

A photograph of a forest path with sunlight filtering through the trees. The path is covered in fallen leaves and leads into a dense forest of tall, thin trees. The sunlight creates a warm, golden glow throughout the scene.

Of Russian Myth and Lore

*A
Russian
Bear
sip*

CB Conwy

A Torquere Press free read

Of Russian Myth and Lore
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They had been in the car for hours now, the Canadian border far behind them. The landscape surrounding them was beautiful, but Tom was starting to get nervous. He was going to meet Mischa's family for the very first time, and his stomach was filling up with what felt like severely obese butterflies. Moths, perhaps. Overly muscular ones. Gym rat moths.

Tom made an effort and killed the moth metaphor.

The strange thing was that Mischa had never talked much about his family. Yes, most of his relatives lived in Canada, a bit off the beaten path, so Mischa didn't see them that often. And yes, Tom did know the basics; Mischa's mother had died of cancer when he was young, and he had never known his father. Still, it was strange to be this close to someone and not know the people he grew up with.

However, that was going to change. Five weeks ago, in the middle of May, Mischa had gotten a call that had left him grumpy. He'd muttered to himself for almost an entire day before he came into Tom's workroom, the spacious library of the house they shared.

"We're going to Canada in June."

Tom looked up from the paper he was grading. "We are?"

Mischa looked grim. "Yes. No way around it. Sorry." He turned around and left the room.

"What the... Mischa!" Tom got up and stomped after him. "What do you mean, we're going to Canada?"

Mischa stopped and turned around in the hallway, a look of suffering on his face.

"And why the fuck is going to Canada making you sulkier than a toddler who lost his favorite toy?"

"I am not sulking!" Mischa crossed his arms in front of him. Admittedly, he was a bit too macho and Dom-y for the comparison to hold true. But the gesture still made him look surprisingly like a very big, very petulant toddler.

"Yeah, right, you aren't. It's perfectly reasonable that you're walking around staring daggers at the carpet the entire day. Care to tell me what's so horrible about Canada?"

Mischa sighed. It sounded like he had the weight of the entire world on his shoulders. "You're going to meet my family."

"I am?" Tom raised his eyebrows. "Isn't this the time when you normally *ask* me whether I'd like to meet your family instead of ordering me to do so?"

Mischa sighed again. He really had the geriatric, world-weary thing down pat now. "This is where you're wrong. My family has decided that we go, and therefore we go. There's absolutely nothing either of us can do about it."

"But why would we want to do anything about it? What's wrong with them?" Tom frowned.

Mischa looked patiently at him. "They're Russian, Tom."

"But so are you, Mischa!" Tom was starting to get annoyed.

"But they're very Russian. Very. Russian."

After that, Mischa had refused to say anything else about why he didn't want to go to the family reunion. Tom had managed to find out when they would be going and where the family gathering would take place, that was all.

However, Tom was way too curious to resign himself to that little information, so he'd decided to find out more. It had made Mischa flee on several occasions, his lover exasperated at Tom's persistence.

"Don't you know that curiosity killed the cat?" Mischa had asked one evening when Tom had violated Mischa's most holy sanctuary, his office, with questions about the people Tom was going to meet.

"Cats have nine lives. You only have one, and I'm going to make it Hell unless you volunteer some information." He was sitting in the chair in front of Mischa's desk, and he refused to move before Mischa had coughed up some facts about those repulsive Russians.

Mischa whimpered. Downright whimpered.

"I don't want to."

"Mischa. What did I tell you about acting like a five-year old?" Tom said in a warning voice.

Mischa hid his head in his hands and said something unintelligible. Then he sat back up with one of the world-weary sighs that had become his trademark lately.

"Okay, I'll tell you the basics."

That was how Tom had gotten some rudimentary information about the people he was going to meet. Like their age. And gender. In the end, it had just seemed like too much hard work to pull the information out of Mischa, and Tom had given up and told himself that he would find out. If not before, then when he met the family.

Here in the car, however, Mischa had nowhere to go. Surprisingly, he seemed less reluctant to talk about his family the closer they got to their destination.

"My uncle, Vascha, actually grew up in the USSR. He wasn't interested in politics, but he's never liked anybody telling him what to do."

Tom couldn't help the obvious comment. "That's apparently something that runs in the family."

