

"Risen to Grace"

By

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(A Fan Fiction Based on Good Omens, by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett)

Western Front -- December 24, 1914

Could there be anything more miserable than a trench in the middle of the -- pardon the pun -- godforsaken winter? Crowley grimaced, rubbing his arms with chilled hands. He hadn't been warm in days, and he hated the cold with everything in him. He'd never minded it all that much, before. Now, he loathed it to his very bones.

"Never fucking doing this again," he muttered to himself. He shouldn't even *be* here. Wouldn't be, either, but he heard whispers Hell was sending Hastur to "deal with" some potential threat to Hell's big plans for the war, and Crowley got a very familiar, sinking feeling. Somewhere, out here in the trenches, was an angel who didn't belong here any more than tits belonged on a frog.

An angel who probably thought he could stop the whole war, single-handedly, and was going to get himself very inconveniently disincorporated for his trouble.

"Oh, angel, what am I going to do with you?" Crowley muttered to the empty air, then swore under his breath. His human contact, who claimed he might know where to find someone matching Aziraphale's description, was a week late in getting to their rendezvous point here on the Western Front. If the bastard didn't show up in the next three minutes, Crowley was going to demonically intervene his arse straight into Hell and let *them* sort out whether or not he belonged there. Would serve the lot of them right.

"Captain Crowley!" He turned at the hail, to find his human contact -- a sergeant in the British army named Young -- hurrying toward him. "I found him, sir!"

Finally. Angel, you are in so much trouble. "Where is he?"

Sergeant Young frowned in worry. "May I ask what you want with him, sir? From what I hear tell, he's kept the better part of the First Battalion alive, almost single-handedly. They call him the Angel of the Bois de Ploegsteert, over that way."

"Of course they do," Crowley muttered, rolling his eyes behind his dark glasses. His angel was supposed to be tucked away safe-and-sound in his bookshop in Soho, *not* out

on the front lines, in the trenches of the war to end all wars. To Young, he replied, "My business with him is none of yours. Now, where's he at?"

Sergeant Young looked worried, still, but shrugged and didn't question him further, turning to lead Crowley down the trenches toward an angel who was in a Heaven of a lot of trouble.

By the time they reached the trenches occupied by the 1st Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, night was falling hard, and the dark sky was littered with bright pinpoints of stars. Crowley tipped his head back to gaze up at them, letting their distant light bathe a part of himself he rarely acknowledged. He always liked looking up at the stars. They were reminders that he hadn't always felt chained to a bottomless pit.

"Hello, my lovelies," he whispered to them, now, and swore he could still hear their twinkling song, even though he knew that was just a whisper of memory. God hadn't let him hear his stars since he fell.

"What's that, sir?" Sergeant Young inquired, breaking his communion with the stars.

Crowley shook himself and turned his attention back to the human who stood there, now looking thoroughly confused.

"Nothing," he hissed. "Now, where's he at?"

"Doc Fell's CCS is over there." Young pointed toward a tent set back a little way from the main trenches.

"Right." Crowley started toward the Casualty Clearing Station set up in a canvas tent hidden behind woodland shrubs, then realized Young was keeping step with him. *Oh, right.* "You're dismissed, Sergeant."

The man fell back with a relieved expression and headed back the way they'd come originally. He seemed a decent enough human. Crowley briefly wished him well in surviving the war. Himself, he had an angel to rescue.

Ducking into the tent, the first thing Crowley was hit with was the noxious odor of death, blood, and disease. Satan preserve him, it was like being in the plague-ridden streets of London during the 14th Century, all over again. Crowley grimaced. He really didn't like the 14th Century, or any reminders of it. In fact, he wished heartily that he'd chosen to sleep through it.

"Oh, be a dear and put him over there. I'm afraid my hands are rather full at the moment." The familiar voice reached Crowley even above the other din of the sick and dying, and those attending to them. He'd pick up that voice anywhere, no matter the noise around it, and he wasn't about to start considering what that meant.

Clamping a hand across his mouth and nose against the putrid smell of the place, Crowley made his way down the row of stretchers, until he caught sight of a curly shock of white-blond hair.

"Here you are. Do you know, I've been looking all over the Western Front for you?"

