

Laurus

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Excerpt 1

Prolego

He had four names at various times. A person's life is heterogeneous, so this could be seen as an advantage. Life's parts sometimes have little in common, so little that it might appear various people lived them. When this happens, it's difficult not to feel surprised that all these people carry the same name.

He also had two nicknames. One of them—Rukinets—referred to the part of town where he came into the world. But this person was known to most people by the nickname Doctor because he was, more than anything, a doctor to his contemporaries. He was, one should think, something more than a doctor because what he achieved went beyond the limits of a doctor's possibilities.

It is thought that the word *vrach*, for medical doctor, comes from the word *vрати*, which means *zagovarivat'*, to cast a spell or begin to speak. This similarity supposes that words—words as such, no matter what they meant—played an essential role in the medical treatment process. The role of words was more significant during the Middle Ages than it is now because of the limited selection of medications. So speaking a lot was a necessity.

Doctors spoke. They knew certain remedies for ailments, but they didn't pass up opportunities to address disease directly. By uttering rhythmic phrases that outwardly lacked meaning, they *cast a spell* on the illness, convincing it to abandon the patient's body. The line between doctor and charlatan was relative during this period.

Patients spoke. In the absence of diagnostic technology, patients needed to describe, in detail, everything occurring within their ailing bodies. Sometimes they thought the illness left them, bit by bit, along with their unhurried, pain-steeped words. They could only speak with their doctors about all the details of their illnesses, and this made them feel better.

The patients' relatives spoke. They clarified their loved ones' statements or even amended them because not all illnesses permitted the sufferers to give reliable reports of what

they'd gone through. Relatives could openly express concerns that the illness was untreatable and complain (the Middle Ages were not a sentimental time) that it's difficult to deal with an ill person. This made them feel better, too.

The defining trait of the person under discussion is that he spoke very little. He remembered the words of Arsenius the Great: I have often regretted the things I have said, but I have never regretted my silence. Most often he looked, wordlessly, at the patient. He might say only, Your body will still serve you. Or, Your body has become unsuitable, prepare to leave it; know that this shell is imperfect.

His renown was great. It spread throughout the entire populated world; he could not avoid notice anywhere. His appearances gathered many from the people. He would cast an attentive gaze upon those present, his wordlessness transferring itself to those who had gathered. The crowd froze in place. Only small clouds of steam—instead of words—left hundreds of open mouths, and he would watch how they melted in the frosty air. And the crunch of January snow under his feet was audible. Or the rustle of September foliage. Everyone awaited a miracle and the sweat of expectation rolled down the faces of those in attendance. Salty drops fell, resonating on the earth. The crowd parted, letting him through to the person he had come to see.

He would place his hand on the patient's forehead. Or touch wounds. Many believed that the touch of his hand could heal. And thus the nickname Rukinets, given to him because of his place of birth but rooted in the word *ruka*, for *the upper extremities*, acquired additional meaning. His doctoring skills were honed over the years, reaching, at the zenith of his life, heights that seemed unattainable for a human being.

It was said he possessed the elixir of immortality. It is even said from time to time that this gifted healer could not die as all other people do. The basis for this opinion is that his body had no traces of decay after death, maintaining its previous appearance after lying under an open sky for many days. And then it disappeared, as if its possessor had grown tired of lying there: he stood up and left. Those who think this, however, forget that only two people have physically left the earth since the creation of the world. Enoch was taken by the Lord at the unmasking of the Antichrist and Elijah was raised to the heavens in a chariot of fire. Legend does not mention a Russian doctor.

Judging from his infrequent statements, he did not intend to reside in his body forever, if only because he had occupied it his entire life. Most likely he didn't have the elixir of

immortality, either. Somehow, things of this sort don't fit with what we know about him. In other words, one can say with certainty that he is not with us at present. It's worth adding, though, that he himself did not always understand what time ought to be considered the present.

Excerpt 2

Chapter B/V

Arseny stayed in Velikoye Selo for two weeks. He treated and washed the sick. He gave them food and drink, beginning with drink. And he taught those who recovered how to care for the sick.

