Same Time Next Year

by Jael

Summary

Leonard is a demon. Sara is an angel. Still, they've learned to work together over all the millennia--and to appreciate each other. But when Leonard wants to change their...arrangement, will Sara manage to face her feelings enough to figure out what she really wants? (Inspired by "Good Omens.")

Notes

This was spurred by my recent reread of "Good Omens" (though I haven't managed to watch the show yet). Many thanks to Pir8grl!

Most of the great triumphs and tragedies of history are caused, not by people being fundamentally good or fundamentally bad, but by people being fundamentally people.

"Good Omens," by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett

It was a lovely day, really. The sort of day that generally put people in a wonderful mood as they walked in the sunshine and gloried in one of the first truly beautiful days of the spring.

As such, Leonard thought as he sauntered toward the meeting point, it was probably the sort of day he should dislike intensely. He couldn’t quite muster the feeling, though. He liked Central City.
enough that he rarely voluntarily left it these days, and he wasn’t horribly fond of cold weather (ironic as that was, really). He was as pleased with the day as everyone else.

Maybe that had something to do with his plans for it, though.

And he certainly shouldn’t be thinking that.

Leonard was, not to put too fine a point on it, a demon. Fallen child of heaven. Devotee (as much as he was devoted to anything) of Lucifer himself. He’d been on Earth a long, long time, tasked with keeping a weather eye on humanity and his opposite number. Which was what he was doing today.

Really.

Well. Sort of.

Despite the weather, he was all in black. It was sort of his thing. Skinny black jeans, black turtleneck, black leather jacket. Icy blue eyes—well, he was an ice demon—were hidden, at the moment, behind dark glasses. Very short salt-and-pepper hair (which showed an annoying tendency to curl manically if he let it grow any longer, despite all his demonic efforts) gave him a look of experience (or so he liked to think). And the line of 5 o’clock shadow on his jawline was classic “bad boy,” at least by current standards.

Certainly plenty of people, men and women alike, were watching the saunter that fine spring day. (And the ass, especially in those tight jeans.) Well, temptation was part of the job. Perhaps to their sorrow, however, passive temptation was all they’d be getting today. Leonard’s mind was elsewhere.

To be specific, it was on the being sitting on the rim of the fountain in the park just up ahead. Her attention was, to all appearances, wholly on the other people walking by around her, and Leonard let his steps pick up, just a little. As long as she wasn’t looking. It wouldn’t do to look too eager.

He wasn’t that far away, though, when she glanced up. Leonard immediately went back to the saunter. Nothing to see here. He wasn’t that glad to see her.

Something in Sara Lance’s face, as she got to her feet, told him that she saw right through that. But because she was glad to see him too, neither of them would dare say anything.

Sara—properly, Sarai of the Holy Lance—was an angel. Leonard’s opposite number, here on Earth, to be honest (which, as a demon, he probably shouldn’t be). And she was beautiful, all that the modern image of angels tended to be—blond with bright blue eyes and the, well, face of an angel. Innocent and sweet and naïve.

One of the things Leonard loved about her, though, was that that image was absolute garbage. Even That Book (as demons tended to refer to the Bible) noted that angels appearing to humans often had to say, “Fear not!” Angels could be scary.

Sara was no exception. And Leonard, frankly and completely counterintuitively, found it utterly and deliciously intoxicating.

She was badass. Leonard, lurking as only a demon could lurk, had seen her as a shining warrior of the light more than once, including as she took on a group of neo-Nazis in 2017. (Leonard hated neo-Nazis and Nazis alike. They were, he thought, a measure of how much evil humans could come up with completely on their own.)

(And some things, even a demon couldn’t countenance—at least, this demon. He’d never truly
claimed to be a very good one, after all, even if that was a contradiction in terms.)

Sara had left a trail of bodies behind her that day, more (Leonard thought) than he’d ever personally accounted for. (He was rather fonder of breaking the eighth commandment, himself.) And when she’d stopped and turned toward him, as if sensing his presence, the beatific smile on her blood-splattered face had made something deep in his chest do a weird little flip-flop.

If he hadn’t known better, he’d say it was his heart.

He was a demon. He wasn’t supposed to have a heart.

Today, Sara was wearing her usual white leather jacket, he saw as he sauntered closer, trying (and failing) to look cool. Over a blue T-shirt, and blue jeans just as tight as his were. Not that he was looking at her ass, or anything.

Leonard noticed the pin, a tiny heart with stripes in pink, blue, and purple, on her collar, and smirked a little, tapping his own lapel. An equally tiny circle, with stripes in pink and yellow and blue, appeared.

