

The Cockroach Priest

Lucien spends the first several millennia of his awareness looking to humanity for amusement. He thinks mortals are funny and admires their questioning nature. And yet, as he is called to answer for his prideful intellect in court, he speaks only the truth. He has always been guilty. He is no longer amused when those he thought to be friends line up to assist in ripping his wings off.

“It’s all right,” he says in a moment of reprieve. In every direction there are wide smiles. This is what they look to for delight.

Each feather must be removed individually. At this rate it will not end anytime soon though, as an immortal angel, time is never truly a pressing matter. Those who are not helping in his mutilation are laughing. Good. It blocks out his screams well.

Once his back is bare, he is sent back to work for a brief moment. It is a demeaning job mentally speaking, but every job for angels is demeaning in some way or another. Though supposedly a few lucky souls get to be creative and forge miracles. He gets an endless ledger of predetermined actions for humanity that he has to balance for all its virtues and sins using a large abacus. Beads go left for sin, right for virtue. He is told that this is accounting.

He slides a couple beads over to the left and flinches at a phantom pain where his wings used to be. The lack of change in his cubicle is maddening. Sure, heaven itself is nice enough, clouds and all that. The wings were nice too, though they do lose their charm after the third millennia or so. Not that he needs to worry about that anymore. He had gotten too good at this job. The beads practically spoke to him as they sprang back and forth. So he moves faster and faster until the ledger is moving ahead of schedule.

Until he is practically doing God's work before God gets the chance to do it.

Unacceptable pride. And yet, despite the ramifications, Lucien does not regret the choices he makes.

Not in this millennia or the next.

"Lucien!" He turns at the echo of his name. Nothing. "Lucien!" Now he can hear the wings approach. It's one of the messengers, Greg.

He nods in greeting. Pleasant.

"History still running on course?"

"I just balance the books," he points up. "He does the real stuff."

At the mention of god, Greg bows low. Lucien does not.

"You have a new assignment," Greg says.

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

For a moment he thinks the messenger might be joking. "Right." The attempt at humor is strained. He turns back to the abacus; after all, it wouldn't do to miss something.

"Lucien."

"You're still here?"

"Stop. You have been reassigned."

He glances back, eyes lingering on Greg's superbly groomed wings. "And you don't know to what. I can't just wander until I find the job now can I?"

"No wandering, your new assignment is in the human plane. My purpose here is such. Go down, settle yourself."

“And then?”

“Wait for His will.”

“But what about my work here?” He waves his arms at the ledger and abacus before moving a bead to the right. And for a moment it looks as though Greg wants to laugh. He doesn’t.

“You will be replaced.”

Lucien tries to speak but his voice catches on a knot of dread in the back of his throat. “But why?” he finally whispers, “tell me what I’ve done now.”

Greg blinks, “I don’t understand.”

“Why am I being replaced?”

“It is His will.”

“But *why*?”

Something seems to click in understanding, and the messenger’s patronizing gaze is abruptly replaced with contempt. “His will is not to be questioned.” The sharp tone shocks Lucien and he can barely open his mouth before Greg continues.

“Hasten for His will, you will leave now.” As Greg readies himself for flight he says, “Lucien, you have learned much of sin over the years. It is known that few can match your knowledge. What a shame for such expertise to be reminded of the consequences of disobedience for a second time”

It was a low blow but Lucien forces a smile. “Of course, of course, I was only joking with you.”

“Don’t”

The messenger leaves.

In seconds the floor of soft clouds opens beneath Lucien's feet and he plummets. His arrival on the mortal plane of existence is succinct and holds no given direction. It's a stark contrast to the upper hemisphere that he's used to, and his robes are far too warm. There's a small church in the distance. *How fitting.* He sits on the bench outside the church and waits, watching the sunrise peek over a nearby bridge. It looks better from heaven.

"Can I help you?" The man before him reeks of liquor. And if not for the disarming sticker on his shirt reading *Hi! My name is: Rabbi Pascal*, Lucien would have likely run off. He's never actually spoken to a human before, merely watched in admiration from afar. As such he is simultaneously terrified and intrigued. So he stares, mouth slightly agape.

Pascal smiles. "It's a bit early to look so lost my friend,"

Lucien remains silent.

"I get it, you're probably hung over as shit. I'm with you there!" He gestures to his ragged hair and the dark rings beneath his eyes. "Our monthly singles mixer was last night and let me tell you, it was crazy."

As the Rabbi begins to explain how the Jewish mother archetype perpetuates the outrageous amount of women that throw themselves at him, Lucien wonders if angels are capable of sex. And with a glance down at his stuffy robes, he considers whether or not he even has the proper plumbing. He's not really sure; he never thought to check.

"So don't worry I'm not going to judge you." Pascal points to the faded sticker on his chest before holding his hand out, "this is my congregation you're sitting in front of."

Lucien shakes the hand. "It looks like a church," he says quietly.

“He speaks!”

“Irrelevant.”

“Does he have a name?”

“Lucien.”

“Brilliant!”

“I thought this was a church.”

Pascal’s excitement falters. “Well that was kind of the point when they built it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let me put it this way, pretty much every Jewish holiday can be summarized with this: they tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat!” He laughs at his own joke. Lucien does not. “Having synagogues look like churches helps mitigate that first part.”

“Oh.”

Pascal rubs at his forehead with a pained expression. “Look, I’m in pretty desperate need of some aspirin right now. Why don’t you come inside, talk about whatever’s clearly troubling you.”

“I’d rather not.”

“What, because you’re not Jewish?”

“No.” he lies. Jews don’t believe in his breed of New Testament angels, and being at a place of worship for those who question his existence is very uncomfortable. Instead Lucien says, “I’m tired of existing.”

“Well that’s not going to solve anything.”

“That’s kind of the point.” Lucien mimics the man’s earlier statement, “I think I’d like to die.”

“No, no. That’s just silly. I mean you look like you’ve seen some shit, which is great! Now this is what I tell my congregates: if you’re not suffering, even to the point of exhaustion, then you’re not living.”

“But is it not cruel of him,” Lucien points to the sky, “to put us here to suffer?”

“Frankly I don’t think there’s anyone up there.”

“You don’t believe in God?”

“Nope.”

“But you’re a Rabbi.”

“All the more reason for me not to believe.” He shrugs, “What does a job have to do with anything?”

“I suppose it’s irrelevant, but you’re wrong.”

“Maybe not, maybe so.” Pascal grins at the sky. “And yet I still have all the answers I need.” He turns to walk into the building, shudders and drops to the ground. Lucien doesn’t have to check to know the man is dead.

He kicks the corpse.