Death for Immortals

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Death for Immortals

by otherhawk

Summary

Over 6000 years Crowley tried to understand mortality, immortality, grief and loss. Along the way he lives, dies, loves, shouts at God and invents new and terrible coping mechanisms. Aziraphale watches and worries and tries to make it better.

Formerly titled '5 times Crowley died carelessly and 1 time Aziraphale made him care'
Chapter 1

3975 B.C.E

He wasn't sure just why he had followed Cain out into the east. If anyone asked he'd probably say that the first murderer seemed an ideal figure to hang around, what with his general remit being to cause trouble and everything. Truthfully he just hadn't really known what else to do. He couldn't have stayed - there. The grief of Eve and Adam had been too much for him to bear.

Most of the time he stayed in his snake form, slithering along in Cain's shadow, unseen or at least unacknowledged, keeping the worst of the weather and the wild animals away from the human and, discreetly bringing him food and water on those occasions when Cain spent more than a day or so lying under a tree, staring dry-eyed at his hands.

Every time he thought about showing himself – saying something. But he couldn't imagine what he could say that could possibly make any of this better, and he could easily imagine plenty of things he could say which would make it worse. No, the thing of it was, he didn't understand what had happened. Not really. He didn't understand and he was pretty sure he was the one responsible.

Eventually Cain cried less and walked more, finally coming to a beach where he built himself a little hut out of assorted tree bits woven together and took up fishing. It wasn't much of a life, all told, but then no one had much of a life really. There should be more than this, shouldn't there? What was any of this supposed to accomplish?

As always his questions went unanswered.

With an uncomfortable pang he left Cain behind and spread his wings to fly across the ocean. From there he sort of just kept going – flying, walking, slithering, whatever it took to keep moving and not have to stop and think. Days, turned to nights, turned to days again, and the weather got colder until eventually the rains fell frozen from the sky and gathered in heaps so white they reminded him of Heaven and he hated it. They burned too, in a way that fire didn't, and at the foot of a mountain range he stuck his hand deep into a drift, wondering if this was holy. It wasn't, he eventually decided. It was just cold.

He gazed up at the clouds obscuring the mountain top. Maybe the view would be clearer from the top. Maybe he'd be able to look across the world and understand what it was all for. Maybe, if he was that high up, She wouldn't be able to ignore him anymore.1

He decided to climb the mountain on his own two feet, or at least the feet he was currently manifesting. Felt like it was the sort of experience you should work for, and the burn of the ice on his feet distracted him from everything inside his head.

It quickly became apparent that this was more of a struggle than he'd been expecting. In spite of his stern words to the contrary his corporation keep insisting that it needed more and better air to breathe than was available. As a sort of revenge he stopped breathing at all, but developed a splitting headache after an hour or two. And the cold just got worse, the wind biting right through his robes until he couldn’t feel his fingers or toes at all, and his body just wouldn’t stop shaking.

Staring vaguely at the white blotches covering his fingers, he sat down heavily on a miraculously handy rock outcrop, sticking out of the snow field. Just a few moments rest and then he’d either carry on or head back down.
The snow was falling thicker again. He tilted his head back and looked up. “What iss thiss all about?” he asked, scowling as his tongue felt more clumsy in his mouth than usual. Really this body was more trouble than it was worth. “Was it my fault?” he wondered forlornly, and he could pretend he was talking to the uncaring sky, rather than an uncaring anyone else.

He'd spent time with both Cain and Abel as they'd been growing up. Keeping an eye on them, enjoying the day to day family drama. He’d been fascinated when instead of joining his parents in foraging in the forest Cain had started collecting seeds and planting them, letting food grow on the first family's doorstep instead of having to go off and find it. He'd taken to following Cain around his fields and orchards, asking what he was doing and offering suggestions until finally Cain had shoved a couple of stick tools at him and told him to help.

Well, helping wasn't the sort of thing he was supposed to do, but he figured that any way of getting close to the humans was probably alright.² So sometimes he and Cain would sit and talk in the fields at the end of the day, watching the sunset. And sometimes Cain would complain about his brother, about being overlooked, and about favouritism and, well, he had never been anyone's favourite anything, and so he sympathised, he really did.