Aziraphale looked up from the human on the stretcher, his cerulean eyes full of surprise. His hand remained clamped against the shoulder of the man, holding a folded wad of bandage against what must be a pretty severe wound, given how fast that bandage was turning red.

"Crowley! I haven't seen you in forever. What are you doing *here*?"

"I could ask you the same thing. Aren't you supposed to be minding your bookshop?" Irritation and concern twisted together in Crowley's chest and made their way into his voice.

"It's temporarily closed," Aziraphale explained, his attention back on his patient.

"Closed."

"Temporarily."

"While you..."

"Do what I can to stem the loss of life." He sounded sad, and tired. As if what he'd already seen of this war drained away some of his light.

No. No, angel. I won't let you do this to yourself. But what could he do, really? His angel was a healer. He couldn't turn away from someone in need any more than Crowley could contain his endless supply of questions. Besides, last time they saw each other, Aziraphale told him he never wanted to see him again. No doubt, he wasn't going to feel any more charitable once he found out why Crowley tracked him down, again.

"Angel..."

Aziraphale discarded the bloody cloth into a basin of already bloody water, and pressed another to the wound, then glanced toward a young man passing by. "Bring me sutures, would you, Tom."

The man -- really, little more than a boy -- nodded and rushed away. Aziraphale turned back to the man now moaning in pain on the stretcher, his voice gentle and full of so much kindness as he murmured, "I know it hurts. I'm sorry. I'm going to try to fix it."

Crowley didn't ask why Aziraphale didn't just miracle the wound away. He already knew. They'd been through this. The night wee Moraig was killed by the grave gun, in Edinburgh. If Aziraphale went around miracling away the wounds of an entire war, not only would he no doubt overextend himself, but Heaven would certainly have something to say about it. Still, the gaunt hollows of his face... Crowley tried again, his voice softer with painful understanding.

"Aziraphale."

This time, the angel turned to look at him. The pain, and the brimming of tears in those beautiful, cerulean eyes, nearly broke Crowley. This was worse than when wee Moraig died. Worse than watching the Roman soldiers kill his only human friend for no reason than Jesus asked people to be kind to each other. The sight of tears -- frustration, grief, and pain -- swelling in Aziraphale's eyes sent a frothing hatred through Crowley for this entire fucking war.

A hatred he could do nothing about. He didn't have the power to stop an entire war any more than Aziraphale had the power to heal one. He opened his mouth -- to say what, he wasn't sure, but it didn't matter. Before he could say anything, the young stretcher-bearer was back with a suture kit, and Aziraphale had turned away, back to the business of saving a life.

"Crowley, please hold his legs down. This is going to hurt, but I don't have the time to numb it proper. He's already lost too much blood."

The demon didn't even think twice about complying with the instruction. Aziraphale had asked him for help, and if this was the only way he could help... He clamped his hands onto the wounded soldier's ankles and pressed them into the stretcher, watching as Aziraphale withdrew a needle from the pack, measured out suture, and began to painstakingly stitch the soldier's shoulder back together. The sound of the wounded man's screams as Aziraphale worked quickly to mend his shoulder would forever be imprinted in Crowley's mind as he and the stretcher-bearer kept the man from thrashing against the necessary cruelty of the angel's stitching.

Once the man's shoulder was stitched and the wound properly bandaged, Aziraphale nodded Crowley away from the whimpering man and stepped around the stretcher, with a murmured instruction to the stretcher-bearer, "Give him some morphine, and get him on the first cart to a base hospital. His war's over."

Crowley followed the angel as he headed for the other end of the tent, where he poured clean water into a basin and washed his hands thoroughly. The whole time, Crowley watched. He watched humans bleed all over the place, watched them writhe in agony, watched when one of the attending medical personnel shook their heads and covered yet another body. And the whole time, he watched Aziraphale, as well. Watched his soft, sweet angel look as if the weight of the entire world rested on his shoulders, as if he was an inch from breaking down, but determined to make a difference.

There wasn't even a shadow of the soft, hopeful angel who believed in magic, or the goodness of people, in the lines currently road-mapping pain and weariness across the angel's face.

"What did you say you were here for?" Aziraphale inquired, before flashing him a tired smile Crowley knew was meant to cover everything he already read on the angel's face. "It's lovely to see you again, by the way. I haven't seen you since..."

