

I Don't Hear Birds Anymore

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

It was unusually cold today. I couldn't help but find myself distracted by the air outside seeping through into the church. It makes it hard to feel and hard to breathe. It makes me feel like I'm dying. But I couldn't go home just yet, there were things I needed to give back to God. To Gods creations. To myself.

Today the Raven Empire made a global announcement that there was only a little over a hundred years left until earth became completely uninhabitable for humanity. I received the news when I woke up to Alina sobbing this morning. As cruel as it sounds, I don't know how to feel about it. There's a bitter indifference to it, in fact.

The never-ending wars destroyed all fundamentals of human culture. Art, faith, community, these just aren't things that can carry over into a world consumed by a global war with no end in sight. In all the years I've been a priest, I've never had anyone regularly attend or keep their faith. People just can't believe there's a God when all they know is violence.

Maybe violence itself is enough to become a kind of faith. Everyone can believe in violence. It's a fundamental of life, an art practiced by practically every species on earth. Violence exists in everything. It exists in hate, it exists in love, it exists in life, it exists in death. Violence is something that one sees everywhere and anywhere, an absolute. Maybe I'm the only one left who believes in a Christian God and not a violent God.

As I was losing myself in my thoughts, the silence was shattered by the sound of the large church doors swinging open. There at the entrance stood a young man, around his mid-twenties, panting through his tears, trying to form some kind of sentence to me.

"A-Are you a priest? Do you have service here? I need help, I need help more than anything in the world right now. P-please!"

I wasn't exactly sure what to say then.

"What's your name?"

"Joseph, Joesph Numan, that doesn't matter right now. I need hope. I need some kind of faith. I-

don't know what to do.”

“...”

I was under the impression he had just received the news.

“Are you a Christian?”

“Been one my whole life, whole families too. But right now, I don't know what to do. I can't keep my faith anymore. There's no reason to believe in a God that grants us mercy yet all we receive in this life is endless suffering! Endless war! Endless pain! What the fuck am I supposed to do when I receive news that the war that's consumed earth for the past 300 years has reduced its lifespan to only a hundred years?! Huh?! What do you do, what does anyone fucking do!”

At that moment I felt my blood beginning to boil. All I knew what to do in that moment was to scream back at the man.

“Don't you dare insult me and my faith in my own church! Are you listening to yourself? What makes you think you can use that language to me?!”

He was taken back by my words, and I saw his expression change into a more passive, upset one. There was a stiff silence between us until I had finally broken it.

“I understand your frustration. This is no easy news to receive by any means.”

“To be told that humanity has such little time left to exist is a burden that no man deserves to live with. I also wish that I could have had a life without it. It's easy to lose faith when you are guaranteed an ultimate demise, let alone one manmade. You and I won't be there to witness it, but it still stings, nonetheless.”

I saw the man stand awkwardly and fidget with something in his hand, but I couldn't make out what it was.

“But we cannot just give up on our own lives. We're standing here right now because God willed for us to live! The greatest blessing that not all are privileged enough to receive! We cannot just throw that blessing away because one day the earth will perish!”

I could tell my words insulted a part of him, but he didn't respond. He just kept fidgeting with whatever was in his hands. After a few more awkward moments of silence between us, I heard him speak with his head down.

“I had an older brother. I had an older brother who I loved like anyone would. He was compassionate, strong, kind; he'd never let anyone or anything hurt the people he most loved. He always told me how no matter what happened he'd always be there to protect me.”

He had a girl he loved more than anyone too. I remember she told me he wanted to get married, and it made me happy. It made me *so* happy. They were young but they knew in a world like this, they didn't have much time before death stood at their doorstep.”

“I really did believe they would grow up happy together. That one day I'd be an uncle to wonderful children. And yet, their lives came crashing down as anyone's would in a shithole like this. He was drafted when he was only seventeen years old, to fight in a war he didn't give a shit about.”

“It made me *furious*.”