He sympathised. And he was supposed to stir up trouble. And he'd been bored. So yes, he'd egged Cain on a bit. He'd wanted some fireworks, metaphorically speaking. A bit of a barney, a good old-fashioned family argument with everyone drawn in and taking sides.

He'd never imagined what could happen. He'd never seen it coming.

Of course he knew about mortality, there had been plenty of animal deaths by this point. If it came to that he'd seen angels die in the War, and even more die in the Fall. But this had been different. He'd watched Cain and Abel grow up. He'd seen them running and playing together, seen Abel cry in sympathy when Cain fell and bloodied his knee, and he'd seen Cain give up his last few figs to share with his brother. He'd thought they loved each other. He'd thought he understood that at least. But he'd seen Abel lying there on the ground, his face frozen in eternal surprise, and he'd seen Cain standing over him, the rock in his hand, and he'd realised he didn't understand anything.

It was only a few words. Only a little temptation. “They are made in your image though, aren’t they?” he shouted into the storm. “I suppose overreacting is part of the design!” He stood up dramatically, arms thrown wide and immediately got buffeted off his perch by the wind and swept a little way down the mountain.⁴ He picked himself up and trudged doggedly back up the mountain. “Where was I?” he asked blearily, trying and failing to find his rock. At least he wasn't shivering now. Small mercies and all that. Actually he didn't even feel that cold anymore. Clearly he was getting the hang of this corporation lark. He looked up towards the top of the mountain. Might as well press on then, really.

He wished he'd said something else to Cain. Wished he'd said something afterwards. Eve's scream echoed through his mind.

Cain had been cast out. Cursed. So this couldn't have been part of the divine plan, could it? All of this, all of the little family's suffering, this wasn't by Heaven's design. He had seen the shock and horror on Aziraphale's face, had been certain it was mirrored on his own. Not Heaven's design, and it couldn't be Hell's because he was Hell's agent and he hadn't meant to. It had just been a few words... But that left it being something Cain had chosen to do himself, and that couldn't be right, could it? He'd loved his brother, hadn't he? If it was a choice, why make that one?

Snow was falling on his face. The ice was hot against his back. He'd just lie here for a minutes more then he'd get up and be on his way. He'd just -
Actually if we accept that She is omnipotent we must accept that She is capable of ignoring anything She chooses to. However if we accept that She is omniscient then we must accept that She is also constantly aware of everything that She is actively ignoring. In this way, as in many others, we should probably accept that the demon-who-will-be-known-as-Crowley is something of a headache for all concerned.

This was the same logic that he had earlier used to justify being Eve's first choice of babysitter on date nights. His angelic counterpart kept a dignified distance. Crowley invented peek-a-boo, claiming he was taunting the babies for not understanding object permanence.

Aziraphale.

It's possible this could be considered a minor form of divine smiting as a punishment for insolence. It's more probable that it was simply weather. It may even be possible that were we to suppose divine influence in this moment that it was intended as a message along the lines of 'Get off the blessed mountain you bloody idiot, you're literally a snake, you're sitting in a blizzard, and you're not even wearing shoes.'

It had been the first truly harsh winter and Aziraphale had been kept busy. Eve was expecting again and now.... now the boys were gone the little family had struggled to survive. He'd started off trying to be circumspect about his miracles but in the end he'd just made sure that the fields yielded a full harvest whether anyone was tending them or not, and even then as winter wore on far too long he'd resorted to miracling the food stores full again.

It was perfectly legitimate, he told himself. The humans were struggling because of demonic action. Angelic intervention was necessary to keep them going.

It had been demonic action, hadn't it? He'd seen the demon, Crawly, talking to Cain not long before the murder, and Gabriel had certainly been satisfied with that as an explanation. Only Aziraphale had also seen the look on the demon's face afterwards, and that hadn't been satisfaction at a job well done or even enjoyment. That had been bewilderment and grief.

He would have liked to have had a chance to maybe talk to the demon about if after – get the other side's perspective, so to speak. But he'd been far too busy trying to help the poor parents, and by the time he'd thought about it again Crawly had gone and he hadn't come back.

Which was fine by him, really. It stood to reason that his job would be much easier if his demonic counterpart decided not to bother doing his.