"Let's not talk about that, angel." Crowley looked away, his voice hoarse in spite of his effort to sound normal. He didn't want to think about their last meeting. It hadn't gone the way he'd thought. Instead of getting the holy water he'd wanted to have on hand if Hell came knocking, he'd only managed to alienate his angel. So he'd gone to sleep. For the entire rest of the century.

It seemed the most appropriate response to the situation, at the time. Now, he wasn't so sure. He should have been prepared for this, prepared to talk Aziraphale out of getting involved. But he hadn't been, and instead, not only had humanity dragged his angel into the middle of their attempts to destroy themselves, but Aziraphale had gone and put himself on Hell's radar in the process. He cleared his throat and tried to sound bored. "I got wind of a big problem, headed your way."

That tired smile turned wry. "They're *all* big problems, around here."

"Not this kind." Crowley glanced around, making sure no one was listening, and dropped his voice to a quiet hiss as he said, "The Hell kind. Hastur's looking for you."

"Me?" Aziraphale sounded baffled. "Why on earth would Hastur be looking for me?"

"You're mucking about with Hell's plans. Apparently, there's some big plan attached to this war, and you hanging about, healing people, has the Dark Council frothing at the mouth for your blood. I heard Hastur is supposed to eliminate you."

Aziraphale was quiet as he dried his hands. Looking down at his blood-spattered clothes, he suddenly murmured, "Their lives are so fragile, but they're so willing to give them up to keep others safe."

"Angel..."

"I'm tired of patching endless wounds. It's Christmas Eve, you know."

Crowley's brow furrowed. Something about Aziraphale's tone disquieted him. The angel wasn't even acknowledging the danger he faced. His eyes had that faraway glaze they got whenever he was concocting some incomprehensible while simultaneously dramatic plan to do good. "Yeah."

Aziraphale's attention turned his way, and Crowley wasn't sure if he was relieved to see the twinkle of light-hearted mischief back in those cerulean eyes, or worried as all fuck that his angel was about to do something terrifyingly dangerous to his own health. "Maybe there's something I *can* do to help them. Even if just for a bit."

"Angel, we don't have time for--"

But Aziraphale wasn't listening, already striding purposefully toward the medical tent's flap.

"Shit," Crowley muttered under his breath, taking off after his angel. He did *not* like the tone of Aziraphale's voice, or the determined set of his face.

Out behind the medical tent, Crowley stopped dead, a terrified chill washing over him as he watched Aziraphale's forehead begin to glow.

"Angel, no." He tried to scream it, but his horror wouldn't let his voice climb above a disbelieving whisper. "You can't."

"Nonsense." Aziraphale's voice was strained, but his expression was resolved, as he slowly slid the brightly glowing corporeal representation of his halo from his head, wincing in pain as he did. Crowley turned his gaze away, both because the gleam of the halo was like being stabbed in the eyes -- even *with* his shades on -- and because the pain on Aziraphale's face made him want to beg him to stop, and he knew the angel wouldn't.

Glancing Aziraphale's way again, he saw the angel mouth words over the halo, then release it with a light toss into the air, letting it float upward through the night sky until it bathed the entirety of No Man's Land in soft, angelic light -- twinkling like a bright star.

"Aziraphale," Crowley choked out, fear lodged in his throat. "What the Heaven do you think you're doing?"

A peaceful smile slid over Aziraphale's face, and his blue eyes gleamed like the stars as they turned his way. "Wait and see."

Wait and see? He already bloody knew what Aziraphale just did -- they *both* did. An angel blowing up their halo was tantamount to a declaration of war against Hell. Mostly because angels only blew up a corporeal manifestation of their halos in the presence of overwhelming demonic odds. But still...

"Angel, have you lost whatever--" Before Crowley could finish the thought, the corporeal manifestation of Aziraphale's halo burned out and crumbled from the sky in what looked like a shower of twinkling starlight. Then, out of the dark hush that fell in its wake, came a deep voice, singing in German. *Silent Night*. A bloody Christmas carol. On the battlefield.

Soon, other voices joined it. Then, with a start, Crowley realized one of the voices was singing in English. The singing was now coming from their side of the field, as well. Really close, too.

"What the Heaven...?"

"Exactly," Aziraphale murmured from next to him. "A gift. From Heaven."