(A wise man—two wise men, really—had once written that “For those of angel stock or demon breed, size, and shape, and composition, are simply options.” Leonard knew perfectly well that he and Sara both enjoyed exploring all those options. In more ways than one. Neither of their sides really cared who did what, consensually, with whom, contrary to common belief.)

He saw her lips twitch as she noticed, but she didn’t comment. Instead, she just folded her arms, lifting an eyebrow at him.

“You’re late,” she informed him.

Leonard smirked at her, sitting down smoothly on the fountain’s edge and then sprawling comfortably like a cat. She always said he was incapable of sitting in any way that approximated “normal” human behavior. “Oh, you know,” he drawled, watching her intently. “Places to go. People to tempt. Trouble to cause.” A pause. “You look...well.”

Sara didn’t react to the abrupt change in tone. She sat back down on the fountain too, curling her legs under her. “So do you,” she said after a moment, quietly. “I didn’t see you much this past year. Been busy?”

“Eh.” Leonard hesitated. The tone was already different from most of their meetings. Where was the playful flirtation, the banter, the back-and-forth he was used to?

He pushed back his sunglasses, wanting to see her better. Was there a shadow there, in her eyes? He was surprised by the surge of anger he felt at the idea something or someone had caused that.

He was her opposite, damn it, and he was the one supposed to be the one giving her hell, in whatever respect. No one else better try it. Or...or...

Oh, hell. Literally.

He’d take on any being, diabolical, angel, or human, who hurt her.

“You know,” he repeated, a little more subdued as he tried to figure out how to deal with this realization. “I honestly don’t need to do much. People seem to do it all on their own, these days. And worse than I could manage.”
It was true, although Leonard wasn’t precisely a conventional sort of demon. There were things he wouldn’t do—although he really didn’t want the Powers That Be knowing that.

“I know.” Sara watched the water of the fountain play a bit, shifting closer. “That’s...I guess that’s kind of the problem, isn’t it?” She glanced over at him as he sat up, watching her. “They do it all on their own,” she said, lowering her voice. “And so many times, they talk themselves into thinking they’re doing good. And really believing it.”

He did know what she meant. Far too well.

And sometimes it hurt, even to him.

Leonard and Sara, they’d come to their agreement long ago. Earth was a fascinating place, and (for the most part) they really rather liked it and all its opportunities. (And its food. And its entertainment. And its booze.) So, they played their scripted chess match, never a temptation without an instance of grace, and let humanity handle its own highs and lows.

And once a year, they met to check in. That had started, years ago, as just a way to get enough dirt on “the other side” to appease their respective sides. It’d grown into the need to talk to someone else who understood, who just got the highs and the lows. The intriguing and confusing and sometimes heartbreaking nature of these humans they lived among.

Sara, as she’d come to know Leonard better, discovered that he was less inclined to actually harm than merely tempt, and rarely in a way that was truly evil. And Leonard had discovered that Sara, angelic or not, had an ironically wicked sense of humor and fewer illusions than most about her “side” of the coin.

One might say they’d even become friends, over the years. Confidants. And then….and then…

Leonard cleared his throat. “Yeah,” he said quietly, looking at the water and then glancing her way out of the corner of his eye. “Sorry I ain’t been around much.” He’d been trying to avoid getting pulled into the sort of plot “his” side was so fond of right now. The trend was for true evil dressed and posing as lofty moral good these days, and it made him gag.

Give him a good ol’ fashioned sinner any day, rather than those devils in fundamentalists’ clothing. Or even worse, their smug, self-satisfied human patsies, so convinced of their own holy rightness that they’d tell themselves that their fellow humans deserved the worst of punishments for their alleged failings.

Yeah, Leonard was trying to stay far away from that. Or he’d get rather too involved—and not in the way he was supposed to.

Sara gave him a sad little smile, and he decided that that was enough introspection for now. He stood, turning with a little flourish and holding a hand out to her.

“C’mon,” he said, wriggling his fingers. “I think I owe you dinner this year. And I know a great place in this very city.”

Sara considered him, then reached out and took the hand, allowing him to pull her to her feet.

“Aw, no Ritz this year?” she asked a little playfully.

“Nah. I got something better.”
Sara hadn’t meant to let her current state of pessimism show quite so much. She should have known that Leonard, of all…entities…would see and hear it and react.

She’d just been so dam...so darned glad to see him, smirk and saunter and all. He could be a jerk and a jackass, but long experience had taught her that there was no true evil in him, despite everything she’d once been taught about his kind.

