what was once so sweet has soured

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Summary

Angel's memory of sweet times with Valentino is soured, because of what Valentino's done to him. So here he is, trying to sour his memory of his stay at the Hazbin Hotel as well, on purpose. Because of himself. Because of what he did.

And yet, just like he still perversely, irrationally wants Valentino, he still wants so badly to go back to the Hotel.

Angel Dust reflects on why he keeps going back to Val... and why this time it has to stick.

Post-Season 2 (but taking a few liberties with canon)

Notes

TW // discussed noncon, sex work

He knows.

He *knows,* okay? He fucking knows! Angel Dust may be many things, many personas, whatever he needs to be for whoever's paying for his services, but he is not the airheaded brains-fucked-out that he has to make Hell think he is. He is not a damsel. He doesn't need Charlie bleating about "Stockholm syndrome" and Vaggi passive-aggressively bitching about how he *keeps going back to his abuser*— he knows! He knows what he's doing.

He knows it's the only thing he can possibly do.

He doesn't need Cherri's futile encouragement for him not to give up or give in. He doesn't need her forgiveness for him putting his hands around her neck. It doesn't matter that he was 'hypnotised', that it 'wasn't his fault'. He was weak, he was stupid, and he betrayed her trust and almost choked her out. He can see her texts, growing steadily more disappointed, but he's not allowed to answer to them. He can't, not now. Vox, even though he's just a glorified tablet that Ethan has to carry around all day (and periodically plug into a power socket to recharge), has been compelled to keep an eye on what Angel does on his phone, (Velvette too busy picking up the slack as co-CEO) and without a body or delusions of godhood he's actually doing the task pretty diligently.

If he tried to reply, Vox would stop him. Would cut out the phone signal, or crash his phone, or something.

And even if Vox wasn't there, was dead or suffering from a cracked screen… Angel still wouldn't respond.

He doesn't even need Husk's pity.

It's subtle; the bartender hides it well, but it's there. In the way he texts Angel blurry pictures of Fat Nuggets. In the way Angel's sure, sometimes, that he can see a pair of ears each dotted with an ace of hearts, or great red wings, lingering around a corner, within sight of Vee Tower and its entrance and the penthouse balcony. In the way Angel knows for sure Husk is holding onto the memory of him, even though he asked him, through stupid fucking tears he'd been trying not to shed, to *forget he ever knew him.*

And that's worse than the gals being air-headed over the reality of his afterlife. It's worse than the damage he must be doing to his and Cherri's friendship.

But it's what he needs to do. For them.

He doesn't need them to save him. He doesn't need them to put themselves in danger for his sake, when Valentino could make them hurt so much worse than Angel is hurting them by leaving, by ghosting them.

He doesn't need them sticking out their necks for his sake.

He's not worth it.

So he went back to Val. So what? He knows what he's doing.

It doesn't matter what Charlie thinks, 'cause it wasn't some impulse born of "trauma". It wasn't him being all doe-eyed and dumb like Tiffany Titfucker in most of her movies. It was a cognisant, informed decision that's the best for everyone involved. Val gets what he wants, Angel keeps his former found family safe. Everybody wins.

The outcome that leaves no one truly happy is the best compromise.

Okay, maybe it's "unhealthy" by Charlie's ideals, by Heaven's so-called standards, by the books she cited for her fumbling attempts at therapy. Wherever she got that Swedish term from. But this is Hell. This is reality. Nothing in his life or afterlife has ever been healthy: being born into a mob family, growing up during the Great Depression, being queer, having sex with men and doing drugs.

Killing his father. Getting his eye shot out by his dipstick brother. Overdosing. Signing his soul away. Being too trusting.

He doesn't deserve free will. He misused it time and time again.

He knows the choice he made, long ago; the careless mistake that damned him. He knows what he got into, even if he didn't at the time. Angel is aware that the way he's treated, his lack of freedom, his lack of choice are just the consequences of what he did; something that he deserves.

His load to shoulder is other men's loads inside him.

It's an old, familiar routine that's been beaten into Angel (sometimes literally) by the decades, so he knows what he's getting into. He knows Val will hit him again. He knows he'll make him have sex with women for a shoot or for a night on the street if he's mouthed off or been particularly disobedient. He knows Val will fuck him in the dressing room, even when he's too tired, fucked out, sore and raw and cumming dust.