You are not under the power of the pestilence now, Arseny told those who had recovered. It can no longer touch those who have broken free of its clutches.

Not everyone believed him. Some, fearing the ailment would return, quietly left the village, going where there was no pestilence. They soon realized this was a mistake. Their bodies, weakened by illness, could not ward off the adversities of the journey, so the slush and cold fog of the road completed what the plague had lacked the power to accomplish. Those who stayed (they were the majority) believed in Arseny as they believed in themselves. He was their savior and his healing confirmed in their eyes the rightness of his words. They entered the plague houses together with Arseny but no harm came to any of them.

When Arseny had enough helpers to care for the living, he devoted himself to the dead: they could not wait, either. Even the dead who had been brought outside were decomposing, unrestrained. The embarrassed grimaces of the deceased clearly showed there was nothing more they could do with themselves; they required immediate help. A cart was found and loaded with bodies. They were taken off to the nearest potter's field, three versts away, and there they stayed, to wait for Semik. Those who took care of the deceased did not cry. In those days nobody cried, for tears cannot soften the grief of so much death. Beyond that, there were simply no more tears.

When he was certain life was returning to normal in Velikoye Selo, Arseny decided to leave. He said goodbye to its residents on a fine January morning, not allowing anyone to escort him beyond the outskirts. But Arseny's great renown—the source of which may be found in Velikoye Selo—could not confine itself to that one locality.

Arseny's renown spread, independent of his will, through burghs and hamlets, overcoming dank dampness and roadlessness. Arseny moved on to the village of Lukinskaya, but his renown greeted him right at the first house. It stood in the form of an old peasant woman leaning against a carved door frame and holding a ceremonial loaf of bread.

Art thou Arseny? asked the woman.

I am, answered Arseny.

The woman thrust the bread at him and he mechanically pinched some off. The bread was hard because (as Arseny gathered) it was baked long ago.

Do help us, O Arseny, for we are dying the death.

If it so please God, I will help, Arseny muttered, not looking at the woman.

He did not understand where she had learned about him; he silently followed her around the village. Mud squished underfoot, and large, wet snowflakes floated down on them through awkwardly angled birch branches. The snowflakes were invisible against the backdrop of the white tree trunks but their faces keenly sensed them. The snow melted instantly on their cheeks but lingered on their eyelashes, hanging for a short time.

How does she know me? Arseny asked Justina, but Justina remained silent.

Arseny paused then said, I'm afraid she takes me for someone else. And that her expectations are too high.

Sometimes he got ahead of the old woman and looked her in the eyes. They reflected a gray sky with no ray of light. He took the woman by the shoulder and abruptly stopped her. She turned her head but looked beyond him.

You know full well your grandson died so why are you taking me to him? said Arseny.

And why, one must ask, am I alive? said the woman, indifferent.

Arseny did not know how to respond, and it had not been a question anyway. At least not a question for him. He silently watched the woman disappear beyond the snowflakes. Once she was no longer visible, he headed toward the nearest cottage. Work already awaited him there.

Arseny spent more time in Lukinskaya than in Velikoye Selo. There were more patients here. There were also more dead. Apathy reigned in Lukinskaya and it turned out to be much more complicated to get people to help each other. But Arseny dealt with that, too.

He worked to convince the peasants that their recovery depended in large part on them, themselves. With the wish of awakening the life force within them, Arseny proved to them that

God's help often comes in the form of hard workers. The peasants nodded because they took Arseny to be one of those hard workers. But they did not want to become hard workers. Or perhaps could not. Hope awakened within them when a few of the sick they had already mourned made recoveries.

And so the recovered began to help the sick and gather up the deceased. They brought bread to orphaned children, washed houses and burned incense for purification, and cleared out yards and streets that had suffered from neglect during the time of the pestilence. Arseny left the village of Lukinskaya and moved on after seeing this.