Still, it had been a long hard winter and it wasn't surprising that he felt a little odd, he considered, as he watched the sun rising over the hillside. It was only the nature of the oddity that struck him as
peculiar. He felt alone, which was strange, since he'd been the only angel permanently stationed on Earth since the Garden. So that shouldn't be a new feeling at all. He'd noticed when the others left, or at the very least he'd felt their absence which was sort of the same thing. So why was it hitting him harder today? Perhaps he should check in with Heaven? He didn't have anything in particular to report, there had been nothing significant since Abel's death, and after the way Gabriel had spoken to him then, he wasn't exactly in a hurry to repeat the experience...but perhaps he should? Perhaps he was lonely. Angels were supposed to be social creatures after all.

But that wasn't exactly what this felt like. It wasn't coming from him, it was coming from the world. As though some vital piece had been ripped out, leaving nothing but a jagged hole. Something was missing. Let's see, he was here, and the humans, and...oh. Oh, dear. That was about it, apart from the expected assortment of God's creatures. Just him and the humans and a jagged hole where his demonic counterpart should be.

This was the sort of thing he should investigate, wasn't it? Heaven would surely expect a report on demonic activity. And if he focused he thought he could sense where Crawly had last been – where he'd died presumably. Or discorporated, rather? This was all so new.

He made absolutely sure that the humans would be fine on their own for a while and set out, flying across the world in a matter of days. He could have done it faster, of course, but then someone might have noticed and he'd really rather not have to explain what he was doing every time he turned around.

Eventually he found himself flying up the side of the tallest mountain in the world. He was well above the snow line and good gracious it was cold. He shivered and automatically performed a minor miracle to keep the air immediately surrounding him at a comfortable temperature.

He found the remains of the demon fairly easily, thawing the ice around the sad little lump so he could dig it out of the snow. There was no sign of violence or injury. It looked as though Crawly had just laid down and died.

“What in the world were you doing up here?” he asked, knowing that he was talking to nothing but a husk of flesh, the demon himself long since departed. “And why didn't you just miracle yourself warm for heaven's sake?”

In death the demon didn't look especially intimidating. In fact, if it wasn't for the pale skin and those snake eyes, Aziraphale could easily have mistaken the body for human. Remembering how Adam and Eve had acted he reached out to close the eyes over only to find that in his transition between snake and human Crawly apparently hadn't bothered to install eyelids. He clicked his tongue and smoothed out the frown lines from the brow instead. Evil was apparently troubling even to its instigators. He didn't know how to feel about that.

There didn't seem to be anything for him to do here. This wasn't any hellish scheme, Crawly had simply got too cold and discorporated. Probably he was down in hell right now, doing whatever it was demons did on their own time. No doubt either he or another demon would be back sometime soon and the status quo would resume. In the meantime he should get back to the humans, no point in lingering here.

He lingered there, staring down at the red curls strewn across Crawly's face. Enemy or not, empty husk or not, just leaving him here didn't feel quite proper. The remains of a demon shouldn't just be left lying around, should they? That had to be some kind of hazard. The humans might come here at some point and it might be dangerous.
Justifications firmly in place, Aziraphale carried Crawly down the mountain and buried him beneath an apple tree.

5Not that he had much to compare it to.

6Aziraphale had never been especially intimidated by him in life either.
Chapter 2

2863 BCE

The last of the kids died at the age of 140, surrounded by her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. He waited outside the house until the wailing started, an olive branch clutched tightly in his hand as he shredded the leaves into pieces too small for any human to see. That was it then. No more reason to hang around here.

Her name had been Anurash and her mother had thrust her into his arms as the waters rose, begging him to save her, to give her a chance at life. He'd held her in his arms, miracled milk to feed her with, kept her hidden deep in the bowels of the ark with the other frightened kids for far more than forty days and forty nights of cramped, foul-smelling darkness, until the rain stopped and the waters finally receded. A hundred and forty years. That wasn't too bad, was it? That was a lot longer than a lot of humans got. Mind you, Adam had lived to be nine hundred and thirty, so maybe it wasn't as good as all that. Maybe that was the difference between a human made by the Almighty and a human made by other humans?

