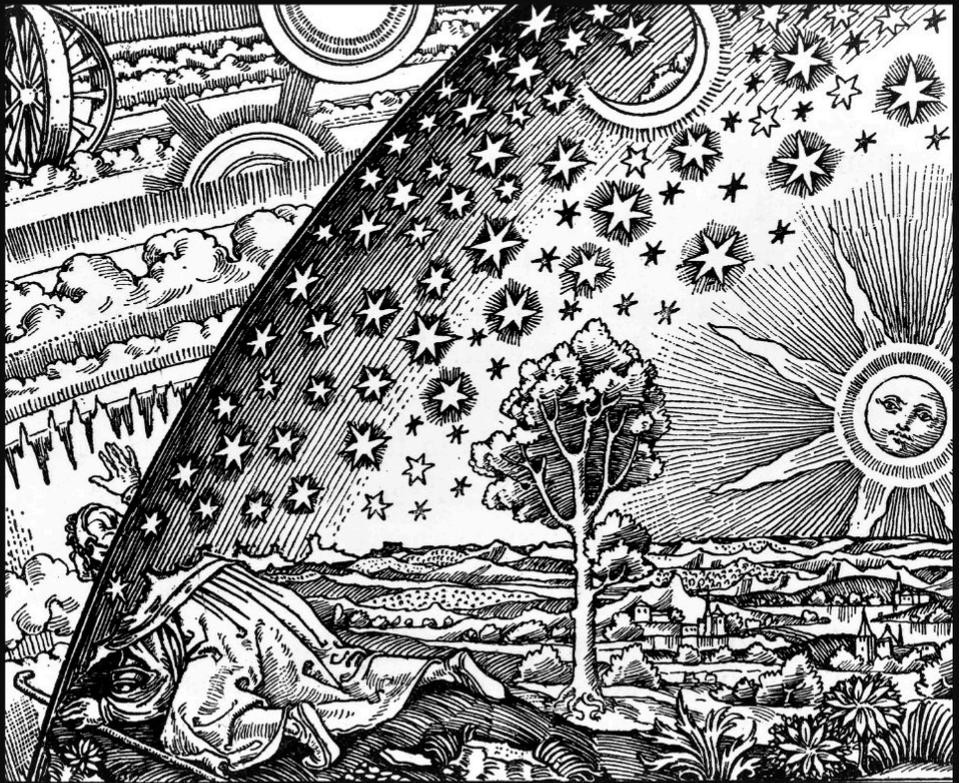


UPON THE ARRIVAL OF DAWN



Joseph A. Schiller

Upon The Arrival Of Dawn

By Joseph A. Schiller

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To my most dedicated support.
My wife, Cinthy.



Chapter 1

"...tasked with keeping a list, a list of names of all souls born of Earth, books of names ad infinitum². Dost thou hear thy name called upon faint whispers in the night? Be thus not afraid, for ye shall receive everlasting peace, and the gods shall hence know thee once again. 'Tis time the divine servant of Heaven erased thy name promptly from the annals of existence. Upon thy brow shall he place his right hand. And his name is Death, thy escort to the beyond."

Papyrus Scroll of Unknown Origin - 2nd Century BCE³

"The winter of one's life can be, and generally is, difficult to accept, especially when one is fully aware of just how quickly one's twilight is approaching, as is often the case in old age. The associated anxiety can be particularly acute if one is agonizing over how significantly afflicted they are in the body and mind, and therefore, how accelerated their eventual deterioration shall be. Why is this thus? It is because *death*, as a state or condition of being, is what ultimately defines mankind's mortality, determining man's terrestrial destiny. Wicked and righteous souls alike fear its gradual approach. Anyone that proclaims they are prepared for the end of their corporeal existence is either deceiving themselves or is trying to fool others.

Perhaps it is unfair for the benevolent, the righteous, to feel any trepidation. After all, did they not try to live their lives in accordance with some commonly accepted sets of principles and values, cornerstones of a virtuous life? These individuals, if any beings at all, should be able to stare off into the beyond with stout hearts, possessing confidence that their post-terrestrial circumstance will be all they believed it could be. Nevertheless, they do not. For most, death's embrace is felt the same, regardless of one's individual merit. And that feeling is trepidation."

"Kah, kah, kah...kah, kah, kah!" coughed Cyril, in one of the increasingly frequent early morning spasms he had been having. "Kah, kah!"