The village of Gory was the next spot Arseny came to on his journey. After spending some time in Gory, he went around Lake Kishem, ending up in the village of Shortino after walking ten versts. From there his route took him to Kuligi, from Kuligi to Dobrilovo and from there to Zagorye. People already awaited Arseny everywhere and the local residents were already aware of how they should help him, the doctor. His words, like his renown, preceded him and everyone now knew what Arseny would say to them upon arrival, meaning he could speak ever less. This became a significant relief for Arseny: of all his work, it was the uttering of words that took the most effort.

Frost finally struck when Arseny was in Zagorye. It was a hard frost: less than a week passed before it had frozen the Sheksna over with a thin but solid ice. Arseny now continued his travels along the frozen surface of the Sheksna. His feet sometimes slipped, sometimes got caught on reeds frozen in the ice, but it was still easier to walk along the river than along roadlessness.

And so he arrived in the large village of Ivachevo, a wealthy village that lived off fishing. In Ivachevo there stood a large stone church named for Andrew the First-Called, who was a fisherman before his apostlehood. The smell of nets and salted fish blended with the smell of decaying bodies in the cottages of Ivachevo. The pestilence had arrived long ago, as in all the river villages that took in boatmen and travelers.

Arseny, who grew up far from watery expanses, sensed the river's presence with every hour. The Sheksna was not large, but the depth of its flowing water radiated a certain unusual energy of motion, even under the ice. This force was new in Arseny's life and it made him uneasy. It awakened in him the thought of pilgrimage.

Excerpt 3:

From Chapter Д/D

Arseny left his house at daybreak and made the rounds to cottages of the plague-stricken. He examined them, determining their conditions and prospects for life. He stayed for long hours in places where his help could turn out to be decisive, persuading the sad angels of death to wait a bit. At times, when he thought his powers had completely abandoned him, he went to Beloozero.

It was already the end of May, but the lake was still under ice, its boundless leaden expanse standing in contradiction to the green-covered shores. Arseny felt the coldness of the lake's depths as he walked along the ice. A waft of that coldness felt to him like a waft of death, as if the lake's abyss contained everyone from Belozersk who had ever departed. He could gaze at the ice for hours, studying what had frozen into it over the winter: shards of a pot, smoldering pieces of campfire wood, a fallen wolf, remnants of bast shoes, and items that had lost their initial appearances and transformed into pure material after resting for so long.

Arseny thought he was by himself but that was not the case. He could not hide anywhere from his renown. Unbeknownst to Arseny, Belozersk observed him from the shore. The city understood that the strain on Arseny would be unbearable for a regular person, so its people did not hinder him from gathering his strength in solitude.

But one day a speck broke free from the shore and began rapidly moving toward Arseny. Arseny paid more attention when it became obvious that the speck was headed toward him. At first he thought the person was still far away but it only appeared that way because the person was so small. When he approached, Arseny saw a boy of around seven years.

I am Sylvester, said the boy. Here I am, for my mother is sicke. Help us, O Arseny.

He took Arseny by the hand and pulled him in the direction of the shore. Sylvester's hand was cold. Arseny moved along, silently, behind him. Sylvester slipped on the ice several times and hung ludicrously from Arseny's hand. But neither laughed because their walk was not joyful. Their walk were accompanied by the crackling of ice beneath their feet; above their heads, there bellowed birds returning from warm lands. From time to time, waves of warm shore air flowed over them as they walked, heating the icy expanse.

My father died two years ago, said Sylvester. Also from the pestilence. My mother's name is Kseniya.

Seeing that Sylvester was looking at him, Arseny nodded.

Sylvester's house stood by a swampy pond near the very edge of the city. Despite Arseny's expectations, it was a nice home, without orphanhood and abandonment.

When did she get sick? Arseny asked before crossing the threshold.

Yesterday, said the boy.

Arseny went in. Sylvester followed him despite a cautionary gesture.

She's my mama, whispered Sylvester. Nothing wicked can come to me from her.

But she belongs to the illness now, not to herself, said Arseny, whispering, too, as he led the boy inside.

