

Death's Exile

by Verna McKinnon

Death walked the combat zone alone, hunting for a soul. Ravens covered the field of corpses hungry for flesh; red-beaked with fresh blood that steamed on the frozen earth. He was neutral to mortal savagery. Blood was their life and their curse. Death searched among the cursed for a rare soul on the ravaged plain.

The harvest had already begun.

"War, so many wars, and they all end up the same open grave," whispered Death, watching the other reapers, gray-hooded creatures diligent with the lifting of souls from the newly dead, but keeping their distance from Lord Death. His shadow brought fear to both mortal and immortal. It made Death lonely, but he often preferred solitude. The company of other immortals he never cared for.

A soul within a dying woman on the battlefield cried out to him and he walked to her. Gently, he knelt by her side, blind to the carnage around him. The woman sensed Death in her last hot breath and welcomed his touch, bringing release to a fragile shell of blood and bone. "Come," he commanded, and her soul rose ethereal and pale into his arms.

"Souls are warm. Only I know this," he said to the quivering soul that clung to his arm. "Let the reapers finish without me."

A solitary raven followed Death on the plain, black eyes bright with curiosity.

In a barren spot of frosted yellow grass, his black-gloved hand made symbols in the air; swirling shimmers of dark-colored runes appeared and disappeared. A liquid, shadowy doorway formed and he prepared to step through it to his own realm.

"Stop," cried an angry voice behind him.

Death looked over his shoulder to see his accuser. It was Immortal Fate, or at least one of them; she had so many sisters. Wearing a scarlet cloak against the wind, a lock of pale hair escaped her hooded face, matching her eyes, the color of sea pearls.

"You don't order Death," he answered softly.

"I do as I please. I am a Fate, you are only Death. That soul you hold is not yours alone," she replied hotly. "You know this soul is marked for rebirth."

Death brushed a lock of dark hair away, and sighed with impatience, "Don't you have other souls to torment with your elaborate plans?"

She wrapped her cloak tighter about her body, cross that her command was not obeyed. "My plans are none of your concern. Now, let it pass to me," she bitterly contested. She held out her hand expectantly, like a spoiled child demanding candy.

"I have my own plans, Fate. Go fight with your sisters. Rip up more of the universe. That is what you enjoy, isn't it?" He turned to jump through the portal, but it suddenly evaporated. The wild cries of the ravens filled the air. The solitary raven that followed him watched silently.

"Do not interfere with Lord Death, madam." He was becoming angry and could not stop it. A strange darkness filled his chest and his hands trembled. The soul that rested in his arms emitted soothing warmth and it calmed Death for a moment.

Fate laughed then, breaking the brief spell of tranquility. Her hands curled into claws, her eyes glowed bright with anger. "Do you think I'm afraid of you?" she cried. Face twisted with malice, she tried to rip the soul away from Death's hold.

"No," he said in a forbidding voice, "I warn you—"

"Warn me! You have no power over me," she spat. Her face was harsh, like that of a bitter whore after too many men. She grabbed the frail soul, its gossamer threads torn painfully from his hands. The soul's cries of anguish made Death snap.

A blind fury overcame Death, one that had been building for untold millennia, and burst into a rage so wild that the reapers wailed in terror. Death embraced Fate with brutal force, violating eternal oaths going back to the beginnings of time.

The pale sky erupted into a violent tempest and the earth trembled as her immortal life faded. Her screams were drowned by the vicious cries of ravens that scattered into the sky now black with storm that hailed on the battlefield where Death stood. Her immortality shriveled against his power, unused on his kind until now. He could sense her eternal life darkening. He obliterated the essence of her being, snuffing out her life until at last she went limp in his arms. He let go then, dropping her to the cold earth.

The reapers howled in fear at what Death had done. He stumbled back; stunned at his own act of death upon one who should not have been vulnerable. Drained and shaking with shock, he dropped to his knees. For the first time, he felt not only the bitterness of life, but the fear that goes with it.

The human soul stolen from Death lay on the mortal earth helpless in the chaos next to a dead goddess. Death knelt in shock, his long gray coat billowing in the rising storm.

The raven that followed him on the field suddenly laughed, "Brother, I never thought you would go this far!" and shape-shifted into Trickster. He was dressed in bright red trousers and a striped shirt, wild red hair long and tangled. He danced around Death. "This is going to be a very interesting day. I'm glad I decided to come."

The flight of ravens blackened the morning sky, dispersing in the madness. A storm surrounded Death, trapping him in its vortex. He tried to rescue the soul that was swept from his grasp, but he was pulled in too quickly.

