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Valente, Catherynne. Deathless

Young Marya Morevna has watched her sisters married off, each to a man from a different strata of Russian life. Awaiting her own husband, she is surprised when Koschei the Deathless, the mythical Tsar of Life, shows up at her door to take her away to his lands as his bride, asserting his power over her at every step. At first repelled by the land of Koschei, in which everything is alive and fountains spout blood rather than water, she soon finds herself at home as its mistress. But in her need to prove herself to Koschei?s frightening sister, Baba Yaga, Marya inadvertantly overturns the balance between Koschei and his brother the Tsar of Death and must spend many years leading Koschei?s troops in the never-ending war between the two. When, finally sick of spirit, she allows herself to be seduced away from Koschei by a seemingly uncomplicated human man, Ivan, and returns to the human world, her problems are far from over. For she has returned to the city of her birth, now renamed Leningrad, in the midst of the worst of the famine and horror of Siege of Leningrad. She must struggle for her own life, the life of Ivan, and the lives of her friends. And when Koschei comes for her once more, the power balance between the two shifts alarmingly as Marya asserts her own control over her immortal lover and husband.

Author Valente seamlessly and fascinatingly blends 20th century Russian history with Russian folklore in her most recent novel. The details of the Siege of Leningrad are painstakingly researched and painfully depicted, as is the history of political turmoil which turned St. Petersburg into Stalingrad into Leningrad, dragging its citizens unwillingly along. Those unfamiliar with the rich tradition of Russian folklore will find much of interest here as well.

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