He understood her better than anyone else at this point, she thought, glancing across the table at him and toying with her glass of wine. The angel Ripkiel, her mentor, would choke, but it was true. The ones who never spent much time here, among the humans and all their amazing and horrible creations and potential, they didn’t get it.

As if he’d read her mind, Leonard, who’d been focused on the remnants of his meal at the little hole-in-the-wall steakhouse he’d taken her to, glanced up.

“And how’s ol’ Rip?” he asked laconically.

Sara sipped her wine. “Oh, you know. Harried and self-important, but still one of the better ones.”

She paused. “And how’s Mik?”

Leonard’s brother, for lack of a better word, was a fire demon. His name was close enough to the name of one of the most famous archangels that he now refused to use anything other than a nickname.

Sara had met him, memorably, at the 1666 Great Fire of London, when she’d shown up, suspicious that the blaze was a demonic ploy. (The angelic host had been on high alert all year.) There, she’d found a big man with a fiery aura staring raptly at the flames and Leonard hovering nearby, his own icy aura evident as he kept an eye on the fire as well.

Mik had been inclined to great dubiousness when it came to Sara, but Leonard had quickly talked him into a sort of truce. In the end, parts of the city burned, but only six people died—and the flames had the counterintuitive benefit of cleansing great swaths of the city after the bubonic plague outbreak (which had killed a whopping 100,000 people) the year before.

(People still claimed it was the wrath of God that had caused the fire—because of the Catholics or the city’s sin of gluttony, depending on who you asked. Sara was still sighing over that one.)

“Mik is…Mik.” Leonard smiled briefly. “He’s OK. He keeps his head down. Still about as fond as…ah, authority…as I am.”

What did it mean when a demon hated authority? Sara wondered, given the authority to whom said demons were supposed to answer.

And what did it mean when an angel felt the same way?

That question led down paths she was still uneasy with. Her gaze dropped to her wine glass again.

“I’m glad,” she said, staring at the pale liquid. “I like…”

She liked Mik. But how could an angel like a demon? They were evil, her side taught. Unworthy of redemption or grace. You didn’t like a demon. Let alone lov…

Sara’s head jerked up. Her gaze glanced off Leonard’s, then ricocheted around the room before resting, finally, on the wine glass again.
Silence, except for the quiet bustling of the restaurant. Sara heard and partly saw Leonard pick up his own glass, half-full of a deep red wine, and take a drink.

Imagined his throat working as he swallowed. Imagined his lips, stained red from the wine. Considered a warm, solid, nonjudgmental presence, intelligent and thoughtful, all the things she’d been told and taught were not for her, and…

Sara lifted her eyes again, letting her gaze meet his, acknowledging the spark—hell, far more than that—that traveled between them.

“Your place is near here, right?” she asked, tossing back the glass of wine. “It’s been a long year.”

Leonard was a little nonplussed.

He sprawled on the black leather couch in his apartment, feet up on the back just because, watching Sara prowl around the space, perusing all his bookshelves and looking out the windows with a restless sort of energy. It was a great spot, he’d admit that, and he had the penthouse and an utterly remarkable view.

He hadn’t paid rent in, well, ever. He'd just sort of moved in, way back when this building had been shiny and new and state of the art, and stayed there as others slowly filled in the apartments below. No one thought about the penthouse after that day, and that was just how Leonard wanted it.

He didn’t pay for utilities or Wi-Fi either. Nevertheless, both seemed to work just fine.

The area was trendy again, now, and Leonard was vaguely surprised that he hadn’t had to “remind” anyone that the penthouse not only existed but was off-limits for years. He wasn’t too worried about it, though.

He was, however, worried about Sara. Something was definitely off. This wasn’t even the sort of brittle, hard-drinking cheer she had about her when there were things she just wanted to forget. This was more. This was worse.

“You OK?” he asked, watching her from half-lidded eyes.

After a moment, Sara turned away from the bookcase—the shelves dedicated to books that people had tried to ban in schools and libraries, always an amusing (if somewhat depressing, for people who liked books) selection. She crossed back to the couch, flinging herself down on it in a way that caused his feet to slide off the back and fall into her lap, a development she ignored in favor of reaching for her wine.

“Just...discontented,” she said simply, after draining half the glass.

“With?”

Sara studied him a long moment, face unreadable even to him. The only sounds in the apartment were the faint noises of traffic far down below.