Mischa scowled, but refrained from contradicting Tom. Tom grinned; it seemed that Mischa had finally learned to recognize a lost cause when he saw one.

"He was a businessman -- or 'biznissmyen,'" Mischa emphasized the last syllable, the strange pronunciation making the word sound distinctly Russian. "Of course, a capitalist endeavor like that wasn't acceptable in a communist regime, so even though he was completely uninterested in politics, he still managed to catch the eye of the authorities. He knew that things were about to get bad, so during a holiday at the Baltic Sea, he arranged for himself, his brother and two sisters to get out of the country."

"How did he do that?" It wasn't just that Tom wanted to know something about Mischa's family; this was simply an interesting story.

"We don't talk about that." Mischa sounded very firm. "It's one of those black holes in the history of refugee families. I tried to ask my mother, but she would never tell. 'Some things you need to let go,' she always said." Mischa shrugged.

"Okay," Tom said. "And he's homophobic?"

"What? No!" Mischa quickly looked over at him. "What makes you think that?"

Tom shrugged. "I've read that homophobia is common in Russia, and I just presumed that was the reason you've kept me hidden away."

"No, Tom. No." Mischa sounded astonished. He quickly looked in the mirrors before pulling over and killing the engine. Then he turned to Tom. "I haven't kept you hidden away; they know that I'm with you."

Tom shrugged again. "It's not a big deal. I know how it is with family." His sister was just... vicious. In a scarily civilized way.

"It is a big deal, and it's not like you think." Mischa closed his eyes. "God, I'm sorry you would even think that." He took a deep breath and looked at Tom. "I haven't introduced you to them because they're..." He gestured with a hand. "They're loud and rude and obnoxious, and I didn't want you to have to endure that. Hell, I'm enough as it is."

Tom accepted the apology and refrained from commenting on Mischa's last remark. The man could be a handful, after all. "So you basically thought that I would meet your family and run away in terror?"

"You haven't met them." Mischa sounded glum.

"No, but I love a challenge. This is going to be fun." Tom sat back, not hiding his grin.

Mischa moaned. "You have no idea what you're saying. They're awful." He started the car again and pulled out on the road.

"What's so awful about them?" Tom got more and more curious.

"They tease me!" Mischa sounded devastated.

Tom turned very slowly toward Mischa. "They tease you?"

"It's not very nice!" Mischa said defensively.

Tom snorted. "Yeah. Now I see why you hate them."

"Just you wait."

If this wasn't his fearsome Russian bear talking, Tom would have laughed out loud; Mischa was definitely pouting. It was quite cute, in fact.

However, Tom had a hunch that Mischa wouldn't like the epithet "cute." As a matter of fact, it was more than a hunch; he sniggered when he envisioned Mischa's reaction at being called that.

"You're doing it again, aren't you?"

"Huh?" That particular fantasy had been entertaining.

"Having fun at my expense." Mischa was going from pouting to moping.

"I have a vivid imagination; I think we already established that," Tom protested.

"Yeah." Mischa sighed, not even taking the obvious bait. "I guess I might just as well get used to it."

As they got closer to their destination, Tom got busy looking out of the window. They had left the highway some time ago, and they were passing fewer cars as well as houses now. The surrounding landscape was mostly forest, and it was getting denser by the mile, it seemed.

"My mother always said that this area is almost like Russia. They had a *dacha* back there, and my uncle bought this place because it reminded him of the cabin outside of Saint Petersburg. Well, it was Leningrad back then, of course, but people never really stopped calling it *Peterburg*."

Mischa slowed down and turned off the road onto a trail. It was uneven enough to make the car lurch, and Tom banged his head against the window.

"Ouch." He rubbed the side of his head.

"Yeah, you can say goodbye to civilization now. You can't even get reception on your cell out here."

For a moment, Tom felt panicked. He had been reluctant to accept the smartphone Mischa had bought him, but he had quickly gotten used to its features. Some used their phones to find the

nearest KFC. Tom used his to find the date of Courbet's "L'Origine du Monde" and the whereabouts of Edvard Munch's "Madonna." It had become his source for an instant fix of knowledge.

"There's nothing at all?" Tom's voice sounded small all of a sudden, even to his own ears.

Mischa smiled wistfully. "None. At least we're in the same boat; we'll just have to stick it out until Sunday."

