

Prologue

August's teacup clinked against the coaster. She flicked on each of the lobby's electric fireplaces and peered at the clock sitting above the handmade little-free-library she'd installed for the residents. It read 7pm. He wasn't early, necessarily, but she had been hoping for just a bit more time.

The air chilled further. August tugged down on the enveloping sleeves of her sweater, curling them into her hands before lifting her tea again. She held the warmth to her chest in a tight hug, inhaling the steam and hints of chamomile.

Effulgent ice crystals spread into the lobby. They sprouted into usual areas, yes, like in the corners of the windows and at the base of the crystal flower vases, but the ice patterns also grew in strange, unnatural places like across the vintage upholstery, in between the keyboard keys on the check-in desk, and along the cuticles of August's brittle, chewed-up fingernails. She had often wondered what it was that was freezing when he arrived. It couldn't have been the water in the air or the condensation on the windows. Surely, it had to be something more omnipresent.

The curtains twitched. The flowers wilted. August took another sip of her tea.

All at once, he materialized before her, his ebony cloak billowing behind him like the train of a spectral wedding dress. The pages from her book rifled open, sending the smell of old paper through the foyer. It mixed delightfully with the newly minted air and the floral notes from her cup.

"Good evening, my friend." Death spoke dulcetly, flashing a flirtatious smile of pointed, all-too-white teeth.

August returned the grin, "Good evening, Azrael." She lifted her mug "Tea?"

"I'd love some, thank you. Do you already know who I'm here for?" Death approached the check-in desk but shifted his gaze toward the wing of hospice suites.

"Victoria, right?" August bit her lip as she caught the time again over Death's shoulder.

Death's head tilted, creaking, "What is it?"

August sighed, "It's just her son, Jared. He took the earliest flight he could, but he's still a few minutes out."

Death's smile faded. At length, he spoke - slowly, and even more gently than before, "Yes, of course. I can wait. I wish I could stop her... physical condition. I don't have any control over - you'd need a doctor. But her soul can stay here as long as we need without trouble, so she would still be present with him, even if she doesn't look like it."

August nodded, "I understand. Thank you."

"Of course," he paused, "I'm only sorry that's all I can do."

Death settled into a couch across the lobby while August made his mug of tea. She handed him the cup and sat down, disrupting the glassy ice patterns that had formed on the embroidered cushions. Between the fireplace, the sweater, and a hot drink, she could typically counteract Death's pervasive chill. "Thank you again," she said, curling her legs to her chest.

The firelight spilled soft, cozy light across the oak end tables, the chairs, and the left half of Death's hallow face. He smiled at her again, his black eyes crinkling at the corners, "I'm happy to help."

August leaned forward, squinting, "Wait a minute... Is that a new cloak?"

Death chuckled, "Actually, yes, although I'm not sure if I like it." He lifted his arms. The cloak had a black-on-black embroidery that was barely noticeable except for in just the right lighting. The sleeves billowed, dwarfing his skeletal wrists. His white, bony hands were a jarring contrast to his human-like face, and the new adumbral sleeves seemed to only enhance the variation.

August shrugged, "The cloak fits the aesthetic, I suppose, but I think the other one is a bit more modern."

He raised an eyebrow, "What aesthetic?"

"You know..." August raised her hands, gesturing up and down Azrael's body, "foreboding and ethereal."

Death shook his head, "Well, that won't do. I don't want to look foreboding. My job is to console, not frighten."

"In that case, I think I'd go with the other one. But you look gorgeously ghostly no matter what you wear," August said with a wink.

Death blushed, his hollow cheeks tingeing pink with such subtlety that August's Irish skin could only dream of having. His eyes broke from hers, clearly wandering the room for a different topic of conversation. Evidently, he found a lame one from outside the lobby window. "Have you seen the clouds today, August? I bet there's going to be one last snowstorm before the season ends."

"Is that so?" August glanced at her still-propped-open book from the reception desk, "Well, I suppose the timing works out. I have some reading to catch up on."

"Oh, that does work out, then!" Azrael beamed, "That reminds me, how is saving up to start your bookstore going?"

August winced, but kept her smile politely in place, "It's — I mean—I'm still going to. It's just with the medical bills..."

His gaze flicked to her headscarf before returning to her face, "Oh, God. I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to--"

August raised her hands, "No, it's okay! It will still happen. I just need to build up my savings again. It should only take me another year. It's really no big deal."

Death's lips tightened to a thin line, "Still, I'm sure that can be frustrating, especially after all the work you've put in. I'm sorry. I know this has been really hard."

August brushed away his concern, "It's fine. Besides, it's going to be well worth the wait when it happens. You should come visit when it's up and running. I'd sell you a copy of 101 jokes for the undead or something."

Death scoffed, "I'm not *un*-dead."

"Then what are you?" August asked, eyebrow raised, smirk growing.

"I'm--" Death paused, "I'm--" He looked down to his clearly undead hands, searching for an answer they both knew would never come. He rolled his eyes, "Well, shit."

August laughed so hard her glasses almost fell off.

Death chuckled too. He removed his hood so he could run a hand through his hair, "Let's ignore my brand-new identity crisis for the time being. What have you been reading?"

August began summarizing, and then despite herself, vividly detailing the intricate plot, the captivating racial system, and the compelling character arcs in her most-recent read. Each time she stopped talking he would probe her further, first about her current book specifically, but gradually regarding the author's literary universe as a whole. In this way they found themselves discussing her newest world of escapism until finally being cut off by a winded, middle-aged man sprinting into the nursing home lobby.



August escorted Jared to room B24, offering a lengthy explanation of his mother's current condition but conveniently leaving out the fact that Death was already here.

Victoria was still breathing, giving all three of them a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Mom,” Jared whispered as he entered his mother’s suite, leaving August and Death alone together in the ornately adorned hallway. They stood quietly -- heads bowed and hands clasped. It was a stark contrast to their animated discussion earlier, but the shared reverence was perfectly familiar. Their friendship, after all, had been built on this routine.

Later, Azrael bowed and, with measured steps, approached Victoria's bedside, his full attention on his new patient.

Chapter 1

August slumped against the metal city bench behind the trolley sign, scrolling TikTok for some – any – kind of distraction.

The IV hadn’t been painful, necessarily, but it had been painfully uncomfortable. When she’d started her chemotherapy treatments, she had opted to get a new IV in her arm each time rather than a port near her collarbone. It had seemed like the right choice at the time, but even after just the first few rounds, she was tired of it. The pricks had left white and purple scarring on her overly freckled arms. The needles bothered her, the saline was cold, and the drug had brought a consistent irritation which paired nicely with a gnawing anxiety of how sick she would feel for the following week.

But repeating this routine so many times had its perks, like how August was now much more prepared. She had worn a cozy sweat suit, for example, which didn’t flatter her too-long legs and pear-shaped hips but was much more comfortable than the jeans she had worn to her first infusion. Her mom also had the foresight to buy her a matching sage headscarf, which complimented both her now-default outfit and her softly green eyes. She’d also brought a large bag filled with different activities she could turn to during treatment, and admittedly read more books now than she ever had. Unlike her first session, which was terrifying, emotional, and full of additional screenings, her treatment days now were nearly unremarkable. However, August still hadn’t adjusted to the habitually difficult aftermath, and it showed in the way she anxiously tapped her sneakers against the sidewalk.

The bus was running late, but the weather was objectively fantastic, so August didn’t mind; she could be anxious anywhere. It was only a 2 mile walk to her studio, but August relied on the transit now that the chemotherapy had taken its toll on her energy. There was only one bus in town. It made a giant circle from one end of town to the other, following the river for most of the route and then crossing one of the town’s many bridges to finish the rest of the stops along Main Street. It was enough to get anywhere, really, provided you had enough patience.

August swapped activities – first to her book, then to a video call with her mom, and then to her audiobook (so she could simultaneously crochet). After another restless quarter hour, she threw her distractions back into her bag and sat, trying out a moment of mindfulness like her mom had advised her to do. It wasn't effective at first, but wasn't horrible either: March had enveloped August's tiny town into an efficaciously adorable mess of pastel flowers and a consistent orchestra of ariose birdsong. Surely, it was no autumn, but the season brought allergy-inducing smells of grass and rebirth and August treasured spring the way a small child would be delighted by their second-favorite candy.

The metal bench chilled beneath her. August straightened just in time to catch Death's familiar silhouette as he lurked along the crosswalk down the street.

"Azrael?"

Death stopped short. His cloak billowed in a spiral, kissing the asphalt as he spun back. It was the older cloak. He seemed surprised to see her, but clearly delighted, "August!" He rushed to meet her, sending ice crystals across the sidewalk and a familial shiver down her spine.