“With the way things are,” she said finally. “In general. Your side...my side...the lines are blurring, aren’t they? And I’m so tired.” She put her head back against the black leather with a sigh. “So many evil people have always thought they’re doing good, but I feel like it’s getting worse. Does it even matter, anymore?”

The words fell starkly into the quiet.
This was where he should take a stab at tempting her to change sides, Leonard thought suddenly.

The successful temptation and turning to the dark side (to borrow a term) of an angel hadn’t happened in eons. If he pulled it off, it would be an incredible coup, a feather in his cap. He might get a dukedom out of it. More so, he’d probably get the Powers That Be off his back for a few more centuries or even millennia.

Leonard took a breath. He started to speak. And...

He just couldn’t get the words out. And nothing was stopping him but his own damned (literally) conscience.

Go...heav...well, something help him, he liked Sara as she was. And he didn’t want her to have to deal with the trials and tortures of hell, or even the guilt of knowing you...

He glanced away. Then back, seeing her watching him.

The corner of her mouth ticked up, wryly. “And you?”

And him what? Leonard, still mentally reeling a little, struggled to think of what she meant.

Sara didn’t let him struggle long. “You OK?”

Ah. The immediate answer was simply, of course, no. But he didn’t really want to explain that.

“Kind of...discontented,” he told her quietly. “With the way things are.”

He waited for her to try to redeem him, to change him. If temptation was the logical move for a demon, the reverse had to be true for an angel, right? He wasn’t sure it was even possible, but surely that was beside the point.

But she didn’t. She just watched him silently, an intent and unnerving blue gaze that Leonard met unflinchingly.

Maybe...he wondered. Maybe she liked him the way he was, too? Flawed in ways an angel simply wasn’t supposed to be?

The quiet stretched out for a bit, long enough that Leonard could see the pink of sunset starting to tint the sky outside. Somehow, they’d moved a little closer, and he could smell the faint fragrance of something around Sara. Something lovely and somehow green, more earthy than he’d expect from an angel.

She was close enough, as a matter of fact, that she could look up at him, that smile hovering around the corners of her mouth again.

“Well,” she said with a sigh. “At least we can be discontented together.”

And with that, Sara reached up, wound her hands in the lapels of his jacket, pulled him down, and kissed him in a way that was distinctly non-angelic.

Or maybe that depends on your definition of the word.

It’d happened the first time back in 1554, though they’d been dancing around each other in a certain way for far longer.
(Sometimes literally—the thought of that sword dance back in 15th-century Scotland could still get his cold blood stirring.)

And maybe predictably, they’d been angry at each other that evening, at least at first. Well, more with circumstances than with each other. And Sara had been far angrier than Leonard. Something that wasn’t surprising, given that she’d blamed him for Lady Jane Grey.

Now, in reality, Leonard had nothing to do with that, nor with the rise of Bloody Mary—though he supposed he couldn’t be sure others of his ilk hadn’t been pulling strings somewhere.

But he had been lurking about the English court when Sara had returned to England in the midst of Mary Tudor’s rash of executions and found out about Jane’s death. She’d confronted him outside the apartments he kept and marched him into them at sword-point, scary and beautiful and so close to losing control that he’d been a little worried for her.

And himself. That too.

She’d accused and he’d retorted, and they’d sniped back and forth at each other until Sara had placed both her hands on his doublet and accused him of breaking their little arrangement of balance. It’d been the hurt in her voice, breaking through the anger, that had finally pushed him to tell her the unvarnished truth.

“I didn’t do it!” he’d snapped back at her, finally, staring down into her furious eyes. “I tried to help her, for Go— for someone’s sake!” He should stop. He didn’t stop. “I tried. And I did it for you.”

He wasn’t really sure why she’d believed him that time. Demons were supposed to lie, after all. But he hadn’t been lying, and he really had tried to help.

For no other reason than he knew how Sara would feel.

Sara had blinked. Had stared at him, the rage slowly fading from her eyes. Her hands were still lying on his chest, and they’d slowly contracted into fists as she stared. Leonard was starting to wonder what she was thinking when she…well, growled.

And then she’d dragged his head down and kissed him. Hard. A rage-kiss, the kind one wouldn’t think an angel, even a badass and unstuffy one, would be capable of.

He’d been stunned into a gasp, and she’d taken advantage of that, claiming his mouth rather ruthlessly. She tasted of spices, he thought incongruously, just before her weight against him sent them crashing backward into the wall. That’d brought Sara flush against him and his arms went around her, pulling her close almost involuntarily.

