Paul leads a mundane, depressed life. The only sunshine during his monotone days is the cute barista from Beanie's - what will he do when offered a one in a lifetime opportunity to change it all?

Notes

I wrote this for a school assignment and I took all their characters bc i loved them, but theyre also a bit OOC sometimes please forgive me
This is a complete AU and has nothing to do with musicals and zombies

See the end of the work for more notes

Paul was astounded time and time again at how the monotony of an office job could thrust him into a deep depression with such regularity. It wasn’t just the boring schedules that kept repeating over and over until they were burned into his muscle memory, so much so that he could do his tasks without even thinking about it; it was also the people around him. They were nice, but mellow, burnt-out and without an ounce of passion.

They were a daily reminder of how the life he led would never be enough.

What did he want, anyway? He had never been a guy with many goals. He hated his job, but didn’t have the determination to seek out an alternative.

So, he was stuck with tasks that repeated themselves in an endless loop, alongside people who were...
just as numb as he was.

The office was timeless. They were all where they were still going to be in ten years. Nothing ever changed here.

The only thing that could possibly make his day just a bit more bearable was being able to listen to some cheerful music. But, after the old secretary missed several calls because she couldn’t hear the phone ringing over her earbuds a few years ago, music in all forms was banned office-wide.

So, all Paul could hear around him was the clacking of the keyboards around him, phones ringing, voices talking quietly to one another and the buzzing of printers spitting out paper.

This constant static rhythm was disrupted at once by the sound of a pen falling to the ground somewhere near his left foot. Paul was absolutely ready to ignore it and continue completing his daily statistics, but the Bill’s voice from above him kept him from doing so.

“Paul, can you give me my pen?”

Paul picked it up, his back aching from being in the same position for too long as he bent down, then reached up and handed the pen back to Bills, giving him a quick smile. Bill reciprocated it with the same practiced beam and disappeared back into his cubicle.

It was almost impossible to believe, but the pen-incident had been the most thrilling thing to happen all day. He was already calling it pen-incident, dear god.

Paul’s eyes got caught on the time-display at the bottom corner of his computer screen.

Lunch-break had been two hours ago. Another two until the day was over. He needed to get out.

Paul pushed back his chair and grabbed his jacket as he stepped out of his cubicle and scanned over the heads of his focused co-workers. The only thing he had left to do was finishing the analysis which he would have been done with in another hour. He would spend that hour somewhere else.

“I’m gonna go on a coffee run, anyone want something?”, he called out, and Bill raised his hand.

“Caramel Frappuccino with extra drizzle and five shots of hazelnuts, please.”

Paul held back a groan. Emma hated doing complicated orders like these. At least they would have a laugh about it.

“Anyone else?”

“A black coffee for me”, Charlotte said on the other side of his cubicle and he nodded. No one else was saying anything, so he left with these two orders. Or rather, he tried.

Right as he was shrugging on his jacket and leaving the big office space, Ted caught him in the hallway with a mug of milk-coffee in his hand.

“Where ya goin, Paul?”, Ted asked as he sipped on his mug that said “Suck deez nuts”. It should be forbidden for the people working here to bring their own mugs to work.

“For a coffee run. You obviously don’t need anything, so-“

“Going to Beanie’s? Like always?”

Ted’s bushy eyebrows were waggling suggestively, and Paul cringed.
“Yeah, you know, they just have better coffee…”

“Instead of Starbuck’s across the street?”

God, he hated Ted. He was the definition of a sleaze ball, always making dirty and obscene comments about everything and everyone. Paul was pretty sure that Charlotte and he were sleeping together, which was a rather surprising fit. Charlotte was a mousy woman who wore cat-shirts most of the time, while Ted had taken to growing a revolting moustache for the last two years. Maybe Ted was a sweetheart under all that greasy behaviour, after all.

“Please tell me you’re finally gonna fuck that barista, Paul. I made a bet that it’ll happen during the next two weeks, and Steve is not gonna get those 15 bucks.”

Definitely not a hidden sweetheart. Paul turned on his heel and made a straight line for the exit door, ignoring Ted’s calling for a “Chai Latte, please”.

The door jingled the tune Paul had grown attached to as he entered the little café, and his heart jumped when he saw Emma behind the counter, cleaning some mugs. Her light brown hair was up in a frizzy bun and as always, she was wearing a yellow apron in unison with the café’s colour scheme. The day was slow, with only one guy in a corner who was blowing away the steam from his hot chocolate and another man in a rather large trench coat, pockets big and bulky-looking.

Paul strode over to the counter, still practising the words in his head. “Two large black coffees and a caramel frappuccin-“

“Hey, what can I getcha?”

Emma was smiling at him the way she always did, and his heart jerked again. Would she only remember him for once?

“Uuh, I, uh, so I want t-two black coffees, uh, large, and…”

Paul was stuttering through his so well-rehearsed order and it made his head burn as if his hair was going to catch fire at any moment. She shouldn’t smile at him like that.

Emma was nodding at his order as he fought his way through it, putting it into the computer and completing the process. Paul’s stutter steadily turned into a grin when Emma groaned at the Frappuccino order. He knew her reactions so well already.

“Who’s that one idiot in your office who keeps ordering these impossible drinks?”, she mumbled with her eyebrows drawn as she turned around to start preparing the orders. Paul counted out the money to pay and added a rather large tip. Maybe she would get the hint.

“That’s Bill. He likes his coffee flamboyant.”

Emma giggled. “Or so I noticed. What did he order last week again? A mocha Frappuccino with three shots of hazelnut, five shots of expresso…”

“Five shots of expresso and extra whipped cream on top but not too much, with a bit of caramel drizzle”, Paul finished laughing along with Emma, who was now preparing Bill’s drink.

