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CRIME OF FAITH

Creatures in heaven cannot die, or so God always wanted us to believe. And maybe they weren't supposed to, but I have been taught to believe there was a first for everything, and this was it.

The angel had its wings torn apart, but there were no marks of blood that would have indicated the physical pain prior to death. All I could take a look at was the shadow of its impact still lingering in the angel's eyes. It was a stare I was familiar with, for I had seen it more than once before.

"Why did you call me?" I asked the angel next to me. It had taken an eternity for the two of us to come here, but then everything since my own death had seemed to have consisted of several different eternities, set apart by variations of praying, singing and worshipping His heavenly work. "There is nothing I can do for the poor soul."

"He did not have a soul," the angel next to me replied with the stern and holy face that was common among all angels. "He was an angel."

Although the angel was not among the higher ranks of His army, he radiated the same arrogance inherent in all of His creatures, stating the obvious when it was unnecessary, covering up the secrets when frankness would have been prudent, leaving the poor souls in heaven, such as myself, utterly confused most of the time. This time was no exception. The angel slid through the room with perfect precision, the slightest beating of his wings creating a breeze touching my face.

He did not look at me while it explained, "You were

summoned, because we are aware of your...expertise concerning death. We are not quite certain what the proper procedures are.”

“You don’t know why he died?” I asked.

“Angels cannot die,” the angel announced with the same flat voice he had summoned me out of my personal part of heaven; a small study, the walls covered with shelves, but still not creating enough room for all of the books read or waiting to be read, leaving piles of them on my desk, the floor and every other part of the room that wasn’t covered with papers, half-filled cups of tea and worn out clothes that reminded me of the time I had been still alive.

I was relatively new (as far as I could tell) and must confess was quite happy to wear my tweed trousers, a matching vest that hid a now useless pocket-watch (worn for sentimental reasons), a plain shirt with a freshly starched collar, and brogues with my favorite beige spats. When strolling through my own personal heaven which strangely resembled Regents Park, or sometime my dearly beloved India, a walking stick would often appear, as if to help to keep my feet on the ground, no matter what that ground was made of. I had pictures of my beloved wife on the desk, a memory now, although she was here with me, in a different part of heaven, content with being free of our marriage. I was less than a memory to her; a memory that would never completely die. Like all the souls in heaven. Like all the angels.

“This one was quite capable of dying,” I told the angel next to me. I kneeled next to the dead body, afraid to touch it, the fear of something holier than a human soul still instilled in me, but it took only a moment before professional interest became more insistent than repulsion or sanctity. The knowledge was still there, untainted by time, space or reason.

When I looked at the wounds inflicted on the creature the habit of my lifetime took over. One of the wings had been pulled out of the waxen flesh, like feathers plucked from a chicken, gathering in a pile behind the back. Bloodless. Weightless. Meaningless. The mortal wound was quite obvious the one in the angel’s chest, a hole as big as a fist that revealed empty darkness where there should have been blood and intestines or the most essential of human physiology; a heart that can be filled with compassion. I slid my fingers into the hole, almost expecting the half-warmth of a newly dead human corpse. Instead, when I pulled my fingers free they came away clean, almost oily. It was a strange feeling, almost forgotten, yet another part of my different existence that had come back to haunt me and yet had an ominous novelty that sent a shiver through my heavenly body. Maybe paradise was not as perfect as I had it expected to be after all. The angel behind me observed all of my actions intently. The dead angel’s expression was one of pain. “The way I see it he was even capable of feeling the pain that comes with it.”

“Why did he die?” the observing angel asked.

Because somebody decided to rip his heart out, I wanted to say, but knew that this response would only cause further irritation for my temporary companion, so I decided to keep my counsel to myself until a more appropriate time.

Created without souls, angels were God’s most perfect servants, thinking about the tasks assigned to them without the benefit of human passion or indeed compassion. Compassion was a gift from only one member of heaven’s community, His will simply executed and usually not challenged. Angels were hatched to fight as perfect armies, personalities only surfacing as an afterthought. This meant that they were merciless, driven by their strongest desire to

obey, which very often left them without the ability to think on their own. Good, little soldiers.