All right, then, he thought, in the one corner of his brain that was still running the show. (He was in a fully human body right then, after all,) All right. It’s not like you haven’t dreamed about this.

And he kissed her back, arms curving around her ass, boosting her against him, even all the layers of clothing of the time not fully concealing his arousal. Sara growled again, then bit his lip, drawing blood, wrapping her own arms around his neck.

Somehow, they’d made it to the bed.

Barely.

It couldn’t really be called lovemaking. He was supposed to be immune to that particular four-letter world, after all, and Sara was supposed to be more, ah, into the platonic notion thereof. No, it’d been
raw, passionate sex, and mind-blowing for all that.

It’d been said (and written) that angels were sexless unless they really wanted to make an effort. But somehow, this had seemed...effortless, at least in terms of forgetting that they probably really, well, shouldn’t. Inevitable. Right.

Sara had been gone when he’d woken, hours later. He hadn’t seen her again for a year.

Then, as they met in Augsburg, she’d hadn’t mentioned what had happened, a coolness about her manner that suggested he shouldn’t either. So, he hadn’t. They’d exchanged reports and moved on without even spending a day in each other’s company. And Leonard, restless and oddly unhappy, had promptly taken himself off to cause trouble somewhere, complete with some judicious seduction of both women and men he’d had an eye on.

A full-on orgy been a fun distraction. For a while.

Their meetings continued, though, and eventually, they’d settled back into the bantering friendship that’d been there before. Leonard procured a deck of French playing cards and they’d started teaching themselves the rules of twenty-one, one of the popular games of the time, which led to lots of good-natured arguing and late nights of talking.

Then it happened again, in 1616.

They’d both decided to get utterly plastered in honor of William Shakespeare, whose death hadn’t had anything to do with angelic or demonic influence but was still something they both mourned. And the drunker they got, the more hands had started to roam, the more a little physical release had seemed like a good idea. Still, they could have gotten rid of the alcohol in their systems immediately, sobering up and probably making better decisions.

They hadn’t.

Sara had still been gone the next morning, and they’d still pretended nothing had happened. But there was no coolness at their next meeting and, Leonard thought, they’d both known it would eventually happen again.

It did. Not long after the Great Fire, when the embers had still been cooling and Leonard had gone looking for Sara, to let her know Mik had left with a gruff “Tell Blondie she was right.”

And then it’d happened again. And again. Sara stopped vanishing afterward. They’d wake up curled up together the next day and continue squabbling about the Enlightenment, or what side the whole American experiment would end up benefiting, or the Industrial Revolution.

By the 1900s, finding their way to a bed (or a table, or a wall, or a handy patch of grassy ground) every year had just been what they did. Oh, sometimes they saw each other more often than that, but their yearly “appointments” were the times that not only including reporting on the state of things to each other and figuring out how to keep their state of balance going, but also hours of intense sex—and conversation and argument and venting and companionship.

But it was just sex, they’d told themselves. That was all.

This, though, Leonard thought, so many years later, lying in his bed amidst tumbled gray satin sheets, running his thumb gently over Sara’s hipbone as she slept.

This had been lovemaking.
There. He’d thought it. He was a demon, and he’d fallen in love with an angel, and what they’d done together here had been love, at least on his part.

With a sigh, he shifted his other arm, and his fingers grazed something soft that wasn’t skin. Leonard felt around the sheets a few moments, then pulled out a feather.

One of his, he thought, staring at it. More than a foot long, and glossy black. Had he really lost control that much?

He ripped his mind away from that thought and what it might entail. Instead, he smirked, reaching out to run the feather carefully, up Sara’s side. She twitched a little, and he moved the tip over, teasing other portions of anatomy until she batted it away.

“Mmmm...” Sara stretched, opening one eye to regard him, then focusing on the feather. “That’s mean.”

“Well. It is me.”

“True.” She stretched, long and slow, and Leonard licked his lips, wondering if he could get her to stay a bit longer.

“Same time, next year?” she asked lazily—and, Leonard thought suddenly, a little wistfully. It was that perceived wistfulness that gave him the nerve to say it.

“Would it be so...bad...” He was supposed to be bad; he was a demon. Leonard soldiered on. “If we...if we...”

Sara raised an eyebrow after a moment. “Uncertainty isn’t usually your thing. If we...what?” she asked, amusement in her tone. Her eyes darkened, just a tiny bit, and she sat up, letting the sheets fall away around her. “Come up with something wistfulness that gave him the nerve to say it.

“Not in the way you're thinking.”Leonard met her eyes. “Can we see each other more than once a year?”