If these spells would subside for even a moment, I might actually get a moment of peaceful slumber, he thought to himself in frustration. He was beginning to stir uncomfortably about his bed, clenching his fists around as much bedding as he could grab. The fits were becoming much more severe and persistent as of late, a source of growing concern.

While Cyril is an older gentleman, until very recently one might argue that he had enjoyed remarkably good health for a man of his advanced age. For the past

several weeks, though, he had been essentially confined to his bed, unable to shake a spell of something respiratory in nature. Cyril's condition began to change innocently enough – an early winter chill of sorts – but quickly progressed further into something much more serious. Bedridden, his physical state gradually worsened to the point that his family felt obligated to step in to tend to him full time.

When the family's collective efforts to help him overcome his ailing condition failed, several physicians were dispatched to attempt to diagnose and treat him, all to no discernible avail. At the same time, the family, as is the wont of most of mankind when faced with similar circumstances, turned more of their attention toward a deity upon which they projected all of their collective hope could and or would intervene on their behalf, and make their loved one whole once again. While hopeful, there were some members of Cyril's extended family who, nevertheless, began preparing for what seemed inevitable – their patriarch's passing. And so, the family sought the presence of men they believed could intercede spiritually.

Mankind's view of its physical condition early in life seems often to be one of almost invincibility or infallibility. Death, however, tends to remind all of just how truly fragile the nature of cellular organisms really is. Cyril's family could regrettably only sit in earnest vigil

day and night, while hoping desperately for signs that his situation would improve.

Cyril's comfort was looked to with the utmost care and absolute dedication. No expenses or conveniences were spared in providing for what was increasingly expected to be the family elder's last days, or perhaps hours. If only everyone in such a state could be looked after with such unconditional outpouring of compassion and devotion.

A man beloved by all that had the pleasure of knowing him, Cyril was, as would be considered by most, a *good* man. While he led, by all accounts, an unassuming and arguably ordinary life, he was at the same time virtuous and not without a sort of merit in humility.

Cyril was not an overly recognizable figure within or without his community any more than others of moderate success in life tend to be. As far as greater mankind is concerned with acquiring more money or possessions throughout life, he was by no means categorically wealthy. Nevertheless, he was, and it must be emphasized, more than respected by the few lucky enough to call him family, friend, and acquaintance.

Prior to this most recent period in Cyril's life, of which this tale begins, Cyril was merely a humble clock-maker, constructing and repairing various time pieces in his small shop below the set of family apartments just a

few paces from the center of his village. Certainly not a trade of any glamor or notoriety, but working hard, he was able to afford a sufficiently comfortable livelihood for his modestly sized family. Cyril was a good provider and a man adored by all. Now his family and friends were repaying his love and kindness in turn, with their own adoration.

Cyril's hacking subsided long enough to allow him to gradually breathe a bit more steadily, and with a little less effort. He slowly opened his eyelids, and, with tremendous anguish, sat himself up in his bed. In his feeble condition he usually required someone's assistance in order to move his fragile frame in any small way. He forced himself on this occasion out of a sudden sense of necessity. His numerous bedsores, a constant source of discomfort, were beginning to irritate him again, making the skin on his underside raw and sensitive to the touch. Gathering what little strength he could, Cyril propped himself up on his elbows.

Gingerly rotating his head about, Cyril slowly scanned his modest room. He noticed a small bowl of food was set carefully upon the nightstand next to his bed-chamber. By the appearance of its contents, it was some

sort of porridge, and had most likely been there for a while. Cyril knew his wife had been in to see him at some point earlier in the evening. The porridge by now had likely lost any aroma or flavor.

Food was once such an indulgence, though, now he was reduced to a largely liquid diet. In fact, he often had to force himself to consume whatever was prepared and act grateful for it. He stared at the bowl for several minutes, unable to decide whether he was desperate enough to try eating, before being overcome once again with sluggishness.

Fatigue often quickly evolved into drowsiness. Gently laying back down in bed, straining just as much as he had when he sat up, Cyril closed his eyes in an effort to return to sleep. In his heart, he said a quick prayer, asking in desperation for uninterrupted slumber; something he had not enjoyed now for several weeks.

He had just started to drift off when something startled him back to reality, believing that he had heard something faint, something akin to a soft voice calling out in the darkness of his bedroom. Heart thumping almost out of his chest, he remained perfectly motionless, holding his breath as best he could as he strained his ears for a hint of what had woken him. After several moments of no perceptible noise of any kind, Cyril felt convinced that he was in fact mistaken.

After all, this old home always makes such unexplainable noises, Cyril thought to himself.

