

distorted reports of this custom have given rise to the rumour that Kislev is plagued by hordes of the Undead.

But even in Kislev, people do actually die. Warriors are generally strapped to their horses and sent out into the oblast; although, depending on the cause of death, the corpse may be burned. If the horse also died, the warrior may be

burned sitting on his horse. Non-warriors are almost always burned, but no one formally acknowledges what is going on. Informally, friends and family grieve and comfort one another, but officially, the village is merely disposing of some waste. Foreigners sometimes form the impression that Kislevites are callous. Such is not the case; they have simply already said their goodbyes.

— SPIRITS, SMALL GODS, & KISLEVITE ODDITIES —

The people of Kislev believe the Gods are the greatest of all otherworldly creatures but also believe there are innumerable lesser spirits who must also be appeased. The nature of such creatures reflects the minds of people they encounter, reinforcing the creature's character and giving rise to traditions particular to Kislev. Throughout Kislev, it is considered right to honour such lesser spirits, for it is a mark of good manners and intelligence to do so. Neglect or disrespect of these spirits is seen as a display of low breeding and ignorance; furthermore, it is just plain unlucky! If a peasant stopped by a spring to drink, he would be wise to ask permission of the spirit that dwelled there first. Perhaps more than most lands, Kislevites have a great many traditions, superstitions, oaths, and expressions that arise in respect to these spirits.

The *Domovoi*, or “kindly grandfather,” is the most common of all Kislevite spirits, a well-meaning, though thoroughly mischievous, spirit that can take the appearance of an old, withered peasant with a long, grey beard or even a cat or a mouse. In houses, inns, and taverns where bread and a small bowl of milk are occasionally left out for the *Domovoi*, it invisibly helps with small domestic duties such as cooking and cleaning. However, if the *Domovoi* feels neglected or if the household is lazy, it is known to mess up farmyards, tangle needlework, and spread animal manure on the door of the house. One cautionary folk tale of Kislev tells of a man who tried to rid his house of the *Domovoi* only to be suffocated by it in his sleep, so it is a rare household that would deliberately set out to annoy a *Domovoi*! But however the *Domovoi* is treated, he is frequently a mischief maker, and peasants and nobles alike are often woken from their slumbers by an invisible tickler or by the noise of mysterious knocking or thrown plates and pans.

When working in the fields, peasants often ask for the blessing of the *Polevoi* and the *Poludnitsa*, spirits of nature said to bestow fertility on the soil of farms that honour them. Similarly, it is considered good luck to offer these spirits a little grain from the harvest to ensure they do not become angry and render the soil barren.

While most spirits in Kislev are generally benign, there are those that actively seek to do harm, such as the *Leshii*, a spirit of haunted forests and malicious desires. Often resembling a peasant without a belt (a sure giveaway to all but the most dull-witted), the *Leshii* can also appear to its victim as someone they know, a beast, or a lost domestic animal. Frequently, it tries to lead gullible victims

towards dangerous places, such as cliffs, swamps, or the lair of a dangerous monster. The *Leshii* is known to hide woodcutters' axes just when a vicious bear or wolf is approaching, so it is customary for woodcutters to carry a spare knife (known as a *Leshii* blade) for just such occasions. Particularly comely girls are often forbidden to walk alone near forests for fear that a *Leshii* might carry them off to an unknown but doubtless unpleasant fate.

The *Vodianoi* is a particularly evil and dangerous water spirit who entices people to the edge of rivers or pools and drowns them for its own vulgar enjoyment. It often appears as a naked old man with a long beard and green hair who sits at a river's edge and begs for help (a plight most Kislevites could not ignore), but in the north of Kislev, there are more outlandish tales of it appearing as a creature that is half-fish, half-Human and drips with slime—though how such a repulsive creature is able to entice people to approach it is never explained. This spirit may also be linked to the *Rusalka*, which is said to be the spirit of a drowned maiden that is angry at her untimely death and seeks to drown passers-by to present to the underworld in exchange for her own life.

The *Ryzhnyi Khoziain* is one of the most feared spirits of Kislev, for no folk tale dares describe it other than as an evil, winged spirit that howls across the steppe on the darkest, coldest nights. None who have seen the *Ryzhnyi Khoziain* have lived to tell of it, and chilling tales persist of riders discovering entire villages vanished overnight, no trace remaining of its inhabitants or livestock. Unlike many other Kislevite spirits, there appears to be no way to placate the *Ryzhnyi Khoziain*, and all peasants can do when they hear its mournful howling is close their eyes and pray to the Gods that it will pass them by.

In addition to these spirits, there are countless others that go by many local names and have their own associated traditions. The origin of many of these has long been forgotten, but the superstitions arising from these spirits persist in many of the stanitsas of Kislev. For example, in the village of Chertza, it is traditional for the hetman to walk around his village naked for the entire first day of the harvest gathering, while in a number of communities along the Lynsk, it is customary to walk backwards with an onion tied to one's head on days when a cormorant's cry is heard before breakfast. Though such traditions are probably meaningless and only serve to make the Kislevites look even quainter to their foreign neighbours, it would be a brave peasant who dared to ignore them.

