

Captain Mikhail Abromovich and Princess Anna Tarasova are the hero and heroine of One Last Kiss. The following are two scenes set at the Tarasov estate in Russia nearly a decade before the book begins. Though these scenes were deleted from the final version, I hope you enjoy this glimpse into their past.

Today was the day Misha would begin fencing lessons to prepare him to attend the Page Corps. Though her gender prevented her from attending school, Anna intended to be included in the lessons. A search of her wardrobe the previous day had revealed nothing appropriate to wear, so she had borrowed a pair of breeches from one of the grooms. Knowing that Mama would not countenance her leaving her chamber in said breeches, she donned her riding habit, intending to tie her skirts up out of the way when the lessons began.

She wasn't sneaking out, not really, but it was no matter if her path just happened to lead her down the servants' staircase toward the stable. The sweet scent of apples and cinnamon drew her into the kitchens to snatch a warm *vareniki* off the table. The filled pastry melted in her mouth as she headed to the covered *manège* where the lessons were to be held.

The breeze carried the scent of newly cut hay, which was nearly obscured by the smell of manure emanating from the stables. The scent conjured an image of Misha. Not because he smelled like manure, of course, but because he lived with his parents in a cottage downwind from the stables.

Misha's eyebrows shot up when he caught sight of her, perhaps because he had counseled her against forcing her way into the fencing lessons.

Marching straight to the fencing master, she said, "I shall need a sword as well."

He bowed to her. "Your Highness, I was not informed that you would be joining the lessons."

"That is because she is not."

Anna sighed and silently reprimanded herself for not checking on Papa's whereabouts. Turning to her father, she said, "But Papa, I learned to ride alongside Misha, so why not let us learn to fence together?"

"Misha must train so he will be prepared to enter the Page Corps. You have no such need."

She cast her eyes downward so no one would see the tears glistening in her eyes. "But I don't want him to leave," she whispered.

“I know you don’t *ma petite fille chérie*, but it is not for you to decide.”

Papa did not understand that Misha was so much more than just her friend. She sniffed and straightened her shoulders. “Then why can’t I learn to fence? I shall need to be able to protect myself since he will not be here.”

“Because fencing is not an appropriate activity for you.” Papa ran his fingers through his hair and turned to the fencing master. “Please start without me.”

His large, warm fingers closed over her hand and drew her toward the stables. An attempt to dig in her heels and resist resulted in him having to catch her when she pitched forward and nearly fell.

Meeting his eyes, she asked, “How will I defend myself if I am not allowed to learn?”

“Anna, you are a princess. You shall always have someone with you to protect you.”

She kicked a stone from her path. “Not always. What about when I walk in the woods?”

“You are safe on our property.”

Allowing herself one last glance at Misha, she capitulated. For the time being. “Very well, then I am going for a walk.” She headed toward the woods behind the stables, and called over her shoulder, “By myself.”

As she passed the stables, she whistled for Koshka, so named because he preferred to spend his nights in the stables with the cats than in the house. He nudged her hand and took the lead along the path toward the lake. Luckily, he seemed not to recall the harrowing experience of nearly being drowned there as a puppy. Anna had narrowly managed to grab the bag from Vasily, their neighbor, before he pitched Koshka into the water. How closed minded to think that the beagle was useless simply because he was blind. She would be glad to see him leave for school. It was Misha she couldn’t do without.

Anna sat on a large rock while Koshka sniffed along the edge of the lake. It had been silly and naive of her not to realize he wouldn’t always be here with her. She understood why Misha had to go; she even admired Papa for arranging for him to attend the Page Corps. What she resented was being left behind. Casting her eyes upward, she searched for discernable shapes among the clouds, as she had done a thousand times with Misha.

Koshka emitted a soft growl and the hair rose on his back. She leapt to her feet and glanced around the clearing. There was nothing to see. Holding perfectly still, she listened carefully and caught a snorting, snuffling sound behind her. Scanning the shoreline, she belatedly

noticed the hoof prints leading up to the water. Her dog stood as still as a statue about ten feet away from her. Though he clearly smelled the wild boar, he had no way to know where it was, and if she called to him, the sound or his movement might provoke the boar to charge. Turning her head infinitesimally, she glanced over her shoulder and caught a flash of brown in the trees behind her. Her stomach rose to her throat, and her heart threatened to beat itself right out of her chest.

She had two choices. She could save herself, or she could risk trying to save Koshka. It was an easy decision. Lifting her skirts so they wouldn't drag on the ground, she moved slowly toward him, carefully placing her feet to avoid making a sound. He turned toward her and sniffed the air, then wagged his tail, which slapped the tree behind him and loosened a dead branch that fell to the ground with a thump.

Dropping her skirts, she ran and scooped up Koshka. All was silent for a heartbeat. Then the boar charged.

She took off. The boar crashed through the brush behind her and she strained to run faster without losing hold of him. Something slammed into her from behind and she fell onto her knees, still clinging to Koshka. The boar's tusk caught in the thick velvet of her habit. Jumping to her feet, she yanked her skirt and pushed forward. The fabric tore just enough for the boar to free his head and take a step back from her, preparing to charge again.