It was possible that one of the many guests that had recently visited had perhaps neglected to close a window before retiring from the bedroom. Slightly frustrated with the prospect of being kept up all night with the constant swishing and swaying from an evening breeze stirring the curtains about his chambers, Cyril closed his eyes once again with a renewed determination to get a few more hours of repose before something else jolted him awake.

These thoughts of rest had no sooner filled his mind than Cyril once again thought he heard the faint call penetrating the silence ever so softly. This time, however, the voice seemed to be speaking his name, as a gentle whisper into one's ear. With all of the intensity that he could gather, Cyril listened for the voice to repeat itself. His mind and heart began to race once again, renewed with scattered thoughts. Was this perceived voice merely the imaginings of a sick man? He was never one that believed in ghosts or specters, but he found himself questioning how firmly he disbelieved. He was not disappointed when several seconds later, like the passing of a light spring breeze across one's face, and yet almost entirely imperceptible, Cyril was convinced that he unmistakably heard his own name called out to him from a yet undetermined corner within his room.

"Cyril..."

"Who's there?!" Cyril called out as loudly as he could into the nothingness of the room, while nearly choking on his own words.

He was beginning to perspire quite heavily, sweat beading across his brow, while his heart rate now began to race out of control within his frail frame. He tried again to calm himself down by attempting to convince himself that the *voice* he believed that he had heard was nothing more than a symptomatic of a senile old man in desperate need of rest. After all, he was extremely sick, and anyone in his particular condition could be forgiven for having periodic episodes of delirium.

"Yes, that is precisely what I am experiencing. These are simply hallucinations brought on by my weakened condition. My poor body is so tired. The sooner my eternal rest begins, the better," Cyril declared under his breath.

His mind wandered for a few moments. The instantaneous and equally terrifying realization that there was something like a hand resting gently on his left shoulder brought him back. "Who's there?" he called out again.

Shivers immediately passed along his nerves. Fear-
ing to move even a millimeter, he kept absolutely still for what seemed an eternity. A steadily rising heart rate and cold sweat returned with increased intensity. Finally, Cyril collected what little courage he could and painfully tilted

his head ever so slightly toward his left side, to look upon whoever or whatever had taken hold of his shoulder. His eyes, finally fully adjusted to the absence of light, rested on an unfamiliar personage positioned on his left, and Cyril's entire being froze in debilitating shock. Terror instantly overcame him at the recognition of the figure moving to sit next to him on his bed. Terror, because he had an equally strong impression as to why this visitor was present.

This state of paralysis lasted for what felt like forever to Cyril. He feared and refused to move, to blink, to breathe, or to even make a sound. Wanting desperately to believe that he was in fact just dreaming, he tried to convince himself that at any moment something would at last stir him awake; that what he was experiencing was nothing more than a bad bout of hysteria. The personage's eyes, nevertheless, remained locked with his, neither set deviating from the other.

It was the specter that finally penetrated the silence.

"You recognize me, do you not?" whispered the figure rhetorically, with an almost inhuman voice. "You know of me and have strong suspicions of precisely why I'm here. Are you surprised?"

Despite the solicitation, Cyril made no effort to respond in any way to the prompt. While not being aware of exactly why, there was a strange and instinctive acknowl-

edgement of this being lingering by his side. Consequently, he was beginning, intuitively, to recognize this mysterious guest's purpose for visiting, and, therefore, he remained resolved not to reply.

"It's perfectly understandable that you would resist responding," said the strange visitor in an attempt to break the stalemate.

The stranger looked upon Cyril with an almost gentle gaze, cocking his neck to the side slightly as he did. "By doing so, you believe that you would ultimately be acknowledging my presence. And, by not answering...well, what do you hope the outcome to be? As much as you would like to convince yourself that these sensations, both auditory and visual, are nothing more than the product of your weakened physical state, deep down in your core you know that is mere foolishness. Yes...I can read your thoughts, and your feelings, as I can of all of your kind."

Cyril attempted to make out the full features of this personage. While he was unable to accurately discern anything for certain, he was able to catch some vague physical traits. Yet, he was unsure whether his eyes were betraying him. Nevertheless, the being sitting at his bedside appeared to be a relatively young man, though it was hard to estimate an age. From what Cyril could recognize, his lines were soft, calm, with an almost childlike innocence. In fact, his features had an almost disarming quality to them. Cyril

stared at those eyes gazing deeply into his. It did not matter that he could not see the specter clearly. He could feel the intensity in that gaze; could feel how the specter's eyes never lost their focus for even an instant. Yet he also sensed what seemed like a friendly enough grin.