"What are you doing here?"

Death bit his cheek, pointing behind them back towards the cancer treatment center, "I was visiting a patient."

August held back a gasp, "Wait... they... *during* their treatment?"

Death raised his hands, his sleeves skidding down his skeletal forearms, "Oh, no! Today is my day off, actually! But I like to give them an advance notice when I can see it's coming." His head turned back to the cancer center, then to the new bruise growing on August's forearm. "Are you doing okay?" Azrael sat on the bench to meet her gaze. The icy vapor trailed behind his cloak, killing the curbside flowers.

"I'm fine." August smiled.

Azrael's eyes focused, searching her expression. His brows furrowed, "You seem worried."

August would be hard-pressed to converse about heavy subject matter. Just because she had cancer didn't mean she was ready to embrace the conversations that were societally expected to coincide with it. But Azrael, she had found, was consistently and unbearably persistent, and August had often wondered if it was a skill he'd gathered from his line of work or just an annoying personality trait he'd spawned with. August sighed and relented, but diminished her words with an obnoxious shrug, "I'm just nervous about how sick I'm going to be. It feels like each time it hits me a little worse."

Azrael frowned. "I'm sure it feels debilitating. I'm so sorry, August."

August winced. Of course, she'd mourned her shitty situation often -- but privately -- and the added irony that someone back in the cancer center was going to die soon yet Death was giving her his sympathy for an impending sick week was not lost on her. She saw the trolley approaching over Death's shoulder, feeling inwardly grateful for the excuse to stop talking about her cancer. She shrugged again, "It'll be fine. Besides, all the sitting at home will give me time to catch up on my reading." She added a plastered smile, grabbing her bag off the sidewalk, "So overall I'm just going to be super boring, nauseous, and unproductive. Care to join me?"

Azrael smiled, "I'd love to!"

August's mouth fell open. He had clearly missed the sarcasm. The heated all-too-common redness soaked into her freckled skin, tainting her cheeks and neck, "Oh. I um..." She inhaled, nearly ready to rescind her invitation. She really didn't want Death, of all people, to see her at her worst, even if she did actually want the company. She'd never ask for it, of course, but nobody else had ever offered either. August exhaled, standing up and bringing the strap of her bag over her shoulder, "I mean, sure. You can come over tomorrow if you want. But really, it's going to be boring. I'll just be reading and watching TV and laying around. You really don't have to."

"Oh, I don't mind," Azrael beamed, "I'd love to come. I'll bring over some coffee."

"O-okay." August smiled, feeling her blush deepen. The bus slid along the curb with a dramatic hiss. The doors flung open and August stepped in.

Death stood and grinned, waving, "I'll see you tomorrow, August!"

August swallowed the butterflies and hummingbirds and whatever else had built up from her stomach into her esophagus. She waved back as the doors closed behind her, "Okay. See you tomorrow!"

Chapter 2

In the morning, and despite her fatigue, August woke early -- meaning before the median rising time for a cancer patient, but still hours after the vociferous songbirds outside. They were, of course, already well-into their day of nest making and worm gathering and still-obnoxiously-ignoring-her-birdfeeder.

August paced about her small studio. She had known Death for over 7 years now -- since she'd started working at the nursing home and long before her cancer diagnosis. But up until yesterday, she had never seen him outside of work. And now he was coming to her home, of all things. For a moment she considered cleaning, but no doubt Death had seen worse than a pile of dishes and a haphazard set of hobbies strewn about, and this small cancer-ridden season of August's life wasn't going to be known as "The time she kept her house impeccably clean."

She did, however, crank her thermostat to the highest available setting, brush her teeth, and donned her least-scratchy wig. Then she hid her 12 potted plants on her back patio just beside her already-blooming perennials. She also ensured all her underwear, which had previously made itself home on her honeycomb-tiled bathroom floor, was properly stowed. And conveniently, while already in the bathroom, she threw up for the first time that day.

It was late morning when Azrael's boney fingers clacked against the front door. He was in what must have been his off-duty clothes: a long, black hoodie, black skinny jeans, and black sneakers. Besides his skeleton hands and ankles, his frightening black eyes, and the fact that the daffodils on her front porch had now wilted, he could have nearly passed for human; gothic and too pale, perhaps, but just-nearly normal.

In fact, Azrael was much more society-ready looking than August at the moment. August hadn't gotten dressed and didn't plan to. Her fuzzy PJs from last Christmas had certainly seen better days and her wig needed a good comb through. She hated looking like this in front of anyone but had frankly run out of fucks to give in her most-recent rounds of treatment. Between getting the mail in her torn bathrobe and nearly flashing the mailman, leaving an open takeout container on her kitchen counter for 2 weeks before addressing the smell, and crying at work in front of one of her nursing home residents who, unlike her, was actually dying, Death's visit to August's dilapidated day didn't even scratch the top 3 most pitiful moments of her chemotherapy experience so far.

"Hey. Um... I brought soup." Azrael said, his tone noticeably more casual and awkward than usual. He held a tray of coffees in one hand and a Tupperware of what looked to be some type of broccoli and cheddar in the other.

"Thank you." August took the container, welcoming him in, "I didn't know you cook!"

Death knelt to remove his shoes on the entryway bench, "I don't usually, so it's always nice to have a reason to." Azrael gestured to the small-but-functional kitchen, "Would you rather I wash my hands here or in the bathroom?"

"Oh! Um.. Here's fine," August said, gesturing to the faucet barely visible under the pile of plates, cups, and rotten food. She wasn't sure if Death's thorough commitment to hygiene was habitual for him or specifically since she was in the middle of chemotherapy, but she was grateful all the same.

"You paint?" Azrael asked, drying his hands with her embroidered kitchen towel and nodding towards her dining-area-turned-watercolor-studio. August had picked the dining area for painting as it had the most natural light in the comparatively-still-sun-kissed apartment. Her painting supplies had consumed more space than it ought, but ultimately the stack of colored easels brought more character to her flat than eyesores.

"I do. I just got back into it when I started treatment, so I'm still pretty rusty."

He passed her pile of abstract-art canvases and stopped in front of one of her landscapes, "This is the old bakery on main street!"

August nodded. She had wanted to sit at the trolley stop across the street from the bakery to paint it but had found herself too tired to leave her house and ended up painting the building from a reference photo instead.

"Wow, August! This is very good! The detail work – all the little pastries in the window..." Azrael lingered in front of the painting.

"Thank you," her cheeks tinged. "I'm going to eat this later if it's all the same to you," August said, placing the Tupperware into her nearly empty fridge. She gestured to the living room (or at least the living portion of her flat), "I was just watching The Office. Want to join me?"



August's studio was nestled under a vaulted, wooden ceiling with antique rafters. The walls were a classic renter's-white, but she had made it her own regardless -- mostly with hanging artwork, corners of salt-lamped lighting, and shelves of her favorite books, but also with thrifted antiques and a few hand-me-down décor pieces from her parents. Her windows welcomed spring with a prismatic brilliance and August was happy to bathe her home in the free sunlight. Besides the house chores that she clearly neglected during treatment, her home was cozy and peaceful.

August sipped her latte and curled into the corner of her sectional with her comforter pulled up to the freckles lining her cheekbones. The Office played, muted with subtitles on, while August held *The Return of the King* on her knees in front of her. Her living room was a large area adorned with a gray sectional and hidden Murphy bed. Admittedly, on her worst days, she wasn't always strong enough to pull down the bed and would just sleep on the couch.

Azrael had joined her, sitting on the opposite end of the sectional, and mimicking her by curling his legs to his chest. For two whole episodes they didn't speak, and she read more of her book while Azrael read the passing subtitles on the show. The silence wasn't awkward like August had worried it would be. Death's company wasn't socially draining either, which was a wonderful surprise. Having spent most of her time fighting her disease alone, August was thankful for the company.

It was Netflix, in fact, who broke the silence first, interrupting Season 4 with its "Are you still watching" notification.

"Allow me," Death said, sitting up to grab the remote off the storage-chest-turned-coffee-table that August used to keep toys for her niece and nephew.

"Thanks! Oh, and you can turn the sound on too if you want. I can read through it either way."

Death shook his head, "That's ok -- I'm happy with just subtitles. I need the reading practice anyway." He bit his lip, "I'm actually a really slow reader, and I don't get to practice all that much."

"Really?"

Death nodded.

“Oh. I don’t know why I assumed you read all the time.” August felt sheepish, inwardly replaying all the times she had showered him with details of her books, and suddenly wondering if she was an annoying friend. “What do you do instead on your off time?” she asked, eager to find a new commonality.