“To the Empire my brother was merely another weapon to be exploited instead of a human being. I knew he was going to die out there, he didn't have a choice. When I gave him my farewells, it was if he was already dead. I could feel the emptiness in his soul. It was the worst moment of my life.”

“And like any soldier he died.”

“We didn’t know he died until 5 months after he did. We didn’t even receive anything he had on him when he died because his body was trampled over beneath horses. It was hard for them to even identify the kid.” There was a deep rage emerging in his tone.

I remember a soldier telling me. He told me with no emotion in his voice that the dearest person in my life had died at seventeen years old on the battlefield. It was if it didn’t even matter.”

At that point I could hear his voice crack into a fit of tears. It wasn’t hard to tell how painful it was for him to bring up those memories.

“I don’t know how I dodged war service, but I did. I knew I couldn’t just die in a war that claimed my brother, one that’s been destroying earth for 300 years. Even after humanity discovers they only have *100 years* left of existence, they still fight. They *still* fucking fight! They kill each other like they’re nothing more than wild animals! How can I keep any hope for this world when it’s slowly being digested in the belly of death!”

Once again, an awkward silence pierced the church air. All I could hear was Josephs quiet sniffing and the cursing under his breath. I felt the cold wind on my skin once again.

“I’m...I’m sorry for telling you all this. I’ve had a horrible day...Everything feels so confusing and hopeless...I’m sure you feel it too. I don’t even know your name yet I’m telling you how my brother died.” He had an awkward laugh at the end of his sentence.

“Crowley.”

“Crowley?”

“Crowley Bass. Father Crowley. I’m the only priest here.”

“Crowley...I think I’ve heard that name around here. Again, I’m terribly sorry for intruding in a space like this. I’m sure you’re annoyed beyond belief.” Joseph held his head down in shame.

“This is a church. My job is to help people in despair, to lead them to the light! Where else would you have gone with problems like these? There’s no reason to feel such shame for needing support during a time like this. You can sit on one of the benches if you’d like, I don’t have much to do right now.”

Joseph walked up the aisle and sat on the pew in the first row. He sat with his head down, hunched over fidgeting with his fingers. He must have put the object he was fidgeting with in a pocket.

I took a seat next to him. I could see him in the corner of my eye turning his head away from me, still embarrassed. I decided to speak to him after a few minutes of sitting in silence.

“I’m a married man. When I was twenty, my wife gave birth to our first son. Two years later, she had our second son. We expected a daughter for them, but she had a miscarriage.”

“Dale Bass was our eldest and Hyde Bass was our youngest. Two of the brightest boys to walk this earth. They were the light of my life. I loved both with all the love my heart can give.”

“Dale was the smartest, kindest boy anyone could raise, and Hyde was charming and fun, always cheering others with his presence. I was blessed to be a man who got to call them my sons.”

I saw Joseph turn just a bit to look at me, but I remained as I was and kept on with my story.

“It was Dale who first got drafted. I think that was the worst day of my life. My wife and Hyde cried until they were sick, their bodies weak. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t just cry with them; they needed someone to depend on. Someone to help them through this. All I could tell them was that Dale was still alive and there was a higher chance of him returning alive than if he was drafted 20 years ago.”

“Well, that didn’t amount to much. He did die.”

It hurt me to say those words. Yet I held back my emotions and continued.

“He was killed a month into service, and we had only received the news almost a year after. Eighteen-year-old kid, killed in a war he had no interest in fighting for. I think you can imagine what our lives were like after that.”

I could see the deep remorse on his face in the corner of my eye as I spoke.

“You know what happened after that? The Raven Empire came to our door to draft Hyde. They told me with a straight face that they wanted my seventeen-year-old son to fight for a war that had already claimed my eldest. They wanted to use him as a weapon. That’s all boys were to them. *Weapons*. Weapons to be disposed of and replaced when necessary. All my wife and I could do was accept their request. They’d kill us if we refused.”

“I think you can imagine what happened after that.”

We didn't talk after that. After a while Joseph just stood up, thanked me for my time, and left. His footsteps echoed throughout the church until he reached the large door. I didn't bid him farewell. I just sat where I was.

