

Grandeur of Mortality

by Mehmet Kerem Türkcan

*Here for a moment's space
Into the light out of darkness,
I come and they come with me
Finding words with my breath;
From the wisdom of many life-times
I hear them cry: "Forever
Seek for Beauty, she only
Fights with man against Death!"*

-Sara Teasdale

Death had been becoming more and more common in the glamorous cities of Amaranth, where clear skies covered the day and colorful clouds painted the night. People had begun to leave their families, they had begun to run away from their homes; they were afraid of losing their beloved, they were afraid they were going to be no more. In the midst of their revelry they had been interrupted by Death: the disease was the embodiment of some perfidious curse that had been lifted long ago, an insidious curse that had once bounded man's dreams. Yet now after immeasurable centuries once again the children of humanity were watching cold bodies lie inert on the streets; they were seeing people they once called gods leave themselves to Death's mercy: some savants were choosing to deify Death and refusing to leave the contaminated areas, convinced by their indolent impertinence that this all-capable strain of Death would inevitably find them to judge their lives. They were beginning to see that that they wanted to die. Others, though, others were doing everything they could to preserve and to survive, before all they strived for was lost.

Titus Andronicus watched the dreaming world from his window on the highest castle overlooking the resplendent factories of Carcosa, drinking the remaining *vino cotto* of his personal stock as the last ship carrying civilians left the limits of the floating city and faded into the clouds, heading for Aquilonia, an old city on Earth at the boundaries of the nation where people thought Death could not enter; where, they thought, they would work together to regain their dominion over the treacherous universe once again. Somewhere in the east, a dying woman was helplessly, uncontrollably screaming. Yet it was not Death which took her life; remnants of the brazen clockwork machinery that had once protected the civilized denizens of the city from each other continued to do their work in their uncaring stillness, for such was their construction. "Eradicate the lunatics; a man without purpose is a hollow man; a man no more chivalrous than Death!" it screamed with faked fervor. Now, patrolling the City, these vicious machines were burning the infected and the zealot alike, never daring to think about the consequences, never questioning Titus' rational and desperate orders.

"Did my father leave, Sir Günther?" Titus asked to the leader of the robots who were sitting around the table. Their human looks masked their evolutionary treachery; they were faster, wiser, and more resilient than the gods they were made to resemble. They all were wearing black suits excluding Günther, who was wearing

nothing of importance other than his favorite monocle: he was afraid of surgery like most of his kin. Medical operations reminded them of the days when people had scavenged ‘machines’ ruthlessly before they themselves achieved immortality. The robots had always been immortal and immune to any disease, but they were no good at fighting; such was their intricate clockwork designed by people too clever to live any longer. Nowadays, they guarded the immortals like the shields of the days long gone. However, at first, they had tried to bring wisdom to those who lacked empathy and honor. However, the people of Earth chose death rather than peace; the soulless war that followed took much from the dead and chose to take much more from the survivors. Those survivors, despite their superiority, had long thought that the war would eventually kill them; instead, just as Jung had observed aeons ago, through the war they were finally able to see that they never actually had a life to begin with. They had changed. Eventually, they rejected the help robots offered. They returned to their soulless Earth and built Sodom once again. Then the robots, in desperation, helped the immortals; and, without knowing, the immortals helped them.

"He died while he was on his way to Ultimus; we cremated him. Yet, Master Titus, I am puzzled; why did you choose to stay in this city conquered by Death?" asked Günther in an emotionless tone. He stood completely still; Titus knew that he was not perplexed at all and silently understood that Günther talked like that to make himself look more human. Actually, Titus thought, the only difference between two of us is that Günther is *better*.

Titus was a learned man; indeed, he knew of the properties of epidemics, their nature, their weaknesses: and he assured himself he was going to exploit these weaknesses. In the safety of his room, isolated, he was going to wait. And he was going to stay alive -- he was going to be fine. He was convinced that Death was going to leave after a while, looking for new lands to pillage and conquer. At least, that was what he tried to believe he was thinking. However, deep inside his heart, he knew that he had remained because he wanted to be defeated; he wanted Death to take him, to free him from this misery: after all, he was cursed with immortality. Hiding this truth inside glimmers of intellect, he answered slowly:

"Sir Günther... you are the only person in the whole galaxy who knows the reason, and yet you are asking me for an explanation? Certainly, this is no time for our hearts to rule our minds."