Tom was going to respond that it was only three days, but they came into a clearing with a couple of cars parked next to a wooden cabin. Tom didn't know if it was the mention of the Russian *dacha* that had made him think that it would be a small cabin, but this house was nothing like a shed in a Russian wood. It was big and looked both well designed and carefully maintained in a way that screamed money.

"This is nice," Tom began as he got out of the car, but he was interrupted by a man coming out of the cabin.

"Mischa! *Malchika!*" The man spread his arms with a big grin and walked toward Mischa.

Tom heard Mischa grumble something under his breath, but then he walked into the embrace. "Uncle Vascha."

Mischa might be grumbling, but Tom saw how he hugged the man tightly. Then Vascha slapped his back a couple of times and stepped back.

"Look how you've grown, *malchika*. You'll be a man before we know it." There was a big grin on Vascha's face -- something that wasn't reciprocated by Mischa. Then Mischa's uncle turned to Tom, the smile on his face fading. He walked closer until he was standing in front of Tom, his eyes narrowing.

"And who, may I ask, are you, then?" With his hands behind his back, he slowly walked in a circle around Tom, scrutinizing Tom every inch of the way.

Mischa groaned. "Jesus, Vascha. Don't do that."

Waiting for the man to get back in front of him, Tom reached out his hand. "I'm Tom. Nice to meet you," he said in a pointed voice.

Vascha looked pensively at Tom, his lips puckered in thought. Then his face split in a big grin and he shook Tom's hand in a firm grip.

"Nice to meet you, Tom." He slapped Tom's shoulder, none too gently. "And sorry about that. It's sort of a family tradition. My granddad did it to Mischa's father. The poor bastard didn't last long after that reception."

"And it wasn't fun even back then, Vascha. Don't you have any manners?"

Vascha completely ignored Mischa's comment.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere," Tom said in a firm voice. He had mixed emotions about Vascha's prank.

"You don't, huh?" Vascha looked speculatively at him.

"No." Tom didn't elaborate.

Vascha was interrupted in whatever he was about to say by a little round woman storming out of the cabin.

"Mischa!" Like a very short but unstoppable whirlwind, she flung her arms around Mischa's neck and hugged him.

Mischa grinned and hugged her back. Tom saw him try to lift the short woman, but he didn't manage more than to stretch her a little. Apparently, she was just as heavy as she looked. She still squeaked like a little girl and slapped him.

"Will you let me down! You naughty little..." She only stopped her scolding when Mischa let her go. Then she smiled and kissed him on both cheeks. "It's wonderful to see you again."

Then she turned to Tom, and Tom steeled himself for more scrutiny. He hadn't even gotten a deep breath before he had her arms around him in a firm hug.

"It's so good to finally meet you, Tom." She pulled back and kissed his cheeks as well. "Mischa has kept you hidden away for far too long." She looked reproachfully at Mischa.

Mischa made an exasperated gesture. "I haven't kept him hidden away. You could just have visited."

"In America?" Mischa's uncle sounded horrified. "Never!" He huffed and walked into the cabin.

The small woman and Mischa made the exact same eye roll. Tom barely managed to hold his snicker back at the sight.

"Let me take this." Before Tom could do anything, the little woman had grabbed their heaviest bags and busily hurried into the house.

Tom stood back, feeling slightly overwhelmed. "So, this is your family?"

Mischa sighed, but there was a fond smile on his face as well. "Yeah. My other uncle might come by tomorrow with his family as well."

"You forgot to tell me the name of -- is she your aunt?"

Mischa nodded. "Yes, she is. Her name is Mascha."

Tom bent to pick up their last bag. Then he slowly stood back up. "Wait. You're kidding me, right?"

"What?" Mischa frowned.

"Mischa, Mascha and Vascha? You've got to be kidding me."

Mischa started laughing, the tension visibly leaving his body as he gave in to his mirth. He had tears in his eyes when he finally managed to stop.

"Oh, Tom. You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into. My other uncle's called Sasha."

Mascha was busy making dinner, and Tom tried to offer his help. Mascha looked at him as if he had offered to cut off his own head, and shooed him out of the kitchen.

"Is that a Russian thing?" Tom asked Mischa in a low voice.

Mischa laughed. "No, that would be a Mascha thing. She'll never allow a guest to help with the cooking."

"Mischa!" Mascha's voice was very loud for such a small woman.