This heavenly host was no exception. His task had been to summon me, but without further orders he would simply accompany me without being of any help at all.

“You called the wrong person,” I said. The angel’s expression changed from the usual calm to the sharp lines of confusion, turning the perfect male face into something human for a moment before God’s servant decided to ignore the conflicting information.

“You used to be a man called Watson,” he said in a monotone voice. “You used to be a doctor. And you used to solve crime. You must know why the angel died.”

“Two out of three is not bad, my winged friend,” I laughed sourly. “Yes, my name is Watson, and yes, I was a doctor, but I never solved any crime. The one who did didn’t quite make it.”

“Make it,” the angel inquired.

“To this place,” I replied.

II.

I still remembered my own death. You must believe me when I tell you, all the stories you have heard about it about death are true. Each and every one of them, because death is something intensely personal, something even God cannot touch or change, however much humans might want to believe otherwise. He has tried to alter or temporarily divert the path of fate many times, but with only one public success. In any case, that was family business.

There are souls in heaven who saw a tunnel of white light opening up above them when they could feel their spirit leaving their bodies, a sphere of wonder calling them, with the voices of all those who had gone there before, friends and relatives and loved ones. Others described their death to me as the dissolution of reality, when they let go of everything, forgot everything that used to make them human, only to remember God’s will before they came to heaven. Others don’t remember dying at all. I remember the face of a doctor looking at me, with the same professional interest that I had observed so many soon-to-be corpses during my career, maybe even with that hint of compassion that I still pride myself with. Even that detached concern could not displace the knowledge that nothing, not even the more developed medicine of the new century, would be able to aid my failing health.

I had closed my eyes and had made peace with myself and God, or so I thought, and thought of my wife, my friends, and of him. The final thought was

of him, I am afraid to admit, it was not of my family, it was not of my beautiful wife, who had suffered through most of my escapades, it was of the one man who had influenced every part of my life. He had died more than two decades before it had been my time, and I had been lonely, and I had locked myself up with books, case studies and memories, which all gathered dust by the end. Some were still waiting to be written down, waiting to be told to the world, but I was tired, the *joie de vie* departed with my beloved friend and companion. When death, (my own) finally came, I was relieved, because it was all over, because I wouldn't be alone anymore, nobody would be alone in heaven, and I would be able to see him again. To talk to him again. To see him solving the crossword puzzle in the Times in less than time than most gentlewomen take to drink a delicate china cup of tea. To listen to him explaining his theories about life the universe and all the rest in that superficially monotonous voice that would always hide his emotions so well. To hear him play the violin, (dreadfully, I might add) but even that earth-bound annoyance would have been a part of my heaven.

My heaven. I suppose I am wrong in assuming total personal ownership. Unlike death, heaven does not belong to me, or indeed anyone; it belongs to The One. And God's idea of heaven was not quite the same as mine. Or what my friend would have had in mind, so maybe I should not have been disappointed to find out that my companion had been sentenced to purgatory, because he had chosen not to believe in God.

I sighed and asked, "What is your name, angel?"

"I do not have a name. Our Lord has yet to decide whether my actions will deem me worthy of a

name."

"Did he have one?" I pointed at the corpse in front of us. "A name, I mean."

The angel nodded, "Rafael."

My perception of personal heaven suddenly changed. It did no longer consist of a place, an emotion or even a time; only a name attached to a face. That of my old friend, companion and colleague, none other than Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

I turned to look at my companion, as if he may have some answer to the dilemma. The creature's face showed no emotion, only the expression which older angels usually wear. The stained glass windows on earth often portray their expressions as one of blessed illumination, but these images offer a poor representation of the real thing. There was one mortal poet who may have had a closer estimation of angels, even if he was unaware at the time. He wrote that the eyes are the window to the soul. When one can look upon the countenance of an angel, one realizes that the mortal artists were misguided in their impressions taken from the manuscripts and sermons. There is no intelligence behind an angel's eyes; only emptiness that can be filled by orders. There is a *venier* that they can draw across those black pools if they so wish, and often do when dealing with the souls here in heaven, if only to allow us to feel more comfortable.