The whole day felt like a dream. All the advice I had given him; I couldn't take myself. I knew that I had no hope left for this world, in anything or anyone. In a way, I wish I was the one to have died young in war instead of them.

The rest of the day was surprisingly sunny. Days like these were rare. Usually, the sky was just a light grey that pierced my eyes. There was something soft and welcoming about the golden hour today that I hadn't experienced in years, like I was in Heaven. Despite the rest of the earth being half dead, the sky continued to glow the way it always had, since the beginning of time.

I decided to sit outside my home to watch the sun set since it would probably be another 10 years till God blessed us with a day like this again. It was hard not to acknowledge the dichotomy in the weather. The day the Empire tells us we have only a little over a hundred years left for mankind and the sky is a glorious, glowing orange you'd only see in your dreams.

“Hi Crowley.”

Alina sat down in the rocking chair next to mine, the weak porch beneath it creaking.

“Good afternoon, Alina.”

As we sat there and rocked in silence, we looked like an elderly couple reaching their final years together. It bothered me.

“I made some tea earlier; It's just a basic blend. I don't know if you'd like it, but I can pour you a cup.” I heard her say softly.

“That would be nice, thank you”

She got up from her rocking chair and quietly entered the house. She came back with two cups, handing me one and sitting back down with the other. The wind blew against her, just barely sweeping her long brown hair out of her face.

She was smiling, but all I could see was the pain in her heart as if she was wearing it on her sleeve. She'd never looked worse. She looked as if she was ready to crawl into a coffin and just die right there.

I didn't care.

I didn't care about her. I didn't hold any more empathy for this woman. I couldn't bring myself to comfort her during a time like this. I knew it would have no effect or bring me any fulfillment. She didn't believe in God either, so my words to her just sounded like any generic preach a priest could make. All I could do was ignore her.

Her soul had begun to weigh mine down as well.

It had felt this way ever since Hyde passed away. There wasn't anything more for us to do or say. It had just felt like talking to an empty husk whenever she was around. My words simply passed through her as if she was a ghost. Sometimes, as cruel as it sounds, I wish she died instead of my boys.

“The army is coming tomorrow to collect half of what we harvested. The soils been horrible recently, so I don't think they're going to be pleased. So, um, just be ready to take a lot of insults, okay?”

“Got it...”

She looked down into her reflection on the tea. She began to hum a song I heard her hum many years ago. We didn't talk after that. The only thing to be heard was her soft humming, the rocking of the chairs, and the wind. We watched the sun lower into the horizon until it was pitch black.

I was woken up by loud banging on the door. Alina wasn't next to me, and I began to feel a pounding headache emerge the more the soldiers slammed on the door. I got dressed as quickly as I could and rushed to the door to answer them. The whole encounter hard to remember. There were about three soldiers there, in their dark knight's armor, just screaming at me for not producing enough harvest to meet their standards. It all went right past me.

It was just then I saw her in the corner of my eye.

That was the moment I believed my life changed forever.

There was a girl there, talking to a soldier. She had this beautiful long black hair that reached well past her shoulders. Even when she was looking down at his feet, I could still see her gorgeous green eyes. She was like an angel. An angel that fell from heaven. Was this a blessing from God?

The soldier was yelling to her about something, yet I couldn't quite make out what. It didn't matter because whatever it was, it was undeserved. She looked so sad and scared with the soldier scolding her. It made me furious. It made me want to push the soldiers in front of me away and punch him. In that moment, all I wanted was to protect her.

As I was looking at her, I felt one of the men hit the back of my head. The pain was

Indescribable. I covered my face with my hands and leaned down just a bit.

“Are you fucking listening?! This is unacceptable! You think the Ravens will survive with incompetent lazy *assholes* like you slacking away at your only job?! You’re lucky were not just taking this land from you!”

It was evil, but I wanted to kill the man shouting at me. I wanted to take his large, silver sword and chop his head right off. I wanted his blood to splatter all over the soil to nurture it.