Mischa rolled his eyes. "Family, on the other hand..." He obediently trudged into the kitchen.

Tom only hesitated for a moment; then he followed, grabbing some cutlery before Mascha could prevent him from doing so, and took it into the dining room. Mischa followed, looking startled.

"What?" It was only cutlery.

"Nothing." Mischa started putting plates on the table.

They went in and out of the large kitchen, getting the glasses and the silverware that Mascha had put out for them. The food in the kitchen smelled good, but there was something in the corner of the kitchen that caught Tom's attention. It was a big glass jar filled with something brown, liquid bubbling around it. It looked like something from a witch's cauldron, and Tom watched it with apprehension.

"Uh, what are we going to have for dinner?"

Mischa pointed to the stove. "*Shchi* and *pelmenyi*. That first one's cabbage soup and the second is something that's similar to ravioli."

"Cabbage soup?" Tom blinked.

Mischa smiled. "It's actually better than it sounds. Russian food isn't that exciting, but it tastes okay. We'll get the whole nine yards tomorrow, I think."

"And, uh, what about that?" Tom pointed to the glass jar.

Mischa laughed. "You look like you just saw a ghost. It's *kvas*, and it's actually very good."

"You eat that?" Tom couldn't keep the horror out of his voice. He had come prepared to deal with difficult family members, but there was no way he could handle whatever was in that jar.

Mischa shook his head, still smiling. "No, you drink it, sometimes with ginger or lemon. We'll probably have some tomorrow. That jar isn't ready yet, though. It's still fermenting."

There were a lot of f-words that Tom preferred to this one. All of them, in fact. But for now, he settled with the relief of the thought that he didn't have to face the vile concoction tonight.

After much bustling and shooing and "Oh, I forgot the salt"-ing, Aunt Mascha finally declared the dinner ready, and they sat down around the table.

The soup was, in fact, quite good, with the vegetables making it light and filling at the same time. Tom was busy watching Mischa, however.

Mischa had been dreading this for weeks, Tom knew. Now that he was here, he was starting to relax and fall into light banter with his aunt and uncle. The change was noticeable. Even at his most relaxed back in Boston, Mischa was always a Dom as well as a highly successful investment manager, and it showed. He never quite let go of his authority.

He did now, though. He easily accepted Mascha's kiss on the cheek and Vascha's hand on his shoulder as his uncle went to get some vodka. He laughed at Mascha's protests, and Vascha winked at Tom. Maybe the man wasn't so bad after all.

They toasted in vodka. Tom didn't like the taste much, but it caused a heated discussion between Mischa and his uncle when Vascha insisted that only Russian vodka was good.

"You can taste exactly where it's from," he claimed.

"Of course you can, because if there's a chemical plant next to the distillery or if the potatoes are moldy, you can taste that. That's not exactly the sign of good quality," Mischa responded animatedly.

Vascha just shook his head. "*Malchika*, you don't know what you're talking about."

Mischa groaned, but Tom could see that he enjoyed the quarrel. He looked over at Tom's plate.

"You haven't tried your *pelmenyi*. Here," Mischa speared one of the ravioli things on his plate and reached it over for Tom to taste it.

Tom accepted it, surprised at Mischa's candidness. He cautiously checked the reaction around the table. Mascha had a wistful smile on her face, and Vascha nodded.

"Good, isn't it? Mascha's *pelmenyi* are great," Mischa's uncle stated.

Tom nodded while he chewed. It did taste good, in a homemade, no-nonsense way. If this meal was anything to go by, he decided, then he liked Russian food.

He dug in, half-heartedly following Mischa's discussion about Russian vodka with Vascha. Or rather, it started out as a discussion of vodka and quickly developed into a discussion about everything Russian.

"But you don't even like the country, uncle!" Mischa sounded exasperated and affectionate at the same time.

"I like Russia! There are just too many Russians there!" Vascha stated as if it was completely logical.

Mischa groaned and downed another glass of vodka. "You can't be serious. The only good things about Russia are the food and drink?"

"And the music, of course."

For a moment, Tom felt a distinct stab of dread. Mischa had only sung for him once, but it was more than enough in Tom's opinion. To his relief, Vascha didn't give any examples of Russian music.

"And *Ivan Kupala*, of course."