He glanced skywards. “What, is it a patent situation? Knock-offs aren’t allowed to be as good as the original? Keep going like this and in another thousand years they won’t even make it to fifty. Where’s the sense in that? If you want them to be better you’ve got to give them time to grow, don’t you?”

A couple of passers-by stared at him. He scowled back and they flinched and quickly hurried away, whispering to each other.

Right. Eyes. Evil demon eyes that they were supposed to shun. It had been a long time since he'd been anything other than a stranger in this town, even though he had largely been responsible for building it. Well, there hadn't been much other option, had there? The oldest of the eighty-seven kids he'd managed to save had been fourteen, and most of them had been a good bit younger than that. What the heaven did they know about building houses, planting crops or digging wells? Only what their parents had got to teach them before Her Upstairs got tetchy and decided hey! Time for no more humans without my seal of approval.

He'd seen the rainbow. It was beautiful. But even now, well over a century later, the kids still found bones sometimes when they played, and those bones had had names, once upon a time, and were they really so despicable that they deserved to be washed away and forgotten?

Anyway, he'd built this town for the kids, and for the first dozen or so years he'd lived among them, making sure that they knew what they needed to take care of themselves. Even after that he hadn't been willing to stray too far. He'd stayed to watch the kids he raised grow up and raise kids of their own, all in absolute defiance of the Almighty, of course. Little humans who shouldn't be alive, running around, growing, with all their questions...it was self-evidently evil, except...except it wasn't evident enough to Beelzebub. As far as they were concerned he should be tormenting, or at the very least tempting, but he couldn't bring himself to do that to his kids, at least not in any way that Hell was going to approve of. And even after they'd grown up he hadn't wanted to wander too far afield, just in case the kids might need him, and in this part of the world there was only the two groups of ark survivors left, and Aziraphale was keeping a close eye on Noah's lot. If he’d thought he could get away with it he might have claimed credit for Noah turning to drink, but honestly he had nothing to do with it. ↓

So Hell wasn't happy with him. Just yesterday a goat had looked up at him with glowing red eyes
and told him he needed to improve his job performance of face the consequences. No specific consequences had been mentioned, but no doubt someone somewhere had something in mind already.

A shadow fell over him. He looked up to see Aziraphale. “Crawly? I thought that was you.” Further sounds of grief came from inside, catching the angel's attention. “Oh, dear. One of yours?”

“Yes,” he answered, without thinking about it.

“I see.” Aziraphale gave him a look of deep disapproval. “Well, it sounds as though there's a lot of people mourning her. I hope whatever little scheme you wound her up in was worth it.”

“What? No, she wasn't...I. Hngh.” He flinched. Her death hadn't been his. Neither had her life, really, she'd lived that for herself. “What are you doing here, angel?”

“Official business. I'm here to offer a few blessings.”

Cold iron seized his spine. “Oh, really, these people are worth Her blessings now?”

Aziraphale frowned at him. “Everyone deserves Her blessings, Crawly.”

There was a small herb garden growing in pots on the doorstep. He grabbed the closest plant, violently uprooted it and threw it as hard as he could at Aziraphale, smacking him right in the chest and leaving a trail of dirt down his white robes.

“Well, really,” the angel sputtered, miracling the mark away with a wave of his hand. “I hardly think there was any need for that.”

Part of him wanted to apologise. Part of him wanted to throw another plant, maybe even include the pot this time. Most of him just wanted to crawl into a deep hole in the ground somewhere and stay there for the next millenia or so. “Don't know why you're so surprised. Demon, remember? Your mortal enemy and all that.”

“Immortal, I think you'll find,” Aziraphale said with a sniff. “And I'm fairly certain that 'mortal enemies' aren't supposed to throw plants at each other.” He did the finger quotes. Crawly resolved to recommend that a special place in hell be set aside for people who do the finger quotes.

“No,” he agreed nastily. “They're probably supposed to lob flaming swords at each other. You go first. Oh, wait.”

The door behind him slammed open. “Gentlemen, please. This is a house of mourning. For the love of God, please take your petty quarrel somewhere else. Have you no decency?”

Aziraphale was stammering out apologies. He sighed and stood up. “Not lately,” he told Rubat, Anurash's granddaughter, and he turned and walked away.