Maybe it wasn't so evil, maybe the man was a demon in disguise. Only a man born in the depths of hell could act like this.

But most of all, I wanted to protect that girl. That beautiful, *beautiful* girl. She so alien yet so familiar. Like someone I had seen in a dream or a prophecy.

At last, the men got on their horses and left. They left with my harvest and left the girl there crying.

After a few minutes of just staring at her, I approached her and comfort her. I got down to her height and I put my hand on her shoulder.

“That soldier was a very, *very* mean man. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Thank you.”

I could barely hear her through the sounds of her sobbing. She held her head in her hands to catch the tears running down her face.

“What did the man tell you? Why was he mad at you?”

“He yelled at me for following him...But he stole dad's crops! He worked really *really* hard to

grow it all! A-And they just took it all from him!”

She began crying even harder. I held her small hands to comfort her.

“That mans a very mean man. God doesn’t like men like that.”

“Yeah...He doesn’t” She sniffled

“How did you manage to follow him out here?”

“I was just so mad at him that I ran after him. Even if he was on a horse, I couldn’t let him get away. Even when mom yelled at me to not follow them I did. I was too mad to let them get away.”

“Where do you live?” I asked her.

“In the next village...It's got four houses and a big well...there's a nice farm that my dad has there too. With a lot of animals.”

Her description of the village was poor, but I knew where she was talking about. That must had been the reason she looked so familiar. I had gone there multiple times to trade harvest with the families there, so I must have encountered her father at some point. I can’t believe I had been there yet never caught a glimpse of her perfection.

“Would you like me to take you back? It’s not safe to be so far from home right now, especially with Raven soldiers around.”

“Okay...” She said softly, wiping her eyes.

I took her small hand and led her to my farm. I didn’t want to walk her home with Raven soldiers patrolling, so I decided to take her on horseback.

“Is that a pony?” She asked me.

“A big pony, yes. Her name is Ostia.”

“I like your pony. My dad has a pony. He’s *really big* too. He’s like bigger than any pony!” Her

spirits had lifted, yet not by much.

I got myself onto Ostia's back and sat the girl up on her as well. I began to lead her out of the pen back in front of the house.

"What's your name?" I asked the girl.

"Dolores."

"Dolores? That's a *beautiful* name."

"...Thank you."

It wasn't hard to hear the deep discomfort in her response.

"I'll get you home. Just hold on tight and don't let go."

I motioned for Ostia to start galloping and we went on our way.

"What do you like to do Dolores?" I asked her on the trip.

"I like the piano. I play it a lot all the time. I like to play it the most when my brother is around, but he's not home right now. He went to another place *really far* from here. But even when he's not home, I play it for mom and dad. Mom really likes the piano because she played it when she was younger too."

"When you return, maybe you can play for me."

"Um...I don't know...I don't really play for strangers. I play for mom and dad, and sometimes my classmates.

I guess she didn't entirely trust me.

A large war horn blared and pierced my ears.

My body immediately went cold.

A war horn. Now. The Raven Empire hasn't even been here for a day to patrol and they're here.

The Swan Empire is here. Right now. Right fucking now.

My body tensed immediately. Ostia kept galloping despite it. Dolores began to panic and cry behind me as well. She was whining and squirming. I motioned for Ostia to go as fast as she possibly could.

Why now? Why now of all the times to have enemy soldiers invade? Was this some kind of curse? Was this hell? Was I a man living through some kind of divine punishment? Was it a dream? A nightmare? Why? *Just why?!*

What's going on?!" Dolores cried behind me. "The horn! The loud horn! Mom told me about it!

She said if I ever heard the horn that bad men were here and I should hide!" Where do we hide?!

We have to hide *really* fast! W-We have to find my parents too; I need to hide with them!"

"Just *shut up!*" I yelled to her in a fit of panic. It hurt me to say that to her, but I couldn't think of what to do with her yelling behind me. I needed to figure out what to do. I needed to find a place where we were safe.

Alina was home.

I knew she hadn't left the house since this morning.