Tom wanted to ask who that was, but was distracted when Mischa reached out for some more bread. Not only did he miss the bread, he also missed his chair when he sat back, and ended up sprawled on the floor.

"Not again, Mischa."

"*Malchika*, not again."

Tom and Vascha looked at each other in surprise when they spoke at the same time. Then Tom smiled, and Vascha laughed.

"He just can't hold his liquor, can he?" Tom said while he shook his head.

"He's a disgrace to the Russian people," Vascha said in a cheerful voice. "Let's get him to bed."

Mischa protested all the way, of course, but since he had problems walking straight -- well, walking at all, to be honest -- they managed to put him to bed. He was snoring before Tom closed the door behind him.

Outside the door to their room, he hesitated. It wasn't even nine o'clock in the evening, so even if he had been able to ignore the snoring, he couldn't really go to bed with Mischa. But he found it awkward, to say the least, to be alone with Mischa's family so soon after meeting them.

Vascha slapped him on the back when he went out into the dining room again, though.

"You're just in time for the dishes," he proclaimed in a happy voice before handing Tom a stack of plates.

Happy to have something to do, Tom carried them into the kitchen.

"No, Tom, put those down. You're our guest," Mascha protested.

"Nonsense, Mascha. *On semya*," Vascha said in a firm voice as he came into the kitchen with more plates.

Mascha grumbled something, but surprisingly quickly, she was assigning Tom to washing all of the fragile-looking crystal wine glasses by hand.

"My nephew shouldn't drink," she said as she busied herself putting away dishes and filling the dishwasher.

"No, I've had to put him to bed before, and it wasn't pretty," Tom agreed, taking care to get all the soap off the delicate glass. He did look up in time to catch the look between Mascha and Vascha.

"Does he drink often?" Vascha's voice sounded very casual, but his eyes were wary.

"No." Tom suddenly felt as if he had to defend Mischa. "I've only seen him drunk once, and it was kind of my fault. I sat him down with Toby and some vodka and ordered him to relax."

"Pff, Toby," Mascha made a derisive sound. "He's just a boy."

"He's got his own club," Tom protested.

"Still just a boy. No sense of responsibility." Mascha sounded very sure. She puttered out of the kitchen, looking very busy.

Tom hesitated; then he decided to ask. "Has Mischa had any problems with drinking?" He had never noticed anything like that, but judging from Vascha's reaction, it seemed like there was something there.

"No, no." Vascha shook his head. "But Russian men drink."

Tom blinked. "Uh, I don't think Mischa does." Neither of them did; it could be months between them having a glass of wine. Then he frowned; it didn't seem fair that he should defend Mischa against something the man hadn't done. "Do you drink? You're Russian." He didn't quite manage to keep the challenge out of his voice.

Vascha didn't take offence at Tom's words, it seemed. "No, I don't. But Mischa's father did."

"He did?" Tom put down the last glass and turned to face Vascha.

Vascha nodded. "Olga -- my sister -- was wise enough to tell him to stop if he wanted anything to do with her. He ran shortly after. We've never heard from him since."

Vascha seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, and Tom was careful not to disturb him. He hadn't heard much about Mischa's past before.

"She was a wonderful woman," Vascha smiled briefly. "She did a great job of raising Mischa, but he was a serious little boy. He always took his responsibility as the man of the family very much to heart, even when he was little. When he got older, he studied hard and worked hard, always pushing himself to make his mother proud. She was, very much." Vascha's eyes briefly met Tom's.

"Then she passed away, and if he had worked hard before, it was nothing like what he did after Olga died. He never looked back, he never slowed down. Until now."

Tom had so many questions he wanted to ask, but they both heard the sound from the bedroom at the same time. Tom quickly grabbed the bucket from under the sink.

"Sorry. I think I have to go."

Vascha nodded. "Yes. Take care of him."

Tom made Mischa drink as much water as possible and emptied the bucket when he finally seemed to be done. Aunt Mascha fretted, but she allowed Tom to take care of Mischa.

When Mischa had finally dozed off again, Tom went to bed next to Mischa. The window was open and the fresh night air filled the room, the forest silent around them. He gently caressed Mischa's hair, and Mischa reached out for him, still asleep, and held onto his hand. For a moment, Tom felt like hugging Mischa tightly, but he didn't want to wake Mischa. He just squeezed Mischa's hand and kissed his lover's forehead. He should be cursing his drunken boyfriend, but suddenly, it felt like one of those moments when you realized how much you have to be thankful for.

