhaps I have taken their virtue, and they found out later that that was insufficient for a contract. It really is a bother to be at the beck and call of a puny human.”

“And without a contract...?”

“Without a contract, I take you to hell with me now.” The demon jumped to the edge of the pentagram. He circled it like a cat. The smell of sulfur followed in his wake.

Aksinya turned with him and carefully watched his bright black eyes.

Asmodeus stopped on the other side, “It was well made, little girl.”

“Of course it was well made. Do you think I would try this without being well prepared?”

“From humans, I don’t know what to expect. Now what will you give me? There are rules to this game.”

“This is no game. I know exactly what this is.”

“You know, little girl. I can see right down the front of your dress.”

“Zatkni!² You have to obey me, demon.”

“Not until there is a contract. Until then, I may do what ever I wish to you.”

“Only if you can touch me.”

“I have all the time in the world. I have been around since that guy laid the foundations of the world. That’s when He created me.”

“You mean God...”

“Don’t say that name. Plus why would a sorceress like you use His name so easily. You are damned to hell just as I am.”

² Shut up!

“Perhaps I am damned to hell, but I know the truth. You were not at the beginning, and He did not create you at first. There is some question as to just who created you and when, so do not speak lies to me demon.”

Asmodeus snarled and moved the rest of the way around the circle, “I am a demon. I may lie as I desire. Now, stop wasting my time, little girl. Give me your part of the bargain and contract me. Either that or let me take you to hell. When the candles of your magic circle burn out, nothing on the earth will protect you from me.”

Aksinya lifted her dagger.

“What do I get? Your finger? Your ear? Perhaps your arm? Does it offend you that much, little girl?”

Aksinya grasped her long braided hair and cut it with the razor sharp dagger, “I shall give you my hair, demon, Asmodeus. This part of me shall be the pledge of our contract. You must please me, protect me, and obey me as my servant until the day of my death.” Aksinya held the long thick braid in front of her and stepped out of the circle toward the demon.

Asmodeus looked as though he wouldn’t take the braid. His legs twitched as though he tried to take a step back. Then slowly, slowly, his hands reached out, and he grasped the braid. Aksinya let it go. She saw her braided hair in the hands of the demon for a moment then it was gone. The demon dropped to his knees.

“Where is your surety, demon, Asmodeus?”

The demon reached out his hands. In them was a locket of tarnished silver. Its fine chain was like a thin braid of hair—the links were heart-shaped. The locket was about one inch high and shaped like a heart. Aksinya bent her head and the demon slipped the chain over it. It

settled around her neck and fell down the front of her dress. Aksinya could feel it burning against her chest, between her small breasts. The scent of sulfur increased for a moment.

The demon gave a laugh, “There is my surety, Lady Aksinya Andreiovna Golitsyna. Are you certain you are not a child?”

“How do you know my name?”

“Lady, I know everything about you now.”

“Then you know I am of age...”

“Eighteen, a virgin, and never kissed. All your secrets. I know what you do every night and what you think...”

“Zatknis³, demon. I have work for you to do.”

“Work already? I thought so. You do know what it means when I work for you—don’t you?”

“Yes, I know what it means, Asmodeus.”

“Then make me work and make me work hard, for every moment of work I do for you shortens your life and brings me closer to the time when I shall be free of you.”

“Then, if you know my mind, you know what I have for you to do.”

The demon stood tall with his arms across his chest, “You have to say them. Plus, it will do you no good.”

Aksinya squinted her eyes, “Why will it do no good?”

The demon pursed his lips and stood silent.

Aksinya’s lip curled up, “If you know my mind, then take me to the house and protect my family.”

³ Shut up

Asmodeus tendered her a sly smile, "I shall, my lady. Shall I touch you or will you touch me?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you wish to travel with me, one or the other must touch. I give you the choice."

"What difference does it make?"

"That you will soon find out."

"Curse you, demon..."

"You are too late."

"Then, quickly tell me, which is better for me?"

"It is always better for your body if you ask me to touch you, but it is better for your soul if you touch me."

"Very well," Aksinya grabbed the demon's arm.

The world swirled in darkness. Aksinya was dizzy and she felt herself rise up and away from the earth. They moved through earth and stone and then air. The night was as dark as her cellar. The air was colder. Aksinya felt a pain in her legs that spread to her hips. She felt as though she had run miles and miles and she was still running. Her breath came in gasps. Then they were at the front door to her house. It was a mansion. Her father's house. It was large and beautiful. It was the most beautiful building for over a hundred miles around. Her father's family had kept it for generations and generations. A large white stone drive wound up to the front and circled statues and lawn. The ground and drive was covered with a thick blanket of snow. And all around the drive were what looked like fallen statues. They were pale and still. They were statues dressed in finery. Beneath them spread dark stains on the blazing white snow.

The moment her feet touched the ground, Aksinya collapsed onto the snow. She lay there unable to breath. Slowly, slowly, she raised up her body. She couldn't move her legs. They burned. The freezing snow didn't seem to cool them. The locket at her breast felt as though it sizzled with heat. She gazed across the drive and her mouth opened—not a sound came out. She could not speak. She could only lay there and stare.