The machine mixing his impossible order started rumbling and shaking, and Emma put down the two black coffees as she started counting out the money Paul had dropped on the counter. She was
about to give him the change, but he stopped her.

“It’s okay. Keep it. Like, like a tip.”

Emma’s eyes grew round. “This is a five-pound tip, are you sure?”

Paul nodded and failed at a rather charming smile. Emma leaned over to the counter, closer to him, a conspicuous grin on her lips.

“This is like, only for me, right? I don’t have to share it with the other guys or anything.”

“Oh no, you’re the only one who always serves me, it’s for you.”

Emma smiled fully now and winked at him as she stuffed it into her yellow barista coat, turning back to Bill’s coffee. Paul was beaming widely, stupidly.

“You’re in here all the time, aren’t you? What’s your name?”

“Paul. And you’re… Emma?”

He was squinting at her name tag as if he hadn’t known her name since the first day he had seen her here.

“Yeah, I’m Emma. Well, it’s nice talking to you – and here you are.”

She put down the Frappuccino and at that moment the door behind Paul jingled, announcing a new customer. It was a long-haired man in a suit, eyes glued to his phone as he walked to the counter and Paul moved aside with his cups to make space.

“One big cappuccino with five shots of hazelnut…” his order went on and Emma started putting it into the machine. Their eyes met and they shared a sly smile at the complicated order. Paul grabbed a carton to put the cups in and looked up again. Emma was giving the man his change back and her eyes flickered over to Paul.

“Bye, Paul”, she smiled apologetically as she started taking care of her new order. He scrunched up his face in what he was trying to make look like a smile and turned to leave. If that damn business guy hadn’t come in, they could still be talking…

Paul was cursing his bad luck all the way back to the office, where he ran into Ted deep into small-talk with Melissa, the secretary, in the door to the kitchen. Melissa was a pretty, young girl who was glad to have her job. She had no idea who the people around here were yet. Which explained why she was talking to Ted at all.

After distributing the coffee cups to his co-workers and finishing his statistical analysis, Paul had another last half hour until the workday was over. He spent it cleaning his desk and putting things back where they were supposed to be, like he did every day at this time. He was almost always done a bit earlier than his colleagues, which had sometimes given him the feeling that he might have more abilities than his work led him to believe.

Until he realized that he had no idea whatsoever how to make a career of the small desk-job he had, so he forgot these thoughts rather quickly. Opportunity was a rarity for his kind of person.

The only thing that had kept him going lately were his daily trips to Beanie’s to see Emma. She had been working there for a few months now, and it had happened every now and then that she wasn’t working when he entered. As such, he appreciated the days when they were able to talk so much
People around him started rustling and shuffling, and he realised that it was almost five. He got up and shrugged on his jacket, shouldering his bag and turned off his computer, continuing to stare at the seconds ticking by.

His thoughts were lost, occupied with whether he should get some take out for dinner later or attempt to cook himself – he lived alone in a stuffy little apartment somewhere downtown, a place that wasn’t really inviting. His cooking abilities were adequate, but he did like the little Chinese take-out two blocks away from the office.

“Day’s over lads, you can go home!”, Mr. Davidson, his boss, had stuck his head out of his office door on the far left of the big room and finally ended their day. Paul waited for everyone around him to have shuffled out of the door until he was left alone, staring ahead at the big clock on the wall. It was a minute after five, and he wished he had a place to go.

Instead, he was frozen in place, leaned against his desk, scanning his surroundings. Everything was so painfully ordinary; the cubicles separating his co-workers’ desks, each filled with pads, pens, a computer with keyboard, little post-its and pieces of paper strewn across their work spaces. The walls were lined with binders, papers and pictures of family, friends or pets.

All of it melted together after a while. There was no difference between Bill and Charlotte, Steve and Ted, Lauren and Jeff. The desks, the binders, the frames all looked the same after a while. A repetitious hell that none of them could escape.

The definition of mediocrity.

Mr. Davidson’ office door opened and the LED lights above Paul were switched off.

“Paul? Not going home yet?”

Mr. Davidson had his suit jacket slung over his arm as he shouldered his bag. Mr Davidson always wore suits, but his long, curly hair and intense eyes gave him the appearance of a crazed squirrel sometimes. He was the best boss this office had ever seen.

“I was actually leaving, just thinking about what to get for dinner.”

Paul straightened up, adjusting his bag as he turned for the exit.

“Well, I hope you find something good. Have a nice afternoon.”

“Thank you, you too.”

The air in the street was cold and windy, which Paul deemed to be an absolutely horrible combination. The Chinese restaurant was not far from where he was, and he started his walk there with fast paces, desperate to get into the hot, steamy dining room.

When he left the establishment 20 minutes later with a little white bag in his hand, the wind had calmed down and the cold wasn’t as bothering anymore. The walk to his apartment was another 30 minutes which he spent staring at the grey, dirty sidewalk. The houses and shops he walked past blurred together after a while; they all looked the same anyway. Nothing ever changed about his commute.

The second he opened the door to his small flat, he kicked off his shoes and shut the door behind him, shrugging off his clothes and threw them to the ground as he walked into his bedroom to
change into something more comfortable.

The evening was spent in front of his computer and the TV, not really giving particular attention to whatever he was watching. He went to bed at ten, too lazy and bored to read one of the many books he had stacked into a tower in the corner of his room. Books he had been wanting to read for years, but never got around to in the end.

He was sound asleep by ten thirty.