The recently deceased Rafael had no such control over his body, the stiff open eye-lids offering me my first experience to stare into the true face of an angel. Unfortunately, it was not to be my last.

"I have been ordered to request your assistance in this delicate matter, angel," my companion informed me.

Before thinking, I replied that I wished him to address me as Dr. Watson. I had only recently arrived

in heaven, and was still rather attached to my name and personality.

“Very well. Dr. Watson, I will grant your unusual request. I must repeat, will you kindly inform us how Rafael came to this state?”

Of course, I had no idea how such a terrible deed could have occurred. As I have already said, I had only recently come to heaven, or so it felt, and had spent most of that eternity in my own personal heaven. I had little knowledge of the inner workings of heaven, and only a smattering of the rules. However, I had been in the army in my former life, and knew that every movement or word would be reported to a higher authority. I knew I needed assistance of my own which might be impossible to reach. I also knew I had to try.

“I will need the aid of only one other person. Do you realize of whom I speak?”

The angel nodded. “We had expected such a request, Dr. Watson. It will not be without difficulties. However, He is quite prepared to grant you the companionship of your friend in this matter.”

III.

Sherlock Holmes hadn't changed one damn bit since I had last saw him. In death he was still as arrogant and as intelligent as he had been in life. Having once been the world's most reputable detective, he still only believed what he could actually prove.

And Purgatory was not one of those things. When the angel and I found him there, on that island that all those sinners had to climb in order to reach the paradise I had been granted for my faith, he looked up, his face as haggard as ever, his smile as thin as I could remember. The eyes, however, had changed quite a lot since we had last met, in his office at 221B Baker Street in London. They seemed to be pained in a way that I had never seen them in life.

“Watson!” he exclaimed when he saw the angel and me approaching. “Come here, old chap! Wondered when you would show up, I must say. And it seems that you've brought a friend. However, since your friend has wings spurting out of his back, I am afraid I must regard him as part of this illusion and will therefore not inquire his name.”

“He does not have a name,” I began, but Holmes cut me short.

“Of course he does not,” my companion told me. “I don't give any of my illusions names, Watson. You see, if I do, they might become real. And I cannot allow that to happen, my dear Watson, I cannot allow that. That would destroy my sanity.”

“Do you know where you are, Holmes?” I asked.

The world's greatest detective smiled. “I'm lying at this very moment on the couch of my study in Baker Street, dreaming all of this, without a doubt.

You always warned me not to inject cocaine into my veins, my dear Doctor. But then, I needed to think! Not to dream!”

He interrupted himself, realizing that he was talking to himself and not to me. “But then, I started to think I was dreaming. And in this dream I thought. I dreamed I was thinking. Now I don’t know which is which anymore.”

“You’re in purgatory, Holmes.”

“That,” Holmes replied, “is quite an accurate description of my current situation, my dear Watson. This makes me believe only more that this must be a dream. In reality you were never quite that perceptive. Don’t take this too personally, old chap. You’ve always been a good companion to me, but not always the brightest spark.”

“I know,” I said.

“You do, don’t you?” Holmes grimaced. “Well, tell you one thing, my old friend. Sometimes it is good not to be too perceptive. It keeps you from seeing things.”

He pointed at one of the other poor souls, wandering around the different levels of this island, rising from the depths of hell and leading to the gates of heaven, a rock big enough to hold the souls of all of humankind, every man, woman and child who ever lived. I, having not been sent through purgatory myself, looked in disgusted interest at the unfortunate ones. Faith, I knew, was their only salvation, although I wished the Lord would be more merciful and embrace all of them without the pain and the suffering. I looked at Holmes. I had been wrong in my first description of his situation. He was no longer the man I remembered. The spark that frightened criminals and policemen in London alike when he was still alive had been buried underneath a mass of bruises, cuts and, above all, self-delusion.