The angel didn't follow him. He told himself he wasn't disappointed.
he wiped that sticky face, and he remembered Teth, and he remembered Saul, and he remembered, he remembered, he remembered.

There was nothing holding him here now. Nothing holding him back. Everyone expected him to be evil – and he was evil, he was a demon. Might as well live down to it.

*

Three hours later and six fights had broken out, three marriages had ended, the blacksmith had been persuaded that there was more room for showing off making weapons rather than farm tools, the hunters had been persuaded that the farmers didn't respect them enough, someone had stolen the entire store of apples and set them fermenting, the pigs had been set loose in the granary and the inn was on fire. 4

It was chaos. There were shouts, smoke, recriminations flying everywhere and children crying in the street.

There were children crying in the street...

A hand closed around his upper arm and Aziraphale pulled him round. “What on earth are you doing?”

“My job.” He didn't look at the angel. The child on the street was clutching a doll in her chubby hand, her parents nowhere in sight. There was a streak of mud across her face.

“You don't...what's wrong with you?”

He shrugged the angel's hand off and gave a sharp-toothed smile. “Popular opinion says everything.”

“There he is!” A screech from down the street. Running footsteps, a whole mob's worth.

“The evil one walks among us!”

“Get him!”

“I see him! I see the demon!”

They were coming from all sides now. He took a couple of steps back. “Lovely seeing you, Aziraphale, but I really have to be going.”

He ran. The mob chased him, parting around Aziraphale like they didn't so much as see him, and the angel just stood there like a rock in the river, and Crawly ran. Hands grabbed out at him as he passed, punching, hurting, and stones hammered into him. Black blood ran down his face, dripping into his eyes. If he reached the river he could just turn into a serpent and escape that way.

He didn't make it. They cut him off, knocking him to the ground, kicking, punching, stamping, and he shifted, slipping into a snake, trying to slither away, and the last thing he saw was the blacksmith raising a sword above his head and bringing it down.

*

Aziraphale carefully buried the little broken body on a hill overlooking the river and tried to ignore the feeling of being utterly alone in the world. He'd seen the demon die and he hadn't done anything. There hadn't been anything to be done, it wasn't for him to interfere, and if he had interfered it would have been to smite the demon out of existence once and for all. Obviously. No, he had nothing to
feel guilty about, it was just that he didn't like seeing the humans moved to such violence, that was all.

He scattered the last shovel of soil on the small grave and stood awkwardly for a moment. “I'm sorry,” he said at last. “I don't know what happened today, but I think, maybe, there was something else I could have done. I'll do better next time.”

There were two people he could have been speaking to. He didn't think either of them were listening.

He did feel it was a reasonable enough reaction to the trauma of witnessing divine genocide, however. He'd even turned to it himself a time or two. The one time he'd actually managed to get to sleep since the Flood he'd had to face the memories of all those desperate hands clinging to the side of the ark until one by one they slid away.

The goat had chewed on his sandals afterwards. He wasn't sure if that had been the hellish influence or the goatish one.

Crowley had never actually been issued a sword, flaming or otherwise.

You might think that this is rather a lot for one demon to achieve in three hours. But even if he had mostly passed unnoticed for the last century Crowley had been living alongside these people. He knew where the buttons were and how best to press them. And, like any act of self-harm, once started it was incredibly difficult to stop.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

On a 12th century battlefield Crowley suffers through flashbacks to the war in heaven.

Chapter Notes

Crowley uses female pronouns in this chapter.

1132 C.E.

They weren’t soldiers. They were builders, dragged from their homes to take part in this stupid war, forced to construct war machines and massive platforms to break the siege. They didn’t want to be here; Crowley could see it on their faces. Maybe they’d had an opinion about which side was right and which was wrong at some point, but that didn’t matter much, because here they all were and the world was on fire.

She could taste smoke on the air. Death too, and she winced at the whistle of a trebuchet, at the explosion of stone and the screams that followed.

Cowardice was a sin, wasn’t it? Desertion certainly was, she knew that first hand. “You could run,” she suggested to the builders, temptation wrapped through her words. “All this noise, all this confusion, the soldiers probably wouldn’t even notice. Even if they did, they couldn’t catch all of you. Maybe they couldn’t catch any of you. If you were quick. If you had a little luck.”