Another day in Paul’s life, a life so ordinary and depressing, a life too insignificant in the big picture, led by a man with no ambition or opportunity, it was a truly sad existence.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of sales calls, statistics and other things that Paul could do in his sleep, surrounded by the same people and the same walls. The only bits that stood out in his foggy memory were his trips to Beanie’s, when he talked to Emma in a way that made him feel like someone noticed him at all. Soon enough it was Friday, almost five pm, and Paul was contemplating getting another coffee at Beanie’s before going home. Emma and he talked on a daily basis now, about anything they could think of; music, movies, actors and books, sometimes even art. Their topics never ran out and their easy and flowing conversations were the only thing he was looking forward to anymore in his daily life. They had talked for so long on some occasions that her manager was forced to come out from the back and warn her worker to keep the non-existent line moving.

Nonetheless, Paul felt like they were finally moving forward with their friendly relationship. Though he was still unsure whether to ask for her number or not, mainly because he had never been the aggressively flirty type. Highschool had always been a long series of unreciprocated crushes for him.

Mr. Davidson called it the end of the day, and Paul swam with the crowd of his co-workers until he was on the sidewalk in front of his office-building. His feet automatically started walking the direction to Beanie’s, his mind still occupied with how he should go about asking Emma out. It couldn’t be that difficult, right?

But what if she had a boyfriend? Or if she actually didn’t like him that way? What if she just talked to him because it was her job to be friendly?

Anxieties were building up in his mind, ever-growing into a tower of questions and insecurities that weighed down on his shoulders. Doubt crept into every crevice of his brain and it only took a few minutes for him to lose all hope.

Someone sweet and pretty like her probably had a boyfriend. And what about that one time her laugh had had a weird, shrill tone to it? She was just forcing her niceness to make him come back. Oh god, she probably knew that he had a crush on her. She was just ridiculing him behind his back.

Paul stopped dead in his tracks, staring at the patch of grass and bushes to his right that belonged to a rather small park of his town. It had rained earlier, so everything was kind of muddy and wet, so grey and ugly. He stared at his own reflection in a puddle to his feet.

His brown hair was tousled after the long work day and his tie was loosened from fidgeting with it, a habit he had picked up the moment he had started wearing suits to work five years ago. There was nothing really special about his appearance; brown hair, brown eyes, droopy bags underneath from sleeping more than what was considered healthy, and his slumped shoulders were neither a
sign for his confidence or ambition.

He was all but extraordinary. He had to be dreaming to believe that someone like Emma could actually like him. Maybe she was just after his two-pound tips after all.

There was a bench in the middle of the patch of grass and Paul sank onto it, ignoring the wetness that sagged into his pants. He was too busy lamenting his more than dead love life, staring ahead, but not actually seeing anything. Memories of old crushes and the painful ends they had met flashed through his mind; the time he had liked the girl who played the tuba next to him in music class, and he had given her a note proclaiming his undying love on Valentine’s day, just to be laughed and pointed at by her and her friends the next day at school. That had been in fifth grade; one of the first and definitely not the last time to have his heart broken.

It seemed like every Valentine’s day, he had believed that confessing his love for his newest interest was a good idea. It never proved to be true, and it only accomplished his current hate for Valentine’s day and everything surrounding it. Stupid cupid.

Emma had been one of the first acquaintances in years that he actually enjoyed talking to and being around. He just felt comfortable whenever he entered Beanie’s, and he didn’t quite like coffee that much for it to be a valid reason for wanting to spend more and more time there.

But none of it mattered. She didn’t like him.

Paul had spent the better part of half an hour on the bench, lost in his thoughts and too numb to register anyone walking by, when he heard something like a desperate tweet and a bit of ruffling. The sound was so small, he ignored it at first, thinking that his mind was just finally going crazy. As it kept happening louder and more frequently, he started looking around, though the source seemed impossible to find. Was there something in the trees behind him?

He turned around and scanned the branches nearby, careful not to miss anything that seemed out of place. The chirping wouldn’t stop, and he realised that it was coming from his left.

The bush to his left fell victim to a closer examination as he leant closer, brows drawn together, concentrating to find anything out of the ordinary between the green little leaves drooping with water, the grass underneath mixed with mud and moss. Then, he saw it, underneath the lowest branches, just barely visible from his position: a feathered, brown wing that was flapping and twisting around desperately.

Paul jumped off the bench and crouched down, and a little bird came into his view. It was lying on its back, one of its wings flailing around hysterically, feathers coming off as it did, opening its beak every few seconds to let out a heart-breaking little squeak. The other wing looked a bit crooked and seemed unable to move as freely as the other one.

Paul slung off his shoulder bag and opened it in search of something to transport the bird in and quickly found a little carton with a left-over donut. He shoved the donut in his mouth so he wouldn’t waste it and shook out the carton over the grass to get out the powdered sugar, and then ripped out some moss and grass, covering the bottom of the box with it. Then came the most difficult part; moving the bird.

Paul pushed the overhanging branches aside, snapping some of them, to get a clear access to the bird, and he gradually started pushing his hand underneath its left side with the unbroken wing. As soon as the bird, still screeching, felt secure under his hand, he started lifting it and added his other hand for security. It was so small, it could have fit snugly into his open palm.
After carefully laying it down onto the still wet grass, Paul used a small branch to poke holes into the translucent cover of the box. He checked once again that the bird wasn’t in a too painful position before shutting the carton, slowly getting up as to not move the bird inside too much.

His walk home was quick now, filled with a child-like determination to save this little creature’s life. Paul had spent much of his youth rescuing little animals, bringing them home in an attempt to mend their wounds and heal their bones. His mom had always met it with a good dose of shouting and bickering, but Paul had not forgotten the joy he used to feel whenever he helped little birds and mice; the feeling that he did change something in the world, even if it was just a small life he saved.

As soon as his apartment door clicked shut behind him, Paul kicked off his shoes and threw his bag into the lounge, not even stopping as he made a straight line for his bathroom. He retrieved his small first-aid-kit and returned to his living room, putting the bird box and the kit onto the low table in front of his TV. He immediately started mending the birds broken wing as he had done so many times in the past: he positioned the broken wing in its natural spot close to the birds body and used a piece of bandage to wrap it around the body at first, in front of the feet, and then over the wing just tight enough to hold it in place. He secured it and then went to get a bit of water and old seeds that his mother had given him years ago for a birdcage he never hung up.