After a few seconds, when the mysterious figure was assured that Cyril was fully attentive, he continued, "Do you know why you recognize me?"

"No." It came out as a stutter, betraying the persistent state of absolute terror Cyril had found himself in.

"That is not entirely truthful, is it? You felt my presence the very instant I entered this room. Your energy flowing through you is as familiar with mine as mine is with yours, as it is with the rest of your mortal brothers and sisters. For we are all part of the same creative force, are we not? Your spirit, if you will, recognized the presence of a force, which, as it did mine, similarly created your existence," added the mysterious guest.

The specter smiled at Cyril, almost warmly. "I am sensing a heightened anxiety within you. There is no need to feel such fear. Be at peace."

There was a rather long pause before either said anything else. Cyril found it impossible to settle his heart and mind, though, not without trying. Despite the strange visitor's admonishment to remain at peace, Cyril felt strongly that those were merely convenient words.

Finally, Cyril gave in, and ventured into a conversation with all the remaining bravery available within him. "Is this the end of my time?"

With absolutely no hesitation, the voice of the specter replied in the affirmative. "Yes. Though, you already anticipated that I would answer as such."

"I suuu...suppose I dddd...did," Cyril said in the trembling tone of a man beginning to accept, and in deep contemplation of, his fate.

"Cyril, try to settle your heart and your mind," suggested the specter. "Arrangements have all been made for you."

At that moment, Cyril noticed the visitor's countenance begin to change, darkening and swelling like lengthening shadows. A sinister smile gradually formed across the visitor's face. Whatever lingering peace and calm Cyril previously had left in his heart quickly vanished and was replaced immediately with a renewed sense of anguish and horror. His first instinct was to use what fleeting strength he could muster to flee from his room in search of help, or to call out to his family elsewhere within the home. His condition, however, was simply too fragile for any attempted outburst or escape. He found it equally as difficult to raise his voice much more than a whisper. Meanwhile, the personage just sat and watched him struggle, staring with an increasingly malicious look of enjoy-

ment on his face.

The stranger then slowly rose up from his sitting position on top of the bed, and once again stood to Cyril's side. He then walked with great purpose toward the window, almost gliding as he did, before eventually taking a position at the front of the room, facing out onto the empty street below. Pausing, the figure looked out into the dark of the night, almost as if he drew strength from it. He remained thus, peering out for several minutes in deep silence. Cyril himself was too struck with fear to do anything to break that silence. It seemed that this being had been sent to escort his soul away to meet his maker. What he could not reconcile was why he felt so mortified instead of elated.

While continuing to peer out the window, the terrible figure stated, "There are several questions you have chosen, as of yet, not to ask me. Perhaps you are afraid of the responses."

It took Cyril a moment, but eventually he managed to choke out one of the questions lingering in his heart. "Am...am I going to heaven, or hell?"

The guest in Cyril's bedchamber responded with a short chuckle – a fiendish cackle. Though brief, the laugh betrayed an intensely demonic nature. "Countless ages have wrestled with such futile questions."

Cyril was beginning to think his heart would give

out just from talking to this terrible specter. *Was that why the thing had come to visit? To hasten my demise?* He shuddered and the increasingly terrifying visitor laughed. He sensed that the terrible personage was deriving more pleasure from his heightened anxiety and fear.

"I have had you in mind for some time," the stranger said. "You led a life more than worthy of having the energy of your soul returned to the source, the origins of all creation, or *heaven* – the thing corporeal beings commonly refer to as the afterlife." He gave another malevolent giggle, whilst still maintaining his gaze out the window. "However, ... I have other plans for your departing soul."

Cyril was once again stunned – paralyzed even – with an indescribable fright. A darkness seized upon the deepest reaches of his heart. It took him several minutes to even marginally recover his faculties.

"Whooo... who are you?" he asked, trembling and gasping uncontrollably at this point.

Cyril was surprised when his visitor did not respond. He was about to repeat himself when he thought he heard a sudden rushing sound from without the bedroom window; the kind of noise made by a strong gust of autumn wind. A wind, from the sound of it, was fast approaching. Turning his ear ever so slightly toward the direction of the disturbance, Cyril now thought that perhaps the noise sounded not of a wind at all, but like the beating

of thousands of sets of wings, accompanied by ever louder, unexplainable shrieks. And his terror increased a thousandfold.

Suddenly, and without warning, the specter turned. Those intense eyes gleamed with malevolence as he coldly answered, "I am... the Taker of Souls!"

