

Taking Lives

Present-day:

You'd think after many years I would have become accustomed to it. The screaming, the kicking, the crying, the gunshots, the sirens, the choking, I have never been able to normalise those sounds, no matter how hard I tried. But still, by some sickening way, I have grown to live with them. The one thing, however, that the effects of time haven't been able to reduce the impact of, was what followed the crushing noises of death- the silence.

There was something about silence, something about the abrupt end to life that stirs a great uneasiness within me. Something about the wispieness of a final breath that shatters my soul into tiny pieces. Something about the hope emanating from a dying child's eyes as a single tear rolled down rosy cheeks that make wet my own eyes.

I can recall every life I'd taken, from the wriggling babies with curious minds to the emaciated elderly whose skin draped to frail bones. Most of us can, it was both a gift and curse to remember every final moment and only when I am alone, do I dare myself to re-live those memories. The most painful ones I had locked up and away in the corner of my mind, never to be opened, never to be thought of again- until now.

1st December 1781: The Zong Massacre

I had been here before, only two days ago. Same ship, different waters. I looked down at the people on deck, the densely packed rows of women and children pressed up against each other heads seemingly permanently bent downwards at the deck floor. But before I could focus in on anything, in particular, the scent hit me.

It was foul and putrid, the smell of vomit and sweat clung to the air as though it too were being held captive on the ship. Azrael turned to me and started speaking, I didn't hear him, not that I needed to, I knew how this worked, I'd unfortunately done it before.

"They say the captain's ordered more to be thrown over." He whispered, "Same as last time Raphael, not enough supplies and the captain says they need the insurance."

I found myself glaring at Azrael as he spoke, not for the manner of how he delivered the words, he was always soft-spoken and gentle, we all tried to be as calm as possible, as though somehow that would compensate for the chaos in which we were immersed in regularly. It was his use of the word 'need' that stung.

Looking down again at the ship, I felt a rising hatred boil inside of me as the fair-coloured men strode down the length of the Zong. Watching as women cowered and curled up as they approached, and children wept to be returned home. I was close enough to see the white men's faces, the smirk of power, the look of pure disgust as they surveyed the quivering people on-board.

Those men needed nothing. They deserved nothing.

"Raphael?" Azrael murmured.

"These humans and their money." I spat.

He said nothing.

"Jones, head 'em up." A white man barked.

Azrael and I drew closer to the ship, floating just above the water, waiting. This part had been hard at first, just staying there, knowing that in mere seconds lives would collapse around you.

There were frantic shrieks from aboard the ship and the crack of a whip tearing into skin, followed by a stifled whimper, I screwed up my face in horror for I recognised those sounds, and recognised it well enough to know it were the shriek and whimper of a child.

“They’ve taken 42 men from below deck.” Azrael said.

A man starting speaking hoarsely, he was stuttering and even though I could see English was not his first language, his message was clear- please don’t do this. The white men did not care for his pleas and roared a cruel laugh accompanied by the clank of chains and more screaming.

Hearing a man scream wasn’t a sound one could ever prepare for, the raw pain of every second, the cry of pure terror and loss of control and humanity in that one sound was overwhelming. Never in my existence had I ever felt so powerless as I had in that moment, as I watched 42 men crash into foamy waves, the sound of their cries and howls of suffering ricocheted in my head for what may well have been an eternity.

“It’s time.” Azrael said disappearing into the water.

I followed him, for us the water was no different from the air or any part of the human world. In some way, the water was easier, there were a few seconds, sometimes even minutes of violent flailing of limbs and a swarm of bubbles erupting from peoples’ mouths, but then it stopped and they slowly dropped further down and down into the ocean.

Lowering my arm, I cupped the man’s face with both my hands, palms pressed against the dark flesh of his cheeks. I had seen many a horror, but none so disturbing as this, none so disturbing as seeing a species tear their own apart for reasons that didn’t go beyond the colour of skin.

24th February 1945: The 3rd Guards Tank Army: The Eastern Front of World War II

It was the worst times of our lives. We’d seen a war before, back in 1914 all through to 1917, we all thought it was over. We’d thought the worst was behind us, that after the last war, everyone would have learnt their lesson. But they hadn’t. They never did.

Azrael and I were assigned to the 3rd Guards Tank Army today, they were a cruel group of soldiers established by the Red Army, a Soviet Union military service, commanded by the notorious Joseph Stalin. All the Angels of Death travelled in pairs now, following different armies around and cleaning up their messes, like the mother of a demonic, psychotic child.

“Where are they heading?” I asked Azrael gesturing to a group of 60 or so soldiers and officers.

The sun had begun its descent, casting swirls of red and orange into the sky, like a twisted mix of blood amongst the clouds. The group I had pointed to, seemed to be on some sort of course, yet I couldn’t help but notice the sway to their step, a sign of intoxication.

“Bunzlau, it’s a Polish town.” Azrael replied, I had, I must admit, already figured that it were a Polish town, for it were Poland that we were in.

I wouldn’t have thought much for it if weren’t for the men’s drunken stupors, and the rifles slung casually across their uniforms. Moving closer to get a better look, I could see their battalion commander amongst them, he, like them, was all too overcome by the effects of alcohol.

The others had told me all the stories of drunk soldiers and civilians, of the crying of young girls as they begged for death, of the mothers desperately trying to protect their daughters. And I knew of the Red Army's crimes.