Surprisingly, when Paul returned with two tiny bowls for the bird to eat and drink out of, it was already on its feet and wobbling about with tiny steps. He remembered always having to put them upright and holding them like that for several minutes before they could walk again. Maybe the bird wasn’t hurt that badly?

He put down the seeds and water and watched as the bird pointedly ignored the food, but rather kept walking around its box.

Paul spent the rest of his evening building a bigger box, retrieving grass, branches and moss from outside to refill it, and by the time it got dark, he had built a whole new home for the bird who had been watching him curiously throughout his work. After setting him down into his new, improved home, he left the bigger carton on his lounge table and watched TV until he felt tired enough to go to bed.

The bird (affectionately named Earl) hadn’t chirped in over two hours and looked rather comforted, so Paul decided that he would go to bed and look after his new companion in the morning. It was the first time in months or hell, maybe even years, that he felt like he had accomplished something. He couldn’t remember the last time he had looked forward this much to waking up the next morning.

It wasn’t the alarm on his phone that woke Paul in the early hours of Saturday, but spare rays of sunshine illuminating his bedroom bothering him just enough to wake him up.

His eyes blinked open sluggishly, shying away from the light and he groaned, rolling over to hide his face in his pillow. Sometimes it seemed, he could sleep forever. There was no end to it, especially on weekends: he had spent the entire weekend in bed sleeping away on more than one occasion.

He was fretting over the past week that he couldn’t remember anymore; the only bits that stood out were his trips to Beanie’s and his conversations with Emma. He giggled into his pillow when he remembered their last long squabble over whether country music was good or not. Her laugh had been so open and sweet when she was jokingly defending Barbara Streisand, and it made Paul’s
stomach feel giddy with fondness.

There was still a smile on his lips, face half buried in his pillow, when his eyes snapped open and
he threw back the covers, jumping to his feet with a flash of excitement that crashed through him
with an energy that he hadn’t felt in months. He had completely forgotten his bird, and he was
more than eager to see how his little friend was doing.

Sliding into the hallway and continuing his way towards the living room, Paul stopped in his tracks
when he heard a shuffling from inside it. Shuffling, like clothes. Like someone was moving
around. He stood frozen in the middle of his hallway, listening. Hoping.

It became painfully clear to Paul now; just how defenceless he was. He had nothing to protect
himself with, except a few kitchen knives. God damn his lazy landlord; several people in his
complex had requested for the locks to be exchanged because they were just so easy to break into.

Still facing the living room at the far end of the dark hallway, Paul tiptoed back into his bedroom
and quickly grabbed his phone, just to realize that he hadn’t actually put it in the charger last night
and it was dead. Right there and then, the realization of his situation crashed over him and for a
few moments, he struggled for air to come in in short gasps.

Suffocation blinded him and he struggled to breathe, blood pumping through his veins as his heart
sped up and beat, beat, beat so much faster than it should, his heartbeat was so loud, oh God, the
intruders could probably hear it, why was his heart beating so loud?

Blood rushed into his head and it felt all cold and warm at once, making thinking so much harder
than it should have been. Paul took a deep breath, two, three, and closed his eyes to focus on what
he should do. The shuffling at the other end of his flat was faint, but not too faint for him to forget
the reality of the dangerous situation he was in.

He needed a weapon. The kitchen was next to the living room. He just had to get there, grab a
knife, and leave the apartment to get to a neighbour and call the police. He could do that. Right?

Paul crept towards his bedroom door and lurked around the corner into the dark hallway, waiting
for his eyes to adjust. Once the blackness in front of him had started to turn into vague shapes, he
tiptoed out of his bedroom and started his slow way towards the kitchen. The shuffling was still
prominent from the living room, and as Paul kept advancing, he realised that there were no steps.
Only shuffling.

He had no time to be confused about this however, because his mind was entirely too focused on
his arrival in the kitchen, where the knives were. His only means of protection.

Pressed against the wall, he sidestepped further and further until the wall wound its way through
the door frame into the kitchen where he stopped for a second to stare at the drawer next to the
stove, where he kept the big cooking knives. There would be two big steps needed to get to it
noiselessly, and after mastering those with no grace at all, Paul pulled open the drawer with one
finger, bent over it and biting his bottom lip in concentration. He could make no noise, or the
burglars were probably going to incapacitate him one way or another.

It turned out that retrieving the knife from underneath what felt like, a dozen other kitchen utensils,
made a lot more noise than one would normally anticipate. This resulted in two or three loud
clinking and rattling sounds, and Paul cringed, holding his breath and frozen to the spot as he
waited for the intruder to burst in the room and stab him.

But there was still only the shuffling, and Paul released the air from his lungs shakily.
He left the drawer open and made the two big steps bag to the door, making his way across the hallway as not to walk right by the door to the living room, but rather shuffle past the opposing wall.

The steps he made became smaller and smaller with every second now, his heart pumping faster and faster, and he was shivering so badly, it was a miracle that the trespasser couldn’t hear his heartbeat or the sound of his clothes rubbing together.

Past the living room and almost at his front door, Paul couldn’t help but glance towards the living room and he stopped in his tracks.

Just like in his bedroom, the morning light was filtering through the darkness of the room, not quite shining onto everything but giving the furniture enough shapes for someone to walk through without bumping into anything. And because of that spare light, Paul could see a figure sitting on his couch, but it wasn’t the person that disturbed him. It was what was attached.

A pair of huge wings were visible in the poorly lit room, and Paul ogled their dark outlines completely lost for thoughts or words. He had to be dreaming, right?