Azrael paused for an awkwardly long moment. He stared at her, or rather through her, as if trying to remember anything fun he’d ever done in his undead life. Finally, he spoke again, “I used to do more, in fact I used to read, but... My job is very hard. It takes a long time to... to recover from the hard days. And then I try to volunteer any extra time I have – I try to help those who have already crossed get established and comfortable. They have help elsewhere, technically, and I have colleagues in other jurisdictions who help, too, but so many of them have already forgotten how hard it is to die and they just aren’t empathetic enough to some of the transition pains.” Azrael swallowed, “But I’ve been thinking I should do better to stay in the right headspace. I’ve been in the market for some new hobbies, and I’ve definitely thought about picking reading back up. I think it would help the work-life balance, you know?”

“Oh...” August’s face fell, “Your job sounds... really awful, actually. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Azrael said, smiling once again. “After all, this job lets me stay earth-side. Now all I need to do is find a few ways to get the most out of my time down here. Then it’s almost like I’ll be living again – well, so to speak.”

August ran her hand through the hair of her wig, inwardly wincing as her sore fingers caught on the ratted snags. “You know, if chemo’s taught me anything it’s that sometimes doing what some-might-call nothing is exactly what we need to be doing. It feels like you’re wasting your life in the moment, but really you’re saving it.”

Azrael nodded, “Thank you, August. I will say I’m amazed at how you’ve spent your time these past few weeks. I know it’s been devitalizing, and I don’t ever want to discredit that experience, but you’ve also filled your time in so many meaningful ways. I could really learn a lot from you.”

“Thank you. Don’t get me wrong; it’s been hard, and I’ve had to put so many things on hold,” August’s eyes wandered to the books piled on her old school desk and the medical bills laying underneath, “but I really have tried to make the most of it.” She turned back to Azrael. “You know, if you want, you could

borrow some of --" August felt the all-too familiar bile building in the back of her throat. She sprang into the bathroom, throwing herself against the toilet.

She hurled, and at first attempted to alternate between holding the hair from her wig and gripping the sides of the seat to hold her balance. That is until she felt icy fingertips sweep back the hair from her face, holding it against her neck in a gentle ponytail.

"Thanks," she croaked between raspy, productive coughs.

Chapter 3

Azrael leaned against the reception desk, cadaverous fingers drumming against the aged, varnished oak.

“Yes, Mrs. Allen, her prescription was picked up this morning and she’ll be starting the new dosage tonight... uh huh ... uh huh... yes, we will be open during our regular visiting hours this weekend but if you’d like to stay past that time, we’ll just need a request submitted at least 24 hours in advance.”

Death stared at her – one eyebrow raised, head cocked, mouth damn-near-smirking. She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Uh huh. Yes. Okay, you too. Okay. Yes, take care.” She clicked the phone against the receiver and took a breath.

“My dear August... how much time would you say is spent giving the residents their care... versus the time spent telling their children and grandchildren every detail about the time that was spent giving the residents their care?” Azrael asked, his devious smile growing.

August scoffed, pulling Azrael’s hood down in front of his stupid grin. He was wearing his hoodie today – his white one – which was a pleasant hint of variety compared to his regular, gothic aesthetic. She liked the way he looked in white, although she still secretly wondered if he was allergic to colors.

“Did you finish all three of them?” August asked, changing the subject because Azrael was annoyingly right about her time and the residents.

“I did!” Azrael chirped, lavishly unloading the novels onto her desk like they were freshly slain carcasses he had just brought home from a hunt.

“Wow. That’s pretty impressive there, Mr. Bookworm.”

“Thank you. And I was looking forward to telling you what I wanted next!”

August smiled. Death had gotten more and more animated with each book he brought back. August brought a hand to her chin, mirroring his typical mannerism, "What book are you thinking?"

"War and Peace."

Her mouth dropped. "Really?"

"Yes, August. Really." Azrael spoke with more unplaced confidence than if August had just announced, in her current chemo-ridden condition, that she was about to run a marathon.

"Um... I mean..."

"Do you have it? Sorry I didn't even think to ask if —"

"No-no," she cut him off, regaining her composure. "I have it. Sorry, um, I think it's in the back of my closet somewhere. If you swing by this evening, you can have it. I would just need your help moving the boxes."

"Sure, I can do that." Azrael beamed, "I assure you that's just what these muscles are made for!" he joked, flexing his quite-literally-inexistent biceps.

August rolled her eyes for probably the 5th time since Azrael had arrived to return the books he'd borrowed. She secretly hoped she would get a 6th before he left, although she'd never tell him that directly; her mom always told her to not give positive reinforcements to negative behavior.

Death beamed, drinking in her annoyance. At last, he relented, "Seriously, though, yes, I can move them. Also, I wanted to ask, is your fridge still doing that thing?"

"Yeah, why? Are you a fridge guy now, too?"

"I am!" Azrael pushed back from the reception desk to stand at attention, "I spent last night with a handy-man YouTube playlist and a dream and emerged fully qualified to fix your fridge," he winked, flashing his flirtatious, lambent grin once again.

And there it was – the 6th eye roll. "You can try again if you want. But my dad said he'd look at it when he's in town next week."

Death shrugged, "I suppose that's fair enough. I'll give it my best shot."

"Speaking of things you're helping me with..." August bit her lip, "The Farmer's Market season starts on Saturday."

"Yes." Azrael leaned forward over the reception desk. His voice lowered back to his old, reverent seriousness, "I promise, August, I will be there."

August nodded but twisted her pen in her hands regardless. The start of the Farmer's Market season just barely overlapped with her last chemotherapy session. August didn't want to take the season off, but she was going to be too sick to do it on her own. After taking a leave of absence for her second job and taking several steps backwards in her bookstore down-payment savings, August was desperate to keep her market booth, and disastrously, the market rules required her to sign up either for the whole season or not at all. Of course, she was thankful for all the help Azrael had given her thus far and was even more grateful that he had offered to help her run the booth. But she was still worried. For one thing, she didn't know how much help he would be; thus far, she was the only person she knew who could see Azrael day-to-day. She didn't know why that was but it would mean she would have to manage the customers. August's mouth went dry. At least Azrael could help with setting up the booth and managing the inventory, which would have been impossible to do on her own, and since Azrael was so cold, it would be nice to have him around if August had a heat flash. But if she got too tired to stay at the booth to--

"August. August, hey, look at me." Azrael took her chin, tilting her face back to meet his, "I know this is a lot right now. Just take a breath for me, okay? I promise I will be there. You can take as many breaks as you need."

She nodded, pretending to be soothed so that she could change the subject, "I'm borrowing Dylan's truck for all the booth stuff. I'll need your help to load it around 7. Then we can ride together."

Chapter 4

As promised, Azrael was waiting in front of the storage unit. He waved to August as she pulled up, then pointed to the little-free-library that was posted just outside the complex (and looked suspiciously identical to the one in the nursing home). “Was this you?” he mouthed.

August blushed, shrinking to hide behind the steering wheel.

Azrael loaded the needed boxes of books, two collapsible tables, three portable display bookshelves, an espresso machine, an extension cord, and a white canopy. They rode together, chatting about their recent reads, the upcoming market, and August’s plans now that her season of chemo was nearly up.

The market was hosted on a side street running alongside the Sandusky River, the sound of which was currently drowned out by the bustle of the assiduous vendors. The Midwestern summer was already pairing with the humidity to produce the calescent, sticky air that was known for being the very thing that kept the housing prices so low in this belt of the country.

The town was tiny, but its market was comparatively huge. The local demographic was of the newlywed-or-nearly-dead variety; the old homes housed old people that kept the luxury retirement center August worked at in business, and a small University brought in just enough twenty-somethings to keep the area diverse. The market turnout was perhaps because it was the only thing to do within 15 miles or perhaps because the small-town culture had instilled an innate desire in its residents to support local businesses. In any case, August was grateful.

One booth housed a musician who was already starting her set. August recognized the singer from one of the local music festivals her sister had dragged her to a few years ago but she couldn’t remember the singer’s name. Azrael danced to her opening music so disastrously that August was grateful she was the only one who could see him. Even still, she hurried Azrael along, dying from secondhand embarrassment anyway.

Beyond the musician were lines of food trucks, some of which drove in from neighboring cities. The trucks’ deep-fried smell enveloped the market, mixing with the humidity to create a permeating festival air.

Their booth was adjacent to a produce vendor, Amy, who currently only had microgreens since it was still so early in the season. To their right was a local florist who'd already set out dozens of bouquets. August recognized some of the arrangement styles as ones she had gotten from local friends and neighbors following her diagnosis. It made sense – there weren't many other flower shops in town.