He gave up on trying to say "no" a long time ago.

Angel knows Val may kill him one day, again, and let him agonisingly recorporate, and pretend to nurture him back to health while telling him that it was his fault, but it's okay because he forgives him.

He knows his dreams and nightmares, and the flashes he sees and feels when he looks in the mirror will come true.

He hates Val. He hates him so, so much.

And he still loves him.

He knows it's love. It's more than just the memory of it. It's more than lust. More than the way he signed his soul away and now literally is on an overlord's chain – he still feels

something in his chest and heart tethering him to Valentino, always leading back to to the blows and the two-faced fuckery and getting railed in the green room.

He just… wishes things could go back to the way they were.

It's screwed up?

Fuck off. 'Course it's screwed up. Nobody knows that better than Angel does, cause he's the one being fucked over. Literally. Spit-roasted for the latest instalment of the *Boystory* saga, while not getting a pittance despite being the star attraction, except maybe Val will give him a gift and praise and the good stuff some random time later; and he's depraved enough and tired enough and worn down enough that he'll be a 'good boy' and accept it. He's used to it.

But it wasn't always this bad.

When he first met Val, fifty—

(fuck him, had it really been half a century?)

—fifty years ago, back when he was managing himself: booking his own shows, making his own way in Hell, a strong independent slutty spider struggling to make ends meet (in much the same way as he had in the last few months of his mortal life)... a tall, fashionable sinner with huge velvet wings had paid for his company and services one night.

He was a romantic with an accent, and a long, dexterous tongue that could both speak sweet *español* and toss Angel's salad like nothing else. He more than swept Angel off his feet; he made him see stars and cum so hard, over and over again, that he couldn't stand up afterwards.

It was first time someone seemed to have given a shit about his pleasure in a long time. It was the best sex he'd had in years.

(It was still, years later, one of the best nights he'd ever had.)

And, in the afterglow, this Valentino talked about his life, his ambitions to run a porn studio, to unite hell's sex workers and make a legitimate industry to rival Asmodeus's empire. Some place safe for Angel, and others like him, that would be permanently safe from the exterminations.

Valentino knew the business, he said. He'd worked the streets and starred in stag films when he was alive, and he'd had a plan, then, to make it from Florida to Hollywood someday. Being in Hell changed nothing, really, he could adapt. He could make it. He sounded absolutely certain and assured that he would.

And it dazzled Angel. This was a real, actual, likely possibility that meant Angel would never have to go crawling back to his father again. His heart beat faster at the idea.

He'd dared to hope.

And that hope was rewarded. Val came back for him. He became a regular client, in fact, night after night after night, and Angel had looked forward so, so much to those nights.

Not only that, but Val offered to meet up not just to have sex, but to grab coffee, to shout Angel a meal. And who could turn down free food in this economy?

Even if it was just a salad.

Val invited him to his place, too; an apartment which actually had proper hot water, where they had made love lazily, off-the-clock; Angel's worries about earning his living for the day suddenly gone.

They chatted idly, sharing bits and pieces of each other's pasts. Small talk. The usual chit-chat. Then Val said he wanted to talk about Angel.

Val told him he saw something special in him.

Angel – well, he saw himself as a notable whore (which was better than how his family saw him, to be fair)… but that was about it. The rest of Pentagram City saw him as a convenient set of on-demand holes and a nice fluffy rack.

But Val? He said he didn't want to change a thing about Angel, didn't want to make him repress his femininity. He said he deserved the finest outfits and lingerie and whatever fit his self-expression best. He wanted him just the way he was.

It took his breath away that someone saw more in him, more than Val's kisses and bites and ambrosia scent did. Angel had already been taught there was no place for love in this world… but maybe that was wrong. Maybe he could have what he craved.

Val had said he'd make him a star.

And he had.

Before he knew it, Angel was consort of one of Hell's rising stars; an ascendant with ambitions of being an Overlord. Val had worn him on his arm like a mink coat, taking him to dinner, to the clubs, to the little premieres of their first stag flicks. Val had picked him up and driven him to work, and had sex with him in the backseat of the car, and (if he didn't manage to crash the land yacht he drove, cause his eyesight was so *shit*) dropped him back home.