"Master Titus, I fail to understand your concerns, I'm afraid. Why would the people on Earth abhor you? It's been thousands of years since the war ended." Günther said, this time looking interested. It was not typical for him to do that. There was something else; something much more sinister in Günther's mind; Titus knew that. While filling his glass, he calmly answered:

"Some people never forget, Sir Günther. They demand inequality, they demand justice. You surely remember the days the dream of Tlön controlled mankind with its trivial truths and the days The Third Reich enthralled billions of people with its totalitarianism and the days people needed herding and believed in nationalism and fundamentalism."

"And you think such medievalists still exist in the modern human society, Master Titus? It was you who had told me that the war had changed human nature."

Günther smiled; he was having fun. Titus did not like that. Thus to maintain his superiority he spoke with a serious tone, trying to show that he was bored.

“My Günther, it is *essential* that they exist-- you see, their truth is just as right as mine or yours- and indeed, if they were to disappear, ignorance would lead to the reinnovation of their inconsistent ideals and people would hold their new vision with such great zeal and tenacity that another war would ultimately ravage Earth once again, eventually leading to the choice we started with. In a way, this simple Markoff process by which all our bodies operate demands conservatism.”

“Likewise, Master Titus, the current human population on Earth is unaware of the existence of immortal societies such as ours. There is little chance that they could identify you, considering the fact that they are determined to live as individuals and as such they are not accustomed to accepting others’ ideals as their own. There is little chance that the medievalists you are talking about have the means to acquire intelligence as to the origins of those who arrive to their ancient, overpopulated cities.”

“Military failure breeds power, for, after all, we all define our cultures and ourselves on the field of battle. Do you still think that those people still remain fools after all those years?”

“No, Master Titus. I witnessed their destructive nature before.”

“Then you can surely deduce the fact that such medievalists are not easily identifiable. It was not possible to track those who supported the transhumanist groups in the twenty-first century as they were seemingly regular working people; it was with the money they gained through their jobs that they chose to support their repugnant world view. Additionally, thanks to my sources, I know it as a fact that there are people who will decidedly want to get rid of me in every single colonized planet -- except this one, of course.”

“So, Master Titus, are you expecting people to return to this city?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“But they will not, Master Titus, they will not. They will think of this place as a cursed one; as generations come and go, your story will be eventually altered; maybe they will call you Death: A tyrant who lives in his abandoned city, commanding over an army of savage machines, wanting to take over the world, waiting for the right time.” Günther spoke again, reflecting his imagination. He wasn’t looking at Titus for he was watching the city; there was something sublime in the shattering green sky, something poetic, something nameless and yet, somehow, *essential*. Titus understood that he had to continue:

“Maybe so. But the human race needs enemies; and the *motives* of these enemies is none of their concern. Similarly, their lives are none of my concern either; for they are nothing but wild beasts looking for a chance to tear each others’ limbs. I remember the war, Günther: I was there when Persephone fell to the Sea Peoples; I was there when the Lame incinerated the radiant Everglades; I was there when the Barrier fell; I was there when we all vowed to live forever for Beauty and Brilliance,

and I remember we were just following the orders, the orders that shaped me into this reluctant tyrant I now am.”

Silence dominated the room. It was a game of thrones, disguised as a game of patience. A large cloud of toxic waste blocked the sun, casting an array of shadows and painting the room into a dark shade of pinkish miasma.

Eventually, Titus lost the game. He tried to swallow the last sip of his wine. Failing, he spoke as the wine that was now his blood dripped from his mouth:

“I want to die, Günther; I want to die. But I don’t want to die by human hands which have only brought me pain, whether it was a lover’s hand or The King’s. I admire Death and I enjoy the pain it brings to those who felt happiness, to those who were addicted to it. But Death is not what I want to get killed by either.

“I want you to kill me, Günther. I want the creation to kill the master. I was the Red Knight while living, and I want to be the Victor in death.”