Dede Korkut and the Angel of Death

There was once a great warrior called Dede Korkut. He and his men swept across the earth conquering lands far and wide, and as his power and wealth grew, so did his pride. He began to believe that he was invincible, and perhaps even immortal. After one particularly great victory in battle, he held a feast in his palace for seven days and seven nights on end. On the seventh night he called for the music and dancing to cease, and he made the following speech:

“Men. We have conquered all before us. There is no force on earth that can hold us back. We are the greatest army that has ever lived and fought. I challenge all creation to stand and fight us, and still we shall prevail, so long as I, Dede Korkut, am your leader.”

When the leader had finished speaking, there was cheering and uproar throughout the palace and the celebrations continued among great merriment and rejoicing. However, God was also listening to the proud speech of Dede Korkut. He was displeased at his arrogance and boasting, so God ordered Az’rail, his Angel of Death, to visit Dede Korkut and take his soul.

Az’rail flew into the palace and stood on the table in front of where Dede Korkut was feasting. The leader looked up at the intruder and said, “Dark warrior, who are you to stand before me so insolently?”

Az’rail replied, “I am not one to answer questions from the likes of you, for I am here to punish your arrogance and boasting.”

Dede Korkut was far from used to hearing such defiance and rude words directed at him. He was filled with rage and jumped up on to the table meaning to cut off the head of the dark stranger. But before he could do so, Az’rail changed into the form of a bird and flew out of the window.

Dede Korkut rushed to the stables and ordered his horse to be saddled immediately. Soon he was charging out of the palace in pursuit of the angel. First he saw him in the moonlight standing on the highest tower of the palace, then he too saw him take off with a wingspan far greater than any bird he had seen before. He charged after him, firing arrows and hurling javelins into the sky, but none came near the dark bird. He pursued him out of the city and into the forest. Deeper and deeper into the forest he went, following the terrible screeches and cries of the bird, when suddenly the angel appeared before him.

“At last you’re mine,” said Dede Korkut, meaning to run him through with his lance.

“No, you are mine,” said the figure before him. “For I am Az’rail, the Angel of Death, and I have come for your soul. You boasted that you were immortal and invincible. Now the moment of your death has come, oh arrogant one.”

At these words, Dede Korkut threw himself on the ground before the angel and said, “Now that I look death in the face, I understand the arrogance of my life. But I beseech you, kind angel, spare me. Give back to me the remaining years of my youth and strength, and I swear that through my words and my deeds I will prove that I have learned my lesson.”

To which the Angel replied, “I do not decide such things. I am but a messenger from the Almighty.”

Dede Korkut cried out, “Then get out of my way and stop wasting my time!” And he fell on the ground and began to pray to God.

“Forgive my boasting, oh Lord of All Creation, and give me another chance”.

God heard his words and was pleased, and he ordered the angel to spare Dede Korkut his life, on condition that he could find another who was ready of his own free will to give up his own life for that of Dede Korkut’s.

Dede Korkut rode back to the palace a changed man. He felt sure that all he had to do was to ask his father to take his place in death, for he was an old man, and had never refused his son anything. But when he came before his father and gave him his request, his father replied, “My son. I have struggled all my life so that I can enjoy my old age. I am sorry, but I am not ready to die in your place.”

Dede Korkut was surprised and disappointed, but he thought that surely his mother would not refuse him anything. But when he asked her she said, “Oh my son! I have already given my life to you many times, when I gave birth to you, when I fed you with my own milk, when I took care of you. Now the rest of my life belongs at your father’s side, as company for his old age.”

The young warrior was left disappointed and distraught. He returned to his chamber and prepared to die. When his young and beautiful wife saw him, she asked what troubled him and he said, “Beloved, the Angel of Death is about to take my life unless I can find someone willing to die in my place. Yet it seems that even my parents, who previously have never refused me anything are not willing to do this for me – so I have no escape. I must bid you farewell for I am about to die.”

When she heard these words his wife replied, “Look no further. Why did you not ask me? I love you so much that I will gladly give what even your own father and mother have refused. Take my life so that yours can be spared.”

When the warrior heard those words of true and unblenching love, tears came to his eyes. He fell on his knees and prayed to God again saying, “Great Lord. Forgive me. Take my life and spare that of my wife, for she has faced death more calmly and bravely than I.”

God was again pleased to hear those words, and he decided to spare both Dede Korkut and his wife, and they lived a long and blessed life and there was peace and prosperity throughout his lands.

God wrote on the palms of the Angel of Death, in letters of light, “In the name of God, most merciful and beneficent,” and he ordered the angel that whenever he must take the soul of one of the faithful, he must show to him those letters so that his soul might come out of his body and return to its maker.