Sara blinked at him. “We usually do,” she said slowly, after a moment.

“I don’t mean...on work.” Leonard let out a long breath. He was still lying there, looking up at her, the sheets caught around his hips, and he felt very vulnerable indeed.

“Stay with me,” he said simply, watching her. “We’ve both said how...discontented we feel, lately. We’re better together. Let’s do something different.”

Sara stared at him. Her fingers curled around the sheets. “You mean...”

“I’m not tempting you.” Leonard felt his lips curve in a humorless smile. “Well, maybe I am, but not in that way. Not to...my side. The other side. Whatever.” He sighed, closing his eyes, then opened them again, thinking.

“They get free will,” he told her a bit recklessly, flinging a hand out, encompassing all of humanity in the gesture. “Why don’t we? Why can’t we make this choice?”

Sara’s laugh was a little breathless. “I think the idea is that we do,” she told him. “Hence the whole ‘fall’ thing.”

“Yeah. But what if I...choose again? I can’t, can I?” He gave her a slightly pointed look. “And what
would your bosses say if they looked in on you now? Is that really free will?"

Sara glanced away, flushing. Leonard would have enjoyed watching the pink color spread down her neck and farther if he wasn’t so concerned about her reaction.

“Exactly,” he told her simply.

Silence reigned in the apartment for a few minutes more. And then, to Leonard’s great disappointment, Sara got to her feet, reaching down to pick up some white, silky clothing item she’d shed on their way into the bedroom. She stared at it as if she couldn’t figure out quite what it was, then looked up at him again.

Were those tears in her eyes? But angels didn’t cry. No more than demons did.

“Stay with me,” Leonard repeated quietly, not moving.

“What would we...”

“Don’t know until we try.”

Sara took a breath and dropped the piece of clothing. She closed her eyes—and was suddenly clothed, all in white and blue again, pulling her garb directly from the ether in a way she rarely did. She’d always said she liked humanity’s creations too much to do that sort of thing.

“I have to go,” she said, turning toward the door, not looking at him now. “We are what we are, Leonard. And we have a job to do, no matter how...how we feel about it at times.”

Leonard found his voice again. “If you feel so strongly about it, why have you helped me hold the balance?”

But the door clicked shut behind her.

Sara avoided him again. For a year.

There were so many times she wanted to go looking, but she resisted, every time. Partly because she didn’t know what to say. Mostly because she was scared.

And tempted.

For long years, she’d expected the demon to try to tempt her, to try to get her to fall, to join the host of hell instead of the side of heaven. Leonard never had, not even when she’d given him openings with her sense of...discontent. He’d listened, and he’d vented as well, but he’d never tried to really change her. He’d understood. And, she’d realized at some point, he had a lot of issues with the way things were himself.

His words that night in the apartment, though—he hadn’t been trying to change her, nor tempt her toward hell. He just wanted...her.

And Sara wanted him.

Heaven help her, she wanted him too.

By the time the year had passed, she really wanted to see him again. Needed to. And she still wasn’t sure what to do or say if he brought it up again, but one way or another...something needed to happen. She couldn’t continue without seeing him. She couldn’t.
When she arrived at the fountain at the Central City park, a little early as usual, she was stunned to see that tall, lanky, black-clad figure already sprawled on the fountain’s ledge, one foot tucked over the opposite leg, looking off in the other direction.

Sara’s footsteps sped up, and her breath caught. Leonard must have heard or sensed something, because he sat up at her approach, still facing in the other direction, but clearly aware.

And, as she slowed and came nearer, he turned to face her.

Sara stopped.

Leonard was...

He was human.

On the surface, he looked exactly the same. But to her eyes, there was something indefinably different. Something missing.

But also something more.

“Leonard,” she whispered, staring at him. No other words would form, so she just whispered it again. “Leonard.”

“Hey,” he said quietly, watching her. No sprawl. No smart-ass comment. No explanation.

“What...how...” Sara had a hard time getting words out. There was too much.

Leonard gave her a tiny smile. “How long have I been...?” He looked down at his hands—those long-fingered clever hands that she knew so well. Human hands, now. “Almost a year. Not too long after...after I saw you last.”

“But...how?” She was whispering and wasn’t quite sure why. There weren’t many people around and they were ignoring the pair by the fountain. But there was a knot in her throat, and it was choking her.

His eyes were distant. “I couldn’t do it anymore,” he told her. “Be what I was. And I...changed.” His gaze focused and fixed on her, intent. “It turns out that’s a thing you can do. No take-backs, though.”