Kseniya lay with her eyes closed. Arseny watched her in silence for several minutes. Even the swelling from the illness had not distorted her balanced facial features. Arseny touched her forehead with his hand, surprised at his own timidity. He pressed on her forehead with his palm to shed his indecisiveness. Kseniya opened her eyes. They expressed nothing then slowly closed: Kseniya had no strength to resist sleep. Arseny felt her pulse. He drew his hand along her neck artery. He pressed several times on the place under which her heart was beating. He could feel nothing in her but the waning of life.

In the entry room, Sylvester looked at Arseny, questioning. Arseny knew that look very well but had not seen it before on a child. He could not fathom what he should say to a child with that look.

Things look bad, you know (Arseny turned away). I feel pained that I cannot save her.

But you saved the princess, said the boy. Save her, too.

Everything is in God's hand.

You know, for God, it would be such an easy thing to heal her. It is very simple, Arseny. Let's pray to Him together.

Let's. But I do not want you to blame Him if she dies anyway. Remember: she is likely to die.

You want us to ask Him but not believe that He will grant this for us?

Arseny kissed the boy on the forehead.

No. Of course not.

Arseny made a bed for Sylvester in the entry room and said, You will sleep here.

Yes, but we will pray first, said Sylvester.

Arseny went to the room and brought out icons of the Savior, His Virgin Mother, and the great martyr and healer Panteleimon. He took scoops and ladles off a shelf and put the icons in their place. He and the boy knelt. They prayed for a long time. When Arseny finished reciting prayers to the Savior, Sylvester tugged at his sleeve.

Wait, I want to say it in my own words. (He pressed his forehead to the floor, making his voice sounded more muffled.) Lord, let her live. I do not need anything else in the world. At all. I will give thanks to you for a century. You know, after all, that if she dies I will be left all alone. (He looked out from under his arm at the Savior.) With no help.

Sylvester did not fear for himself when he informed the Savior of these possible consequences: he thought of his mother and chose the weightiest arguments in favor of her return to health. He hoped he could not be refused. And Arseny saw that. He believed the Savior would see it, too.

Then they prayed to the Divine Mother. Arseny glanced back when he did not hear Sylvester's voice. Still kneeling, Sylvester slept, leaning against a storage chest. Arseny carefully carried him to the bed and prayed, now alone, to the healer Panteleimon. At around midnight he went in to begin taking care of Kseniya.

Chapter E.

For several days, Kseniya did not improve. But she was not dying, either. In this Arseny saw a display of God's boundless mercy and an encouragement to fight for her life. And he continued to fight. He lifted Kseniya's head a little, pouring into her mouth drugs for the plague as well as infusions to strengthen her flesh during her struggle with death. He held Kseniya by the hand, whispering a prayer and feeling how the help from Him to Whom he appealed poured into his patient through him.

When Arseny left her room, Sylvester greeted him in the entry room. They went to the lake for a short time after praying for Kseniya's good health. The days in Belozersk had become hot, so the coolness of the lake was pleasant. They did not go out onto the ice because it was

already unreliable: underwater springs had created melted patches and pools in the ice. The ice had changed from dark blue to black, from stable to fragile.

You will marry my mother, won't you? asked Sylvester as they walked along the shore.

Arseny stopped from the unexpectedness.

I want for us to always be together, said Sylvester.

You see, Sylvester...

After walking a bit ahead, the boy slowly returned to Arseny.

Do you have another woman?

You ask very adult questions.

That means there is?

One might say so.

Arseny saw the boy's eyes fill with tears. Sylvester kept himself in hand so the tears would not roll down his cheeks.

What is her name?

Justina.

Does she live in your village?

No.

In Belozersk?

She does not live on this earth.

The boy took Arseny's hand and they walked on, silent.

On the fifth day of her illness, Kseniya began to recover. She had no strength whatsoever but death no longer threatened her. She looked with gratitude at Arseny, who helped her drink, fed her porridge with a spoon, and brought her to the chamber pot.

I do not feel embarrassed around you, she said. This surprises even me.