But it was hard to ignore the fact that I simply did not care for her anymore. She was a woman who had been weighing down my soul for years. Right now, I had the perfect excuse to leave her behind.

I was here with the most beautiful girl in the whole world.

So, in the moment, I bid my farewell to her. This was enough to damn my soul to hell, but I

can't imagine hell is any different than this. So, goodbye, Alina.

Ostia continued to run as fast as she possibly could to the village. I didn't have time to waste. There was a chance the Swan Empire was already stationed there. The wind hit my face like a million needles digging into my skin. It was once again unbearably cold today; made even worse by the fact we were going as fast as we possibly could on horseback amidst a war. More horns began to blare, a horrible sound echoing throughout the land. Birds began flying out of trees in a panic, filling the dull, grey sky with their large black hoards. It was a haunting sight. Their loud caws and clicks were enough to horrify anyone who heard them.

A Swan Empire soldier bolted in front of us. I quickly motioned Ostia to halt which almost threw us both off. Dolores was grabbing my vestment as hard as she possibly could, her tiny hands shaking furiously.

The man slowly approached us. Swan Empire soldiers sported large, white armor with deep and intricate designs from the head to the bottom of their boots. Their horses looked just like them, the only difference being a large, pale metal horn that protruded out their foreheads. In a way they resembled some kind of angel, but they were anything *but* that. The horse the man stood atop of must have been twice Ostia's size.

The soldier clutched the large sword in his hand, motioning his horse to move forward just slightly.

"I'd never seen a Raven scum up close...You're more hideous than I imagined." He snickered.

I could tell by his voice he wasn't much older than either eighteen or nineteen.

Despite this, it was hard to ignore the genuine malice in his tone.

“This is going to be the first time I kill someone like you. I can barely keep my excitement!” he snickered.

I guess this kid was just some naive sadist.

I motioned for Ostia to run past him the second he began to raise his sword. He swung the large weapon at us but missed my shoulder by half a centimeter. I was terrified. Dolores was terrified. We were playing a game of life or death.

As we ran, we could hear the soldier chasing after us, screaming things I couldn’t make out. I looked back for a second and in the corner of my eye I saw the man right next to us, lunging his sword at me once again. I immediately motioned for Ostia to turn around as fast as possible to dodge it. The force from the swing was just enough to have the weight of it drop him off his horse.

The second the man fell I motioned Ostia to trample over him. There was this disgusting crunching and sloshing sound below her, as Dolores covered her ears and screamed behind me. I couldn’t stop. I know if I left the man there, he would get right back up on his horse to follow us once again. Soldiers from the Swan Empire were *terrifying*, truly agents of Satan himself. You could beat them to near death, and they’d just get right back up and try to kill you back.

I felt horrible to exposing Dolores to a scene like this. A soul as beautiful and pure as hers didn’t deserve to witness something so grotesque, so evil. After I was certain the kid was dead, I quickly got us back on track to the village. We couldn’t run into anyone else if we wanted to save her parents.

After about five minutes or so, the village was finally in sight. It was blurry, but it was in reach.

“Dolores, were almost there! Just hold on a bit longer.”

She didn’t respond. She just sat behind me sobbing. She buried her face into my back to wipe her tears.

We were too late.

We were *far* too late.

When we finally reached her village, it was already being pillaged. Every house had been either trampled over or burnt to a crisp. Anything and everything that seemed of value to the soldiers was thrown into big cloth bags to sell for money later. It was a scene of pure terror.

That wasn't even the worst part. The most haunting sight was all the bodies lined up on the cold ground. Tied up with thick ropes and laid onto their backs. Men, women, children, even animals like farm stock and dogs were laying there. All with gunshots to the back of their head. A dark, crimson blood stained the ground spilling deep into the soil. You could even see bits of brain matter within the puddles.

My whole body froze. All I could feel in the moment was a deep and visceral disgust. It didn’t help the way the wind began to pick up either.

And we were right there in front of about 12 Swan Empire soldiers.

They noticed us.

They glared at us.

They were whispering things to each other.