Val had been so sweet on him, at first. Had made him feel special, *wanted*, after three damn decades of going it alone, getting gigs at clubs and giving out handjobs in back alleys and getting reminded that he wasn't wanted in the Ragno family. Three decades of getting catcalled or called *fag* and *fairy*, nearly the same as he had in life, except he could never be permanently killed, and there were just as many fellow queers willing to heckle a bigot, punch a Nazi (there was a lot of punching Nazis in his first few years in Hell, after the war) or throw a few pipe bombs where they were needed.

Three decades of living paycheck to paycheck. Three decades of spending each extermination in a different place, a different bed.

Now he lived in a nicer, safer apartment – but he slept at Val's, most of the time. Well, if you count mind-blowing sex as 'sleep'. He could afford more sex toys. He could afford to go to the more reputable dealers and swankier clubs more often, when he needed his fix.

And his queerness was celebrated now. It had value. Crowds flocked to his films. Other prostitutes were left in his (heh) dust. The catcalls in the street came with admiration now. Angel could charge more for his services, and few clients complained. He had money left over after the rent was paid.

He, Angel Dust, was valued.

Most of all by Val.

For the first time in his life or afterlife… he was satisfied.

So he ignored the first warning signs. Wilfully.

Because he could justify Val's lashing out at paparazzi as protectiveness, an aspect of being wanted. He could justify his physical reprimands of other actor by believing Val's criticisms were right. He could justify when Val was cold or distant or snapped back at him a little, because running a company was tough and the poor guy wasn't good with reading. Or numbers.

He loved Val. Loved living like this.

He didn't want this to be wrong. He didn't want to believe loving Val was *bad.*

He didn't want to have made a mistake.

But.

The more famous Val became, the more distant he became. The shorter their rounds of sex were. The more they fought. Creative disagreements and the confusing mess of paperwork they both needed to do for each film Angel starred in. Angel dove into the drugs he could afford, trying to escape, but sometimes it seemed like that made the fights worse.

Val said hurtful things. He shamed Angel for treats.

Angel said things back. Apologies were made, later, sure, but that just reset the cycle.

"You know, 'sorry' starts to lose meaning after a while…"

He should've known that already by then.

Suddenly, in the absence of that honeymoon glow, Angel wanted *more.* It wasn't enough that he had these comforts and this fame. He wanted the thrill of their first time again. The thrill of his – their – rise to stardom.

It went to his head.

So he indulged in more and harder drugs. He demanded more – more elaborate scripts, more adventurous scripts, more time on camera. He became the brat he played on screen. He became a diva.

He still felt bad, afterwards. Val made him feel bad about it all.

Maybe Angel should've noticed more that Val wouldn't apologise until Angel came to him with an apology of his own.

One night, though, Val's apology was pre-emptive.

Which made it seem more sincere. More sweet. It came with the offer of one of his sweet cigarettes, and though Angel was already high as a kite to detox from the day's filming, he accepted it.

Then Val told Angel he had something that could stop their fights. It was the paperwork, he said, that was to blame for it, and if they could get rid of it, it would solve all the headaches. Angel would never have to sign so many pieces of paper for each shoot ever again, and they could get right to the good, hard, horny stuff straight away. Just one signature, now, just like an autograph, and it would all be taken care of.

And not only that, but he said Angel could move in with him. No rent. No commute. Just this penthouse above the studio, and this bed, and all the creature comforts in Hell, and it would be just like starting over.

It had made so much sense to Angel at the time. Val had said he could trust him. Angel had trusted Val enough to confide in him his real name, and that his biggest sin was that he'd killed his father. He could trust him with this.

Angel signed his signature with a heart.

Only later would he find out he'd handed over his soul.

The peace and contentedness from that deal only lasted for a short while. And then the fights came back, and got worse.

When he could remember Val's broken promise, Angel had felt betrayed.

He genuinely wasn't aware when he tried to leave the first time. He remembered that he'd had enough… something to do with the outfit Val wanted him to wear for the shoot. It had straps

that went right over where his retractable third set of arms were hidden, and that was uncomfortable, but he'd probably packaged it as a complaint about how it looked on him.

He'd thrown something. He'd kicked over something else. He'd tried to walk away. Out of the studio.