The flesh loses its sinfulness during illness, said Arseny, after thinking. It is becoming known that the flesh is only a shell. So there is no need to feel embarrassed about it.

I do not feel embarrassed around you, said Kseniya again, because you have become close to me.

Kseniya improved. On one of the next evenings, she got up and boiled a turnip. She cut the turnip into even little circles and placed it in bowls. She watched the men with a happy gaze.

Arseny looked at Sylvester: the boy was hardly eating. It began to worry him that Sylvester had been listless all day.

After supper, Arseny took Sylvester by the wrist. As he approached the boy he already knew things looked bad but he did not understand how bad until he felt Sylvester's pulse. Arseny felt as if his own blood had reversed its flow and would now gush from his nostrils, ears, and throat. Kseniya still kept talking but Arseny could not even part his lips, distinctly feeling his inability to help. He looked at the child and again he wanted to die.

Sylvester did not sleep that night. He thrashed around in his bed, seized by an inexplicable restlessness. He tossed and turned and could not find a comfortable position for sleep. The muscles in his arms and legs ached. After falling asleep for a few minutes, he would quickly wake up and ask if Kseniya and Arseny were there. He thought they had gone. But they were beside him: they sat by his bed and never ceased watching over him. Kseniya did not speak; tears ran down her cheeks. Toward morning, Sylvester fell into delirium.

Kseniya lifted her head.

Save him, O Arseny. He is my life.

Arseny fell to the floor next to her, buried his head in her knees, and sobbed. He wept from the fear of losing Sylvester and from his inability to help him. He wept for all those he had not succeeded in saving. He felt his own responsibility for them, a responsibility he had to bear alone. He wept from his own loneliness, which now burned at him with an unexpected sharpness.

In trying to cure Sylvester, Arseny used every measure against the plague that Christopher had ever taught him. He employed several methods whose usefulness he had discovered himself through observation. He sat the child on his own knees and held him that way, not letting him go. Arseny feared the angel of death might come for Sylvester in his absence. Arseny knew he would press the child to himself at the crucial moment, pushing waves of life from one heart to another. He felt dread when Sylvester began coughing. When he wiped the bloody slime from the boy's lips, Arseny feared Sylvester's soul would fly out with the dreaded cough, for the soul's position within the body was not stable.

Arseny remembered what Sylvester had said and appealed to God: Help him, this is so easy for You. I understand that my request is impertinent. And I cannot even offer my life for the boy's because my life is already devoted to Justina, before whom I am guilty for the ages. But still I trust in Your boundless Worship and beg You: save the life of Your servant Sylvester.

Arseny did not sleep for five days and five nights: another reason he could not let Sylvester out of his arms was that the boy needed to be held in a semi-sitting position. When Sylvester lay down, his lungs quickly filled with phlegm and he began violently coughing it out. On the sixth day, Arseny sensed changes: they were not yet outwardly visible but they did not escape Arseny.

Without explaining anything, he ordered Kseniya to pray harder. Falling from exhaustion and lack of sleep, Kseniya prayed harder. She genuflected before the icons in the sacred corner and remained that way for hours. Her hoarse voice now intoned continuously. Her hair came loose from under her headscarf but she had no strength to neaten it. And her tears stopped, no longer flowing down her cheeks. On the seventh day, the boy opened his eyes.

Arseny collapsed on a bench after uttering a prayer of thanksgiving. He slept for two days and two nights but still did not feel rested. He understood that he needed to get up, and he dreamt that he was getting up. He wanted to examine Sylvester and he dreamt that he was examining him: the examination showed that everything was fine with Sylvester. Arseny knew that he was dreaming but he knew that he was dreaming the true way of things. Otherwise, he would have dreamt something else.

A cool touch to Arseny's hand woke him. Kseniya's lips. Seeing that Arseny had opened his eyes, Kseniya pressed his palm to her forehead. Sylvester stood behind her. The boy was pale and thin after the illness he had borne. He was transparent, almost spectral. A crease in his shirt stuck out from behind his back as if it were an angel's wing. He smiled at Arseny, not trying to come closer. Letting his mother go first.