“There’s been a murder,” I told him.

“A murder?” he echoed.

“A murder.”

“Indeed,” Holmes said. “A murder.”

I could see all of the pain being pushed back into the place of his mind where it wouldn’t matter anymore, all of his self-doubt dissipating immediately as he heard the news. The smile became bigger and cut through his haggard face.

He gently touched my shoulder and led me away from the angel as if even the merest presence of such a creature would endanger his suddenly newfound sanity.

“Well, Watson, you must tell me about this.”

The travel into heaven was a short one, and filled with conversation that had little or no meaning to the angel who traveled with us. Holmes relayed the final months of his life to me, sinking deeper into his own thoughts with each sentence as if had those particulars had been debated in silence by him over and over again. I knew how Holmes had died, I must confess here, although I have never before talked about it and have lied openly when the reporters had asked me after I had taken a look at the corpse. With the help of Inspector Lestrade, it had been possible to keep my friend’s reputation as spotless in death as it had been life. Good, old Lestrade, having risen in the ranks of the Yard primarily because of the unnumbered cases in which Holmes consulted and weren’t written down by me, hid the evidence and I performed an autopsy whose outcome had been determined before I had started it.

Hearing my old friend talk about it brought back those memories.

“It was the strangest sensation, Watson,” he said, perfectly oblivious of the fact that we were gently spiraling upwards without the help of machines. I wondered what else he had experience in those times

when the cocaine had been coursing through his veins to warrant such an obvious disinterest in even the simplest marvels of God's presence. "I could feel my heart slowing down, I tell you, I could feel it slowing until it became the mere ticking of a poorly wound clock, without rhythm or balance. We must investigate this further when I wake up, of course. If you can control not only your breathing, but also your heartbeat, there might be a way to simulate death, as those accounts from the Jamaican Islands tell us. Nothing supernatural about it, I assure you."

The fact was that Lestrade and I had been successful in keeping from the public had been that Holmes killed himself with an overdose of cocaine. The syringe had been still in his hand when I had found him, the eyes dull and broken. I nodded. As I said before, death is always an extremely personal experience and not one that can easily be described by words, although Holmes tried his best.

"Strangest sensation," muttered Holmes. Changing subjects abruptly, he gave me another thin smile. It was that one smile I remembered so well, the one that always reminded me that my companion had never quite thought as any other man. "Now, tell me about this crime. You haven't spoken more than two words in a row, my friend. And I need to know every little detail that can be remembered. Did you find the body?"

I told him no, and to my shame I thought to myself that I hadn't even thought of asking that question to the angel who had summoned me. The enormity of the discovery had been enough to shut out anything else in my mind. An angel who had died was unheard of, and an angel who had been killed defied any belief that I had. I looked at Holmes. Somehow this

realization made it a little easier to understand my friend's illusion.

"We have to talk to the person who did," Holmes said. "And of course, we need to know as much as we can about the victim. Cannot start an investigation without knowing what to investigate, can we?"

Rafael had not been moved, nor had the body been touched by anybody, as per my request. Holmes wandered through the crowd of angels who were standing around the corpse, whispering to each other their secrets and their fears, all of which could be summarized in one sentence. Were they still safe here in the heavens, if an angel as Rafael could be killed without even having been able to defend itself? Already my friend's mind was altering the reality around him, with a memory more than equaling my own, and so we found ourselves on the cobblestone streets of London, on the sidewalk, observing a naked body in the gutter and being surrounded by other naked men sprouting wings from their backs while the typical London hustling and bustling continued us without taking notice.

A paperboy ran down the street, shouting the latest news that an angel had been found in the streets of the Empire's capital, and whether that would mean the beginning of the end. Holmes only frowned and the boy disappeared around the corner, his voice fading quickly. I could feel my trousers around my legs, and my weight, albeit it only in my imagination, made me breathe hard when I followed my friend. It made it hard to remember that I was already dead and that all pain, physical or otherwise should have been a distant memory of the past. But this place was more than a memory, it was, with the familiar sounds and smells of old London, my heaven, much more so than all the time I had spent in paradise.