Sara figured there had to be more to it than that, but she’d also had another sudden, horrifying realization. “You’ll die.”

And Leonard, that jackass, nodded. Far too calmly. “Eventually. I’m told I’ll probably get a bit longer than the usual run, ‘specially since I started out in a body that wasn’t exactly newborn.” His smile was a little wry, but his eyes were still direction.

And suddenly Sara was angry. At him? At herself? At the world? All three? She took a deep breath, hands folding into fists. By the way Leonard’s eyes flickered, he sensed it.

“You’re leaving me,” she said, voice breaking on the words. “No, you left me.”

You’ve gone where I can’t follow.

“I didn’t mean to,” Leonard said quietly.

And then, even quieter: “You could join me.”
Sara’s heart stopped.

She stared at him. He stared back.

And then it started again.

“I can’t. I...” She took a step backward. Then another. Saw the hurt in Leonard’s eyes—human eyes, pale blue, no longer truly icy—a hurt that he quickly concealed.

“I get it,” he told her, looking away again. “You have a mission. A good one. I get it.” He unfolded himself from his seat, standing, still tall enough to nearly tower over her—though he’d never once used his height that way.

And he turned away.

There was, apparently, nothing else to say.

Sara struggled to breathe.

“What about the balance?” she asked the back of his black jacket helplessly. How could he do this to her? How was she going to keep going, throughout all the years, without him?

Leonard paused. Then he looked back over his shoulder.

His face was still, his eyes...

“Gotta feeling it’ll keep going, one way or another,” he told her. “Think about it. I have. A lot.” An odd expression crossed his features, but it vanished before Sara could try to identify it, leaving only regret behind.

“Good luck, Sara,” he said softly. “I’ll be rooting for you.”

And she watched him leave.

“Rip!”

The angel Ripkiel had a place he liked to go sometimes. He told the others of his kind who asked that it was where he went to meditate on the nature of the world and time itself. In reality, he just liked the quiet and the fresh air.

It wasn’t much, really. A meadow in the mountains, a place humanity—and other angels—rarely approached. Ripkiel rather liked humanity, really (sometimes more than he liked other angels), but he also liked quiet.

“Rip!” the voice shouted his name again. He opened his eyes and sighed, then looked up from his seat on a large stone, dragged to the meadow by a glacier thousands of year ago.

The angel Sarai, a protégé of his once, approached him, eyes bright and posture tense. She must have flown up here, but she was on foot now.

And she looked pissed.

Ah. So they were going to do this now. Rip (and, yes, he knew about the nickname) smiled a little, sadly, as he turned to face her.
Sara’s steps stuttered to a halt a few feet away. She took a deep breath, eyes fixed on him. “Did you know?”

“About what?” Rip asked mildly, then continued before she could get another word out. “That you’ve had a partnership with a demon for millennia? That you’ve worked against heaven’s stated goals with him?” He paused. “That you’d fallen in love with him?”

Sara didn’t deny it.

“No,” she said, without missing a beat. “That he’s human now. That...that’s a thing that can happen.”

Rip nodded, glancing away and out at the view. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I think I came very close to it myself once.”

Sara blinked. He’d surprised her. After only a moment, she came a little closer, seeming a little more subdued.

“There was a woman,” Rip told her, simply, answering the question before she could ask it.

Sara paused. “What happened?”

Rip gazed out at his view again. “I couldn’t leave...what I am...behind. She died. The end.”

Silence, except for birdsong and the faint whistle of the wind.

“Why couldn’t you?” Sara asked finally. She leaned against the larger rock next to him.

Rip looked at her. Really looked, seeing the conflict and the regret on her face.

“Too much doubt,” he said, wanting her to understand. “I just wasn’t sure. And you need to be.”

“I don’t understand. Do you...do you turn yourself human?”

Rip sighed, studying Sara. “It’s not that simple,” he told her. “Or...perhaps the point is that it’s ultimately simpler.” He looked up at the sky again, the sun and the clouds, and thought of Miranda. With regret, always.

“You decide,” he said simply. “That’s all. You decide and you change, and that’s it.” He glanced at Sara, holding out his hands before him. “Free will.”

She didn’t say anything. An interesting expression crossed her face and she looked up at the sun too. Rip wondered what she was thinking.

“Are you going to go with him?” he asked, after a few minutes, keeping his tone wholly unjudgmental.

Sara’s gaze snapped back to him. “I can’t do that!”