Azrael set up the tables and unloaded the boxes while August arranged the books along the display shelves. She had also put together a few "bookish mystery bags" in brown sacks, which she set strategically throughout the displays. Then she put together their coffee station: a secondhand espresso machine, a batch of cold brew she had made the night before, a box of cups and lids, an assortment of homemade syrups, and a cooler with ice and gallons of milk. They worked together to line the canopy with fairy lights and a few fake hanging plants. Given Azrael's help for the season, she opted for fake plants instead of the real ones she'd used last year. As for the lighting, it was unnecessary for the bright summer morning, but it fit the aesthetic they were going for.

"I think that's almost everything," Azrael said, walking back from the truck with a large display that August didn't remember owning.

"What's this?"

"Oh. Um..." Azrael bit his lip as a twinge of pink crept up along his jaw, "I made it for the booth. This is what you wanted to call the bookstore, right?"

"The Aurelian Library" was lettered on the board in intricate, white chalk lines interwoven with dazzling, gold, glitter accents.

August brought a hand to her mouth. She exhaled. "Oh my God. Really? Oh my God this is perfect. Azrael, thank you so much!" She rushed past the sign, throwing her arms around him.

"Wait-" Azrael yelped, stepping back.

"What is it?" August recoiled, her stomach twisting at his reaction.

“Oh, God. Sorry. It’s not like that – I mean it’s not a big deal, it’s just...” Azrael sighed, his minted, icy breath kissing August like the draft from a walk-in freezer. He ran a hand through his hair, wincing as he eyed her up and down, “It’s just the glitter kind of gets everywhere.”

It was then that August finally noticed the glitter residue coating Azrael’s fingers, his T-Shirt, his jeans, and his sneakers. The sparkles also lined the underside of his jaw —exactly along the route that he would typically stroke with his thumb when he was nervous or in thought. And now, with his most-recent gesture, it was also in his hair.

August looked down to find her own outfit now tainted with glitter as well, dusting her shorts, her blouse, her Van’s, and everywhere in between.

She laughed – full, deep, cleansing belly-laughed. It was met with a second hug – this time from Azrael now that the glitter situation was already futile. Azrael was freezing, of course, and he smelled like cinnamon and evergreens. She thought she could hear his heart skip a beat as it pounded in her ear. August leaned into him for longer than she should have, her breath catching from either the heat dissipating from Azrael’s chill or her ever-most clandestine thoughts inching their way forward in her mind.

With cleaning wipes and misplaced hope, they scrubbed themselves as best as they could, emerging just as glitter coated as if they had never tried to clean up at all. At last, they gave up and August set the sign in front of their booth while Azrael took one last trip to the truck.

Meanwhile, the early-morning customers began filing through the market. Most of them passed her stand entirely, but a surprising number stopped to browse. August began the typical canned customer service routine when Azrael’s voice mixed in with hers, thick and velvety and warm.

“Becky Chambers? I think we do have at least one novella by her back in storage. I’ll make sure to bring it next week. If you’re looking for a new author to check out, though, I’d recommend this one. The plot is a bit typical for the genre, so I’ll admit I did guess the ending, but the characters are diverse and not always easy to root for, which I think makes it more interesting.”

August’s mouth dropped. Azrael had put in contacts that covered even the blacks of his eyes and wore an arm-length casing to look like he had prosthetic arms and hands. He completed the transaction with the short, middle-aged woman, thanking her for her patronage, then turned to August to hand her their newly acquired cash.

“What the heck?” she mouthed.

Azrael smiled, mouthing “I’ll explain later” before turning to the next person in line.

From there the market activity picked up – first with a small rush of older market enthusiasts who came before the noonday heat could set in, and next with a smaller but consistent trickle of younger University students. They admittedly didn’t buy as much – possibly because their wallets were already tuition-sapped, or their time was already consumed by textbooks instead. In any case, Azrael and August settled into a steady dance of transactions and coffee making.

In fact, August was mid-sale when her sister flew into her arms, filling August’s face with strawberry blonde curls and her nose with Lydia’s signature flowery perfume. It was still a pleasant scent, but admittedly smelled different now as a side-effect of the chemo.

“Oh my God look how cute this stand is! You guys did such a good job! This is darling!” Lydia jumped, squealing, “I’m so proud of you!”

August smiled, bending down to hug her niece and nephew, “Thank you. What are you guys doing here?”

“We came to help. I was going to tell you, but I didn’t want you to count on me just in case I couldn’t make it with the kids, but it looks like you already have help anyway.” Lydia spoke with an eyebrow raised, alternating her gaze between August and Azrael.

“Yes. This is my friend, Azrael,” August gestured, very selectively choosing her facial expressions to plead the fifth to Lydia’s non-verbal line of questioning.

“Azrael. Wow. Is that a foreign name? Where are you from?” Lydia reached out to shake Azrael’s prosthetic hand, eyes churning upwards to meet his. With the scleral contacts in place, his eyes were a dark chocolate brown and perfectly passable.

Azrael shook his head, “I grew up on a sugar beet farm in Michigan. My parents are just... a little creative with names, I suppose.”

“Oh. So how did you two meet?” Lydia kept her candy-sweet smile plastered on her face, trying to hide the sister-warranted interrogation hiding behind her questions.

“We met at work.”

“Oh, are you one of the CNAs?”

Azrael’s head swept to the side, “Sort of. I work in hospice care. I specialize in pre-and-post-mortem care.”

Lydia winced, “Yeesh.” She licked her lips, clearly just as unsettled by uncomfortable subject matter as her younger sister. “And your parents... are they still in Michigan, then?”

Azrael shook his head, “No, they passed several years ago.”

“Oh my God I’m so sorry! How old are you? That seems so early.” Lydia tugged on her ear, vexed by the lack of light-hearted subject matter available.

Azrael nodded, “I’m 27. And thank you.”

Evan spoke up, interrupting Lydia’s line of questioning with his own, “Why are your arms grey?”

“These are prosthetics,” Azrael knelt to show them off. “These are things people can use if they don’t have arms of their own.”

Evan squinted, “Why don’t you have arms of your own?”

Lydia pulled Evan’s shoulder to scold him, but Azrael raised a hand to stay her.

"No, it's okay. I was born like this." Azrael spun his wrists to show off the prosthetic components. They were silicone with carbon fiber accents, and appeared to have all the joints and complexities that would be used in actual prosthetics. "You're Evan, right? August has told me all about you!"

Evan nodded, "I'm Evan. I'm August's nephew. This is my mom," he said, pulling on Lydia's pant leg. "My mom bought me a dinosaur bike yesterday. It's blue and green and has a velociraptor on the front. I want to ride my bike to school but Mom says it's too far. I'm going to go to 1st grade," he said, holding his index finger up, "This is Katie. She's my sister but she's too little to go to 1st grade."

Azrael's grin widened, "Is that right?"

"Yeah. She's going to go to preschool someday but that's not as hard as first grade. Oh! And guess what! Yesterday we went to the library, and I brought a dinosaur toy whose mouth opens and closes so it can eat people," Evan made a crashing sound, throwing one hand against the other to imitate his toy dinosaur.

"What color is it?" Azrael leaned his head against his hands, settling in for the long haul in a mildly uncomfortable squat.

With Azrael occupied, Lydia elbowed August in the stomach. "Who is he?" she whispered.

"Just a friend" August mouthed, giving Lydia another challenging glare.

After confirming she had enough help and following a specifically long story about the service dog they saw yesterday at the library from Evan, as well as a particularly intense tantrum from Katie, Lydia left again.

Exactly 17 minutes later, August's phone vibrated with several omg-who-is-he-tell-me-everything texts from her sister.



"I'm so confused," August said, cleaning the espresso machine for the third time. She bathed in the coffee smell as often as she could. She had worried the beans would smell different after she started chemo. They didn't, and August couldn't have been more grateful. It was nearly lunch time, so the crowd had died down near their booth, clustering instead around the food truck lines at the other end of the street. There wasn't anyone within earshot, but August kept her voice down anyway. "People can see you. Like *see you*..."

Azrael set down the street corn he had bought from one of the vendors, "Only those who I want to see me can see me." He seemed less concerned about being heard but spoke softly anyway to match August's tone. The Elote had dusted his nose and chin in chili powder, which looked even more ridiculous given the glitter he already had on his face.

"Then why have I always been able to see you?"

Azrael licked his lips and paused. He wiped his face on his arm. "I guess because I wanted you to see me," he said, tracing his jawline with his thumb, "This life can be... lonely sometimes. And I needed a friend."

The last sentence hung in the air a little too heavily. Azrael ran his hand through his still-glittery hair, undercutting his answer with a subject change, "But hey, my grand entrance into society gave me an excuse for a new look," he posed, flexing his prosthetics and looking left and right to show off his scleral contacts.