IV.

“Are we already under attack by Satan himself?” one of the angels inquired.

“He wouldn’t dare,” replied another.

“It would mean war.”

“Between heaven and hell.”

“And the Fallen has lost the last one, in open and fair battle.”

“Lucifer is a coward,” said another. “And it is a cowardly act, to strike down an angel from behind. So it must be Satan, for who else who show such an apparent lack of courage?”

“Firstly,” Holmes said, lecturing his surrounding like he was the headmaster in a boarding school, “it is quite apparent to me that this man was killed by somebody standing in front of him. If you would observe the wounds, and I’m certain Dr. Watson will confirm my observation with his medical expertise, it is obvious that he must have known his murderer and must have allowed him to come close enough for those kinds of wounds to occur.”

My friend took me aside and consulted with me. I agreed with him that wounds like that, the complete opening of a ribcage, could only occur, if the victim in question was already dead or the murderer attack from the front, at very close range. Holmes nodded, knowing that this short consultation provided him with exactly that type of information he needed to know. And that wasn’t my medical opinion, but rather the reaction of the other angels standing close to us.

Holmes, as usual, was a keen observer, registering even the minutest details.

“Lucifer, indeed,” he whispered to me, then turned around to face the angels. They all expected him to supply them with an answer, one that I – due to my previous working experience with Holmes – already could anticipate.

“This can only mean one thing,” he announced with his flat voice, already turning observation into fact. “The victim knew the killer. And knew him quite well, for him to be allowed such closeness.”

It took a moment for the angels to comprehend what that had to mean.

And then there was the first wave of shock, something I personally found remarkable to observe, I might add

In my time I have observed the questioning of so many different people regarding a violent crime that I believe I can say with an authority that I have watched the all range of human emotions, from shock and disbelief to arrogance and disinterest. Questioning an archangel added to that experience the observance of a cold interest, untainted by feelings or even the slightest comprehension of the reasons why it had to appear and answer to a mere man’s soul, and not even one that should have been part of the heavens so closely guarded by it.

I led Saint Michael into my study, where Holmes was already waiting, standing by the window. We were in 221B Baker Street, and Holmes watched the traffic outside, which was slowly coming to a halt in the rush hour. The smell of freshly smoked tobacco lingered in the air. I appreciated every little detail. It was like coming home.

“Ah, Saint Michael,” Holmes said, being as impolite as ever and not even offering the archangel the chance to look into the detective’s eyes. My friend continued

to look outside and exhaled plumes of smoke. “How very polite of you to attend this session.”

“I did not have any choice.”

“No, of course you didn’t.” Although I couldn’t see his face, I was certain that Holmes was smiling. “I’m terribly sorry if this causes you any inconvenience. My friend Watson and I will try to conduct this investigation as discreet as possible, including your questioning.”

“I shouldn’t be here,” Saint Michael said.

“Indeed,” said Holmes, “you shouldn’t be. And your friend Rafael shouldn’t not have died such an atrocious death, which only serves to illustrate that life is in general unfair. Could you please make notes of this meeting, Watson?”

Saint Michael’s questioning was not the first one we had conducted. Indeed, all of the archangels had been summoned to us, and most of them had only followed that order grudgingly, so Holmes was already used to their arrogance, which at the worst of times actually equaled his own. The questioning of the other angels had been, in comparison to other cases we had been involved in, mercifully short. There had only been four angels who had seen (and had been seen) in the presence of poor Rafael, and those we all had interrogated. Saint Michael was the last. I sat down with the yellowish notepad in my hands and started scribbling, although both my friend and I knew perfectly well that this only served to refresh my own memory for a later time, if and when I chose to turn this episode into a tale. Holmes, as usual, was quite capable of registering every little movement, every smile, an involuntary twitch in the eyes or the smallest contradiction in a story to be told to him.

“How did you know Rafael?” he asked.

“He was an angel.”

“Like you?”

“There is nobody like me,” Saint Michael replied. It was a statement of fact, spoken without pride. The other archangels had given similar replies when interrogated.

