

## **Azrael**

A loud honk came from a passing car, swerving to avoid my outstretched legs and waking me from my trance-like state. I was sat out upon the uneven curb, scarred from the ever-crushing might of the lorries rushing to deliver goods to the factories towering ahead of me. I tucked my legs back underneath my body and began pushing against the raised path behind me, propelling myself back to my feet before wiping the chipped chunks of sodden asphalt clinging to my hands into the fibres of my coarse jeans.

An ominous cloud of fumes began crawling across the road ahead of me, seeping down from the vent atop my workplace into every crevice and crack in the road as though it were a mass of off-white oil, slowly engulfing my feet and plunging me into a pale fog. While the acrid fumes passed over me quickly, they left an unbearable starchy taste in my mouth and lingering in the hairs of my nostrils, covering up the sweet, salty sea air that came from the coast. Once the cloud had passed I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with equally dislikeable petrol fumes from a passing truck which roared past.

As a moment passed, I began my descent onto the road, tentatively dangling my scuffed shoes over the disfigured curb below me and falling back into my working routine. I meandered across the road when I was struck by the sudden red flash of an approaching tanker a moment too late, causing me to cower in my last moment like a possum in the beam of a flashlight.

After a momentary pause, a stillness washed over me and drowned me in an intolerable silence. Allowing my body to drift in line with my mind, I slowly opened one

cautious eye to the sight of the tanker mere millimetres before me, unmoving as though it had stopped abruptly by a wall between us. The silence surrounding me grew more unnerving as it was coupled with the odourless air lingering around me, pushing back against my skin as though I were wading underwater.

The silence was eerily tranquil, with birds suspended mid-flight above me watching over the unmoving traffic. I stepped back to approach the tanker which towered before me, the gleaming red frame reflecting intensely in the still sun. I reached out to press my hand against the metal beast that sat between myself and my swift demise however as I brushed my hand across its smooth surface I could feel nought but the rough metal. I felt no heat from the engine, nor the gentle rumbling as the tanker grumbled and groaned - it lay completely dormant in a state of pure idleness.

'It's a magnificent sight, isn't it,' whispered a sweet voice from behind me, piercing the unnerving silence, 'yet it never lasts for long.' I turned to see a cloaked figure facing me offering a pale hand in greeting, "You can call me Azrael," he declared proudly, rearing his head to reveal his ashen white skin which remained partly covered by a charred shemagh. His tattered cowl flowed down and joined his cloak, tied at the waist by a single black band of silk which shimmered faintly as he stepped forwards.

'Do not be alarmed. As you may have guessed, that tanker is about to be the cause of your untimely end,' he exclaimed in a worryingly upbeat tone, 'though that need to bother you anymore. I have been sent to cast judgement upon you - perhaps we should continue this conversation over a cup of Earl Grey?'

With a snap of his fingers, a small wooden table appeared between us with an assortment of plain white plates, all littered with brightly coloured cakes and macaroons. Glancing across the table I noticed a third figure looming across from me, staring intently at me with a pair of pearlescent eyes while pouring themselves some tea from a dainty teapot. The figure bore a wide smile which hung suspended among its wrinkled leathery face, seemingly worn into the frills of its raven-feathered collar and slender black frame.

Azrael pulled a book from his side and laid it open upon the table, throwing a reluctant smile to the figure at his side, "This is a Shinigami," He muttered hesitantly, his voice wavering, "and as averse as I am to work with his kind, they certainly know how to guide souls to the afterlife.

"No then," he called out, plucking a fresh quill from the Shinigami's collar, "Shall we start with your name?"