Without hesitation, the devilish form threw open the bedroom window in order to allow in a flood of demons; terrible spirits called Keres summoned for the purpose of devouring souls. At his bidding, the Keres quickly went to work to rip Cyril's life energy from its mortal frame. His soul screamed out in tremendous and dreadful agony, a scream that reached every conceivable corner of time and space of Creation.

Silence soon prevailed. There were no discernible traces remaining of any activity in Cyril's apartment; none, except for Cyril's cold and lifeless body lying in his bed. One might have mistaken him to be in a deep and permanent slumber, were it not for the terror of his final moments frozen in his lifeless face, the eyes staring at their tormentors and the mouth agape in a silent outburst.

Chapter 2

Cyril's bedroom, and the entirety of his home for that matter, remained absolutely still well into the early morning hours. Not a soul stirred from their evening's repast. Winter had begun to reveal itself in the increasing chill, taking an ever-greater stronghold over the landscape, occasionally leaving its frosted kisses upon what had been, in Cyril's mortality, the windowpanes of his chambers. While the early morning sky still displayed a few remaining stars twinkling across her firmament, a thin layer of wispy clouds had slowly crept in and was gradually concealing them from view. Only periodic glimpses of the marvelous expanse were allowed. The scene would have otherwise been described as tranquil, betraying no signs of the evil

that had transpired earlier.

Another shadowy figure appeared at the foot of Cyril's bed, taking long, deep breaths, and gazing at length at the deceased man's cold remains as they lay eternally motionless on top of a crumpled mess of sheets. The figure rested his hands gently upon the footboard, gripping lightly while periodically rubbing the palms of his hands along the smooth lacquered grain of the wooden frame, almost as if coming in contact with the texture of the furniture produced some entirely new sensation that this visitor had not yet had the pleasure of experiencing. The stranger's glances slowly shifted, starting at Cyril's bed frame and moving about the small room, scanning the scene methodically, fixating at moments, only to return again to scanning. No corner of the room was overlooked; every point was given equal attention and scrutinized thoroughly. After making a quick, yet careful, study of the surroundings, he stepped around to the right side of the bed, pausing alongside Cyril's corpse.

Leaning down towards Cyril's remains, the stranger lifted and placed his right hand gently upon the corpse's forehead, rubbing it ever so delicately several times. The warmth that Cyril's mortal body at one time possessed no

longer radiated through these carbon remnants. The figure continued this rubbing action for several minutes, looking down on the deceased, full of sincerity and tenderness. Were someone to be in the room to witness the scene, they would not be blamed for believing the mysterious guest to be an intimate friend. The mysterious guest's countenance soon changed, however, to one of grave concern, even deep distress. His clairvoyance enabled him to begin to assemble the timeline of events that had taken place prior to his arrival. The preliminary evidence that could be derived suggested that someone, or more correctly, something, had claimed, and consumed the energy that once animated Cyril's form. If confirmed, this could possibly suggest that a cosmic essence, or essences, had violated their sacred charge, and thus the holy celestial creed itself. Such a circumstance raised numerous, disturbing questions, and posed difficult quandaries for our visitor; questions for which, he recognized, answers must be gathered in great haste.

The visitor began moving once again about the bedroom, patiently, methodically, as if he were a detective of sorts, attempting to sniff out clues left behind at a crime scene. He felt strongly that he should look over the apartment once more. Every little detail, even the seemingly insignificant, drew the stranger's full and undivided attention. A casual observer to the scene would not have noticed

anything out of the ordinary; yet this figure was meticulous because he was not seeking out purely physical evidence, but more specifically, he sought the ethereal echoes left behind, which are only perceptible by a select set of essences.

The Ethereal Echo, or the continual trail left behind by any and all cosmic disturbances, is the ongoing record of that which has, is, and will take place at any given moment in time and space across this vast expansive universe⁴. These reverberations are like instantaneous snapshots along the timelines of the Cosmos. The energy signatures of all living beings are constantly embroidering the fabric of space and time with the moments of their existences. The stranger scanned the apartment for those very signs of what had taken place with great purpose and intention. What unraveled before him disturbed him considerably more than he could have ever imagined in all his endless centuries of existence.

