

Of Death

By Nikos Gaitanopoulos

His eyes, dark of color, fell upon the immense gate. Vankar had trouble suppressing the ironic laughter that was building up inside him. The huge doors were embedded with the countless skulls of all the beings that had ever stepped on the earth, yet even in their skeletal form through some weird spell they still kept all their primordial emotions clear on them. Anguish and joy, fear and arrogance, pride and shame, knowing and surprise. All together they mingled to create a large tapestry that mortals like Vankar were expected to recognize in their fantasies as the Gates of Death. Yet the spirit that now stood in front them had traveled far both in the human and the spirit world and his mind had survived too many questions to be taunted by such a tasteless image of death. His hands tightened on the only non-spiritual object in this dimension, his scythe, and with a grim expression on his face Vankar pushed the gates wide open, without really so much of an effort. It was an illusion after all to scare off souls that had wandered too far in unpermitted questions and illusions have no weight. A darkness so pure that it could have been the very origin of the word welcomed the stray soul inside.

"No three headed hound to keep me out? No boatman to take me across the river and over to my resting place of bliss?" shouted Vankar to the deepest of the darks and his voice echoed long and far for what seemed to be an eternity.

"I think we know each other too well to go over such tiring for the both of us formalities", said a whisper from the depths. Vankar had felt little fear until now, even when the axe fell on his uncovered neck at the time of his dying. However, even as a spirit, he could feel a chill go down his spine as the ageless voice seemed to come from every direction, even from within his own mind. Yet his sense of purpose was stronger and he held his place. He had come for a reason after all. Ignoring all else he stepped forth letting the darkness swallow him the way a sinking ship is swallowed in the depths.

Whispers, screams and love-talking, all the dying words of those who had crossed into the realm of the spirits before engulfed him in a stream stronger than the rivers that flood with the melting snows in spring. Any god fearing mortal who heard such a vile symphony would step back as his sense of holiness would prevent him from going any further. Any one sane enough would just drop on his knees and plead for mercy. Vankar however would have trouble claiming he was either. Dementia had come before death for him and it had really been far worse. The day he had managed to break free of his own mind had been the one when he had surpassed the mental strength of many of his kind. The darkness was not really that disheartening and worst voices had kept him company as he froze on the snow when he wore his mortal body. Onwards he marched and gradually he could see his feet stepping on a great marble floor in front of a throne that belittled him the way the existence of a god belittles that of a mortal.

He didn't bother with the overwhelming effort that was made to make the whole thing terrifying. He ignored completely the huge sculpture that was so tiresomely worked to look like a throne and was fashioned after the spitting image of a

million souls trying to reach the figure sitting on it and plead for its mercy. The futility and inevitability of death were supposed to be depicted there but Vankar was indifferent to such extravagant splendor. The moaning of souls did not sound strange to his ears. To whose ears would it sound so when they had held a dying lover or a friend killed by their own misguided hands? Vankar was more interested in the figure sitting on the throne.

His face was a skull of alabaster bone and he wore a huge cloak that covered his whole skinny body and shaded the place where his eyes would be. It could be that among all the souls it was only Vankar that could understand that Death was actually smiling. They were old acquaintances after all. Death was death of course, the fear of all humankind, end of all things and so on and Vankar was his chosen. Death was huge yet the scythe that he held in his bony hands, and was just a greater imitation of the one Vankar held in his hands, seemed even more immense. The long handle looked like it was tempered in blood at its forging and the blade was made of such a shiny dark metal that it seemed to suck the light within its depths. Absorbing the living essence out of mortal bodies was what it did after all. It was a weapon of great beauty and even Vankar felt awe below its massive shadow. He couldn't forget that this was the First Great Weapon ever forged at the beginning of the world, for Death exists hand to hand with Life and one cannot be without the other, or so the priests of the Gods claimed in their holy teachings. The philosophers of Vankar's age thought else.

"You have come far, Vankar." said Death and the hall trembled with his voice "Is your purpose fulfilled at last? Did you come to surrender your soul to be forever erased as promised?"