“Who the fuck are you?” One of the men finally spoke up. He was different. Unlike the boy we had encountered earlier, this was a man around his late thirties or early forties. He must be the one patrolling the group. I didn’t respond to him. Dolores continued to hold onto me as tight as she possibly could. Our souls harbored the same fear in the moment.

“I said who the fuck are you!? Answer me! Are you Raven scum? Are these people your friends? Are you trying to save them?!” He pointed his sword at us as if to put us in a spotlight. His voice was rash and gruff. The other men began to climb atop their horses. I was about ten seconds away from panicking.

“Mom! Dad!” Dolores screamed through her tears.

I felt her release her grip to get off Ostia. Not now. Oh god not now...

“Dolores! Dolores *don't* go over there!” I immediately screamed.

She fell to the ground before I could grab her and immediately ran to the first two lined-up bodies. They looked to be a man and a woman possibly around their thirties.

They were her mom and dad. She was looking at the dead bodies of her own parents, bawling her eyes out. As she sat there on her knees, she attempted to hold them up with little success. Despite her dress being black, you could see it absorbing the blood on the ground. I was frozen in a position where I had my arm extend outwards, yet the rest of my body remained still.

“Mommy! Daddy! What did the men do to you?! Answer me! I'm scared mommy! I'm scared daddy! *I'm so so scared!*”

She wept while hugging the corpses.

“*Dolores!*” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

Before she could respond one of the soldiers walked up to her and grabbed her by her hair. She screamed in agony. I couldn’t even motion for Ostia to move forward as two other soldiers positioned their swords to block my path atop their horses.

“Who’s this? Dolores? Shes a cute girl. Shes a *really* cute girl. Where did you find someone like her?”

“Let go of her! Don’t talk about her in that manner!” I yelled to him. The two men beside me once again motioned me back with their swords.

“You want her instead?”

Dolores was squirming under the man, writhing in pain.

She was murmuring something to herself. I could see her lips moving yet couldn’t hear her.

“What was that?” The man tightened his grip as he raised his voice to her. I saw that she had stopped crying. It wasn’t that she felt any better, but more the fact she couldn’t bring herself to cry anymore. She had used up all her tears. All that remained was a blank expression, like that of a porcelain doll.

“I miss mommy...”

“What was that? You miss your mommy?” The soldier mocked her as he tugged on her hair once again.

“I miss mommy...I miss daddy...I wanna go home...I don’t want any men here...”

“Why not? You’re too pretty to give up. Were just doing our job here, no hard feelings. I’m sure

the man there loves how beautiful you are too. I can see it in his eyes.” He glared in my direction, using his sword to point towards me. He had this disgusting, smug smile that enraged me.

“Don’t call me that...”

“Don’t what?” The man turned to Dolores

“Don’t...Don’t call me beautiful...Don’t call me anything like that...I’m not a doll...”

“I’ll call you whatever the fuck I want! Don’t tell me what to do you raven brat!” He shouted as he threw her into the ground.

“Dolores!!” As I screamed, I was pushed back once again with more force than before.

As I screamed the man picked Dolores right back up. She was defenseless. She was defenseless and there was nothing I could do to save her.

It all felt like some kind of cruel joke.

The day I am blessed with meeting Dolores, the most perfect, magnificent soul God can place on this earth, and she's being held by the hands of pure evil itself. And there's absolutely nothing I can do about it.

“I think we’ll be taking this beauty with us.”

My body froze.

No...No, *no no no Please God no...*

Dolores began to scream and cry once again. “No! Stop! Let go of me! I don’t want to go anywhere! I wanna be with mommy and daddy! I don’t want to be with you!” Despite how much she squirmed to free herself the soldier just covered her mouth to stop her resistance.

Before I was even given a chance to react one of the men swung his sword onto my back. The pain stung throughout my whole body almost immediately. I screamed. I screamed like a wild animal. The blood sprayed in the air like some kind of grotesque rain shower. Ostia began to panic and stomp backwards as she heard me. The soldier pushed me off her and slashed her own throat.

“Ostia!”