Dreams weren’t this realistic. He had never felt such panic in a nightmare. On the other side, a winged person sat in his living room right now, so who was he to talk about what seemed real or not?

Perhaps this was a prank? Was it Ted, playing a practical joke on him? Putting on an angel’s costume and breaking into his flat to scare him shitless in the morning?

Still staring at the silhouette of the winged person, Paul realised what the shuffling sound was; it wasn’t a person walking around, or clothes moving. It was the feathers of the wings moving, rubbing against each other.

Paul had been frozen in his spot for at least 30 seconds now, and he truly didn’t feel like he could ever move again. It reminded him of when he was younger, when he came into his parent’s bedroom because he couldn’t sleep, waking them up to ask if it was okay to stay in their bed for the night. They would get mad at him sometimes for disturbing them in the middle of the night, and Paul distinctively remembered one time when he had been having nightmares all night and he wanted to stay with his parents so badly, and as he stood in their open bedroom door, staring at their slumbering shapes, unable to open his mouth and wake them up or turn around and walk back into his room, he had felt just as stuck, feet as roots, screwed into the ground tightly.

He had gaped like a fish, open and closed, open and closed, dreadful fear hanging over him, too terrified to move a muscle, night terrors weighing down his young shoulders scaring him away from his own bed, until he had finally broken into tears and thus, woken up his parents at last.

Time had reversed and Paul was six again, in too much awe to react to the winged person in his apartment.

It turned out that he didn’t need to react at all.

“How long are you gonna stare at me in the dark anymore?”

His tense muscles jerked, and Paul flinched back, a shrill, uncontrollable sound emitting from his throat. His heart was beating so fast now, the blood was rushing through his ears and he had to open his eyes wide to see anything, momentarily blinded from the rush.

His breath was coming in short, erratic huffs, almost in rhythm with his pumping heart, and he
gasped for air shakily, trying to control himself. It didn’t quite work out, however.

Somewhere deep inside of his gut he felt a pull, and Paul almost stumbled over his feet as he edged closer to the living room, unable to control what he was doing. It was a magnetic force he felt, something that compelled him to walk closer and inspect what was happening; natural curiosity perhaps, or something more.

The doorframe was behind him now as he stood in the entry to the living room, much closer to the winged silhouette who was watching him patiently. His unarmed hand reached up and felt along the wall behind him for the light switch. There was no stop to his actions; it didn’t feel like they were his limbs moving, they weren’t executing commands from his brain. It was something new, foreign, forcing its way into his muscles and senses, moving him on their own accord and will.

The light flickered on and the shape on his couch turned into a person – or what Paul first thought, a God.

He was almost entirely naked, his privacy covered merely by a small piece of loincloth that left little to the imagination. Everything from the muscles in his arms to the features in his face, the strong, shaven jaw to the high cheekbones was well-built and perfectly proportioned, as if someone had compressed the ultimate ideal of beauty into one single person. Paul couldn’t help but let his eyes roam over every single inch of the god-like man’s body, and he realized that even the veins in his hands and throat looked flawless, as if they were chiselled from marble. His skin had a kind of glow that seemed inhuman, so alluring and soft, begging to be touched.

His mussy, dark brown hair looked raunchy, as if they were a result from someone clenching their fists in them over and over again. The colour in his eyes was not quite identifiable from the distance, but they had an alluring sense to them, with wrinkles around the eyes that spoke of wisdom and laughter.

The most impressive thing about him though, were his wings. They were folded back behind his back, but towering tall above the man’s head, moving and shuffling their feathers every few seconds. The changing colours they displayed in the dim light above them were fascinating; translucent, shifting every few seconds from pearly white to a dusty grey, flashing every colour under the rainbow every now and then in a shimmering play of every hue imaginable. Paul got lost in search of the glints of fiery reds, sunny yellows, sky blues, forest greens; all so distinctive but also in a never-ending, corresponding play with each other. Like a diamond rotating beneath a star.

There was not a hair, not a muscle or a feather out of place on his entire body. He was walking sex-appeal, and it took all of Paul’s self-control not to jump the man in front of him right there and then.

Instead, he gave in to the inviting lure and let his legs walk him over to the opposing chair, all the while still staring at the god in front of him.

Paul had had minor crushes on boys in the past, nothing he had ever really thought about. However, he had never seen a man quite like this. If his limbs weren’t moving on their own right now, he was sure the pull of attraction from deep inside his gut would have made him leap onto the man’s lap already.

Paul sat down, still staring, speechless. His mind was utterly and entirely empty, devoid of logical thought and reason. He wasn’t even searching for anything to do or say, because nothing could possibly be a rational reaction to what was unfolding in front of him.

“You’re probably wondering who I am.”
The smoothness of his voice hit Paul fully now and it was like getting struck by a boulder. It fit his appearance perfectly; velvety and sleek like silk, engulfing him with its smooth, seductive tone. There was nothing he could possibly resist that voice. Thank god the magical pull emitting from the bottom of his stomach, otherwise he would have given in to his urges and leap onto the man like it was a necessity for survival.

The man seemed to know exactly what kind of effect he had on Paul because when he didn’t answer, he smirked, showing of perfectly white, straight teeth.

“You humans always react the same. It is quite amusing, I must admit.”

Paul finally felt the urge to say something, tilting his head as he croaked with a raspy voice: “Humans?”

The man laughed, and it sounded like the most melodic music to ever reach Paul’s ears. Lovely and full, not missing a single timbre.

“You may call me Eros, though I quite liked being called Earl. Do you give all your pets such ordinary names?”

The breath in Paul’s throat hitched, ogling the man in an entirely new light. Impossible, wasn’t it? It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t.

“I can feel your confusion. Allow me to explain.”