But then there was a chain around his throat and Val literally pulled him back, and his claws tore into Angel's limbs, and he told him he was nothing without him, so he would do whatever Val wanted, and then…

and then…

…and then he didn't want to remember.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't kind. There was blood coming out of holes. It left him curled up in the fetal position afterwards.

And then Val still made him film a gang bang scene. And then another. And another.

Val apologised for it all, later. But his apologies were acidic. Poisonous. He told Angel it was his fault, that he shouldn't have pushed him like that. That he didn't like having to do this to him.

For the first time, Angel doubted his sincerity.

So his soul was owned.

Did this stop him trying to get away? Not at all. He negotiated. He was good at that – he'd grown up in the mafia. He was taught how to do this shit, to handle deals or disputes between rival families. He'd learned to compromise, growing up under his father.

As the instances of anger and violence and violation on Valentino's part tallied up, Angel saw moving out as space. Freedom. Agency. And he was gonna claw back as much of it as he could. Getting an apartment, moving away from Val… that seemed attainable. Maybe it would make Val regret his absence.

After a few arguments (one of which involved a bullet in a limb) Val acquiesced, and let Angel go.

…Except the only apartments Angel could find within in his budget were crummy ones. Valentino gave him less and less in each paycheck, so eventually Angel didn't have enough to cover rent.

And just like the pornos he filmed, the landlord expected an alternative to rent if Angel couldn't pay up.

That was the only choice Val was giving him. He either had to suck it up and stay, or go crawling back.

He lasted two months.

Then it was back to sucking it up as Val had him shoot scenes with women, have sex and film while too high to say 'no', left him licking his wounds and doing his own aftercare and realising Hell might really be a punishment for him after all.

When Vox entered the picture… well.

Vox paired up with Val, after a lot of dancing around the question, in a 'mutually profitable partnership' (but Angel clocked that fucker as 'repressed and making it everyone else's problem' on the spot. Vox had that specific look of resentment and discomfort any time he was in proximity with him, and Angel thought he'd be used to that by now but somehow Vox's was so blatantly obvious and loathing that it gave him a major league headache).

But Vox had Valentino's ear.

And suddenly Val had even less time left for Angel.

The door to his penthouse was closed.

Vox financed the expansion of Val's studio, brought it under the banner of his media and technology empire. Val's seductive talents and limitless supply of 'fresh meat' in turn (though Vox would never admit it) gave the TV overlord a new edge in advertising. Aphrodisiac plus addictive commercialism was a winning combo.

Valentino's vision had been fulfilled.

And Angel couldn't feel any joy of it, because he wasn't a part of it. None of his fellow studio workers were, not like Val had promised. He was just another whore under Val's thumb.

Val wasn't doing this for the good of the common sinner, he was doing it because he wanted power and control, and working with Vox gave him even more of that.

Once, Val had said he saw Angel for who he really was.

Now it was clear Val only saw him as an object. An object to be worked to the bone, to be worked so hard and left to subside on more substances than proper sustenance. It left him feeling like his highs weren't highs, and just what he needed to scrape through each day. It left gaps in his memory.

Even sex wasn't fun any more. The sex toys he'd bought with Val's money gathered dust in a taped-up cardboard box.

There were some silver linings to it all, though.

With Val no longer paying attention to him, Angel was able to go clubbing more. He took himself to places outside of the Entertainment District, out of Val's sphere of influence.

And that was how he met Cherri Bomb, a new arrival in Hell. She was spunky and bombastic – literally; she made her own explosives. Better than pipe bombs, she said.

She had the tolerance and the stamina to almost match him out on the town, which was no small feat.

Which meant that when he OD'd on one night out, she was there. Tending to him, not with much of the way of first aid equipment, of course, compared to an Overlord, but with kindness and earnestness and experience.

This was the sort of connection he'd thought he'd had with Val right back at the beginning. Something he still craved, and maybe not even in a sexual way any more, which could've been because Cherri was a woman but also because he was just so. Goddamn burnt out and he just wanted to be able to be held and cuddled without being expected to give so much of himself up to.

He was a little wary – after Val, he always would be.

But Cherri didn't want his soul. She didn't want power over others – she just wanted territory.

He found he could be vulnerable around her, without her asking for his trust. Without her asking for anything but for him to have fun with her.