Another explosion, somewhere even closer. Orders screamed across a battlefield. Blood. A bitter taste in her mouth. For a moment she could hear the beating of terrible wings.

“You could go home,” she pleaded. “Things could go back to the way they were before.”

“We can never go back,” someone said, his eyes fixed out across the fields towards the burning moat.

The builders built their platforms. Their families – women, children, the elderly and infirm – were forced to gather materials to fill in the moat. And when they died – and they died, and oh, they died, they died – their bodies were left in the moat to support the platforms their men built.

They stood on a wall of corpses to storm the Silver City. We can never go back.

“You can’t just – “ she tried, and the ground shook, the world went grey, and she was breathing smoke and gunpowder and fragments of wood and flesh and bone. The builders were gone. The soldiers were gone. She ran, not knowing where.
She had been a builder once. She had built stars and set them spinning, and it had been good. She couldn’t remember now the steps that had taken her away from the stars to this place of screaming and pain, with blood dripping down her face, but she must have done something terrible. There had…she’d had questions? Were questions terrible?

A man-shaped figure holding a flaming spear stepped out of the smoke towards her. He was shouting but she couldn’t make out the words. She took a step back and he thrust towards her, more figures joining him, their holy weapons raised aflame.

Maybe answers were terrible.

Fire dug deep into her side and she screamed, waving her hand towards them instinctively, and they were gone, vanished like they’d never existed, only the black blood trickling between her fingers proof that she hadn’t imagined it.

She had to go. She had to…find someone. Someone on her side. There had to be someone left on her side, didn’t there?

Moving hurt. Breathing hurt, only she couldn’t remember how to stop. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed, to a Name that burned on her tongue. “Please…someone?”

There was a hollow. A crater, maybe. She stumbled down into it and almost tripped over the little group of people huddled in the mud. They stared at her, the taller ones, their faces lined and grey, standing in front and behind them…fledglings. Kids.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she told them. “Can’t kill kidsss.”

They didn’t seem to understand, and then the world tilted a little and the old woman was holding her up by the arm, dabbing a filthy rag against her eye and making a sort of concerned clucking sound that Crowley thought she might be content to listen to forever.

The fledglings were staring at her, all huge eyes and trembling lips.

“It’sss going to be alright,” she promised them. “You’ll be alright.”

She was lying. Why was she lying?

More explosions, drawing closer, and she could hear the whistling arcing towards them, could smell the impending death on the air. “No!” she screamed in defiance towards the sky.

Time s-l-o-w-e-d.

Without regard for whether it was possible, she gathered them in her arms, these people, her people now, and spread her wings over them like a shield and willed feathers to steel. Fire and rock smashed against her and she dug her heels in and didn’t break. “No. No. You’ll be alright. You can’t kill kids.”

And it was over, and she was lying in the mud, crying in the mud, dying, and there were gentle hands on her, cries of alarm, and for a moment she was ready to sink into oblivion but then another voice rang out from above and she looked up and caught sight of white, pure and unsullied, and realised that here was another angel, come to finish them off now she was weak.

No. Not today.

She hissed sharply, and she couldn’t stand so she crawled, her wings extended still, putting herself in
between the others and this new threat.

The angel was talking, still above her, no flaming weapon to be seen, thankfully, but he raised his hand, reaching for her, and she lashed out viciously and watched in satisfaction as golden blood dripped into the mud. It was barely a flesh wound but still the angel took a step back. “You can’t have them,” she managed to say, and even her own voice sounded distorted and wrong in her ears. “They’re not dying today.”

The angel reached out for her again, talking loudly, sounding frustrated, and this time he jumped back before she managed to land a strike. Pity. “Fuck off, ssoldier boy,” she hissed.

Her arm suddenly decided to launch a rebellion, refusing to hold her up any more, and she collapsed, only just managing to catch herself on her other, more cooperative, elbow. This could very well be It. One last blow with a holy weapon and it would all be over. Kinder than the Fall, probably. Though her wings were just as broken now as they had been then.

The angel was crouching on the ground. He was going to get mud on his nice pristine clothes. Serve him right. See if she would miracle it away for him now. His voice was good though. Soothing. She wondered if he would make that soft clucking noise if she asked….