Paul was staring at his lips move as they formed words, and he had truly never listened to someone more than he did right now right there, desperate not to miss a single word of what he said, to relish in every tone his throat produced.

“Every now and then, my wife and I have a little fight, and whenever I annoy her too much, she deploys her dear friend Artemis, to turn me into a hurt animal and drop me somewhere on earth. It’s how she choses to deal with me being an ‘eternal troublemaker’.”

Paul was just staring at Eros – or Earl? - at this point. His brain flatlined.

“So, you picked me up and helped my puny little form even though you could have left me to die. I admire your determination to help the littler, more helpless things.”

“What?” Paul’s voice was husky and dry. He had to swallow a few times, but his mouth was a desert. His body had stopped working properly about ten minutes ago.

Something in the back of his mind kept nagging him, like the loose end of a cloth waiting to be pulled free. It was at the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t quite catch the thought that kept slipping away, evading his desperate grip for something rational right now. He felt awfully light-headed.

Earl, or Eros, or whoever he was, rolled his clear, bright eyes.

“Always the same reaction. Take your time.”

Eros. Paul knew the name, but he just couldn’t recall from where. Was it from old stories? Legends? A book he once read?

And with the sensation of a gut-punch, he remembered the time when he was 14, utterly obsessed with Greek mythology for about a month. He had bought every book on the subject he could find, learning all he could about the different deities and gods, what their stories and powers were.
Paul’s eyes swerved back to Eros who was looking around his living room, examining the furniture and other things lain about.

It made sense, and no sense at all at the same time. Eros, the god of love, sat in front of him. Of course, Paul was just seconds away from jumping his bones; he was lust and passion personified.

On the other hand, a literal Greek god was sitting on his couch. The lightness in Paul’s head rose higher and higher, taking over and his stomach gave out, his guts flipped over into a black hole and nausea shot from his abdomen up into his head. His vision gave out and Paul’s entire world went black.

“Fragile humans, why do they always faint? Ridiculous.”

The muffled caramel voice Paul had been dying to listen to earlier crept into his ears and the black hollowness around him started to take shape: unforgiving light pushing against his eyelids. His body felt heavy and useless, as if his bones were too heavy for his muscles to move them. The sounds of quiet muttering and shuffling kept getting louder until they were annoyingly clear in his head, bouncing around and forcing him to rise from his blackout. His head was spinning in slow, excruciating circles, and his throat and chest felt icky and uncomfortably tight with nausea.

The light was intruding, loud and shrill, and a groan emitted from deep within Paul when he blinked once, twice, and closed his eyes again. He wasn’t ready for this reality just yet.

“Listen, I don’t want to disturb you more than necessary. I just wanted to offer you usage of my power as a sign of gratitude.”

Eros, the Greek God in his living room, still there and real, had sensed Paul waking up. He forced his eyes open and the edges were still a bit blurry, making it difficult to focus, but Paul had no problem finding Eros. He stood out from his bleak décor like a shining peacock in the middle of a garbage truck. He was standing up now, shimmery wings still held close to his body (Paul estimated their stretched width to be about 15 metres, and if he were to unfold them, they would probably break his flat apart) as they shuffled and stirred every now and then. They looked like they were itching to spread out and fly away.

Right then, Eros turned around to face Paul, and he felt overwhelmed with the chiselled beauty in front of him all over again. His features looked so perfectly sculpted, healthy skin glowing with an energy that Paul felt unworthy to be in its presence of. His perfectly plucked and groomed eyebrows were drawn together in worry. Paul was still unable to move, hypnotized by the way the god’s muscles moved when he stepped closer.

“Here.”

With the flash of an eyeblink, Paul felt a rush of energy flushing his every vein to his very fingertips, the roots of his hair and the bottom of his toes. For a moment, a single heartbeat, there wasn’t blood in his heart but some kind of sunny, light electricity that shot through every fibre of his body. He jerked upright and gasped at the sensation, never having felt his entire body like this before: he could sense every smallest moving hair, the vibration of his eardrums, the uncomfortable sensation of the hard, old chair he was sat in.

With another heartbeat, the hypersensitive sensations were gone, and Paul fell back into his seat.
panting, shivering from how intense and real his body had felt mere seconds ago. The energy that had electrified him, compelling him to jump up and just do something, was still there though, like the most extreme energy drink or coffee in the universe.

“Sorry, I forgot how dull life is to humans. Do you feel better now?”

Paul looked up at Eros, who stood next to the couch, hands folded behind his back and watching him carefully. He forced the tense muscles in his neck to nod his head, and Eros’ features turned softer, relieved.

“So, back to where I was. I’m offering you a unique opportunity to use my powers. Whatever you want, I can offer you, however there are some conditions that you need to know-“

“What powers?”, Paul interrupted, and he immediately regretted it, snapping his mouth shut as he stared at Eros wide-eyed. Was there a penalty for cutting off a god’s word?

Eros didn’t seem to notice, however. The panic that had risen in Paul’s chest left him with the puff of a breath.

“I can make anyone fall in love with you in any way you want but like I said, there are restrictions.”

“What do you mean, love in any way? There are different kinds of love?”, Paul felt more courageous with every word. It wasn’t every day that he talked to literal sex appeal. Eros released a low chuckle, and Paul couldn’t help but groan at the sound of it, a passionate wave crashing through from his abdomen through the rest of him, like he was in the middle of a heavy make-out. Sex appeal indeed.

“Of course there is. There’s passionate love, Obsessive love, eternal love, sweet love, natural love…”, he trailed off.

“What’s sweet love? And natural love?”

“Sweet love is when the person you choose to fall in love with you dotes on you for the rest of your life, treating you exactly the way you want. They will present the ideal kind of love your mind imagines, so it’s different for everyone. If your concept of love is based on your partner making you pancakes every morning, they will make you pancakes every morning. It’s the real version of how you believe love works.