Her blood sprayed the soldiers pale white armor in a deep, dark red.

The second I hit the ground I huddled my body together and covered my head. I couldn't die. No matter what happened I just could not die. Not here, not now. If I did, I know my soul would be damned to the ninth circle of hell. There was absolutely no way I was going to die before saving Dolores. She needed someone. She needed me.

The soldiers tried to have their horses trample over me, yet in Ostia's dying moments she pushed both the horses away from me.

“We'll be taking this beauty with us back to the empire! Good luck out here, old man!”

Other soldiers began to follow him.

“Don't even worry about him boys, look at that gash on his back! He'll bleed out and die as long as we leave him here! Besides, who would wanna give a Raven scum like this a quick death?!”

He laughed alongside his men as they went along their way. I couldn't do anything about it. I was frozen and paralyzed and all I could do was lay there. Just lay there and die.

“Dolores...I'll save you...I'll...save you...”

I could hear her scream. I could hear her screaming until she was completely out of sight.

The wind was cold, and the ground was colder.

Was this some kind of curse? Was this a punishment from God? Maybe I should have abandoned Dolores and saved Alina instead. Maybe Dolores was some kind of demon in disguise? Leading me to temptation and sin? No....No! Don't you dare think that of her! Dolores presence was proof of a blessing! Of true purity!

Dolores was proof I really am alive! She was proof the world was still able to harbor beauty! She was an angel! God had sent me an angel, and the Swan Empire just wants to take her away from me because they want an angel all to themselves! They don't deserve her, nobody deserves her!

I woke up to a familiar voice. It was hard to hear at first, but after a few moments it was crystal clear.

Joseph Numan.

He had found me unconscious and bleeding and was there to help me.

“Joseph...”

“Crowley! What happened to you!?” He had pushed me onto my stomach and was bandaging my wounds. I looked up to the sky and noticed it was night. The sky was so dark you could just barely see the moon.

“When the Swan Empire came, I just hid in the church expecting you to be there as well. There weren't many survivors but still some none the less. I had other people go out to find anyone who was still alive. I never thought I'd find you so far from your home with a gash like this one in your back!-”

“Joseph.”

“Yeah?”

“I need to save Dolores.”

“...Dolores?”

I tried to pull myself up, but Joseph motioned for me to stay still until he could finish bandaging me.

“Who's Dolores?”

“The girl who lived here. She was beautiful. She looked like an angel...”

“What happened to her?”

“Those Swan sons of bitches took her from me! They think they can control her! Use her! You can't use an angel! I need to save her! That is what my life has led up to!”

“Crowley please calm down!” Joseph shouted back to me.

“...Sorry.”

I remained still until he had finished bandaging me.

“I'm honestly surprised your still alive Crowley. In the cold like this, just bleeding out while unconscious...It's a miracle. Maybe the wound wasn't that deep. When I checked, it didn't seem to pierce any internal organs...”

“Joseph. When will it heal.”

“...Maybe a month with special care at the least-”

“Joseph! Do you understand?! I need to save Dolores as soon as possible! Do you have a horse I can borrow? I need to get on the road no later than a week! She could be dead already!”

Joseph didn't respond. He just looked at me with wide, shocked eyes.

“Look, the Swan Empire killed my horse and kidnapped a girl very special to me. I just need to

get on the road as soon as I can to get back at them. I know it's not an easy task, but I cannot die until I accomplish it.”

“You’re...”

“I’m not crazy Joseph! I know what I need to do! Saving Dolores won’t be easy but it’s not impossible! I just need the resources...I need a new horse and maybe a weapon and I can make it!”

“...”

He looked away to the ground for a second.

“...I have a horse you can borrow. Carole. She's a large horse who can get you as far as you need her to. I’m not sure how successful you’ll be, but I’ll wish you all the luck I can give.”

“Make sure to pray for me every night, got it?”

“Of course.” He chuckled a bit.

Dolores, Dolores, sweet Dolores.

I’ll make a world for us where you’ll never cry again.

So just stay alive. I’ll save you. If it's the last thing I do.