Next morning was Saturday, and Mischa wasn't exactly in great shape, even if he had thrown up until he was completely empty the night before. He lurked in the corner, looking equal parts hung over and petrified at the sight of the kids running around the house or having huge water fights outside. It was very sweet.

In the end, Tom decided to take pity on the man. After lunch, he grabbed the two nearest kids (he had never really figured out how many there were -- somewhere between two and four, or maybe they were just all over the place), sat them down at the table with paper and crayons and taught them how to make numbers into pictures.

"Anybody know what the first number is?"

"Yeah!" The kids were adorable when they rolled their eyes like that. The girl quickly wrote the number one on the paper.

"Exactly. But you can make it into something else. Watch this." He wrote the number one and went on drawing a flag. "Now it's a flagpole."

The kids examined the drawing eagerly and approved of his artistic interpretation.

"How about two?" He wrote the number and looked up at the kids who studied it intently.

"It's a swan, see?" He drew feet and a beak and eyes.

"But I've never been able to figure out what you can draw from the number three. Do you have any ideas?"

"It's a butt!" The boy said with glee in his voice.

Okay, Tom hadn't seen that one coming. But he guessed that it was the result of a five-year old's healthy imagination, and he left the kids giggling over the drawings they made from other numbers before going to drag Mischa out from his corner.

"You're good at that." Mischa sounded impressed. And somewhat relieved, now that the kids were pacified.

Tom shrugged. "I got some practice with my sister's kids before she taught them the word 'fag' and what it means."

"You miss them?" Mischa's voice was sympathetic.

Tom shrugged again. "I miss that I don't miss them, if you get what I mean? I never really got to know them."

Mischa put an arm around Tom's shoulders, and Tom automatically looked around to see if anybody was watching them. But Mascha was in the kitchen, and Mischa's uncles were out studying Vascha's new car. Besides, Mischa didn't seem to care, so Tom decided to relax.

"Are you sure we shouldn't help your aunt? It's got to be a big job cooking for this many people."

Mischa laughed and drew him in closer. "Don't you dare. She loves to cook; this is what holidays are all about to her. The worst thing we ever did to her was when we convinced her to have her sixtieth birthday catered. She's still complaining about the starter."

Tom let himself be led around the house to the porch outside their room, Mischa grabbing a pitcher of ice tea and glasses on the way. The nook was in the shade, making it wonderfully cool. There wasn't any furniture here, but Tom grabbed a couple of blankets to sit on, and Mischa collapsed on the pile with a contented sigh. Tom sat down next to him.

"I almost feel human again." Mischa poured a glass and gave it to Tom.

Tom took a sip. "Hey, this isn't ice tea." It tasted sweet and hot at the same time.

Mischa grinned. "It's the *kvas* you eyed so suspiciously yesterday, or at least what will eventually come out of that jar in the kitchen. I told you it was good."

Tom sipped again. "It is. Is it ginger I can taste?"

Mischa looked a little sheepish. "Yeah. It's said to be good against hangovers; I think that's why Mascha made it."

After drinking, Mischa leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

"You look better, as well." Tom made himself comfortable by stretching out his legs. "But I think we can conclude that vodka doesn't agree with you."

Mischa didn't open his eyes. "It's not even just vodka. I simply can't stomach alcohol. But I always manage to forget that." His breathing got slower, and his head slowly sank down on Tom's shoulder.

Tom smiled and kissed Mischa's head. Then he just sat, enjoying the quiet and Mischa's body next to his.

Tom walked down the forest path, still feeling slightly confused. Vascha had told him to go out here in the forest, even though it was late in the evening and the big bonfire had almost burned down.

"Don't worry, you won't be alone. Just walk on ahead."

That probably meant that the rest of the family would follow. Tom didn't want to step on any toes, so he hadn't even protested when Vascha insisted on putting one of the garlands the kids had made in his hair. It kept falling down, though, so he put it around his neck instead.

It was one of those midsummer nights where it didn't really get dark. On top of that, there was a full moon, bathing everything in a light strong enough to cast shadows.

It was quiet, but it was still eerie to be alone out in the woods at this time of night, and Tom startled when he heard a noise behind him.

"Tom? Is that you?"