“Real love is only possible with two people who are compatible in almost every way, but held back from making it work because of certain circumstances, like time. It’s the rarest form of love, because there are only few people you meet in your lifetime who you could share real love with.”

Paul absorbed the new information like a dried-out sponge. He had never seen love like that; so many different versions of it, all so unique.

“And the other three?”

“Obsessive love is of course, when the other person is just obsessed with you. They don’t see your flaws nor any problematic behaviour you display. It is borderline stalking, and irreversible, so if you become sick of the person, it can become quite a hassle. To be sincere, few people I have met have wanted obsessive love.”

“Like a fan stalking their idol?”
Eros nodded. “Like that. Passionate love is, well, love that is based on sex-life, which will inevitably be very good. It’s up to both parties to work on their emotional love, otherwise it will only be a sexual bond for the rest of their lives.”

Paul frowned at that. He would be the last guy to be averse to sex, but he couldn’t imagine doing it over and over again with a person he felt no real connection with.

“Eternal love is like real love, only it is not necessary for the two parts to be predetermined for each other. However, their personalities will be moulded to fit each other, so neither of them will really stay who they were until my arrow hits them. They will be happy, but a changed version of themselves.”

It was a lot of information to take in, but Paul was fast to pick out what seemed the most attractive to him, thanks to his new, inhuman energy.

“So, the real love is what you would seek the most? Even if it’s the most difficult to get?”

Eros sat down onto the couch and the pearly feathers of his wings shifted, folding together tighter.

“Yes, quite. Do you have anyone in mind that I could use my powers on? Like I said, it would be a sign of my thanks.”

Realization rushed over Paul and his heartbeat sped up at all the possibilities.

He never really believed in true love, or the idea of cupid or well, Eros. How could shooting an arrow into someone, thus making them fall in love with you, be true love? Love had to be deserved, something to be worked hard for. It shouldn’t be delivered with the shot of some cosmic power. But the concept of real love… It would be a hit or miss. Either they were destined for each other anyway, and the arrow would just quicken the process, or…

“What happens if you shoot an arrow into someone who’s not destined for you? If I’d want real love?”

Eros was seemingly granted with eternal patience alongside his never-ending existence, because he didn’t seem at all bothered by Pauls long thinking pauses and endless questions.

“Nothing happens. You’ll forget that you ever thought about them in a romantic way, though. It will be erased from your memory.”

“And if the person were destined for me?”

Eros smiled lovingly at the thought.

“They will approach you, and your love will unfold naturally. Like a real fairy tale. Bu-“

“I choose real love.”

Eros’s eyebrows shot high onto his forehead at the bold statement.

“Are you sure? Real love is rare.”

“I know, but it’s either that or nothing else. I don’t want eternal or sweet love or anything like that. Real love or none at all.”

Eros nodded at that, mouth creased into a respectful pout.
“I’m impressed.”

He waved his hand into the air, and with a snap, a block of paper plopped onto Paul’s lap, out of nowhere.

“You have to sign it. Then I’ll perform the spell.”

Paul was staring at the front page of the contract, the bold letters on the front swimming in his vision like a ridiculing joke.

“Contract: Real love”, it read.

“You need a contract for this kind of stuff?”, Paul raised his head and blinked at Eros. The God sighed with the power of millennia of drama.

“Yes. People kept complaining about unknown side effects or conditions, so I just make everyone sign it. Makes it a lot easier, because afterwards they can’t come complaining to me.”

Logical enough. Paul flipped through the three or four pages, skimming the different kinds of consequences and conditions.

“No family members.

No animals.

The person cannot be in a current relationship with anyone else that would be another real love for them.

The person has to be somewhat in the proximity of the target; no one from the other end of the universe.”

And much more like that. With each note he read, Paul felt more excited and giddy about his decision. He felt good about this, he really did. Maybe it would work out and he could live a happily ever after, or it wouldn’t, and he would know for sure that it would have been impossible from the get-go.

“Need a pen? I advise you to read through the conditions, though.”

A blue ballpoint pen popped into Paul’s hand, and he almost didn’t flinch at the sudden surge of power so close to him. He was getting used to spending time around eternal Gods, it seemed. The thought alone made him chuckle.

Maybe this was still just a dream after all.

He flipped to the last page, not bothering to read every margin and note individually, putting his signature at the bottom of the page with a flick of his wrist.

“Great. Who’s the lucky one?”

Eros reached for the contract and Paul handed it to him – such a human movement, it seemed utterly ridiculous.

“It’s this girl I see almost every day, but I don’t know where she lives or what her last name is…”

“Don’t worry.”
Without a moment of hesitation, Eros reached over to touch Paul's hand and closed his eyes. Paul watched them flicker around wildly behind the eyelids and he felt the spot on the back of his hand where Eros was touching him starting to burn.

Mere five seconds later, Eros leaned back and opened his eyes to offer a warming smile.

“Got all I needed.”

“What did you do?”

“I searched through your memories of love interests. I just need her face to find her.”

Under any other circumstances, Paul would have felt embarrassed to have anyone see his memories of Emma and how he perceived her, but Eros had surely seen worse. He was the god of love, after all.

“Well, I’m gonna do my work and leave you to it. Here”, a second batch of papers plopped onto Paul’s lap, “a copy of the contract. You can never be sure enough.”

Paul stared at the God, stunned. Was this it? Was he about to find true love? Or would he just forget about Emma entirely?

Would Eros just leave him to a changed life now? How was there a Greek God in his living room right now, anyway? Was any of this real?

Paul was lost in his thoughts again and he only woke from it when Eros moved to pat his knee.

“Fun doing business with you. Have a good life.”

