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Mistress of the Solstice (excerpt)

Mistress of the Solstice (excerpt)
by Anna Kashina

(The dark essence of Russian myth.)

I stood beside my father and watched the girl drown. She was a strong one. Her hands continued to reach out long after her face had disappeared from view. The splashing she made could have soaked a flock of wild geese to the bone. She wanted to live, but there was no escape from the waters of the Sacrifice Pool.

I looked at my father's handsome profile. His pale face, awash with moonlight, looked magnificent. The power of the Solstice enfolded him. It made me proud to be at his side, his daughter, his head priestess. He was the one who mattered. The only one.

The girl's struggle ceased. The rippling water of the lake stilled, glittering in the silvery light of the near-full moon. We watched the flicker of the glowing candles set in the flower wreaths as they floated downstream. A few of the wreaths had already sunk—bad luck for their owners, who would most likely die before the next Solstice. Maybe one of them belonged to the next Sacrifice Maiden?

I felt my father stir next to me, as he too peered into the amber depths of the lake.

"A fine sacrifice, Marya," he said. "You did well."

"Yes." I closed my eyes to feel the familiar calmness wash over me. I was detached. I didn't care.

I didn't even know her name.

My eyes still closed, I sensed my father throw off his cloak and stand naked, his arms open to the cool night breeze.

"Bring her to me, Marya," he whispered.

I stretched my thoughts, seeking out her body tangled in the weeds on the bottom of

the lake, seeking the spark of life that still remained there, trapped, beating in terror against its dead shell like a caged bird. I reached for it, brought it out, and gave it to my father. I sensed the moment the two of them became one, her virginal powers filling him with such a force that the air around us crackled with the freshness of a thunderstorm.

He sighed, slowly returning to his senses. I kept my eyes shut until he found his cloak on the damp grass and wrapped it around his shoulders. I sensed his aura returning as he once again became himself. The Tzar. The immortal. The invincible.

The undead.

We could hear people singing in the main glade. The celebration was at its full. Soon they would be jumping over the bonfire. As the night reached its darkest, quietest hour, they would break into couples and wander off into the forest. "Searching for a fern flower" they called it. Fern has no flowers, of course. But searching for it made a good excuse for seeking the solitude of the woods. Besides, the blood of virginity spilled on the Solstice night glowed like a rare, exotic blossom of true passion. Those who found their fern flowers tonight were blessed by Kupalo.

I could hear the whisper of every leaf, every tree, and every flower in the forest. This was the night when the powers of Kupalo roamed freely in the world; this was the night when everyone's mind was clouded by Love.

Except mine. Love had no power over me. My mind was free.

The book from which this excerpt is taken will be released November 30, 2013, by Dragonwell Publishing