**Resources**

Dixon-Kennedy, Mike, *Encyclopedia of Russian Myth & Legend*, ABC-CLIO Inc, 1998

Kononenko, Natalie, *Slavic Folklore Handbook*, Greenwood Folklore Handbooks, 2007

Ryan, W.F, *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, Sutton Publishing, 1999

**Overview**

In lore across the Slavic world, from the northern slavs of Poland and Russia to their southern kin in Croatia and Slovenia, there are the so-called ‘unclean’ spirits of forest and field, home and bathhouse. They are descended from those sneering ambitious angels for whom heaven simply wasn’t enough. And when those angelic rebels had been cast from heaven, they fell from such great heights - and the lesser of these squirmed beneath the weight of earth’s gravity, merged with the earth and water, crept and crawled into swamps and wooded lands, into barns and fields...and homes and bathhouses. And the more domestic of these unclean spirits - those of the home and bathhouse - is our focus in this episode. Indeed, ‘unclean spirits’ is a play on words here, for while the Domovoi and the Bannik are apart of that category, they also have strangely domestic functions, inhabit spaces and even perform functions very much centered on cleanliness, at least the hygienic sense of the term.

Now, the Russian bathhouse, a type of sauna, was an eery place, often a run-down log shack set away from the home in grove and shadow, a place apart, a place where the Bannik, the spirit of the bathhouse, reigned and even entertained evil spirits, witches and the unclean dead. Yet, it was regarded with an ambivalent reverence - on the one hand, loud voices, boisterous singing and joyful mayhem were taboo because, perhaps, there was the recognition that the veil between worlds here was thin, easily rent and stirred by shrill human energy. On the other hand, there was also a seemingly contradictory reverence for the potentially helpful powers of the bathhouse, for women laboured here to bring fragile squalling infants into the world and divinations were practiced. And these vital forces made the Orthodox church hem and haw - for the church forbade the magical practice of seeking to bathe during a thunderstorm or bathing with the spiritually potent midsummer herbs gathered on the feast of Agrafena-Kupal’nitsa.

Another unclean spirit of the domestic realm is the Domovoi, a household helper whose presence inhabited the stove and the glowing beautiful coals therein. The lore certainly has roots in the cult of ancestors, who themselves were often considered protectors of their familial lines. This strange little man exhibits the opposite of traditional behaviour; he is a nocturnal being who performs feminine household functions: weaving, cleaning and mending. But do not be fooled by his diminutive womanliness, for if a household allows itself to descend into selfish strife, violence and swearing, the domovoi looms large, wreaking havoc on the home in retaliation, for, perhaps, his very being is woven into the atmosphere of the slavic home and violence and anger amongst families stings like a vinegar doused cut.

**Inspirations & Approaches**

I decided to take a slightly different approach with this episode, using an ongoing story in parts with a frame tale, rather than separate tales. This was mostly inspired by, strangely enough, slavic eclipse lore, which envisions the moon engulfing her brother, the sun. This element of strife also neatly fit my decision to use domestic abuse as the central conflict and the catalyst for the wrath of the bannik and the domovoi.

I was also intrigued by the idea that the Domovoi was a creature of opposites - being nocturnal and a male who did female domestic work. I decided to use this as on ongoing motif in my descriptions of this odd dwarvish being. Moreover, the fact that the bannik hosts unclean spirits intrigued me and I thought that it would give the character added dimension if he felt anger at the husband’s cruel rejection of his girl infant.

**Further reading, viewing and playing.**

‘The Bathhouse at Midnight’ was a particularly fascinating read and I highly recommend it. There is also a computer game called ‘The Domovoi’ that provides an interesting interactive storytelling experience with the folklore.