Trickster wildly danced, his long red hair ravaged by the wind and rain that poured with vengeance. The thunder and lightning burst like mad fireworks. Trickster laughed, "You are being called home, Brother. I think you have some explaining to do."

"Stay out of this," Death shouted, as the tempest engulfed him. Death wailed to the heavens as the maelstrom pulled him into the Realm of Immortals. He cursed the universe, knowing he had nothing to lose now. He had already lost everything. Death vanished from the mortal plain.

The fragile soul was tossed helplessly away on the violent wind.

Death woke up in a strange vast chamber with no ceiling, just the sky revealing the lights of stars and galaxies in the dusky heavens. Sitting up, he realized he was not alone. At the rim of the enormous chamber he was surrounded by a ring of hooded beings carrying silver swords. Shadow creatures from one of the darker realms, he knew. Mute and faceless, they were terrifying to most of the other immortals. The Ancients use them as guardians.

Death was a prisoner. He slowly stood up. "Where am I?" he asked the shadowy sentinels. "Speak," he commanded when none answered.

They remained silent.

“They will not answer,” replied Trickster’s voice from behind.

Death turned around to see Trickster carrying the dead body of Fate in his arms.

“Do I make a great entrance or what?”

“Go away. And take that with you,” Death said, pointing at the chalky corpse of Fate.

“Now, dear brother, is that anyway to treat an eyewitness? Or a dead relative?” He looked up and shouted, “Can I put her down now?”

Death heard nothing in reply, but was not surprised. His confinement seemed to include total separation from the immortals, even his judges—except for Trickster. But then that could also be part of his punishment. He felt oddly weak. But being yanked into the Otherworld by the Ancients would leave its mark even on an immortal.

After a moment, Trickster shrugged and dropped the dead goddess to the hard marble floor. She made a sickening thud when she hit the floor. “She was getting awfully heavy. I was sorely tempted to make a dead weight joke but no one would appreciate it right now.”

“Since you are here you can at least be useful. Where am I? And please, no riddles.”

“The Dome of Judgment. Personally, I thought it was just a myth meant to scare baby gods into behaving.”

“We were never children.”

“Speak for yourself, Death,” Trickster grinned. “They are calling for my testimony. If it is any consolation, no one liked her. You should see what is happening outside though. All the realms are hushed. You can taste the fear. I just came from home sweet home, replete with all of our annoying relatives. Immortals from all the domains are upset. This has shaken them all to the core.”

“Please...like they haven’t wrecked chaos upon each other since eternity. Throughout ages and worlds, they have acted like children fighting over the last piece of chocolate.”

“But you were neutral,” replied Trickster. “And you know immortals cannot abide the notion that death could touch them. Do we face oblivion or another state? The Ancients know...but they aren’t talking.”

“They never do.”

Trickster looked at the circle of guards that surrounded them. "The Old Ones must really be ticked off to use these creatures. Creepy, aren't they? Their lives must be glum and boring, all that doom and such." In a rare serious note he asked Death, "Why did you do it?"

"That is my concern. Now please go away."

"They are waiting to judge you anyway," he shrugged. "They want me to leave too. I have never seen an Ancient. No one has. Perhaps you can write me and tell me from whatever prison they are sending you to. Unless of course, they kill you. Killing death? Kind of ironic, isn't it?"

"I am sufficiently moved by your cleverness, now please go." Death pleaded.

Trickster did a back flip and with a rakish grin disappeared.

Alone, he pondered his act of defiance. Whispers would fill the halls and realms. A new Lord Death would be chosen from one of the reapers. Immortal evolution, though not a new creation. Death could imagine their desires to covet the rank of a god.

Death waited in the strange chamber surrounded by the dark wraiths. The Ancient Ones, elder powers not even an immortal has ever seen, were his judges. But things work fast here. Creation was a snap, after all, and he had existed since creation. A whirl of images and voices filled his mind. Then the judgment came.

Exile.

Alone in a dimension where there's nothing. A lifeless void would be his home. He was banned for all time from the other realms, both mortal and immortal. His power of death was stripped from him.

Well, at least it was quick. He would be punished. The other immortals of his kind would return to their bitter games and tricks with each other. The other worlds they played with would be fair game too. But they would not be punished for destroying whole worlds.

Oh no.

The fallen god of death for once had no regret, no neutral numbing of the senses to do his job. But with the deletion of neutrality, came the emotions that he kept within all through the ages. He wept for all the souls and all of creation, knowing the chaos that reigned, and for something else lost too.