Crowley’s wings faded away as she died. There was a burning in Aziraphale’s chest as he felt that too-familiar wrench of emptiness – loneliness and grief that he knew he shouldn’t feel but couldn’t bear to call sinful. His hand trembled as he reached out to brush the bloodied red hair away from her face.

Immediately his hand stung with sharp pain and he looked up in surprise to see the humans huddled together, glaring angrily at him. One of the little ones had just thrown a rock. They were protecting her, he realised, immediately guilty at his own surprise. He had no idea what relationship Crowley had with these people but clearly she had at the very least saved them, judging by the strength of the miracle that had attracted his attention. And they had seen her trying to keep him away, trying to protect them from him - it made sense that they would be protective of her, even in death. And that they would treat him like an enemy.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt her,” he said helplessly, wishing that he’d managed to pick up more than a couple of words in the local language over the past couple of days he’d been here. “I just want to help – I know her.”

Crowley hadn’t known him though, his mind whispered to him, and he remembered the fear and desperation in her eyes, the anger, the hate… (Soldier boy. Was that really what she saw when she looked at him? Yes, that was the Purpose he had been created for, but he thought he was more than that now. He thought that his long sojourn on Earth and his acceptance of his role here had given him a new purpose.)

Most of the humans eyed him distrustfully. The old woman ignored him completely and moved forwards to Crowley’s body, dabbing away the blood from her face while she clicked her tongue sorrowfully.

The dull ache in Aziraphale’s chest seemed to spread. Enough. This was enough.

He stood up slowly, brushing off his hands fastidiously before clicking his fingers, and all at once the noise of battle seemed to fade, as though everyone fighting was experiencing a sudden moment of confused peace. “Right then,” he said brightly, holding out a hand to the humans. “Let’s get out of
With a bit of effort and a minor miracle he was able to pantomime his intentions clearly enough, and he ushered them as quickly as he could across the battlefield, sticking close behind them and allowing peace to break out in his wake. He tried not to imagine the talking to he was going to get for all this blatant celestial interference. “Why did I decide to stop my observations to protect these particular humans, Gabriel?” he muttered under his breath. “Oh, no real reason. I just thought my demon would want me to. That is to say, not my demon, she’s her own demon. Or, rather, she’s Hell’s demon, I mean.” Somehow he didn’t think that would achieve the desired result.  

The old man carried Crowley's body across his shoulder. Aziraphale longed to take her from him, to carry her himself. She hadn’t recognised him. He wasn’t even sure if in that moment she’d had any idea where or when she was. Blood had been trailing from both her ears, and her face had been a mess of shrapnel gashes, the remains of her dark glasses digging deep into her face. And her wings! He wasn’t certain if he could have saved her even if she had let him get close enough to try. Oh, he wished she’d let him get close enough to try; if nothing else he could have eased her pain.

He rubbed his thumb across the scratch she’d left on his hand, absently healing it.

He could only hope that it was the damage to her physical corporation that had her so lost and confused, because if it was the trauma, and if she hadn’t managed to snap out of it when she got back to Hell...well, he shuddered to think. He didn’t know what the forces of evil would do to a traumatised demon but he doubted it involved a nice cup of tea, a warm blanket and a kindly listening ear. Come to think of it, he couldn’t imagine that being discorporated while saving humans was going to look good for her either. Oh, dear. He bit his lip hard. They wouldn’t...destroy her, would they? No, they couldn’t, she did good work, or, rather, did bad work well. But he knew from a couple of things she’d let slip over the centuries that Hell could be just as violent towards its own as to the humans. “Oh, Crowley,” he murmured fretfully. She would be fine. She’d be just fine and she’d be sent back to earth in no time.

They had reached a farmhouse – he wasn’t absolutely certain who it belonged to, but the humans all walked in like it didn't matter so he joined them. By this point they seemed to accept his presence. He even got some gap-toothed smiles when he produced some candied fruit for the children. And then it was him and the old lady in a bedroom, Crowley's body laid out on the bed, and the kindness with which she prepared the demon's body for burial brought a lump to his throat.