What the being was able to gradually puzzle together was an event of unspeakable wickedness; one in which Cyril suffered a horrendous fate. A soul that was once destined to have its life energy promptly and honorably returned to the state of original creation upon its eventual demise, was prematurely eliminated, devoured by damned spirits, and thus placed in an eternal limbo, enslaved to become a servant of evil itself. Our outsider could

not understand why something so dastardly had happened, baffling any attempt to formulate a coherent explanation. Clearly, Keres⁵ had been present, and were guilty of the atrocities he was now obliged to investigate. Nevertheless, the *why* and *what* that were behind the act were entirely unclear, and were, therefore, the most disturbing aspects of the forthcoming investigation.

The transient entity sat himself down for a moment on a chair in a far corner of the room, trying to process everything. He asked himself again what might have been behind such an act, as was revealed to him by the Ethereal Echo. For the Keres would not and could not devour the soul of someone of the physical plane without having been directed to do so first by a divine servant, whose duty was to escort wicked souls into the cosmic abyss beyond nothingness. Even if this was what had occurred, it must be a mortal deemed to be evil in order for a cosmic agent and Keres to be involved. For it was this mysterious visitor's responsibility and directive, and his alone, to help the souls of the righteous by escorting them to a reunification of the energy of life with that of Creation. He would have escorted Cyril to the afterlife when the properly designated time was determined by the Universe to be Cyril's end. Something, therefore, directed the Keres to ravish the soul of a righteous being against the Law of Eternity, suggesting unfathomable ideas for our companion.

What made this scene even more disturbing was not just the gruesome or questionable nature of what was recorded on the Ethereal Echo. On the contrary, this was not the first such instance; the stranger was aware of evidence suggesting similar incidents where righteous souls had been devoured by the Keres; and these were occurring with increasing frequency across Existence. The increase was so alarming that it began to lead the guest, a being generally above earthly feelings of fear and anxiety, to become marginally frightened by what this increasing evil implied. All that could be surmised thus far was that there had clearly been a stirring presence of malevolence about the terrestrial realm – an unjust proportion of wickedness.

The mysterious personage, while making one final pass around the small confines of Cyril's bedroom, vowed to himself, and the sacred office which he faithfully held, to get to the bottom of the mystifying deaths of so many decent souls.

"I, Azrael, the divinely ordained Escort of Righteous Souls, will hunt down whichever essence is responsible for causing such a dangerous imbalance between good and evil in the Universe, and bring about justice throughout the Cosmos!"⁶ he promised to himself as he finally departed the scene. "It is I, and only I, that has been chosen on high to retrieve the souls of righteous creatures, and usher them back to be connected once again with the energy of all

Creation. This sacred responsibility is not to be trifled with." He spoke with such conviction; it was as if the very shadows quivered before him.

There was once a time, recorded in the annals of the Cosmos, when the essence known as Azrael was much more than just an usher of deceased souls⁷. At one point along the Universe's infinite timeline, Azrael was one of the chosen sons of Creation; a member of the Council of Light, or Seraphim Council. Despite his elevated station as an immortal lord of Eternity, he had one weakness – his feelings for a mortal woman. Azrael had succumbed to her charms, a strict violation of the Law of Dissonance. Charges were brought to the Council of Light, and Azrael was ultimately cast out of the Council, having been found guilty of violating the Law of Dissonance. Therefore, it was determined that his essence should be reduced to inhabit a terrestrial, and thus, imperfect, body – the very form which had brought about the fall to begin with. The first part of his eternal punishment was that he should have to live out a mortal existence, to experience all of the pain, suffering, and struggle therewith.

Azrael would live out his human experience with the mortal woman with whom he had fallen in love, and

the son they had conceived together. He gained some small degree of recognition as a humble, yet accomplished physician, trying desperately to help his beloved terrestrials cheat death⁸.

After growing old among the mortal races he so adored, Azrael suffered to feel the throes of death himself before ultimately returning to Creation. It was then that the Council handed down the final portion of his punishment. It was determined that Azrael was to serve the needs of Creation for eternity. His essence was sentenced to collect the passing souls of mortal beings and return them to the energy of all Cosmic beginnings, thus completing his humiliation, for his shame would forever be his intimacy with mortal suffering and death; to experience all of the anguish, loss, and fear with that most sorrowful of sacraments. When the names of terrestrial beings across the Universe are read in the halls of Eternity from the Tablet of Destiny, or Cosmic Record, Azrael must hasten the call to collect those spirit's home.

For Eternity Azrael will continue to serve out penance. With the sacred power, the Word of Death⁹ bestowed upon him for the purpose of fulfilling his sentence and allowing him dominion over the terrestrial plane of existence, Azrael is thus able to move freely between Creation and the created¹⁰.