August rolled her eyes, "Yeah, but you keep forgetting to breathe." August stepped forward, squinting, "Can you even see through those things?"

Azrael shrugged, "Yeah, I can see enough, but seriously, do they look okay? I'm worried if the black shows through around the edges."

August pressed her thumb against Azrael's chin, tilting his face down toward her. "No, I can't see the black at all. I like your actual eyes better, obviously. But I suppose these do look a little less *undead*."

She expected him to scoff at the term but was surprised to see a smile sweep along his face instead. "You like my eyes?"

Her eyebrows raised, "Of course I do! Don't you?"

Azrael blinked a few times, perhaps just to re-adjust to the contacts, "I mean... No. Not really. They kind of stand out."

August paused at this, "Well I like them," she finally muttered.

Azrael bit his lip as his eyes searched hers. A cluster of market patrons headed back their way, food-truck goodies in hand. August shifted the subject again, removing her hand from Azrael's face to re-stock their espresso beans, and firmly re-cutting the tension. "Did you mean that stuff about growing up in Michigan?"

Azrael nodded, "Not in this life, obviously. But in my time *actually* alive, that's where I was."

"And you guys were sugar farmers?"

"Yeah. It was a good life for what it was, and so was my time on the on the other side." Azrael shrugged. He gestured to the river behind them, to the market, and to August, "but to be honest, I much prefer my life now."

Chapter 5

“Hey! How did the Market go today? Are you going to answer my texts? Who is that guy? He’s totally your type – you know, all dark and lanky and stuff. What’s his weird name again?”

Azrael cleared his throat from the other end of the phone line. “Hey, Lydia. “

Lydia gasped, “Oh, shit.”

Azrael laughed, “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it. I get it all the time.”

Lydia groaned, “God, I’m so sorry. But also, why the hell are you on August’s phone?”

“He’s not,” August chimed in, “You’re just on Bluetooth. We’re on our way to return Dylan’s truck.”

“Dylan?”

“Yeah, he’s Mark’s son.”

“Mark like your landlord, Mark?”

“Yup. Dylan’s not using it while he’s in college, so Mark’s letting me use it on weekends for the market.” The simple fact that Dylan’s truck could even run was a marvel. The passenger door no longer opened, the gas gauge and speedometer were always several degrees off, the gear shift was finicky at best, and the windshield wipers were completely torn off. The seating consisted of one long bench that stretched the width of the cab. It had been reupholstered with designs that were vaguely Native American, which complimented the dream catcher and feathers hanging from the rear-view mirror but clashed with the flames painted on the front hood. In all fairness, however, the flames clashed with everything, not just the seats. The engine rattled like it was falling apart, but when she called Dylan to ask about it, he told her that was normal. August turned down the heat, which remarkably worked, so she could hear Lydia over the noise, “What do you need, Lyd?”

“Well... I was wondering if you would be free Monday evening. And, you know, healthy enough –”

“I can’t plan how I’ll be feeling,” August interjected, a hiss of frustration escaping with her reply. Azrael gave her hand a quick squeeze then returned it to the steering wheel. August flushed. “Sorry, I just meant we can plan on something, but I just can’t promise –”

“I know, I know. It’s just... I have a date and I was wondering if you’d be available to watch the kids.”

August exhaled. “I don’t know. Monday would be the day before my last treatment so theoretically I should be okay, but I don’t want to commit and end up feeling too sick.”

“What if your friend, Azar – um – Ozzy – Came with you?”

August muted the phone, “Would you want to come with me to babysit?”

Azrael shrugged, “Sure!”

She unmuted, “Yeah, we can do that.”

“Oh my God you’re seriously the best! Okay so she said she’ll pick me up at seven. Can I pick you up at six to give me time to get ready?”

“Sure.”

“I owe you big time! Thank you thank you thank you! I love you so much!”

“Love you too. See you Monday.”

The phone clicked.



Lydia's car was clearly once nice before it was subjected to years of abuse by toddlers and children, but August, who didn't even own a car, was not one to judge. The front passenger seat wasn't too bad, of course, but Azrael's conditions were more intense; squished in the middle-back between two oversized car seats, holding his knees to his chest and listening to Even droll on about the helicopter they saw this morning while Lydia poked his face with a slobber-covered finger. Luckily, it was only a ten minute drive from August's studio to Lydia's home. Lydia filled this time easily by updating them on Evan and Katie's current bedtime routines.

Lydia's house was old which was reflected in the home's unique layout, tight stairwells, and oversized sunroom. Lydia adored it. She made the home her own with selective remodels and complimentary décor that mixed vintage statement pieces with an overarching mid-century modern aesthetic. The house was overflowing with life, mostly from living plants, but also from selective color and adornment choices that seemed to give the home a soul of its own. Lydia patted Azrael's shoulder as they entered the mudroom, "Ozzy, will you stay down here with Evan and Lydia? August and I are going to go upstairs to curl my hair."

"Sure. Hey. Um. August," Azrael held a plastic smile, but lingered awkwardly between the garage and the main living room. His eyes were darting around the living room like it held a sleeping dragon. August's heart skipped a beat.

The plants.

"You coming, Aug?" Lydia was already halfway up the stairs.

"Yeah. Hey, can I move your plants outside real quick?"

Lydia stopped short, "What?"

“Yeah. Azrael has allergies and sometimes he doesn’t respond well to some of the flowers and stuff.” August’s mind raced. She knew her limits when it came to lying to her sister, and she was coming dangerously close to the edge of them.

Lydia’s brows furrowed, “I mostly get the air purifying ones, so I don’t really have a lot of flowers. Like this one’s Aloe Vera. I don’t think he would—”

“They’re really bad allergies. I just don’t want to take any chances. That ok?”

“Sure. Whatever. I’ll meet you upstairs.”

August breathed a sigh of relief. There were precisely 19 plants in Lydia’s living room and 6 more in the kitchen. There was barely enough room for all of them on Lydia’s back patio and August was thoroughly out of breath after all the trips.

“Thank you” Azrael mouthed, stepping across the mudroom threshold, finally free of possible verdure murder. He and Evan dove into the stash of cars together in the living room while Katie toddled aimlessly nearby, sucking on the head of a Barbie.

Upstairs, Lydia was well into curling her hair with two different outfit choices waiting for her on her bed. August sat on the rim of the tub so she could watch her sister through the reflection in the mirror.

“So... are you going to tell me about this guy or what?”

August shrugged, “There’s nothing to tell,”

“Lies.”

“No, really. We’re just friends. We’ve been friends for like 7 years.” August rubbed the back of her neck.

Lydia’s eyes narrowed, “Then why am I just now meeting him?”

August shrugged, "Because we used to not hang out outside of work and now we do."

"And you guys seem to get along."

August nodded, "We do."

"And...?" Lydia raised a brow.

August shook her head, "No, it's not like that. Like, he's amazing but he's not –" August stopped herself, not knowing how to finish her sentence.

"He's not what? He's cute," Lydia grimaced, "– well, your type of cute."

August exhaled, "It's not that. It's just..." The banter was expected from someone like her sister, and it didn't bother her, necessarily, but it introduced ideas that, even in the privacy of her own mind, August didn't allow herself to entertain. It was like Lydia was blatantly opening the door to a room August had left locked, and now all she had to do was wander inside. August bit the insides of her cheeks, rubbing her temples, "I don't think he would be interested."

Lydia smirked, "And if he was?"

"Then... Then I don't know!" August raised her hands, trying to diminish the frustration building in her voice, "I mean yeah, *if* he was, then, I mean, sure. But Jesus, Lyd, it's just been so nice to have *someone* around for once while I'm going through arguably the hardest thing I've ever had to go through or will ever have to go through in my life and I don't want to ruin it with turning our whole – whatever it is – into something it's not."

Lydia cringed, setting down her curling iron.

August sighed, "Oh God, I'm sorry, Lyd. I didn't mean – Of course you've been there too, it's just..." August hugged herself. She wanted to disappear.

"It's fine, Aug. And you're right," Lydia turned around, taking August's gaze, "I haven't made a good enough effort to be there for you. I just didn't want to force you to have us over when the kids can be so overwhelming for you, but I guess that just translated into us never coming around at all." Lydia swallowed, "But I really am sorry."

August's smile didn't quite meet her eyes, but she nodded, "It's okay. Thank you. And *I'm* sorry. I didn't... I didn't mean it like that."

"I know, honey, I know." Lydia said, pulling August into a hug. August could only compare a hug from Lydia to a hug from her mom. Her older sister's arms felt like returning to her childhood home. Lydia was always warm, and she smelled of flowers and citrus.