Maybe he could trust her.

So he chanced confiding in her. His predicament. His fuck-up.

And somehow it didn't bite him in the ass. Cherri understood him. She'd had a shitty, controlling ex who had tried to follow her down here, and it had been quite the challenge manoeuvring him into getting double-tapped during an extermination.

"Lucky bitch," Angel had said, and Cherri had laughed and told him that she preferred to be called 'cunt', thank you very much. And offered him a donut swiped from a shop caught in the middle of her ongoing turf war against some snake in a zeppelin.

So they became fast friends. She was his go-to, when he could get away from the studio in a crisis, if he needed a fix outside of Val's regimented anorexia diet. He returned the favour, when she needed it.

And her crummy little apartment became a safehouse for him.

With Val no longer paying attention to him, Angel was able to doctor together a better script, and pick the fellow porn stars he had the best chemistry with, for something above the

lowest-common-denominator porn Val was now churning out.

And that creative liberty made for an award winning stag flick he would be proud of for the rest of his afterlife, and show off to anyone who would listen.

(Yes, he picked that big Hellhound fella to spite Val, because Val had complained about him and his high-metabolism bod stealing the attention of his owned souls away from him.)

Val still took the credit, collected the award, slapped Angel on stage before giving the acceptance speech, and Angel never saw that big handsome wolfy hunk again.

Ah well. There was another silver lining. Valentino and Vox started fighting.

The TV man, apparently, had had a little breakup with another overlord some years ago and *still* wasn't over it. And Val was an envious sort, he didn't like not being someone's priority. He only put up with Vox dragging him along for fights for a while before that bit of tension exploded.

There were broken screens and glasses galore. And it was always over the stupidest things.

Was this how he and Val had looked when they fought and broke up and got back together? Was this how it felt to be on the outside? Was this how it felt to not be so blindly in love with Valentino for just a second, and see the petty, vindictive person he could be.

So… maybe it wasn't just Angel who was broken, defective, the cause of all the problems between them.

It still somehow made Angel feel envious.

And that feeling didn't go away until the first time Val came back to him with apologies and sweetness and interest in him at last.

Then they were 'on' again. Angel moved out of his latest apartment and back into the new penthouse at the top of the new Vee Tower. Val was preening, showing off, and Angel could shove down the resentment that Val kept talking about Vox – either in glowing praise at all the new things he'd brought in, or ranting venting

All he needed to be was a good, submissive boy and Val would keep praising him and being a considerate lover again.

For how long, though?

Angel realised he was willing to take what he could get.

Val was still so good at getting under his skin and making him feel so pathetic and needy for recognition. Usually he did it in the sexual way, the way where Angel would accept any act or position Val 'offered' – but he could also do it emotionally, like this weird mix of father-figure

and lover that Angel did NOT want to think about too hard, no thank you, fuck you Freud (or whoever it was).

On those nights, Val reminded him who had kept Angel safe all these years. There was a threat in the niceness, but when hadn't there been? Angel was just jaded enough now that if he ignored it it was 'cause he was self-aware.

Val reminded him that Angel had trusted him with his former name and his backstory.

(Was this when Val had told Vox Angel's secrets? He practically had object impermanence, he wouldn't bring something up unless his memory had been jogged recently enough. It had to be fresh.)

Val reminded him of the good times they'd had. He even walked back all the things he'd said about Angel being a bag of mildly entertaining holes, and told him he was special. His star. Instrumental to Val's success.

Objectified.

Angel still accepted that praise, and the smokey, sleazy, toothy kisses that followed.

Of course it didn't last.

Their arguments became a haze. It didn't matter what was said. It didn't matter what they were about. They just happened. It was an endless cycle.

Angel left. He came back. He left. He came back. He moved out, he moved back in. He partied with Cherri, helped her win territory. Blew up one of Val's clubs with her. Paid for it in blood.

Val was willing to actually *kill* him now. It was just as fucking awful as the first time he'd found out that being killed down here wasn't a death sentence. Pulling himself back together sucked. It was sobering, and he wasn't one for being sober any more.

And not being sober did tend to impact his on-camera performance, which meant more slip-ups, which meant more making Val mad, and… *fuck, what the hell was he doing?*

He kept doing it anyway.