The bleak abyss awaited the fallen god. Death was led to his fate by the dark warriors. Taken through a deep tunnel of roiling energy, he walked like a brave hero. Death did not fight or plead. He accepted his fate. The portal opened to the place of exile, his eternal prison, and Death stepped through it without hesitation or faltering.

The exile was in another plane of existence, created long ago but never used. There were many planes of reality, as there were heavens and hells. They made lots of these, just in case they needed them.

There was a single stone bench of gray stone. Death sat alone and wondered just how long he could bear the solitude. There was nothing but barren and endless plain with a gray sky and misty ground. Well, the Ancients were consistent.

He had no idea how long he sat there, but was oddly annoyed when he was interrupted by the bright entrance of Trickster, jumping along the mists and hopping like an idiot. When he finally gave in and acknowledged him, he sighed and wondered if this was also part of his punishment.

He looked at his red-haired brother with dismay, "I thought I was exiled alone forever What are you doing here?"

"Making trouble. But that is my job. They are still talking about you. You have caused quite a stir, Brother. Never in the ages has anything like this happened! Some even became fearful of you. They are also petulant they had no hand in your punishment."

Death shrugged his shoulders, "I do not mind this exile. I welcome the time alone. My family is a dysfunctional chaos I want nothing to do with anymore. I could never stand their company, including yours, so go away."

"Oh, they fight and get violent, and sometimes take a world or two with them, but never like this. Not from you. You are one of the neutral powers. You violated your reason for being. You killed a god...on purpose."

Death considered this, but could not agree. "I violated nothing. Death is not about what one deserves, it never has been."

"Still, does a god deserve to die?"

Death cocked an eyebrow and replied grimly, "Of course. All creatures should fear death. Yet, they go on using the universe as their playground. I have been neutral since creation. But is

that justice? How many of them cause pain and death for no other reason than boredom? The most ancient of the powers, what is their purpose? Is it good? They do not even care. I did no worse than they; I just had an actual reason for it. One of these ages, they will run out of worlds to play with. Then there will be a bitter fate for them all, far bleaker than my own.”

“You are a pouty boy today,” the Trickster taunted, “and I came to cheer you up.” He did a handstand and a back flip.

Death was not impressed by same old silly tricks. He could not even enjoy his exile. He often wished he could be left alone. Now that he was to be, Trickster would not go away. He became angry and shouted, “You never did anything selfless since the day you were made. I was sentenced to exile alone. I do not recall any visitation rights from irritating relatives.”

“But I know a secret, brother.”

Trickster loved secrets. Death knew this and also feared it.

“First, will you at least tell me why you killed her? You didn’t tell the judges I bet. Those ancient mysterious forces did not even know, did they?”

He looked at his brother and said, “I acted as death for countless eons for those who wanted and deserved life. This creature Fate abused life. There are many fates, but she was the worst of the lot. The only remorse I have is for something I will never see again.”

Trickster took an apple, red and glossy, out of his pocket and bit into it. “What is it? Come on, confess so I can curb the gossip with a bit of truth.”

“Leave me alone,” Death said bitterly. “You would never understand. It goes back to the beginning.” He got up from the bench and began to pace to and fro in the mist, alone and somber in his dark gray.

“What does?”

“A soul,” Death whispered sadly, “From the time of the beginning, before we became cruel in our powers, when time was young and did no harm yet. In that beginning the first souls were made.”

“Yes, and they are still churning them out. They do get reused though,” Trickster nodded and bit into the fruit with relish. “Recycling is very universe friendly. Reborn into new bodies, then death, then back to the well of souls, one of the heavens or hells, or to another birth, or-”

“Ascension into another realm, a higher dimension,” Death answered.

“It hardly ever happens. The souls are damaged from reuse, and the new souls are too inexperienced. Go back to the soul story and stop moping,” Trickster encouraged.

“Countless ages ago, I retrieved a soul from a woman, young and innocent, but cursed with knowledge of her fate. An oracle touched by Fate.”

“A Cassandra Project? They do love creating oracles no one believes in. It is such a waste.”

“Yes, an oracle of great vision. She was a special soul created for the powers. She would be reborn again and again, in many worlds, many lives, as an oracle. But each death would be horrible and always when she was young. She would always die in some wretched way because of her powers. But her soul always remained pure. No stain. No bitterness or pain. I delivered her soul for rebirth countless times. Each time we met, I learned more of her beauty and gentleness. But her curse was to be reborn in a life of pain and sorrow. The brief times when she was in the realm of souls awaiting rebirth, we often talked, but never hoped for happiness. Not us. We are eternal and branded by duty. But the pain of the ages began to take its toll. She deserved peace, in one of the many heavens that were made. But she was denied that by the Fates. One Fate in particular, who took pleasure in her many deaths, and that was the Fate I killed. She was the one who marked her; she was the one who could remove her curse. It was a cruel hobby that served nothing and yet she refused me. So I took matters into my own hands.”

