A Slow and Lingering Descent
by write_away

Summary

Falling, it seems, is not so different from emptying a bottle of wine on the couch with your best friend a week out from the Apocalypse-That-Was-Rescheduled.

That is to say, of course, that it felt both terribly natural and horribly painful for Aziraphale, who at first could not quite distinguish between the sensation of being stripped from his divinity and that of his heart being flayed open by the sincerity of Crowley's gaze over a glass of merlot.

Or, the one where they don't get away with it all and both need some saving.

Notes

I'm quickly devouring all of the fallen!Aziraphale fics I can find, so I decided to throw my own into the ring. More tags (and potentially warnings) to be added as I continue. This is my first fic in fandom and I am, to be quite honest, figuring it out as I go. It's going to be a blend of book and show than either specifically, though I borrow elements from the show to set the scene.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale Falls. It is unpleasant, if expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Autumn” by Rainer Maria Wilke

The leaves fall, fall as from far,
Like distant gardens withered in the heavens;
They fall with slow and lingering descent.

And in the nights the heavy Earth, too, falls
From out the stars into the Solitude.

Thus all doth fall. This hand of mine must fall
And lo! the other one:—it is the law.
But there is One who holds this falling
Infinitely softly in His hands.

Falling, it seems, is not so different from emptying a bottle of wine on the couch with your best friend a week out from the Apocalypse-That-Was-Rescheduled.

That is to say, of course, that it felt both terribly natural and horribly painful for Aziraphale, who at first could not quite distinguish between the sensation of being stripped from his divinity and that of his heart being flayed open by the sincerity of Crowley’s gaze over a glass of merlot.

Let’s stay in tonight, Crowley had suggested only hours before, yawning out of a nap, from his sprawl across the arms of Aziraphale’s comfortable chair, shocking the angel out of his book from the suddenness. It was an unusual request for the demon who had a tendency to push them both into the city in a restless whirl of mischief. He nearly always had an air of twitchiness to him when he didn’t find enough trouble for himself. Then again, between the end of the world, mentoring the Antichrist, and deceiving their superiors, it was possible that Crowley had enough of trouble for the time being. I’m bored of humans.

Crowley bored of most things - he had a remarkably short attention span, even for a demon - but I’m not bored of you always went unsaid. Instead, the demon looked over the rims of his shades and raised his eyebrows, waiting for a response.

After six million years, Aziraphale knew it meant basically the same thing.

Well, if you’re certain, my dear, Aziraphale eventually replied, several seconds too late. Perhaps takeout?
Crowley replaced the lenses and grinned. *I’ll get the wine, angel,* he said and Aziraphale’s stomach swooped.

Sometimes, Aziraphale wondered if the demon had ever truly meant a word of their Arrangement, or if he’d simply been killing him slowly with kindness for millennia. Mostly, though, he felt sure that the demon did not mean to twist the knife in his heart. It was, unfortunately, in his nature, and just as tragically in Aziraphale’s to allow it as long as Crowley could stand to remain in his presence.

He figured that lovestruck was a poetic way to die, even if it was metaphoric. It had taken him quite a few decades to come to terms with such a human sentiment, but he was steadfast in it. This, too, remained unsaid, and Aziraphale hoped Crowley understood. Even a real death would have been worth being on the receiving end of that piercing stare from his dearest friend, his Crowley. He had endured it for millennia, and would willingly endure it for millennia more.

That being said, if it had all ended there under the demon’s careful contemplation, Aziraphale may not have even noticed he had Fallen.

Of course, that is not how Falling works.

Aziraphale had hardly an instant to consider the heat in his gut that grew whenever Crowley and he cohabited a room before all thought was robbed by pain.

Then, he became acutely aware of the Fall. It was not unlike how one might suddenly notice their face being plunged into a bucket of icy water and held there by a bruising grip until numbness or darkness takes hold, except, for Aziraphale, it was his entire body rather than just his face, and the infernal fires of Hell rather than ice water, and complete immobility from within as if his corporal form had finally realized it never truly belonged to him, nor had any other part of his being.

He felt set aflame, though he, distantly, recognized his skin was actually quite cool as he shivered and shook. It was an awesome and fiery burn from within, as if the holy water he had been submerged in still lingered within his pores, biding its time, and now oozed out to seek bitter vengeance. His eyes leaked with it; his blood boiled; invisible chains coiled around his wrists and throat and wings and tugged down until his lips ripped open in a soundless scream.

He was already on the floor - he could not go lower and yet - yet - Holiness was clawing its way out of his body from anywhere it could. He choked on it, felt it burn sores into the roof of his mouth. It seeped from his ears and left open wounds dripping down his neck, down his chin.

The funny thing about the Fallen, the former angel known as Aziraphale had mused several times before, was how little they seemed to think of Heaven. It was almost like they had forgotten. Perhaps, he mused now, it was simply that the fire left nothing to remember.