"You're just lucky I haven't put on mascara yet," Lydia whispered, pulling away to brush a tear from her eyes. "I don't ever want you to feel like I'm making your cancer all about me. But sometimes I just get so scared. I'm not trying to avoid you, it's just..."

"I get it," August replied, and she really did. This time her smile was genuine, "It'll be okay, Lyd. I promise."

Lydia nodded as she continued to wipe tears from her face, "Am I still allowed to watch you ring the bell tomorrow even though I've been a shitty sister?"

August crossed her arms, scoffing, "You'd better come. I've been telling the nurses all about how cute Katie is and they all want to meet her."

Lydia laughed, "Sometimes I wonder if that's the only reason why Jordyn wants to go out with me."

"Wait, has she already met the kids?"

"Oh no," Lydia shook her head, "But I showed her some pictures. Which dress should I wear?"

"The blue one. But not with those shoes. Do you still have your other flats?"

"I think so. Let me check," Lydia bit her lip, "And, August... please don't tell Mom and Dad about Jordyn when they get here tomorrow."

August's brows furrowed, "Lyd, they already know you're bi—"

"It's not that." Lydia sighed, "I know this makes me a hypocrite since I just finished grilling you over Ozzy, but this is just a first date and I don't want anything to feel rushed with the kids... And you know Mom's gonna ask all these questions. I just want the space to take things slow, you know?"

August pursed her lips, "Yeah, that does make you a hypocrite. But yes, we'll keep quiet."

Lydia smiled. "Thank you. Now for tonight, I ordered a pizza for you guys but let me show you where the snack bin is in the pantry just in case."

Azrael and the kids were still in the living room when they got downstairs. Azrael roared, stomping dramatically towards Evan with his arms outstretched. Katie giggled, bouncing along on his shoulders.

Chapter 6

“Alright, huddle up! Evan, you and August will be on a team. Then me and Katie –”

“No way!” Evan cried, raising his arms, “August is too big! She can’t hide anywhere! I want Katie on my team!”

“Okay fine, but you have to help her look with you, okay? And you hid last so now it’s me and August’s turn.”

Evan nodded, turning to August “We’re only counting to thirty – even though I actually know how to count way higher than that!”

Azrael knelt to see Evan at eye level, “Last ground rules. No going into your mom’s room – her curling iron might still be hot and I don’t want Katie to get hurt, okay?”

August chimed in, “And no bathrooms – Lydia said Katie will try to play in the toilet water.”

Evan waved his hands, “Okay, okay now go hide! One! Two! Three...”

Evan covered his eyes, clearly peeking through his fingers, which effectively removed the living room and adjoining kitchen as suitable hiding options. August and Azrael bolted upstairs. She ran into Lydia’s room while Azrael ran to Evan’s.

Lydia’s room was simple. She had recently moved from her crib to a floor bed, which was exciting on its own but not a fantastic realization in the current context. The only other notable furniture was her dresser, which was nestled inside her closet. August might have been able to hide on top of it, except it was covered in clothes and clutter.

“Ten. Eleven. Twelve...”

August ran back through the hall, bypassing the bathroom and into Evan's room. He had a few boxes under the bed. It would take some adjusting to hide. She mentally bookmarked it for her next turn when she might have enough time.

"Fifteen. Sixteen..."

She slipped into Evan's closet, nearly tripping over a Hot Wheels track on the way in. It was certainly not meant to be a walk-in, and the closet floor was crowded with toys.

"You're on my toes," Azrael whispered, his icy breath grazing her face.

August jumped, "I didn't even see you!"

He smiled, "Good. Now, don't blow my cover."

August grabbed the clothing rail to keep her balance, then jumped at how frozen the metal was.

"Shh!" Azrael scolded her.

August scoffed. "It's not my fault you've frozen the whole closet," she chided. She kicked a few toys to try to make room to stand, but they also had nowhere to go.

"You're being too loud. You're going to give us away."

August clicked her tongue, "You're so dramatic. He hasn't even started looking." She shifted again, bracing against the closet wall this time to keep her balance. "God, it's cold in here. I can't find anywhere to stand."

Azrael shifted his feet, bushing a few toys aside, "Put a foot here."

August slid her foot next to his, leaning on Azrael to find her balance. His chest was solid, freezing, and perfectly still.

“You’re forgetting to breathe again.”

“Isn’t this the exact use case where not breathing is the perfect advantage?”

“Azrael, he’s six.”

August could feel Azrael’s chin brush against her wig as he shook his head, “You don’t understand, August. He’s good. Really good. We played a few rounds while you and Lyd were talking.”

“Where did you hide last—”

“Ready or not here we come!” Evan’s footsteps rumbled through the house as he climbed the stairs. Katie giggled as she trailed behind.

“He cheated,” August whispered.

Azrael nodded, brushing his chin against her head again, “I know.” August’s teeth began to chatter.

Azrael sighed, “I’m sorry about the cold,” he whispered.

“It’s fine,” she whispered back, shuttering between words. Her chattering grew louder as the temperature continued to drop.

Azrael tipped her chin upwards, then cupped her face in his hands. He held her jaw too softly to stop the noise completely, but it did soften the sound.

August rolled her eyes. “He’s. Six.”

“Yes and he’s going to win if we’re not quieter.”

Evan cleared Katie’s room, then the bathroom (forgetting the no bathrooms rule). He flew open his door with a thud. He checked under his bed, pushing several boxes aside to make sure. Meanwhile, Katie grabbed at the handle on the closet door.

Chapter 7

“Azrael. My dad’s going to be here in like half an hour. I’m telling you, just *wait*,” August urged, sitting on the Formica kitchen counter and chucking a popcorn kernel at Azrael’s head.

Azrael sat up from his hunched-over nest of tools and parts he’d amassed from single-handedly taking apart August’s fridge – plus the spare parts he’d accumulated from the 19 trips to Lowe’s he’d racked up in the meantime. “That’s exactly why I need to fix it *now*,” he chided, hovering back over the compressor fan before being pelted in the ear by another piece of popcorn.

“Wait a minute,” August hopped off the table and crouched down, “Are you trying to *impress* my dad?”

“N-no. No. It’s just a matter of principle.”

August rolled her eyes. “Oh my God. You *are*!” August’s parents were coming into town to watch as she rang the bell. Admittedly, the celebration felt misplaced somehow. After all, August didn’t feel any better yet. In fact, she still felt just as sick, weak, and horrible. But nevertheless, her parents had plane tickets booked and Olive Garden reservations set for this evening.

August left Azrael in the kitchen and retreated to her own messy project in the living room. Piles of books were strewn about, each waiting to be photographed by an ad-hoc photography station consisting of a giant, white sheet, every lamp she’d ever owned, and a hand-me-down camera. The process was arduous; each book had to be photographed, the photos had to be uploaded, edited, and finally published to her website. Every 10 minutes or so she would find an excuse to take a break – typically involving a snack or a glass of water or an excuse to be obnoxious, all of which would send her meandering back to Azrael’s desultory stretch of kitchen floor.

August had just finished photographing her gently used copy of Frankenstein when a small buzzing emerged from the kitchen, followed by a cheer from Azrael.

“I got it! August, I got it!” He ran to the living room, lifting August by the waist and spinning her in circles. At first, she let her legs dangle under her as she braced her hands on his shoulders. Then her feet nearly knocked over one of the lamps, so she adjusted, wrapping her legs around his waist.

Azrael spun again, cheering just loud enough to drown out the sound of the front door opening.



“It’s Azrael, right?” Wendy asked, peering at Azrael through the rear-view mirror. After meeting her yes-just-a-friend friend when walking in on their not-just-a-friend display, it had been a thus-far unadroitly silent ride together to the treatment center. Her parent’s rental car was uncomfortably nice. Every inch of it was white, and August busied herself fighting off intrusive thoughts of what would happen if she threw up in this ridiculous house-down-payment car to even acknowledge the awkwardness.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Azrael was sitting upright with his hands between his knees, and August wondered if he felt the same way about the car.

“August has told me all about you and how much you’ve helped her while she’s been in treatment.” Wendy took her teary eyes off the road for just long enough to meet Azrael’s gaze directly, “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

Azrael nodded, “Thank you, Mrs. Henley.”

Wendy turned back towards the road, “We’re going to Olive Garden after August rings the bell if you’d like to join us. It’s the least we can do after all you’ve done to help our baby girl.”

Azrael nodded again, “I’d love to. Thank you.”