“You were going to take her soul somewhere?”

“Yes, a safe haven. A paradise. I not only took life, but transported the souls to where they were supposed to go. I could never enter this paradise, but she would have been safe there. Not even the Fates could touch her there.”

“You old fool. You did all of this for love. They will never believe it.”

“I don’t care. But her soul is lost to me now.”

“Oh, it has been found,” Trickster replied and retrieved a small bottle of dark blue glass from his pocket. It was ornate, like the kind they used for perfume. “It is amazing how little space a soul needs.”

Death stared at the tiny bottle. Fear knotted his being when he realized what was in the bottle. “Where did you get-”

"I just found it lying around. Imagine that! All the other reapers were terrified after you had that little temper fit. With a dead god lying there and the storm, they didn't notice me scooping her up and putting her in my pocket after you were taken away." He handed the bottle to death and added, "She misses you," in a whisper void of all jokes now. "I also find it ironic that Death treasures love more than any other immortal or mortal. You sacrificed godhood for a simple soul. That is one for the poets. I must remember to tell one of the muses."

Death bowed his head and gently held the bottle in his hand, "Thank you for this."

"You are such a martyr," Trickster quipped impatiently and uncorked the little bottle for him.

The essence of the soul was released and it floated for a moment, then it began to change. It took on solid form, shifting into the shape of a woman. Her body was well shaped with the curves and lines of a woman at a ripe stage of life. Her hair was the amber of autumn leaves, silky and lush. The skin was a smooth pale olive. But the face was astounding. A pure and gentle beauty with large deep blue eyes, soft lips and high cheek bones. She stood before them naked, unashamed and innocent.

"How is this possible?" Death asked in amazement.

"I am the sub total of all the women I have been," she answered. "Trickster has made me different now. I have been made whole now, in this body. Does it please you?"

He simply nodded.

"I used some powers borrowed from a few relatives, though they did not know whom they were doing it for."

"Why are you doing this?" Death asked, "This is not like you?"

"Let's just say, I owe you one."

The woman looked at Trickster impatiently and said in a firm voice, "You must tell him."

Death looked at the mercurial face of his brother, and then a sudden realization struck him. "You told Fate where I would be? What I was doing? This is also your fault."

Trickster shrugged and smiled, "I know and this is my penance. It was in my nature, brother, to cause trouble. I did not think my little tattle would upset the entire cosmos."

Trickster offered the woman a bite from his apple, which she took without hesitation. She bit into it and then handed it to Death with a smile.

He looked at her and it with confusion.

"Come on, Death-this is one time you can trust me," Trickster said impatiently.

Death took the apple and bit into it. He had nothing to lose. He had just gained the impossible. He laughed. Funny, he never laughed before. Then he kissed the woman for the first time as man and woman.

Trickster did a quick dance and took the core of the apple and sprinkled its seeds. The landscape began to change, taking on colors of green. The sky became blue and a sun rose high in the sky. All around them the realm of bleak gray changed to a primal world of trees and grass, with a river flowing silver in the distance.

The astonished couple saw the transformation. Death asked, "What have you done?"

"Oh, I borrowed a bit of fruit from a special tree. Apples are a mythical fruit for many reasons. Oh, and one last thing," Trickster said, and a gown of deep blue and a pair of shoes appeared. "I can't leave her naked. It might get cold at night."

"How thoughtful," she replied lightly, donning the dress.

"You also might want to think if a name for her."

Death took her hand, "I think Eve is appropriate. He turned to Trickster, "They will find out someday."

Trickster shook his head, "I doubt it. No one will look here and the Ancients do not care. I think they have forgotten about it anyway, else they might have built a better prison for you."

"Are we mortal or immortal?" Death asked.

"You're still an immortal. The powers did not strip your immortality, only of death and its attached powers. She too is immortal. This place will be a sanctuary as long as you stay. I must go now, Brother. Have a sweaty honeymoon."

Death smiled and said, "Goodbye, and thank you, but won't they punish you?"

"I doubt it. Chaos is my nature. Farewell, former Brother Death." He departed with a dance, opening a smoky portal he jumped through it.

Death picked up the soul of his heart, which now beat fast and hard with joy. They were alone for the first time in an eternity.

He smiled at Eve and said, "I need a new name, my love, for I am no longer death. Death is exiled. I am free."

THE END

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