And with a heart-melting wink, there was a loud flutter, and the winged deity was gone. The couch felt full with his absence and Paul stared at the spot where he had just sat, wondering if this had all been real. Of all the different mythologies and legends out there, all the religions and cults, Paul was astonished to know that Greek mythology was the one that was based on facts.

Maybe it had all just been a dream.

The rest of the weekend passed in a flash. Paul, somehow incredibly exhausted from his encounter with Eros, slept most of it away, jittery and mortified at what was going to happen on Monday. Would Emma ask him for his number? Or would he forget her? Wasn’t it a good sign that he still remembered her? Were they destined for real love or had Eros just not worked his powers yet?

Nights were disturbed with dreams of shimmery feathers and handsome faces, sweet smiles and yellow aprons. It was a miracle that Paul managed to get any rest at all, despite sleeping for so long. His mind just wouldn’t relax, running wild with possibilities, questions and realities.

The moment Paul sat down in his cubicle on Monday morning at nine am, every muscle was tense, riled up to release at any moment. It took all amount of his self-control not to jump up immediately and go for a coffee run, but Mr. Davidson wouldn’t allow him to go so shortly after work had started. Mr. Davidson was a relaxed boss, but not that easy to convince.

The hours passed painfully slowly, the seconds hand making its idle way around the clock with
such gradual pace, it drove him crazy. Paul didn’t even bother doing any work; he could never focus on anything in a moment quite like this.

Emma was still fresh and bright in his mind. Eros’ power had worked. They were destined for real love, and Paul was finally about to find real adoration, happiness, a future in the charming, sarcastic little barista. He felt as energized as he had after Eros had given him a powerful push to wake up, but in a truly amazing way that made his stomach flutter and somersault.

As soon as the clock struck eleven am, Paul jumped up and shouted out that he was going for a coffee run.

“Cappuccino for me, please”, Bill mumbled as he jotted down numbers on a chart. Charlotte and most of the others in ear-shot weren’t listening, so Paul grabbed his jacket and tried not to run out of the office in excitement. As soon as he exited the building, he dashed down the street. He just couldn’t wait anymore. His guts were flipping and tumbling, giving him a prickly sensation all over, leaping with him in elation.

The well-known bell jingled when Paul pushed open the door, smile wide on his face. This was it. His life was about to change.

Emma with her back turned to him, washing the dishes, was the first thing he saw, and Paul’s heart sped up even more. He was grinning stupidly now, but he couldn’t help it. With a few big steps he was at the counter and Emma turned around. Her hair was up in a messy bun as always and the yellow apron was a bit crooked, but she still looked lovely. Her doe eyes were warm and welcoming, and as soon as they found his, she gave him a pleasuring smile.

“Hello, what can I get you today?”

Paul’s smile froze and for a moment, he couldn’t breathe. The look in her eyes was foreign.

She didn’t recognize him.

Emma was looking at him like he was another customer. Not the guy she had been joking about bad movies with last week, not the guy who came in every day to talk to her; not the guy who was destined to be with her.

Had it all been a dream?

“Uh…A cappuccino, please”, Paul uttered, and she nodded with another smile, tapping on the screen at the counter to register his order. Had he gone crazy? Had he dreamed up what happened on Saturday?

No, it couldn’t be. He still had the contract. It had to be real.

Paul stared at her back as she turned around to prepare his coffee, and he reached into the pocket of his suit pants for money. He didn’t even count out the coins, just dropped them onto the counter.

Emma was oblivious to the meltdown happening behind her. All he could do was stare at her back, the way some loose strands of hair curled around her neck and how the ghastly, yellow apron still managed to make her skin glow in the dim light of the café.

The order was done, and she turned around, handing him the cup with another pleasuring nod. Paul couldn’t even reciprocate it, as his stomach was starting to pull with dreaded nausea. Before he could pass out or get sick, he turned around and walked out, leaving the jingling bell and his destiny behind.
Instead of turning right back to his office, he made his way up the street; the way to his apartment. Bill’s coffee was quickly forgotten and the only thought pumping through his mind was ‘the contract, something went wrong, the contract’ and he leapt into a full sprint. The cup of coffee splattered onto the ground and he didn’t even turn to look back.

Paul couldn’t remember ever running so fast in his life. The walk that usually took about 20 minutes was over in less than five, and when he finally crashed into his closed front door, he was so out of breath he could barely feel the burning in his sides anymore, sucking in air desperately as he fumbled for his keys to fit into the lock.

He didn’t bother shutting the door behind him, he didn’t even turn on the light, but he stumbled into his bedroom to the night table next to his bed, where he had put the contract, falling onto his knees. There had to be some explanation for this.

It was the first time that Paul read through all the conditions and consequences individually and his body was starting to shiver and tremble on its own accord, gut-wrenching dread building inside of him like a balloon about to burst.

Then, finally. A reason.

“If the intended person already has developed feelings for the target, feelings far enough for them to approach the target on their own decision, my powers will void their pre-existent feelings and erase any memory and affections they had for the target. In this case, my powers work as an antidote for the already developed sentiments, and the process is irreversible.”

‘Irreversible.’

Paul sank back onto the balls of his feet as the contract slid out of his hand, underneath the bed. There was a twisting sensation deep down in his gut, like the irrepressible urge to scream and rip out his hair, punch something and destroy things.

Already developed feelings.

Emma had already liked him. She had been about to ask him out. He had destroyed his chance at love, and she would never remember him the way she used to. It didn’t make sense.

Wetness burned in his eyes and Paul shut them tight, but to no avail. Seconds later, big, fat tears were running down his cheeks, and there was nothing but loss inside of him, the doom of his decision, the mistake of not reading the conditions before signing.

He had lost his real love.

Stupid cupid. Stupid Paul.

Stupid love.

End Notes

Thank you for reading and please consider leaving kudos or a comment if you liked it!!
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