Rip shrugged. “No?” he asked. “You’ve been unhappy. I’ve seen that. You’ve changed.” He held up a hand as her gaze sharpened. “That’s not a criticism. If anything, maybe it’s a compliment.”

He sighed. “Sometimes I think the reluctance to change is our downfall,” he mused. “I know it was mine.”

The younger angel let out a long breathe. “But…” she said. “The world…”
Rip listened to her voice drift off before he spoke again. “You know how much good a single determined human can do in the world,” he told her. “And I have a feeling that in the end, that might be the most important thing of all.”

Rip looked back at the view. Sara didn’t say anything.

After a moment, though, he felt a shadow fall over his face as she unfurled her wings again. He felt the downdraft as she stepped back and took off.

And he reached down to pick up a single white feather from where it’d fallen to the grass.

“Goodbye, Sara,” he said quietly, looking out over the mountains. “We’ll miss you.”

Trying to decide what to do with your life was an interesting process.

Leonard, sitting on the rim of the park fountain and perusing a newspaper, put it down and sighed. Millennia of experience as a fallen angel didn’t really translate to any sort of job experience, as it turned out. Well, maybe as a politician, but he wasn’t touching that with a 10-foot pole.

It didn’t matter as much as it might have. Any amount of higher or advanced knowledge he’d once had was gone now, but Leonard wasn’t stupid. And he’d always been very pragmatic.

Between the money he already had in a nice, safe bank account and the investments he’d made, he didn’t really have to work—even though his landlord had suddenly realized there was a tenant in the penthouse, which existed after all. (Fortunately, he also had a signed, witnessed rental agreement, whether or not the man remembered it.)

It was even legit. Leonard was more or less trying to walk the path of the angels—so to speak—these days.

His decision had reset his personal scales, but Leonard knew better than pretty much any other human on Earth right now that good and evil were a good bit more complicated than most people believed. Still. Should he wind up in hell one day, there were a lot of…entities…who’d particularly like to see him scream. Better to walk the line.

He pulled his long legs up on the fountain rim and sprawled out again, putting his hands under his head and looking up at the sky.

For the past few weeks, he’d held out hope. He’d looked for Sara everywhere, hoping she’d come back. Hoping she’d decide, like he had, and she’d show up on his doorstep, beautiful and badass and human.

But he wouldn’t ask more than he already had. Pressuring her wasn’t something he ever wanted to do, and it wouldn’t work. It had to be her decision, and it had to be for her.

He closed his eyes, feeling the sun on his eyelids. He liked it. When he was a demon, sun had always felt a little…too good. He was supposed to be a creature of darkness, after all.

He might have stretched out there for a minute or an hour, just enjoying the peace, when a shadow fell over him. Leonard thought about opening an eye, then just decided to hope the person went away.

He felt someone pick up the newspaper by his head.
“Job ads, hmmm? Looking for a new career?”

His eyes popped open.

Sara was standing there, next to him. She had the paper in hand, studying it, and…

She was human.

And the most incredible, amazing thing he’d ever seen in his long life.

Leonard sat up so fast that he had to blink, unused to the sensation of vertigo. Sara gave him a wicked little smile, then dropped her gaze to the paper again.

“Substitute teacher…no. Landscaper…no,” she mused. “Telemarketing…isn’t that a fairly demonic profession? Maybe not.” She set the paper down and regarded him. “Guess you’ll have to find something else to do.”

Leonard just stared at her.

After a few moments, Sara started looking a little uncomfortable. “Leonard?” she asked quietly. “I mean…if this OK? Do you want me to leave? I…”

But then she stopped. Mostly because Leonard had stood, taken a step forward, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her.

Distantly, he could hear wolf whistles in the background from park passers-by, and a few suggestions to “get a room!” They didn’t matter.

All that mattered was that Sara was kissing him back. Fervently. Her hands wrapped around the back of his head and her body molding to his.

When they finally broke away, they were both breathless.

“I…” Leonard cleared his throat, letting his hands drop to his sides. “Well, I had a city CSI I met suggest looking into law enforcement. Because I seemed to have some experience with…certain criminal elements.”

He gave a look from under his lashes. “I don’t know. Personally, I think I’d made a hell of a thief.”

Sara smiled at him. “I don’t know,” she said, thoughtfully, running her fingers down his jacket. “I think you’d make a better hero.”

Leonard coughed. “Maybe we can figure out something more…in-between?” he suggested delicately, holding out a hand to her.

Sara took it. “As long as it’s with me,” she told him. “We’re in this together, and don’t you forget it.”

“Me and you, angel. Me and you.”

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