“That is, I assume, because you are an archangel.”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” Holmes let the silence extend just long enough to make even somebody as powerful as Saint Michael feeling uncomfortable. This was something our mutual friend Lestrade had never mastered, and his methods of interrogation had been often crude and tainted with the violence that seems to be inherent in police work. Holmes frowned upon that. He was of the opinion that questioning in any form was a much subtler contest, a fight between two intellects trying to outmaneuver each other. “Could you tell me when you last saw the deceased?”

“I saw Rafael when we were in His presence. We were preparing for the day of judgement, on His behalf.”

“I gather you mean the apocalypse.”

“Yes.”

“Ah.”

“You are a non-believer, soul,” Saint Michael whispered calmly. “You do not deserve even this shadow of the heavens He has presented you with.”

And then he turned to me. “Neither do you, soul, for you do not want to embrace the quietness of paradise.”

Again, this was a sentiment expressed as well by the other archangels. I involuntarily, as on those other occasions, found myself shivering, as if there was a cold draft coming into the study. Holmes sucked his pipe, not noticing anything of the kind.

“So we don’t belong here, do we?”

The archangel stayed quiet. His eyes were blank, and remained pools of darkness, absorbing even the dim light of the gas lamps Holmes and I had lit to

fight the twilight outside, creeping into the streets of London.

“I have no further questions for you, Saint Michael,” my friend, the detective, concluded then. The archangel stood up and unfolded his wings. They nearly took up most of the space in our crowded living space, but were without substance, made out of the purest light and seeing them here and now made it so much easier to understand why Holmes could delude himself by thinking that all of this was a figment of his imagination.

Of course I knew better.

It just didn't make me feel better.

When Saint Michael left, Holmes stayed unusually quiet. Even the rhythmic sucking on pipe ceased, and after a while the tobacco went out, leaving only the ashen remains. My friend carefully placed the pipe onto one of the tables, right next to the window, crossing his arms behind his back.

“Do you still believe this is heaven, Watson?” he asked me.

“Well, Holmes, I...”

“I do,” he cut me off. “They are not human, these creatures, and I do wonder what they are, exactly. If they are angels, then this must be heaven, since only that could be the logical conclusion of this argument, whether I am personally glad about it or not. But if it is, then I must admit I would prefer to be in hell.”

“Holmes?”

“They killed him. The angel, I mean. They killed him and they don't show the slightest remorse, nor do they show pity. It is remarkable, really.”

“You mean Saint Michael and the other archangels?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“But they wouldn't,” I mumbled. “Surely they wouldn't. I mean, they're angels.”

“Yes, they are, aren't they?” Holmes turned around to show me a grimace I'd only seen once before in his life, when faced with the ultimate challenge of his mastermind, facing Moriarty. He looked tired, and all of the cracks in his façade showed, accumulated over a lifetime and its aftermath. “Born and prepared for one reason. And one reason alone. To fight. To kill. For His sake. It is quite apparent how Rafael was killed, my dear Watson, nor does it take great ingenuity to deduce who did it.”

Holmes turned around, and – with great care – put on his overcoat, his gloves and placed the pipe in one of the many pockets, before he addressed me one more time.

“No, the real question that needs to be asked is why Rafael was murdered,” he said, before he added, with the mischievous smile that I had come to know and admire, “and there is only one place to answer it.”

My friend stepped outside the study, not even waiting for me to gather my own belongings or to finish my notes. “Come along, Watson, the game's afoot one last time.”

“Where are going, Holmes?”

“We're going to talk to the one responsible for Rafael's death,” I heard the detective's voice from the outside. I slipped into my own coat, put on my hat and hurried, not to lose him in the multiplicity of the heaven's, for already the illusion of London had been fragmented, and other pieces of memory slowly put layer on top of layer until only Our Lord's Presence remained. Holmes determination, despite the illusions of his life shattering in front of him, was without equal. “We're going to talk to God.”