He couldn't help it.

At some point he thought Val was actually letting him go, for good… giving up on him… but then he realised he couldn't go back to the old ways. He liked the creature comforts too much. He was addicted.

Angel stopped trying to leave, about 30 years after he met Val.

Not that he had the say in where he went. Val still punished him. Val made the distance the punishment. He sent Angel off to live in crummy apartments again, and took too much out of Angel's paychecks, and Angel accepted going back to letting the landlord have sex with him when he couldn't pay rent.

After that, it was just the occasional bit of 'acting up'. Pushing Val's boundaries, trying to make space for himself. Trying to help, to do more than he was asked to. Such as taking the incentive, working the street of his own accord when he could, when he thought Vox wasn't watching (something which became increasingly hard for a period of seven years when it seemed the TV overlord had a lot more focus to spare on him.) and taking a meeting with an upstart gang of loan sharks.

Which got him sent out to work the streets.

But Val also bought him Fat Nuggets. Paid him just enough to get by. Gave him fame and fortune and everything that goes with it.

Without Val's punishment, Angel wouldn't have happened across the Princess of Hell in her limousine, trying desperately to recruit a patient for her pet project before the imminent Extermination. He wouldn't have been handed the money to pay his rent and then some. He wouldn't have found someone who believed there was good in him with such naive earnestness and innocence that it moved him (reminding him of Molly.)

So Angel told himself he was still thankful for what Val had done for him. And he told Val what he wanted to hear. That he would move back to the tower after the Extermination. That he would do this extra shoot or this extra shift of working the streets. That he would work himself to the bone, as ordered. That he would tell Charlie to get the hell out of the studio.

Hoping Val would one day see through the decades-old act, despite his eyesight.

Hoping Val would find his favourite toy broken, and throw him away.

And yet also… hoping it wouldn't happen.

Even with the Princess of Hell handing him a whole wad of cash, even with him finding friendship with the gruff, rugged old bartender at this Hazbin Hotel whom he would gladly hold a candle for, even with him entertaining the slimmer-than-he-was possibility that he could get out of here… he yearned. He felt compelled. Compelled to wish that he could go back to that first meeting, that first night together, that first film they shot together.

Not to do things differently… but to do it all over again. To have that rush. That high. That poisonous pleasure of believing he was loved, wanted. *Safe.*

And the worst part is? Now he's back at Vee Tower, he almost gets his wish.

Valentino does surprise him with gifts or flowers, or takes him on a night out just because. Dinner at the ritziest Beelzebub-starred restaurant in the Pride Ring, one frequented by the Goetia, one where Val only lets him get a salad. Drinks, at a bar that Vox bought up a while back. One that has a pretty aquarium. One that is so bright and high tech and yet still brings back bitter memories of the barstool at the Hazbin Hotel… and its bartender… that reminder burns as it goes down.

Later Valentino might dance with him, and Angel will try not to think with the brief dance he shared with a bartender in a back alley, and feel guilty for preferring that.

Sometimes there are no scenes to shoot, no clients to see, for a whole day. Sometimes there are no blows across the face. No choke-holds, no threats, no snarling raised voice in the studio, no two-faced flip-flopping between sweet and sour on the phone.

No new toys to distract Val.

(He's the toy now, the prop Val uses to show Vox that he's still mad at him, by withholding affection from the TV and giving it to Angel instead, and it reminds Angel the finiteness, the transactional nature of it.)

Sometimes the sex is slow and — not gentle, never truly gentle, but a facsimile of tender. The pleasant reminder that Val earned his position as (behind Asmodeus) the face of Lust. That he has a magic tongue, magic fingers, and a prehensile member that he knows how to use… and, above all, experience. Experience that no one else can match, sans Asmodeus.

Sometimes Valentino does love him tender all over again. Especially now Angel's come crawling back from his dumb little attempt at atonement.

He craves being treated well. He wants to savour it.

… and he can't. It doesn't feel right any more.

It should. He wants it to.

But it doesn't.

And he resents it so, so much.

It's his fault. It's Val's fault. It's Vox's fault. It's Charlie's fault and Husk's fault and Vaggi's fault and Cherri's fault for raising his standards. It's paradoxically all of them at once, but most of all his, for never seeing any of it coming when he should have.