In less time than it took to start the whole fucking war, men on both sides were singing. Then they started calling out to one another, across the span of No Man's Land. As Crowley watched in stunned amazement, men began climbing out of their trenches on both sides, crossing to meet in the middle of the barbed-wire laden No Man's Land, shaking hands and talking, laughing. Pretty soon, they were improvising gifts out of whatever they had on hand, and someone had organized an impromptu soccer game in a clear patch of ground.

Crowley whirled toward Aziraphale, unable to contain the shock running rampant through him any longer. "I thought... How did you *do* that?"

Aziraphale merely smiled. "There's more than one way to blow up a halo, dear boy. In the presence of demons, it's an act of war. But with a little grace, we can all rise above what blinds us. Merry Christmas, Crowley."

Crowley's shock melted away, and he threw his head back and laughed. Why the Heaven was he even surprised? This was Aziraphale. There wasn't a being in all of existence capable of more grace, or more love for humanity, than his angel.

A.Z. Fell and Co Bookshop, Soho, London -- 1941

Crowley studied the wine sloshing in his glass as he swirled it around. It was a good year, but he couldn't get the color -- like blood -- out of his mind, tonight. Nearly losing Aziraphale twice, after realizing just how much and why that was an unacceptable risk, had him contemplative. Knowing his angel risked exposure to help the likes of *him* tonight sent a softness through him he wasn't sure how to deal with. Combined with the wine in his glass reminding him of blood, he couldn't help thinking about the war out there, around them. That brought to mind the last war -- "The war to end all wars" they'd called it. Yet, far too soon, the humans found a new and terrible way to kill one another.

"Can you believe we're back here, again?" He muttered to Aziraphale, not looking up from his wine.

The angel made a small sound of confusion. "We always drink here. It's safer."

"Not the bookshop," Crowley hissed, shaking his head before taking a drink. The alcohol did its familiar burn. He barely felt it, anymore. "War. You'd think they got all that killing out of their system, last time. Instead, they just keep finding newer, more effective ways to kill each other."

"Crowley..."

He glanced up, letting his gaze burrow into the beautiful blue eyes of his angel. They were so calm, so happy, now. But he could still remember a time they'd been filled with tears, teetering on the brink of destruction. He took another, larger drink, trying to burn away the memory. It wouldn't go. Finally, he rasped, "Remember Christmas, 1914?"

Aziraphale's smile faltered for just a second. "The Christmas Truce. Yes."

"You blew up your halo for that. Risky, angel. That's what it was." He'd nearly disincorporated on the spot when he realized what Aziraphale intended. Of course, he'd *thought* the angel was blowing up No Man's Land, maybe to prove a point to the humans that they were a bunch of idiots for running around doing their best to off each

other, or just generally declaring war on Hell. He hadn't known a halo could be used to create peace, too.

Crowley shuddered at the familiar taste of fear, and chided, "You could have set off a war between Heaven and Hell, you know."

Aziraphale smiled indulgently at him. "Don't be silly. I knew *exactly* what I was doing. Besides, you were the only demon there, and you weren't going to tell anyone."

Crowley chuckled in truth, warmth flowing through him in a heady rush at the absolute trust in his angel's voice. The humans didn't have it half right.

Some things really *were* worth dying for.

A.Z. Fell and Co Bookshop, Soho, London -- December After Thwarting Second Coming

Aziraphale hummed a Christmas carol to himself as he finished winding a long strand of tinsel and tiny colored lights down the banister and attached it carefully to the wrought iron with a little tap of his fingertips against the decoration.

He loved Christmas. Not just that it represented Jesus' first arrival on Earth all those centuries ago, but the peace and goodwill it fostered in humans. The bright colors, the beautiful carols, so full of hope and happiness, and joy. The decorations, and togetherness.

He drew in a deep breath and his smile widened. And the food. He loved the food, of course. Right now, the whole shop smelled of the mulled cider, hot chocolate, and freshly baked cookies he'd made for the party he'd planned. Now, he just needed to get the invitations out...

"For Satan's sake," groaned a familiar voice from behind him. "Angel, you promised..."

Aziraphale turned, casting a gleeful, loving glance at the demon who stood paused with his hand hanging in midair over the horse sculpture on the front counter, dark glasses held loosely in his long fingers as he stared in a blend of horror and disbelieving amusement at the ten-foot tall tree, studded with a mish-mash of ornaments Aziraphale had collected over the past two hundred years since Christmas trees became a thing people did.