To his relief, it was Mischa who walked around the cluster of bushes.

"Yeah. Is the rest of your family out here as well?" He walked closer, not wanting to be alone anymore.

"No, it's just me. Vascha said that you would be out here. Did he tell you to go looking for fern flowers?" Mischa grinned.

"Flowers? No." Tom was about to ask what this was all about, but then Mischa frowned.

"What's that around your neck?"

Tom laughed, a little self-conscious. "Vascha put it in my hair, like a garland or something, but it kept falling down... What's wrong?"

Mischa was staring at him. "He gave you that? And sent you out here?"

"Yes? Mischa?"

Then Mischa's arms were around him, holding him tightly. "Mine. You're mine."

Tom smiled and tried to pull back. "Of course I am."

Mischa was serious. "No, you don't understand. You're mine." Before Tom could answer, Mischa kissed him, lips frantically pushing against his.

Tom answered Mischa willingly, but there was a certain desperation in the way Mischa held him tightly. He tasted blood from their hard kiss, the force of it overwhelming him, and he tried to push Mischa back.

"Mischa!" He had to say it twice before Mischa listened. "Relax. I'm not going anywhere, you hear me?"

Mischa watched Tom as if he didn't understand. Then the ferociousness disappeared, and Mischa looked naked and vulnerable and so, so tender.

He lifted his hands and caressed both of Tom's cheeks. "Mine." Then he leaned in to kiss Tom again.

Tom felt Mischa's lips again, but this time Mischa was only brushing lightly against Tom's lips. They were sensitive after the first attack, and Tom shuddered at the gentle contact and leaned in to get more.

He got what he craved, Mischa's tongue gently poking into his mouth, now seeking what it had demanded before. Tom closed his eyes and surrendered, his body molding itself to Mischa's.

The kissing went on and on, the intensity ratcheting until Tom could barely breathe, the sound of his heart throbbing so loud in his ears that he couldn't hear what Mischa said at first.

"Turn around," Mischa repeated. "I want to make you mine."

Tom groaned, the desire shooting through him at Mischa's words. He was clumsy, and Mischa had to help him turn and lean against a tree trunk.

Mischa reached around, and first Tom thought that Mischa was going to touch his dick. But Mischa reached into his pocket, finding the little bottle of sunscreen that Tom had carried there all day.

Tom wanted to say something, but then Mischa pulled down his pants, and the gentle caress of the fabric against his buttocks was enough to make him close his eyes and hold on to the tree.

Mischa mumbled something encouraging to him, and then he felt Mischa's fingers at his entrance. He strained backward to get them into him, but Mischa just brushed lightly over his opening.

"Slowly. Let me do this."

Tom sighed and relaxed, and Mischa rewarded him by pressing harder, the insistent finger suddenly moist. It made it even better, his opening slippery and slightly cool in the night air. Mischa unhurriedly massaged his opening, stepping down the intensity every time the excitement made him tense up or try to move to get more.

In the end, his body got the message, and he pressed his cheek against the tree, eyes open, but seeing nothing but the silver moonlight. Then finally, the first finger pushed into him, and he opened up, accepting it with a sound coming from deep down in his stomach.

"Yes. My boy. My Tom." Mischa gently pushed deeper, and Tom accepted it without fighting the intrusion and without trying to get more. He relished in the feeling when Mischa began moving that single finger, but he didn't try to push for more, just accepted what was done to him. Eventually, he got another finger, and he accepted it with no resistance, reveling in what Mischa did to him.

It was different from their usual lovemaking. Even outside of scenes, fucking almost always hurt a little because he was so tight -- and Tom liked it that way. Now he was lost in the pleasure, his whole being surrendering to what Mischa did to him.

He got a third finger, and the feeling of being full made him want to cry, it was so perfect. He closed his eyes again, everything centered on what his body was feeling.

Then the fingers disappeared and Mischa pushed into him, covered in cool lotion. He went deep, and Tom couldn't do anything but yield to the thick member being driven slowly and inexorably into him, filling him until he was as complete as he could ever remember being.

When Mischa started moving, it was as if he pushed his entire existence into Tom every time he thrust in deeply. He was covering Tom's back, his arms around Tom's chest, and he kept up a litany in Tom's ears.

"Give me this. Let me in, baby, let me take you. I have you. I have you."