He shouldn't have ever led them on into thinking he was salvageable.

And sure enough, a few days later it's back to business as usual, bruises to conceal under makeup, a list of who he needs to fuck. Val will be distracted by a new favourite 'employee' of his, or maybe Vox fluttering his virtual eyelashes innocently and worming his way back into Val's good graces. It's the reminder of what he condemned himself to.

It's not going to get better.

It's not.

He ignores the fireworks going off right outside the tower, the desperate calls of a familiar princess's voice. He doesn't think about who must be setting them off. If he hears huge wing-flaps nearby, he stays away from the windows and keeps to the inner rooms and catacombs. He knows it's not Val flying around out there.

If his phone buzzes in the early morning, he tells Valentino it's just spam.

He listens to his voicemail in secret. That's how he knows Charlie's pleading and wheedling and trying to therapy-speak explain his predicament to him. That's how he knows Vaggi is exasperated and judging him, her patience worn back down to zero. That's how he knows Cherri feels betrayed that he doesn't trust himself.

(Husk doesn't leave voice messages. He sends texts. Angel forces himself not to read them.

But he does save the photos of Fat Nuggets that come with those texts.)

Angel gets away with this. He thinks Vox is letting him get away with it, and he suspects Val asked Vox to 'turn a blind eye' to this secret secluded self-flagellation. Because it makes him feel sick that all his friends sound so emotional.

For him? Because of him? He can't tell.

It's just another form of punishment.

He forces himself to think of what Val would do to them, if he caught them. Mounting Husk's wings on the wall. Paralysing Niffty in the lights and lens of a camera. Making Vaggi fuck a guy. Showing Charlie what all the souls in his power go through on a daily basis, first-hand.

That's what he's protecting them from. Like he took the fall for Molly whenever she knocked something over when they were a kid. He has to take the fall for them.

The vague recollection of standing up on stage, badmouthing the hotel rears its ugly head again.

He has to make up for that.

So he stays, and does as Val asks.

He fucks a dozen guys before noon. He cleans the splooge out of his fur, changes, and does makeup that's only gonna get cried and sweated away away during the next shoot. He does that all in two minutes flat. He subsides off of cigarettes, water, and Bolivian marching powder, and the lowest-calorie meals Val can spare.

He tells himself the Hotel was a fluke. He tells himself everyone there wanted to walk over his right to self determination just as much as Val and Vox. That they wanted to change him in ways he didn't want to be changed. He tells himself that he didn't see Pentious, with a halo and all his black and grey hues changed to pastel blues and yellows, on that big screen hung

on Vee Tower's facade, even though he did. He tells himself that the snake died a pointless sacrifice.

He tells himself Husk only wanted him for his body. A body that was meant and made to be used.

When Val gives him enough blow to get properly high off of, and fucks him almost like he did so many years ago, Angel can almost believe it all.

Redemption. What a joke. What did he even do with his time at the Hazbin Hotel anyway? Drink a lot. Flirt a lot. Instigate a fight. Do nothing while he watched a friend die. Spy on his friends.

Choke Cherri out.

Endanger those he cared for.

Redemption was bullshit. At least for him. It wasn't something he could ever get.

It wasn't something he deserved.

Angel's memory of sweet times with Valentino is soured, because of what Valentino's done to him. So here he is, trying to sour his memory of his stay at the Hazbin Hotel as well, on purpose. Because of himself. Because of what *he* did.

And yet, just like he still perversely, irrationally wants Valentino, he still wants so badly to go back to the Hotel.

He wants to apologise to Charlie for making her worry, and tell her gently all the things she didn't know, that she was getting wrong about souls like him, so she can have a better shot at helping more sinners. He wants to hug Cherri, and joke about her choking him out to make them even, and she'd probably whack him for it but that was alright.

(To see her before she gets redeemed and goes to spend the rest of her afterlife fucking Mr Two-dicks up there.)

To see his baby Nuggs again. To have a Harder Daddy at the Hotel bar, made just the way he liked, and take Husk to bed. Maybe not even for sex, but just to cuddle.

To delude himself into thinking he had a shot at seeing Molly again.

But Angel can have Valentino. Maybe he'll have him for all eternity.

He can't ever have the Hotel. He can't have friends. Family.

He can't even have himself.

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