

Koschei the Deathless

[Excerpt from the *Song of the Forefathers of Simrock*]

There did the foemen lay ambush: the poison-green forest
Far from the ice, from the pitiless stones of his birthing
Far from the earth where the bones of his people are frozen—
No-one to rise at the call of the Dead-Caller, Koschei.

Only with him were the living, gone in the longboats—
The best of our men and our women—to doom in the southland,
Leaving for lovers the duty to blacken their faces,
Cut streaks in the ashes, in weeping for warriors' beauty.

Each of those raiders, by savages wily and woodclad,
Was cut in the throat, speared in the belly, garroted:
They fell into shadows; as men on a ridge between mountains,
Each looked behind, seeing the wind take his brother.

Then came the savages' master, Hájvard the Hunter,
Black was his hair, and his arms were as brown as the tree-bark
As the moon was the curve of his bow; then sprung forth the arrow
To root in the breast of the stone-skinned Last-Secret's Finder.

Koschei leapt forward, cried challenge, dying, not dying;
Snow-haired and sinewy, running, his voice pale as lightning.
Twice more the serpent struck, Swift-Handed Hájvard:
Three barbs of iron, thorns in the Dead-Caller's body.

Then did he stand before Hájvard the Hunter, not swaying
But grasping the throat of the southerners' champion and hissing.
His grip was as cold as the pitiless stones of his birthing
But, shifting, an arrowhead cut through the blood-paths within him.

Instantly out flowed the strength from the Last-Secret's Finder;
Hot was the sword where he fell, but his eyes were like ice-shards.
"Hunter, Swift-Handed, your arrows unerring: beneath you
My brothers lie dead, and I strengthless—but you cannot kill me."

"I am the Last-Secret's Finder. No power within you
Can send me to join these, my stalwarts, in shadow
Only the blood of my blood can restore what by choosing
I lost, and my kinsmen who live are all in the northlands."

Hájvard the Hunter was still, as a stag within bow-sight.
Bronze was the knife in his hand, of sharpness unconquered,
Yet strength was not in it to kill what is deathless. He wavered,
Then turned, swift-devising; his eye found the Shape Between Branches.

“Spirit who rules in the forest, beseeching I call you.
Ancient he lies, amid youths who were grass to my sickle,
He among all will not die; even now he is breathing,
Strength fills his lungs like an ice-wind, like winter returning.”

Then were her feet in the glade; the lights were about her.
Fair-haired, the Spirit before him. Behind her two handmaids:
Nineve, Arafel—here for their deeds I must name them.
Then knelt the Swift-Handed Hájvard, who bowed before no man.

“Bronze is the knife in your hand, of sharpness unconquered.
I take no pleasure in bronze,” said the Spirit, “but this do I give you:
Cut with it now, in the breast of the Last-Secret’s Finder.
I give you the strength: seek his heart with the tip of your dagger.”

Koschei lay silent and watching, his eye was on Hájvard’s.
No blood-clotted cry from his mouth for the southerners’ bragging.
Only he said: “They will find it, my kinsmen yet coming—
Swiftly though, do what you must; leave the rest for our children.”

Strength ran like sap in his muscles, and once with the dagger
Did Hájvard cut deep in that breast that was gray as the mountain.
Only a piece of the Dead-Caller’s Heart met his seeking;
This did he give to the Shape Between Branches, fair-haired and shining.

Strength ran like sap in his muscles; again with the dagger
Did Hájvard cut deep in the breast that was gray as the mountain.
Only a piece of the Dead-Caller’s Heart met his seeking;
This did he give to the Pool-Maiden, depthless and knowing.

Strength ran like sap in his muscles, again with the dagger
Did Hájvard cut deep in that breast that was gray as the mountain.
Only a piece of the Dead-Caller’s Heart met his seeking;
This did he give to the Wood-Warden, jeweled and unflinching.

Gone was her blessing, and lo, there was one piece remaining.
Koschei the Deathless looked on, beyond pain, beyond bleeding
Hájvard, his foe, found the last of his strength and, arms shaking,
Cut out the last of the heart. And the body beneath him—

—was ash, it was nothing, as all men and women but Koschei
Forever shall be. And the four-quartered heart: that was taken
And buried, deep in the forest. And these were the doings
Of Koschei and some of his enemies, there in the southland.

Child of the ice, look to the pitiless stones of your birthing
And know: of the children of Koschei, the strong ones took root there.

Blood of his blood, theirs is his dying, his living,
If first they seek out what was cut from his body.

This could they do: restore what he lost by his choosing,
Give him his death—but drink of their own in so doing!
Daughters and sons of the future: what news of the Frostwroth?
Does nothing remain to be fought for? No joy in contending?

Then give him his death, for victory wearies the victor:
Comes the gold sunset, comes the gray twilight, then nothing.
Or do we fight? Does the North need a champion undying?
The bones in the earth, do they yearn for the Dead-Caller's urging?

Then, blood of his blood, go to the treacherous southland
Take up his four-quartered heart, and know that the Last-Secret's Finder,
Father of kings, snow-haired, long-sinewed, will save us:
Again will he ride, always in fury, the Deathless.