August's mom had brought a “Thank You” card for each of the nurses in the facility, and she cried as she handed out each one. August’s dad, Troy, had brought a few books he had just finished, and August devoured the first one during her last infusion. August didn’t love murder mysteries as much as her dad did, but she read them fervently regardless as she treasured maintaining the shared interest more than the book contents itself.

Lydia arrived with the kids just as the nurses were unhooking August for the last time, and Evan busied himself and the staff by asking about each and every medical component he saw.

August hadn't cried since her third week of treatment, and she'd inwardly taken pride in that fact. She hadn't imagined what finishing chemo would feel like, as it had never felt like it would actually end. In fact, even after ringing the bell, she would still have to deal with the side effects of this most-recent infusion, and she still had more follow-up appointments on her calendar than she could count. But, as August rang the bell, she watched her parents, her sister, and her best friend cheer with more joy than she had ever seen. And it took several moments before she realized that tears were streaming down her cheeks.

In the treatment room, August's father had said he was proud of her, and while she wasn't sure if she was proud of herself quite yet, she already felt stronger now than she had in a long time.



The Olive Garden was one town over, which gave August just enough time to fully update her parents on her most-recent doctor appointments and her follow up just-in-case screenings.

Lydia was already seated when they arrived. She was trying to answer Evan's questions about what a restaurant hostess does while helping Katie drink from a straw. After aimless chatter about who was getting what and returning their menus to the acne-coated teenage waiter, the conversation drifted to Lydia, who had so many updates for Troy and Wendy about Katie's new milestones and the funniest things Evan had said lately. August sat back, exhausted, and pleased to finally be out of the spotlight.

Wendy had just finished handing out her obligatory new-toys-from-grandma when their food arrived. It didn't smell completely different than it would have before August had started chemotherapy, which was a reassuring sign. August shook her head, trying not to wonder how long it would take for her taste to return to normal.

Wendy turned to Azrael, "So, Azrael, what are you – Catholic? Protestant? Democrat?"

"Oh! Um..." Azrael swallowed, "I mean, I am religious. But I don't really have a specific theology that aligns with—"

Wendy waved a hand, "Oh, no, that's fine dear. What I'm getting at is I typically like to pray with my family before meals. Would that be okay with you? Because if not, I'm sure Jesus would be understanding with me skipping out this one time."

Azrael smiled, "Yes, Ma'am. I would love to pray with you."

Wendy nodded, taking his hand, "Well, alright then. Darling, will you do the honors?"

Troy took August's left hand, giving it a squeeze, then Azrael took her right. He was wearing his prosthetics, of course, but the gesture reminded her of the time he squeezed her hand in the car without the prosthetics on.

As Troy prayed, August couldn't help but replay the memory in her mind again and again.

And again.

Chapter 8

“Hey Aug... Um... I might need some help.” Azrael was cupping his hands as best as he could, but the water was seeping through the cracks in his fingers regardless.

August laughed, “Guess you’ll have to keep that on your face forever.”

He squinted, cracking the clay mask around the corners of his eyes, “That’s not funny. Seriously, what should I do? I could use a cup...”

“No, no. You’ll make a mess. How do you wash your face at home?”

Azrael shrugged, “I typically just do it while I’m in the shower.”

August clicked her tongue, “That’ll take too long. Here. Um...” She cupped her hands under the faucet, then lifted it up towards Azrael. He leaned over, placing his face in the water. August had to remind herself that he didn’t need to breathe as his mouth rested against her palm, fully submerged. Finally, some of the clay began to loosen and August was able to brush it off from around his jaw with her thumbs. She lowered her hands, letting the water and clay run into the sink.

“Well that kinda worked” she said, noting the patches of clay still glued to his cheeks and forehead.

“Yes, thank you! I was worried there for a second.” Azrael rubbed at his cheek, flaking off some of the still-hardened pieces.

“Don’t you dare!” She seized his wrists. “You can’t pick it off. It’s bad for your skin. You have to wash it off.”

Azrael sighed – audibly and purposely just so he could freeze her still-damp face.

August rolled her eyes, biting back a small shiver. “Don’t be a baby. Here, let’s just do it one more time.” She cupped her hands again, holding the water over the bathroom sink.

“Next time I’m picking the self-care activity,” Azrael grumbled, lowering his face again.

“I mean aside from this one obvious flaw, this is the perfect thing. For example, the clay takes exactly one episode to harden, which is perfect. Plus, now we’re already in the bathroom for when I get nauseous.”

Still submerged, Azrael only shook his head, causing most of the water to spill from in between August’s fingers. She tested the clay along his cheeks with her thumb, then realized their brand-new predicament. “Hey, um, Az...”

He looked up to take her gaze, but his expression fell when her hands followed suit. Between the water and his icy skin, her fingers had glued to his jaw like a tongue to a flagpole. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” Azrael grumbled.

August couldn’t help but laugh. “What now? I think it’s your turn for the next bright idea.”

“We could get a hot rag—”

“Then the rag would just get stuck too.”

“The kitchen sink?”

“It’s not very deep. Do you think your head would fit under there?”

Azrael groaned. “Well we need hot water.” He glanced up, “There’s the shower...”

August shook her head. “We’d get soaked. No way. I’m wearing a white shirt.” She tugged on her wrists, feeling her skin pull.

Azrael put his hands over hers, “Don’t. Don’t even try. You’ll pull your skin off.

“At least then we’ll match,” August chirped.

Azrael clicked his tongue but didn’t laugh as he was busily scanning the room for other ideas, “We could try the kitchen sink. I bet if I contorted my head I would fit.”

August winced.

“Or... I mean....” Azrael winced back, “Or I could promise not to look?”



Azrael had to lift August to step them into the shower. “Ready?” he asked, searching her eyes.

August’s hands were beginning to burn from the cold. “Yeah, just do it.”

Azrael turned the knob, firmly shutting his eyes. It took a few moments for the water to heat up, then a few moments more for August to feel her fingers come loose. She watched Azrael, even while water dripped into her eyes, ensuring he kept his promise.

He did.

“You can look now,” August said, draping a towel over her now-soaked clothes.

Azrael beamed. “Thank heavens that worked!” he exclaimed, shaking the water from his hair.

Unlike her, Azrael hadn’t worn white. But his light blue shirt, August now realized, was made of a thinner fabric than she would have expected. His chest showed through his shirt – fully human, unlike his arms, although leaner than average, and unexpectedly handsome. August caught her breath, not at his features, she was sure, but merely at the surprise of it all.

Chapter 9

“Hello?”

“Hey. August?” His voice was coarse and graveled, like the tail end of a cold.

“Azrael? What’s going on? Since when did you get a phone?”

Azrael was gasping, his voice shaky and unsteady, “Just recently. I’m still learning how to... Hey. Um... are you... are you free? I’m sorry – I know it’s day 4...”

“I’m fine. What the hell is going on?”

“I’m—I’m at the hospital. I’m... can I come over? Just in a couple minutes?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous! I’m coming over there. I’ll see you in a few.”

“Wait, but are you sure? It’s day 4...”

“I know what freaking day it is, Az. Stay there, I’ll see you in a few.”



August straddled her bicycle, biting her lip as she mentally envisioned the distance between her home and the hospital across town. She exhaled. The route was a very reasonable distance in normal circumstances, but her chemotherapy had left her in less-than-reasonable states. She swore at her previously – healthy self who could have done this so easily.

She started, at first pedaling hesitantly, but slowly ramping up as her muscle memory kicked in. The first mile was hard; the next ones were hell. Her energy was a pitiful atrocity and it showed in the way she panted and gasped and swore. Her heart thumped in her ears. She felt dizzy. Her legs rebelled, screaming at her with every pedal stroke. Every symptom from her months of treatment was now on full display, mocking her in a parade of pathetic weakness.

August rolled into the main entrance, throwing her bike against the metal bike rack, gasping in a mess of sweat and bile. She found Azrael seated on a weathered city bench just outside the hospital's main doors, shaded under a large oak tree and surrounded by freshly groomed but now-wilted flower beds. August whimpered as she approached; an exhausted, disheveled shell of a friend trying to find enough energy to be useful again.

His robe was pulled down and tied around his waist, revealing nearly-opaque skin. His muscles, veins and sinews tapered off under his rotator cuff, leaving nothing but bones from what-should-have-been triceps down to his fingertips. His arms were wrapped around an invisible substance, gripping it against his bare chest.

Azrael was trembling. Thick, black tears streamed down his face. They formed small pools in the sickly hollows of his cheeks before racing down his neck, leaving tar-like streaks in their path. He was breathing in jagged gasps, and August tried not to look at his pulsing chest as it contorted under his erratic sobs. He glanced up to her and twitched a pained nod.