Asmodeus picked his teeth, “You were a bit too late, little girl. So you called me to save them, but you were too late, and now you are marked for hell for nothing.”

“Zatknis⁴, demon.”

“Is that your brother over there? I think I recognize his clothing. That is certainly your mother and your sister. They didn't take the time to ravish them—unfortunate, but that should make you feel better.”

“I can't stand.”

“I told you if I touched you it would be better for your body.”

“What happened to me?”

“If you rest in the bosom of the devil, your body will be protected, but your soul will be eaten away. If you choose to come with me, your body is affected by the world we pass through.”

“Pick me up, demon.”

“Do you know what you ask?”

“Pick me up. I cannot walk. I wish to see them.”

Asmodeus picked her up in his arms. He was unusually gentle. He smelled of myrrh and sulfur. His skin was hot and dry. In the cold evening, it felt comforting to Aksinya like sitting close to a warm fireplace.

“Take me to my father.”

⁴ Shut up

The demon strode to a body cast down on the drive. The man's coat had been removed. His shirt was dark with blood. Asmodeus tightened his grip, "I would not look at his face. They shot him there. It is your father Count Andrei Nikolaevich Golitsyna. He is dead."

"Why should I believe you? You are used to lying. It is a habit with you."

"But I can't lie to you, my lady."

"I wish to see my mother."

The demon carried her to where a woman lay. A young woman held her hand. They both didn't move.

Aksinya's voice sounded emotionless to her, "Is anyone alive?"

"No, my lady, they are all dead."

"Do you swear?"

"I cannot swear. I can only tell you the truth."

"I wish to kiss my mother and my sister and my brother. Bring them over and take me close to them."

The demon gently carried each of the bodies over and moved them close to one another. He let Aksinya down near their heads. She touched the face of each and kissed them. Aksinya didn't look at Asmodeus, "Bring my father here and put him beside them."

"I told you before."

"Do it!"

"Yes, mistress."

Aksinya didn't look at her father's face. She took his hand and kissed it. She still didn't look at Asmodeus, "Bring the others. My maid and my governess, the priest. Place them where I can touch them."

The demon collected their bodies and put them near Aksinya. She touched their cheeks and kissed them each in farewell.

The demon stood across from her, “You have not cried a single tear for them?”

“Is that so odd?”

“Already your soul becomes mine. I cannot weep for anyone or anything either.”

“Why should I shed a tear for those I cannot help? The time for tears is well past. The time for revenge is at hand.”

“It will not bring back your family or your friends.”

“But it will ease my soul. Why would you dissuade me from it Demon?”

Asmodeus blinked.

“This is my order to you. Those that killed my family and these servants. Find them and kill them. Return with their bodies and place them here before me.”

“You are truly a fine mistress. Already I am called to death and destruction. Hell will welcome you.”

“Enough of your lip. Go now.”

Asmodeus bowed. The darkness shimmered for a moment, then he was gone. The locket at Aksinya’s breast began to burn.

Aksinya started to pray. She cried out the Greek prayers her priest had taught her so painstakingly. She cried them to the night, but her eyes were tearless, and she wasn’t certain if her words reached anywhere near the heavens.

As the morning frost began to form and the top of the snow became brittle with rime, Asmodeus returned. A faint whiff of sulfur came with him. He carried many, many men and

boys. He laid them one by one neatly in rows across the lawn. He put them where Aksinya could see each one. They were horribly dead.

When the demon was finished, he stepped over to Aksinya and gave her a smile.

She glared at him, "I didn't tell you to tear their bodies up like that."

"No, you didn't tell me how to kill them. It was a great pleasure to mistreat them this way. I assure you they all felt indescribable terror as they died. It was my service to you. The torture they felt more than paid for the suffering they caused you and the world."

Aksinya shook her head, "I suppose that will be held against me too?"

"Every action I do in your name is accounted to you, mistress."

"Here are my instructions to you. I cannot walk and I am cold. Take me to my room. You may carry me."

Asmodeus lifted her up and carried her into the house. The front door had been broken in and the foyer was torn apart. The furniture here was soiled and ripped. Asmodeus carried her up to her room and laid her on her bed. The room was untouched.

Aksinya lay back on her pillows, "Now, bring all my books and equipment to me from the guest house. Place them in my room. While I sleep, bury my family in our plot."

"I cannot say any words over them."

"I shall myself tomorrow. Do not mistreat them. Do you understand me?"

"I understand you and I obey you, mistress."

When Aksinya awoke, her books and tools were neatly stacked near the door. The sun was high, but not very bright. A low coal fire burned in her fireplace. The demon must have lit it. She guessed it was still morning. The moment she moved her legs she regretted it. She lifted

her dress and examined them. They were black and blue. The bruising went up to her thighs. She gingerly felt them. They weren't broken, but still very, very tender. They felt as though someone had beaten them. She could barely move them. Though the room was cold, the black dress she borrowed from her mother's closet was sweaty and uncomfortable. It smelled of sulfur and incense. The scent nauseated her. Aksinya reached back and unbuttoned the bodice. She hadn't been able to button it up all the way anyway. She undid the buttons one by one until she could wriggle out of the dress. She stood naked for a moment then stumbled to her closet and took out a nightgown. She pulled that over her head and went back to bed.