Vankar raised his head and his eyes seemed to penetrate the darkness below Death's cowl and behind his skeletal eyes. He was an educated man once, one far more knowledgeable than most, yet just looking straight at Death was something he never had gotten used to. Even when he walked the earth as his Chosen. His memory of a heart seemed to stop within his chest and could he breathe as a spirit he would do it much faster than normal.

"I have come to kill you..." he said simply and leveled his tiny scythe so that the curve of the blade was directed towards Death "And take your place. Not as a tyrant of minds but as a mere guide to the world that we now are."

The Terror of Humankind's laughter seemed to make everything tremble in terror. Had not Vankar been aware of his spirithood, as most spirits, he would fall on the ground and cover his ears. Even so the laughter seemed to shake his very being and for once he was filled with uncertainty. What madness had driven him there? What immeasurable arrogance?

"For once I think that even we, gods, can be mistaken and I was gravely so when I thought you were smart enough to be my Chosen. You? The mere ghost of a mortal can hope even to touch me? I am Death and I cannot die."

"It took me really long to figure..." said Vankar and his stare was even graver than his voice "And I spent much of my life thinking and studying as well. It's hard to redeem your mind from a thousand years of foolishness and the weight of gods after all. Yet I know you, Harvester. You are not Death. No one is death. You are just a mere impostor, a scarecrow hung in a field of mortals to scare them all and make them fear you. You are great, Harvester, that much I will give to you. You managed to implant so much dread in our minds that we had to

create the ones they call your brothers and sisters. We had to create manifestations called gods so that we would not fear your scythe. We knelt so we could be spared. Yet for so many years we prayed and no answer came from above. There was need of a man who was named Doctor to just halt a bit the Great Scythe. And he was a mere mortal. There was need of a thinker named Philosopher to see the light beneath its great shadow. He was a mere mortal too. There is need of someone who will bring down your façade and show the world what Death really is, a decaying of the body, the breaking of endurance and the failing of the heart. I am a mere mortal, Harvester, and I stand before you to bring an end to your tyranny of lies."

It was then that Vankar felt the greatest of fear, a fear deep, holy, embedded within every man be he educated or not. No one blames a god of fraud just like that and claims to finish his reign as well. Vankar was right to fear. For countless centuries no one had come before the Harvester and ever managed to see through his lies. But there was no one as well who had crossed the earth, conquered the empire of knowledge, reached both the sane and insane limits of his mind, killed friends and lost a lover, mastered magic and finally died only to continue in his spiritual existence his task. No one was death's chosen before. Yet even the Chosen should cower before such a spectacle as terrible as the Harvester, letting all the illusions fade away for once, took his real form in front of the eyes of the mortal even if Vankar believed himself as immortal as his soul. Even if that soul could disperse in any moment now.

The throne faded away as well as the gates and the great darkness around them. The fogs of the spirit world loomed around them and there they stood against each other as equals. The Harvester had no face, or no substance as a matter of fact. Only the Great Scythe remained from his previous form although it was much, much smaller yet no less terrifying. The skull was no more, neither the skeletal hands. Beneath the folds of the black cloak lingered only darkness such that made all previous darks before seem like a mere shadow. Vankar swallowed hard. He saw no eyes this time. There was nothing for his gaze to penetrate. Yet he felt the Harvester's stare and it was heavier than remorse. He saw his scythe and even though the god himself had bestowed it upon him it seemed as crude as a tree stump. There was nothing around Vankar to remind him that even though his opponent was not Death himself he was no less terrifying and possibly no less conquerable. There was only his little human reasoning to fight the Harvester with and it really was not much at all. Yet it was those words he screamed for one can scream only of his beliefs when coming face to face with such a threat of his very soul.

"Death is but a phenomenon. Gods are creations of the human mind and I have to erase you so that the world learns that what can be devised with its mind can be destroyed as well. I do not believe you. I have embraced Death. And if I am the death of the God, I may as well be Death himself. Not as a tyrant but as a kind guide to the realm of the spirits."