The words held Tom together, held him grounded, and then they didn't anymore, and he drifted, flying so high and being centered by Mischa at the same time. He hadn't even known that he was coming, but the explosion was immense, blinding him and shutting out everything but Mischa's words, Mischa in him. He gave in and let himself fall.

When he came back, he was sitting on Mischa's lap, Mischa's arms around him, holding him and warming him in the cool night air. He didn't want to open his eyes, didn't want to do anything but sit here, close to Mischa. He reached around Mischa and hugged his lover.

Mischa touched the garland still around Tom's neck, rearranging it from where it had been pulled away by their lovemaking. Then he began speaking.

"Tonight is *Ivan Kupala*," Mischa said in a low voice. "It's the Russian midsummer. We celebrate it by meeting and having a meal together, and during the day, the kids splash each other with water, like Vascha's kids did today. In the evening, there's a bonfire. But in the late evening, it was tradition that the young girls went out into the forest, wearing garlands in their hair, and the young men would follow shortly after. That was why Vascha sent you out here."

"He thought I was a woman?" Tom was too comfortable to get offended, but still.

"He thought you were mine. And you are. But the way he did it..." Mischa's voice faded.

Tom shuffled a bit and opened his eyes, looking up at Mischa. "What does it mean?"

"It means that he thinks we should be together." Mischa's voice was a little rough. "And giving you that garland himself -- he wouldn't have done that unless he meant to give us his blessing." Mischa's eyes were shiny in the moonlight. "Unless he meant you to be part of the family."

Tom leaned up and kissed his lover, and then he leaned his forehead against Mischa's without saying anything. They sat like that in the peaceful midsummer night, the beauty of the moonlight surrounding them. And it suddenly felt like home.

"I like your family," Tom stated as they had waved goodbye to Mischa's relatives Sunday morning.

"You must be insane." Mischa shook his head, but he didn't sound particularly unhappy. As a matter of fact, there had been a bit of mushiness about him since last night, even when they had to get up early.

"Hey, I'm with you. That isn't a great proof of my sanity."

Mischa sort of sat up straight and sent him one of those looks that made Tom regret the fact that they had a very long drive ahead of them before they were back in their playroom. He shook it off, though, and continued.

"The only thing I never got was that word your uncle kept calling you -- *malchika* or something like that?"

"Oh, God." Mischa had a stricken look on his face, his former attempt at authority vanished. "I didn't think you had noticed that."

"I did. You ought to know by now that I don't miss much. What does it mean?"

"I'm not telling you." Mischa shook his head. "Never. That was the whole reason I didn't want to go here."

There was a way to find out. Tom rummaged in his bag.

"Oh, look," he said with enthusiasm and held out his phone. "Reception. You know what that means."

For a moment, Mischa looked terrified. Then he seemed to think of something, and he smiled triumphantly. "It won't help you, because you don't know the Cyrillic letters."

Huh. Tom realized that Mischa was right; all he had to go with was the sound of the word.

But finding information was what he did best, and he began experimenting. It didn't last long before he had found a way to spell it with Latin letters, and then he Googled that.

"Hmm... There's a title here..."

"Don't you dare do that." Mischa sounded slightly panicked, but Tom was too busy to listen to the protest. There was apparently a movie with the word in the title; perhaps if he found a movie database...

Tom blinked as he saw the English translation on the small screen in front of him. Then he double-checked the result. Still the same. He looked over at Mischa with disbelief.

"'Boy'? Your uncle is calling the biggest, baddest Dom in North America 'boy'?"

Mischa groaned, sounding thoroughly unhappy. Tom couldn't help it, though; the mirth bubbled in him until he had to throw his head back and let the laughter out. When he was finally done, he had to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"I'm never going to live this down." Mischa's voice sounded piteous.

"Probably not," Tom answered before leaning over and kissing Mischa on the cheek. "But it doesn't matter, because you're mine."

End

If you liked Of Russian Myth and Lore, you might also like A Russian Bear, Happily Ever After, Alphabet Soup, and I like you - all by CB Conwy.

About the author: *Doing relatively sane and responsible things during the day, I'm always looking forward to coming home to see what my characters have been up to. It's only very rarely what I want them to do, but there you go. I have no problems whatsoever reading both Flaubert and smut*

(although not at the same time), and the only thing I like more than chocolate is a good comfort read.

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