The pound of someone running drew her attention to the woods. A glimpse of red flashed before her. "Run!" Misha shouted. "Anna! Climb the tree."

Of course. She took off for the nearest large tree. She was faster than the boar for a short period of time. Her hand slammed into the tree, the bark scraping the skin. She scrambled to reach a branch and pull herself up the tree without dropping Koshka. Pain shot across her hand and she spared a momentary glance at her torn, bloody fingernail. The boar crashed along behind her. She cringed, anticipating his tusks piercing her flesh. The boar thumped into her and fell to the ground. She took a deep, steadying breath and turned around.

Misha had run his blade through the beast's heart.

Her legs wobbled and she dropped to the ground, then slid away from the still twitching boar. Misha plunked down beside her and closed his eyes. "Criminy, Anna." He turned to meet her eyes and swallowed hard.

"Thank you," she whispered.

“Are you hurt?”

“You mean besides my pride?” She glanced at her scratched hands and torn fingernail.

“Nothing that won’t heal easily.”

Misha’s smile fell. “What happened here?” he asking, pointing to the skirt of her habit.

“The boar’s tusk was caught in my skirt during his first charge.”

He rushed to her and slid her skirt above her knees, revealing torn, blood stained breeches.

It didn’t hurt. Anna hadn’t even realized the board had grazed her leg.

Misha gently rolled the breeches up to her knees, his warm hands sending shivers flitting across her skin. Her chest tightened around her heart.

“It doesn’t look deep. Does it hurt?”

Anna shook her head, confused by the new sensations fluttering through her.

He dropped back down beside her and bumped her foot with his. “I came looking for you to yell at you about how stupid it was for you to try to force your way into my fencing lessons. You know, because you have no need to protect yourself.”

Anna met his wry smile and giggled, then they both burst out laughing.

He extended his hand to pull her to her feet. “Meet me in the stables before dinner and I’ll teach you everything I learned today.”

Misha paced as he waited for Anna to arrive. This would be her last fencing lesson before he left for the Page Corps on the morrow. He had put much thought into what moves would serve her best if she was caught alone. It was unlikely that she would ever need to engage in a sword fight with a man, but he did not want to consider another incident like that with the boar. Especially since he would not be around to protect her.

Anna rushed into the manège. “I’m sorry. I had difficulty eluding Mama.” She pulled her skirts up to the tops of her thighs and bunched them against her hip before securing them out of the way for greater range of movement. He watched appreciatively as the newly developing curves of her legs were revealed.

“Up until today, we’ve been focusing on fencing with an opponent, but I’m most concerned with you being prepared to defend yourself from an animal attack.”

She nodded and he continued.

“Let’s practice lunging.”

They took their places, a bit further from one another than they normally lined up for sparring. “Now lunge at me.”

Her first attempt was too weak, too easy for him to parry.

“Again. Make sure you come at me as hard as you can.”

He made her repeat the movement over and over, until her arm shook with the effort. “Better. Let’s stop and rest for a few minutes.”

They walked to the well behind the stables and drew up a bucket of fresh, cold water. Anna drank as much as he did, then cupped her hands and splashed water on her face. It dripped down her neck and wet her bodice. She was turning into a woman before his eyes. Though he didn’t intend to look, he couldn’t help but notice her breasts as the wet fabric clung to them, outlining their gently rounded curves.

Tearing his gaze away from her, he said, “Are you ready for more? I want you to practice removing your sword from its sheath, just like you’d have to do in an unexpected situation.”

She nodded and led him back into the manège, where she untied her skirts and let them drop to the ground.

“I’ll come at you, and I want you to draw your sword as quickly as possible.”

Three quick steps and he was upon her, but she wasn’t able to get her sword up before he reached her. “That’s not fast enough. Try again.”

He reset his position and came at her at a slightly slower pace. Her sword struck his chest after his second step.

“Not bad. Again.”

On the third try, she managed to remove her sword, but her foot caught in her skirts and she pitched forward into him. He was moving too fast to stop, so he wrapped his arms around her to cushion the fall as she went over backwards.

“Ooof.”

“Are you all right?” He had locked his elbows so he wouldn’t crush her, but she had still landed hard against the sand footing in the manège. He brushed a loose lock of hair from her forehead and leaned down to press a chaste kiss to the soft skin he had unveiled.

“You didn’t hurt me.”

A single tear slid from her eye and he wiped it away with the pad of his thumb. “Then why are you crying?”

“Because I don’t want you to leave,” she whispered.

“I don’t want to leave you either, but I cannot afford miss the opportunity to attend the Page Corps.”

She opened her mouth to speak again, but knowing that she would only continue to argue, he pressed his lips to hers. Fire roared through his veins, awakening a new hunger in him. He knew without a doubt that she was meant to be his. As much as it would hurt to be away from her, the Page Corps was the only chance he had to better himself, to make himself worthy of her.

Not wanting to frighten her with the force of the feelings he was barely managing to contain, he attempted to pull back, but she clasped her hands around his neck to prevent him from rising.

Looking into his eyes, she asked, “If I let you go, do you promise to come back to me?”

“Always.”