His voice trembled at first. Would there be any colors in the spirit world his long hair would shine in their brightest red beneath his bronze rusty helmet and the runes on his cloak would pierce the eternal mist with their blue light. Even He Who Had Carried the Name of Death seemed to reconsider for a second. However he was a god invented to be Death and only to that could he cling. So, wide he raised his hands, black cloak billowing and scythe soaring and he started a chant

in the language that was first spoken on earth. His voice, that old known whisper everyone hears just before the gates of the spirit world open for him, seemed to be made just for this chant, so terrible and majestic it was. For Death had been a ruler too long and no human could be denied of him. And as he chanted countless forms arose around him. And the aspects of all possible manners of Death joined his side. Famine was there, Pestilence as well. Time walked among them and joined hands with Death in Battle. Lovesickness embraced Suicide and Carelessness danced with Hatred and Jealousy. Vankar was all alone. And yet in this dire moment he threw his head back and laughed the way humans defy Death.

"You are really nothing but an old trickster, Harvester. For once stand as what you are, a god, and treat me with proper respect. I come before you and you dare face me with illusions? We both know that I have faced things far worse and won't fall for your tricks. Let those spirits be, for only the spirits of the dead can accompany you in their bliss now, and fight me." Vankar's voice became angrier with every word. It couldn't be such an old trickster that had ruled the minds of people for so long.

"You have become arrogant, mortal." answered the Harvester with his patience running out,
"it was a mistake giving you importance for humans thrive on that better than fungus on a corpse."

"Your mistake was never giving me importance, shame of a god" bellowed Vankar and he stood tall with all the pride a human could get by killing his god "Your mistake was letting me continue my quest when I died. When that axe fell on my neck and you came before me, you should have taken me to oblivion like all the rest. Instead you struck a deal with me to let me continue my quest for I had served you in my life well. I detest myself for being your tool for so long and spreading death in my path yet I stand before you and I am no mortal as you call me. You fail even to comprehend that as it seems. The moment you let me go in exchange for erasing my soul instead of letting it rest, you let me turn in something much greater. Death is Oblivion. The Loss of Purpose and Memory. You allowed me however stick to them like a castaway clings to driftwood. I am a Purpose. And Purposes live longer than gods even when it is Death itself."

And those were the last words the two exchanged as they rushed against each other. Death or the Harvester or whatever you might call him was silent as a grave and morbid as a moonless light. Yet Vankar, although far smaller and less impressive than the god, ignored the spirits that looked upon them and passing through them he sang of his beliefs and immortality. Of the Death of death.

"Grandpa is dying, dear. Let him rest."

"No, mother...", cried the little girl, "Grandpa said that Death is not to be feared. He said that it is only the loss of memory and the passing to the beyond. He fears not."

Her mother could only hold her tears for that much. She knew these things to be true. She let her daughter go and turned her head aside so that she would not

see her cry as well. Whatever death was, it did not come lightly to mortals. In the next room on his deathbed the old man embraced his little granddaughter and smiled to her brightly.

"If indeed I will lose all my memories, I want you to be the last of them, sweetheart. No. No don't have that expression. You will remember me and it might be as well like I am alive then."

"How can you smile, Grandpa?"

"It seems the time for the final story has come then. Well, listen and listen well. There came a day when I was no older than you when something changed. Something broke within everyone's soul and suddenly we feared not. It was not the everyday fears that were gone. No. But all the superstitions had suddenly died away. People dying could smile as I do now. Some even claimed that Death was not as they felt it would be. He was just a young, proud looking man, with red long hair and friendly stare. He was always on time yet also kind and caring. One even lingered alive long enough to say that Death was dead and Vankar had come in his place. Vankar should not be feared. And he is handsome too, sweetheart."

When Vankar was young he had learned that of all the forms of magic storytelling was the strongest. As he approached that room invisible he could see that effect in all its glory for the girl was now holding back the tears and listening wide-eyed and wide-eared. The old man stroked her hair and raised his stare to meet Vankar's eyes, visible only to him. He nodded and his smile faded a little.

"Is Vankar really handsome, grandpa?", asked the girl looking at her grandfather's face.

"You bet he is, child...", replied the dying man absentmindedly "Yet, Vankar... Is it so wrong that I fear you a bit?"