August approached and sat awkwardly on the bench. "Hey," she whispered. She reached to place her hand on the nape of his neck. She could finally make out the small, sleeping bundle he held in his arms. It was nearly invisible but gleamed lightly like clear water in sunlight.

It was the soul of a baby.

August gasped.

Azrael clutched the infant tighter in another messy sob. He was holding her skin-to-skin, the way most parents would with their tiny newborns. August turned back towards the hospital doors, wondering about the baby's parents who, at that moment, must have been grieving their stillborn.

"What's their name?" She asked, returning her gaze to Azrael's pained, haunting eyes.

"Eleanor." He whispered, stroking back small tufts of hair from her tiny forehead. She had thick, gossamer hair that glimmered against Azrael's white thumbs like intricate gatherings of spider webs. Azrael's tears dripped down the sides of his nose as he pulled up layers of his black cloak to cover her. "She had... her lungs... she couldn't breathe," he finally whispered between rasps, resting his dry, pallid lips on the tip of her head. Eleanor squirmed, snuggling feebly into his chest.

August sat, watching helplessly as Death continued to cry. "I'm so sorry, Azrael," she finally whispered, aghast at how unhelpful she was being, but she wondered if perhaps that was the harsh reality of Azrael's pitiful existence; In dealing with the most un-fixable situations, there would be no cures to be found for his grief, only powerless, exhausted company. August held the hair along the back of Azrael's neck, resting her head on his unbelievably uncomfortable shoulder. His head tilted to rest on hers as they sat together in a grief-stricken heap. At length, Azrael's haphazard sobs slowed into a silent, heavy stillness.

A silent half hour passed before Azrael began to tell August about Eleanor's parents: about the nursery they had made in their small, two-bedroom flat; about the shitty factory job Jacob had taken during Alicia's 2nd trimester because of the insurance benefits; about the complications Alicia had during her pregnancy and the haunting diagnosis they faced during their 20 week ultrasound; about the small sliver of hope that survived that Eleanor still might make it; and about today-- that Eleanor's aunt, Talia, who had passed away 10 years prior, would be here soon to take her.

Surely enough, after another half hour, another iridescent presence approached the small bench. Death spoke softly with her, invoking his reverent, careful presence that August recognized he would always use with his patients at the nursing home. He delicately updated Talia on the condition of her sister and brother-in-law: on Alicia's labor and delivery; on the state of their grief; on the precious 45 minutes they had with their Eleanor; on Death's opinion after caring for her that Eleanor preferred to sleep skin-to-skin on her guardian's chest rather than in a cradle or football hold; on the tentative dates he had overheard regarding funeral arrangements; and on the resources he had already personally put together for Eleanor's great grandmother to help care for this new, tiny soul on their side of eternity.

Finally, and with great care, Death swept the sleeping Eleanor from his arms to hers, and Talia, with a thank you and a bow, faded back into the ethereal air.

Azrael wilted. His reverent persona was now masking his grief, but August could see through his balletic façade as he stood in front of her - bare and hollow and grieving. At length he untied his robes from his

waist and returned them to his shoulders. His bony fingers tossed his hood over his head, and he approached August once again.

“Thank you, my friend. Today was... Difficult. And I very much appreciated your company.”

August flew her arms around his waist, pulling Azrael into a tight, freezing hug as she wiped her snotty tears into the cloak on his chest.

He returned the embrace, resting his chin against her hairless head. His arms clacked against each other as they encircled her shoulders.

Chapter 10

August laughed as she took a rag to the sink to dampen it. The sink was empty today and freshly polished. Azrael had taken the time to clean it last night after he did the dishes.

"I guess I should clarify here," Death stammered, trying not to move as the goo slid down his fingers, "When I said I knew how to crack an egg, I suppose I meant that I did, at one point, know how to crack an egg. But that was nearly a century ago so I must have lost the muscle memory."

"And the muscles," August observed. She tapped the side of Azrael's waist, "Turn this way."

He did, and she began to wipe the joints of his fingers, one by one. The process was tedious, and perhaps much more intimate than either of them had suspected it would be. "How old *are* you?" August asked, cutting the silence but refusing to look up to Azrael and instead keeping her eyes intently locked on their intertwined hands.

Azrael's lips pursed, pensive. "It depends on how you do the math, I suppose. I typically say 27 because that's the time I've spent as a reaper, so it just feels the most accurate. I was born in 1902, so in that sense I'm over a century. But most of the time between then and now, I wasn't earth-side, so I don't think they count.

August finished cleaning, and then for good measure repeated the process once again. It felt all at once necessary to preserve the touch for as long as she could, and she assured herself it was due to the need for cleanliness since she was still technically immunocompromised.

"What made you decide to become a reaper?" she whispered, still keeping her eyes obdurately fixed on his hands rather than his face, and the subject matter inexorably focused on anything besides the inconveniently indecorous thoughts that were piling up along the back of her mind.

“Have you ever thought about eternity, August?” His breath traced its way down her jaw as he spoke, suddenly whispering as if his response were a secret not even the birds outside could hear.

Against her intentions, the way he’d said her name coerced her gaze up to meet him. It was cold and ascetic, and the suddenly troubled expression in his eyes matched the suddenly shifted tone of his voice.

August frowned, “Not... not really, I suppose.”

Azrael paused, turning his head to think. When he spoke again, his voice was gentle and contemplative, and not unlike his typical, reverent demeanor he held when he would visit an elder at the retirement home, “Don’t get me wrong. It’s a really hard job; to be so powerless to the realities of death, and then to be responsible for shepherding a grieving soul to their new home. But I feel like I need to be down here anyway. I had a hard time adjusting to life on the other side. It’s difficult to explain, but being down here makes time less linear, I suppose. I think I like having a lifetime that has an expected end date, even if deep down I know that end date is just the start of a new cycle. Now I have this haphazard body, but it ages and withers like a normal one would. It will let me grow old and die again and I think in some way I’m meant to live like this — one lifetime at a time rather than staring down the enormity of forever all at once.”

His response had caught her off guard perhaps just as much as her question had caught him. August bit her lip, “You know, I’m proud of you, Azrael. Yes, for your work but,” she rubbed her jaw, mirroring his ever-too-common tic, “You’re allowed to be more than just a reaper, you know, and I’m happy to see you being... more.”

Azrael nodded “I hope you know how grateful I am to you for helping me get... reacquainted with that — living, I mean. It really has meant the world to me.”



Chapter 11

“August, what song is she playing over there?”

August peered up from the display stand she had been obsessively re-arranging for the third time. The crowds had died down to nearly nothing, which had given August time for her anxious, barely productive behaviors to kick in. “I don’t know. I think she mostly sings stuff she writes herself.” August paused to try to weed out the lyrics. The song was a ballad; slow and nostalgic and melancholy. Several older locals had gathered around the musician’s booth and were sitting or standing nearby to listen. The younger university students passed along slowly, but their heads turned up from their phones during the emotional chorus.

“I really like it.” Azrael’s shoulder blades met under his shirt as he leaned over the table to attempt a better view.

“Do you want to dance?” August heard herself ask. She bit her tongue, wondering how the hell that intrusive thought had made its way out before she could stop it.

Death turned around. A muscle in his jaw tightened. A pink flush built all the way up to his ears. A soft smile spread to his eyes, unguarded and engulfing. “I’d love to.”

Azrael took her hand. His counterfeit fingers, with some awkward difficulty, interlaced with hers. Even through the plastic casing, she could feel the wintery exudation from his arms. Or perhaps it was from the rest of him – which was now astonishingly close. August’s palm traced along the texture of his shirt before finding a home in the axis between his neck and collar bone. She could tell by the lack of movement that Azrael was holding his breath. She could hear him swallow – in fact, she could follow the trail of it down to the hollow of his throat. His arm found her side, thumb bracing against her hip bone. For a moment she was frozen, both from Azrael and from the twist in her chest reveling its way through her stomach and into her legs. *What on earth was she doing?*

Azrael exhaled. His hand rocked against her waist, guiding her into a gentle sway, and the avidity alone impelled her to follow. Slowly, delicately, they began to dance.

Time passed. The chorus folded into a second verse. At last Azrael spoke. "Am I doing this right?" He whispered, "I mean, is this still how people dance?"

August chuckled, "For ballads, yes, but there's a lot more jumping up and down for the faster ones."

Azrael shrugged, "That seems straightforward enough. I really think I'm starting to get the hang of this twenty-first century thing."

August rolled her eyes, "You're not allowed to say that until you can send a full text message by yourself."

Azrael sighed, "I guess that means I'll never get to say it, then."

"No? Are you that unconfident about it?"

"I bet I could," Azrael said, smiling, "but I think I prefer it when you help me."