The four archangels guarded the Presence when we arrived, all looking at Holmes and me with barely concealed antipathy. Saint Michael frowned and already stepped forward to halt Holmes' approach, but when he came close enough to stop my friend, Holmes merely frowned and the angel's face went blank. He didn't retreat, nor did he acknowledge in any way the presence of somebody in his immediate surrounding. The angel was no longer ware of this reality. Holmes waved his hand in front of Saint Michael's face. The angel didn't move.

"Very interesting trick," my friend, the detective said, to no-one in particular. "You could have merely acknowledged your guilt, but then, restraint has never been one of your main characteristics, has it?"

I searched Saint Michael as well. The angel's face was rigid, the eyes blank and mere dots of black that led into the hollowness of Saint Michael's being.

"Burning bushes and floods and commandments." Holmes put out his pipe and lit it. He took one deep drag, then exhaled through his nose. "Simple and straightforward. May I comment that your skill in murder is laughable? Genocide, perhaps, but there only numbers count, not ingenuity."

I looked around in the first fits of panic, anticipating or perhaps awaiting some sort of divine punishment for the blasphemy uttered by the detective. Despite his brilliance in deduction, it was absolutely obvious that my friend had gone mad, since this could only mean one thing: *Holmes was accusing God of murder!*

"Holmes," I whispered urgently.

"All of the angel's are your creations, aren't they? Or, to be more precise, your eyes and ears and hands. Unlike us, they don't have a soul, and thus no free will. You can use them as you wish. Let me ask you if Lucifer has realized yet that you wanted him to rebel against heaven. Somehow I seriously doubt this."

"Holmes."

My friend waved his hand to acknowledge that he was well equipped to hear me, but that he chose to ignore whatever cautioning words I might have been able to tell him.

"You see?" he continued. "In my experience the motive for a crime is the key that links the crime, the victim and the criminal. No death is ever wasted, at least in the eyes of the murderer. There are reasons for his behavior, even if those reasons are not within the understanding of people deemed sane by society. There was never any question as to the identity of the murderers. Saint Michael and the others were the last ones to have been with Rafael, and every single one of them made clear that they were in your Presence. And who would kill in the Presence of God?"

Holmes puffed and stood there, in the midst of the frozen archangels.

"Yes, who indeed?" he mused. There was a shadow rising behind the hazy surroundings, shaped like a human, but with the wings of an angel. Eyes stared at us through the fog, and the shadow took a step forward, then another, and with its third step it became recognizable.

The angel Rafael moved closer to Holmes, who was already expecting him, as I could tell from the way my friend's face tensed. Rafael gave my friend a smile that showed an origin beyond that of a human being or even that of an angel, although I had never seen any kind of human emotion being reflected on an angel's face. The smile both Holmes and I looked at

was not arrogant, but it also wasn't warm or inviting. It was the smile of a child that had been found out.

"God, I presume," Holmes said to the angel.

"I apologize that I couldn't be more of a challenge to you, Mr. Holmes," Rafael said. The angel had his arms behind his back and wandered around, nodding at me, before focusing all of his attention back to my friend. "I did try, you must admit, to present you with those elements that you needed."

"You killed Rafael."

"Yes, I did," God said with the voice of his dead angel. Still, the ribcage was torn open and the gaping hole of darkness where the heart and lungs should have been was difficult to overlook, even when Rafael's face – now filled with God's will – radiated more than angelic determination and his voice was a soft whisper. "And I brought him back to life."

"For a while," said Holmes.

"For a while," conceded God.

"Why?"

"To make you see."

"I see a murderer."

"Good." Rafael gave me a nod, and the ruffled feathers moved gently. "Unlike your friend Dr. Watson, that's all you have ever seen in your life, Mr. Holmes, haven't you? Murderers and thieves. Consequently, that's all you've ever believed in."

That's when I realized. Holmes must have thought along the same lines, for his face froze and if there had been a mirror here, I would have been able to observe the same reaction on my features, for I could feel the coldness of this realization flooding over me. *That's all you've ever believed in.*

And God looked at my friend, the detective, and spoke. "Now believe in me."