“I'm sorry, dear girl,” he said, as he washed the blood away from her face. “I wish I'd reached you in time.”

*  

On previous occasions it had taken a few years for Crowley to make her way back up from Hell. Five, Aziraphale had found, was about the average. Infernal bureaucracy at work, no doubt. And he was kept busy enough, trying to heal the latest papal schism and told himself he wasn't worrying – but then he turned around and ten years had gone by. A decade, and not even a hint of his demonic counterpart.

He worried. In the relative privacy of his own mind, he worried, and he hared across the globe after every suggestion of demon activity, hoping... but it was never Crowley. In fact, sometimes it seemed like he'd found every demon except Crowley, and he'd foiled more possessions and devilish schemes than he ever had before. He'd even ended up discorporating a few minor demons – in self defence, of course, but he still received the standard memo of praise from heaven.
It was forty years before Crowley came back. Aziraphale wasn't certain at first, but he left the monastery behind to investigate demonic energies in Rome and found Crowley lounging in a bar that surely couldn't be the one they'd once shared a drink in back in 41, but certainly seemed to be roughly in the same place and, quite possibly, was using the same glassware. Without having washed it in the interim.

Not quite sure if it was safe, he sat down at the table next to the demon and stole careful glances at his friend. (Or, rather, acquaintance. Or, rather enemy.) Crowley looked paler than normal, though that could be the new corporation, and she moved stiffly as she reached for her drink.

“Paint a picture, it'll last longer,” she said irritably without so much as looking at him.

“It's been a very long time,” he whispered back. “I was beginning to think you weren't coming back.”

“Yeah. Well.” She shrugged with painful indifference. “Paperwork gets a little bit more hellish every time. Did you miss me?”

Yes. “What do you think?”

“Right.” She drained her drink. “Stupid question, really.”

“Are you alright?” he dared to ask.

She shrugged again. “I'm fine, angel.”

“About last time -” he began, and she interrupted immediately.

“- there was a battle. I died. Don't remember more than that. Don't need to remember more than that. Got it?” The threat was sharp.

He sighed and nodded.

“Good.” She smiled. “Let's get drunk.”

Hours of drinking went by and before he knew it the bar was closed and somehow they'd been locked inside. Crowley opened a new barrel and Aziraphale miracled what he thought was the appropriate money onto the counter.4

“I don't like it when you're not here,” he told her, as she walked back to their table, tripped over a stool and ended up lying flat on the floor, still holding the carafe upright somehow.

She peered up at him, yellow eyes bright over the top of her glasses. “Can't just stay with you all the time, angel. Your side wouldn't like it.”

He shook his head, frowning. “No, thas...that's not what I meant.”

“My side wouldn't like it either, come to think of it.” She poured the wine directly into her mouth, somehow managing to do it pensively. “An' I don't want them to be angry with me, least f'r a while. Someone's been giving them ideas. And little pointy hooked things.”

His blood ran stone cold. “My dear,” he said tremulously, kneeling on the floor by her side now, his hand clutching hers. “My dear, you need to be more careful. Please.”

She scoffed. “‘Careful' is a four letter word. It's all good, angel. ’sss all fine.” She turned her head
away, and her mouth was trembling. “’m gonna sleep now, ’kay?”

“Of course, dear,” he said quietly. “I’ll keep watch.”

He didn't let go of her hand till morning.

1 As a matter of fact Aziraphale had already been heading in Crowley’s general direction, due to a vague but growing sense that he was needed. This was probably a coincidence. Certainly it would be somewhat presumptuous to characterise it as Divine intervention.

2 In point of fact it would, if the desired result was to make Gabriel stop asking about the miraculously-saved humans – mainly because on hearing that the Archangel Gabriel would suddenly have many, many more pressing matters to discuss with his erring subordinate. Thankfully while Aziraphale was not a convincing liar the idea that an angel would attempt to…obfuscate the truth…to their heavenly superiors was unthinkable and therefore Gabriel, with his supernaturally limited imagination, never thought it.

3 He also earned a reputation in Hell as a tenacious and deadly opponent, which had the happy side-effect of helping Crowley’s reputation as well.

4 In reality the currency in question hadn't been used in a good thousand years or so. Fortunately for the tavern owner the coins were made of solid gold.

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