Later a scratching sound at her door wakened her. She sat up.

Asmodeus called from the other side of the door, "When are you going to get up? We have many things we must discuss."

Aksinya settled back on the bed, "I am tired. I don't wish to get up now."

"It doesn't matter. You are awake and I need to speak to you," the demon pushed the door open. He came in, closed the door, and squatted before it.

"What do you want?"

"You have over fifty dead Bolsheviks on your lawn."

"Yes, I realized that."

"Do you realize what it means?"

Aksinya shrugged.

"Are you so stupid? Right now the Party officials are hearing about all these missing Party members. They are getting an earful from their wives, mothers, and sisters. Very soon they shall begin to search diligently for them. Very soon, they will find them on your lawn."

Aksinya pulled the covers over her head, “So they will kill me too. Isn’t that what you want?”

“It isn’t just you. It is everyone in the village and the district who supported your family.”

Aksinya threw back the covers and stared at the demon. She tugged on her lower lip, “Why do you care—it’s just more killing?”

Asmodeus sneered, “The first is that I am contracted to protect you. The second is that I cannot harm the innocent.”

Aksinya’s brow rose, “So those on my lawn were all guilty?”

“Yes.”

“What must you be guilty of to lack enough innocence to merit your condemnation?”

“You must be guilty of murder or of another of that guy’s laws that call for death.”

Aksinya smiled, “You mean God’s laws.”

“You know whom I mean,” the demon spat.

“Am I guilty?”

Asmodeus drew his talon along the floor as though he wrote on the wood, “Yes, mistress, very guilty.”

“I don’t wish any harm to come to my father’s people. What do you suggest?”

“I can dispose of the bodies so the Party will not look here.”

“That is good. Do it.”

“There is another problem.”

“Yes. Speak.”

“The problem is you.”

Aksinya lay on her pillow again, “There is no problem with me.”

“You cannot remain here. There is no food and there is no heat. Everyone you knew is dead. There is a revolution here. You shouldn’t get caught up in it.”

“I am already caught up in it. What if I asked you to fight it with me?”

“There is only so much I can do.”

Aksinya rolled over, “Why do you care for me at all?”

“I told you, mistress. You have a contract with me. I am required to protect you.”

“I just want to die.”

Asmodeus shifted from foot to foot, “That would happily end our contract, but I would be in default.”

Aksinya rolled her head back to stare at him, “You are afraid. What on earth would make a demon like you afraid?” Her mouth worked for a moment. Asmodeus didn’t say anything. Finally, Aksinya burst out, “You are afraid of Him. You are afraid of God. Could that mean that God allowed me to do this? Is there still some hope for me?”

Still Asmodeus didn’t reply.

“I slaved over those books for years to arrive at just this point. I worked toward only one goal—I wanted to save my family. In the end, all my work, all my planning came to nothing. In the end, I failed to protect the people who were most precious to me. In the end, I damned myself for no reason at all. But, now, the very idea gives me hope. Could I find a way to nullify our contract and regain my soul? Is there still hope for me?”

Asmodeus shrugged, “If you wish to fulfill our contract now, I can take you back to hell with me.”

“Ha, our contract was not for my soul. I only gave you my hair...”

“...as surety. The contract was ultimately for your soul. I hold your hair as surety for the time when I will take you to hell.”

“But you fear Him. Don’t you see what that means?”

The demon smiled. He gave a little bow, “I know your mind, therefore, I understand what you think it means. You could be mistaken.”

“When I contracted with you, I wished only one thing. I wanted to save my family. I did not wish a demon servant. I did not want riches or power.”

“What about beauty?”

Aksinya looked away, “What woman doesn’t want beauty?”

“I can make you beautiful.”

Aksinya laughed, “You can only make me look beautiful. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. My beauty is buried deep within my soul. My father told me that every day...” Her words stopped abruptly, and she pressed her lips together.

“I can give you whatever you desire, mistress.”

Still with her lips held in a firm line, Aksinya, glared, “You cannot give me back my mother, father, sister, or brother. You can’t give me love or family or parents. You can’t bring back the dead and you can’t change time. You won’t even give me back my soul. These are the things I desire. You can’t give me any of them—what good are you?”

“You should have asked yourself those questions before you contracted with me. I’m still not certain you are past the age of accountability—perhaps you could seek an annulment?”

“You perverted demon. I am not married to you.”

“Ah, but for better or worse, you are. Plus, I am not the pervert. I see your mind. I know what you do for solace.”

“Zatknis!”⁵ Aksinya flounced into the covers.

“Now we must plan.”

“I will plan. Go do what I have ordered you to do. When you return, perhaps I will grant you an audience.”

Asmodeus bowed. Aksinya didn’t see him—she had already closed her eyes. She heard the door to her room open and close.

⁵ Shut up