A severe lack of education amongst their ranks resulted in uncivilised and sadistic behaviour. Though they were kept in line by their commanders, when the fighting on the battlefield was over, they started a new war, one they seemed to keep winning. Though, I suppose it hardly qualified as war, for their opponents were defenceless- nuns, mothers, grandmothers, children, women who were carrying the unborn, all of them, defenceless.

The soldiers stopped walking as they came to a building, one of the officers stepped up to the door. He had a face reddened from the drink and was sporting a thick moustache of bushy white, his stature was one of a larger type, the kind designed to instil fear.

"Otkryt!" He bellowed in Russian (meaning open up!) hitting the butt of his rifle against the door.

There was an instant commotion inside and a tired-looking lady came to the door. She must have been in her early thirties but it was hard to tell for her face was overcome with an intense look of absolute fear.

The soldiers barrelled past her and instantly, shrieks erupted throughout the facility. I had witnessed the crimes committed by a man against a woman, but never before had I seen anything so brutal, so savage, so cruel.

I waited for hours, for once I longed to take the lives of these women, to let them suffer no longer. But I couldn't. They screamed and begged for release from this world, for the warmth of a smoking barrel pushed against their foreheads and the click of a trigger, for the deafening silence that would follow. Their only reply:

"Rossiyskiye soldaty ne strelyayut v zhenshchin." - Russian soldiers do not shoot women.

Yet somehow, what they did was much worse.

Nevertheless, during my time in the war, with the Red Army, I'd pressed my palms to the flushed cheeks of many a woman, and taken her soul gently. I'd watched many a girl drive a blade across her wrists to end it all.

And even as the war ends and I look at the broken mess of humanity, I cannot be naïve enough to believe that this is the last I'll see of their cruelty.

September 11th 2001: New York City

I had always loved watching the planes soaring in the sky, truly one of mankind's greatest creations- aircraft. There was something elegant about them, the smooth white wings slicing through the air, the nose of the plane as it streamlined under the clouds and the gentle rumble of the engine.

Not that they were easily spotted, as I stood in the middle of a street in New York, looking up and around, the planes were mere toy figures swimming through the bright blueness of the sky.

The streets were bustling with cars and people going about their daily business, no sense of urgency besides the mild morning rush. There were two structures ahead of me, colossal buildings, that towered over the city, one of the more extravagant creations of man, representative of power and control, or so I thought.

Shadows danced on the pavement, like the people, they seemed to be in everlasting movement, at no point daring to stay still for even a second. I had always been fascinated by shadows, perhaps it was because I had never had one being who I was, perhaps it was what they represented. The absence of light, a part of the world that even the brightness of the Sun could not touch. A part of the world that was dark.

And on that day, as the creeping shadow of a plane flew over the road, a darkness engulfed those nearby, a darkness I knew would last forever.

Before anything else, I heard the scream, of a young lady on the pavements, she was looking at one of the towers. Her phone, with which she had been using earlier to talk to a friend from high-school, lay on the ground, screen cracked, cover chipped. Her eyes were fixated on the building as one pearly-white hand covered her mouth and the other was half-extended to the tower in a sort of gesture.

But then I saw it. The nose of the plane that had glided so effortlessly through the skies before now plunged through the side of the structure, the wings of white that once sliced the crisp air above, now pierced through the steel frames of the tower. A small cloud of smoke poured from the sides and for a split second, there was silence.

Then huge storms of red and orange bellowed from between the 93rd and 99th floor followed immediately by swirls of black and grey smoke. I took a step backwards at the sight, trying to drown out the screaming and crying off those around me.

A small girl of around ten shivered in petrification, collapsing to the floor as, knees to her chest, eyes shut tight, fingers rammed into her ears to block out the situation. I was at the building within seconds, floors were already littered with the broken bodies of those whose hearts had stopped beating on impact.

I froze. I had never frozen on the job before, but I did. My throat was dry and tongue thick and heavy in my mouth, I drew a long shuddering breath as though it would calm me, but I couldn't feel anything. I was rooted to the spot, hands trembling, limbs suddenly slack with the shock of the sight.

My eyes made their way weakly to the window, to the people on the streets, some looking up with a morbid twisted kind of curiosity, some calling the authorities, some standing motionless like I was.

Some of the other angels had already started taking the lives of the people around me. Azrael glanced to me, as though waiting for my beginning to act, but I couldn't. I couldn't do it.

Present Day:

You kill for money, you kill for sex, you kill for the suffering of others. You kill in the name of race, you kill in the name of gender, you kill in the name of a delusional freedom. Each day I watch as you blame me for your suffering, you blame death for your troubles. But you are blind. You are blind to the malignance of your own kind.

My eyes are burning; it is an unfamiliar feeling. As it all comes back to me: The ship, the water, the begging, the soldiers; the rifles, the women, the screaming; the smoke, the crash, the running.

I feel a single tear crawl out from my eye, it edges its way to the corner of my eyelid, staying at the tip for a second. Hesitantly it freezes, as though debating whether or not to roll down my face, as though it too is overwhelmed with thought.

And before I can stop it, the tear falls from my eye, dripping down and down, like the blood that bloomed at the tip of the finger of the princess who slept for a hundred years. After a few seconds of more salty tears streaming down my face, the true nature of the situation crashes down upon me as I realise that I am crying.

I look out at your globe of blue and green, tilting and spinning on its orbit and I cannot help but wonder to myself.

How cruel your world must be to make an angel of death cry.