"It's tradition!"

"So's riding a blessed camel across the desert to give a baby useless shit he won't ever actually get to use., but you don't see me rushing out to rent camels, do you?"

Aziraphale huffed out a sigh that was one part annoyance and three parts pure indulgence. He couldn't stay mad at Crowley when he was like this. His lovely demon still struggled with the concept it was okay to just enjoy holidays. He didn't take it personally. He knew Crowley preferred to pretend he was annoyed by or bored with everything, instead. Aziraphale saw the little sparkles of happiness in Crowley's eyes -- as blinding as starlight -- and knew his demon got far more enjoyment out of pretending to dislike things while indulging Aziraphale's utter abandonment to the joy of every human experience.

"Here." He retrieved the box of invitations he'd spent yesterday evening writing up from the desk and dropped them in Crowley's hands. "If you're going to carp, make yourself useful and deliver these. Then you don't have to look at the decorations."

"Better idea." Crowley dropped the box casually on the table beside himself and, before Aziraphale could protest the misuse of stationary, Crowley had him wrapped up in long, strong arms, his mouth making soft, heated passes over Aziraphale's, sinking deeper with each pass. Aziraphale wasn't about to deny him. He leaned into the kiss, one hand clutching the demon's side, the other winding around his neck to burrow in silky strands of collar-length red hair.

Aziraphale lost all track of time, lost awareness of everything except Crowley, until a voice somewhere in the background finally drew his attention. Easing from the kiss, he caught the smug smirk on Crowley's lips and the devilish gleam in his eyes. Flushing happily, he turned his attention to their visitor, and was immediately flustered by the sight of the angel standing there.

"Oh. M-Muriel. What brings you here?" He fought the old, ingrained urge to flinch away from Crowley's touch in the presence of another angel as the demon practically draped himself over Aziraphale's shoulders in what had become a familiar arrangement over the months since they reunited -- one of Crowley's arms draped over one of his shoulders, and Crowley's head resting on his other shoulder. Currently, the latter involved Crowley nuzzling at his neck and jaw.

Muriel, for their part, seemed utterly oblivious to the display, beaming at the two of them before hurrying toward the tree, practically squealing over each of the ornaments. "Oh, they're *amazing*! You have so many! I didn't expect this many!"

"Told you, he's been collecting them for centuries." Crowley left off his teasing nuzzles to call after Muriel.

Aziraphale watched them in consternation for a moment, then whispered to Crowley, "How does Muriel know I put up the tree today?"

Crowley shrugged and sighed as he straightened. "I told them, angel."

"How?"

"Not now. Months ago -- while you were gone."

Aziraphale flinched at the reminder, biting down on the instinct to apologize again. He'd apologized so often, now, and Crowley long since told him to stop apologizing, that they were good, and he didn't need to feel guilty. Still, he couldn't help the soft, dismayed sound that left him.

"Angel, don't," Crowley murmured, nipping his ear and nuzzling the side of his head. "It's just an explanation, okay? Muriel called me one time. They were reading something and didn't know what Christmas was. I told them I was the wrong person to ask, but that you always decorate the shop around this time every year." Crowley sighed, then. "Sorry. I forgot all about it, 'til now."

Aziraphale smiled softly, reaching out to smooth his hand over Crowley's chest in a light caress. "No apology necessary, love. You did just the right thing. Like always."

With that reassurance, he moved toward where Muriel stood, holding a small ornament that looked like a cobbled-together boat, made out of an unused bullet. Their expression was perplexed as they looked up at Aziraphale. "I don't understand what this is supposed to be, Mr. Fell. What is it?"

Aziraphale took the small ornament from Muriel's hand and felt a sad smile tug at his lips. "This was a very special gift, from a time when war ravaged the world, but for one Christmas Eve night, there was peace and brotherhood among men..."

He heard the front door open and close, and knew Crowley was off to deliver the holiday invitations. Aziraphale's smile widened as he recounted the events of that night over a hundred years ago, when an angel and a demon brought peace to an embattled humanity, if only for a little while.

It was, after all, his favorite Christmas story of all, if for no other reason than it was one of a very few he got to spend with his beloved demon. He was looking forward to many, many more.

THE END