He vaguely recognized another being knelt beside him, someone else’s trembling hands pressing into his shoulders and holding him down as he writhed, a silky voice that murmured nonsense and cracked when it said *angel,* but he was far too far gone to understand anything beyond agony. His back arched, wings lifting and cracking and breaking and healing beneath him all at once, sparks smoldering and crackling along each feather.

The someone above him was still saying *angel* again and again, *I’m right here, angel* and *angel, it will be over soon, just stay still and I will fix this, angel,* *I will,* and *I will not leave you, Aziraphale,* but he truly had no idea who the voice was speaking to. He was no angel. Angels did not burn and
he was absolutely blazing.

He just hoped that the bookstore would survive it this time.

Surely this torment would be over soon, he thought, and almost verged on prayer despite the way he sensed it would make every part of him burn anew.

And then it was both dark and numb. Heaven, it seemed, had just enough mercy left for a Fallen angel.

Chapter End Notes

*It would be like Crowley, quite frankly, to exact torture in a slow and unseemly manner, as he did prefer the more subtle styles of corruption which made him rather unpopular among his colleagues. However, it's crucial to note that had Crowley known his adoration hurt Aziraphale as it hurt himself, even a fraction, he would have never laid eyes on the angel again, and would have perhaps destroyed himself in search of undeniably undemonic repentance. [return to text]

**The numbness and darkness would have remained a constant had Aziraphale been permitted to experience either at that time. Heaven is not that kind. [return to text]

***Crowley had always evaded the question of his first name, his angelic one. Once upon a time, it seemed like stubbornness. Now it seemed far more likely that he just did not know. [return to text]

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear your thoughts! You can also find me on Tumblr at theirdarkreturning, where I occasionally scream about writing and ineffable husbands.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Crowley reminisces and ponders his own punishment as he cares for Aziraphale through his Fall.

Chapter Notes

You may have noticed I made some slight edits to the prologue as I attempt to fix up my formatting and create functional footnotes. I apologize if anyone gets mixed up and/or lost in this process as I learn HTML (whoops!) Enjoy! I've loved hearing from you so far.

Crowley was the one who named Aziraphale’s bookstore.

He scarcely mentioned the fact -it would raise eyebrows both Above and Below, not to mention In-Between[*]- but it was the truth. A neutral deed, he liked to think to himself, a favor for a friend that was neither good nor bad. Hardly worthy of special attention.

He’d thought he was being awful clever that afternoon as Aziraphale tutted over shelving and boxes of dusty books, the blank sign and ledgers laid across the couch that the demon quite desperately wanted to nap on. The angel, unfortunately, would not allow it.

“The couch is occupied,” Aziraphale said shortly. He had dropped the “my” the second time Crowley yawned, and the “dear” when he had made to shove the wooden slab to the floor. “If you must indulge, go home.”

And Crowley pouted, because beside the aching, empty, loneliness of his own flat, the couch was in the center of the most perfect spot of sunlight that shone through no-longer-grimy windows[**] and he wanted nothing more than to stretch in its warmth.

“But angel,” he protested, fighting to keep the whine out of his voice. He was a demon, perhaps, but he was a dignified one.

“Sleep on the floor, if you’re so tempted, then.” Aziraphale stepped back to admire his handiwork on a shelf, then shook his head and snapped it straight.

Crowley was tempted, had been for at least an hour in fact, but he had staked a claim on the cushions themselves and was not about to back down. So Aziraphale wanted to be an Adversary? He could be adversarial.

“That’s not very mortal of you, angel,” he pointed out and un-miracled the shelf to crookedness. Aziraphale whirled around to glare. “I thought this shop was about being one with the humans.”
“It is, but -“

“Blending in.”

“You see, it’s all a bit more -“

“For the good of humanity.”

“Well, obviously, I am an -“

“To spread knowledge to the masses.”

“And what has unfixing my shelf got to do with any of that, demon?” Aziraphale snapped, fixing Crowley with a delicious glare. Frustration was most unbecoming on angels, and that was precisely why Crowley loved pushing Aziraphale to the edge. Still, Crowley winced. Perhaps he’d pushed too hard. Though he called his friend by his otherworldly title often, Aziraphale only returned the favor when he was truly and deeply mad.

“Just thought you’d want to do it the hard way,” he mumbled. “The human way and all.”

The moment hung between them. Aziraphale sighed. He almost always broke the silence. Crowley did not know if it was an angelic trait or just one of his own, but he appreciated it nonetheless. He reached out a hand as if extending an olive branch. “Oh, I am sorry, Crowley, truly,” he said. “It’s just that I plan to open in a week and this is all quite stressful.”

Crowley did not clasp hands as Aziraphale clearly hoped he might, and instead set his eyes about the shop. It was a mess - hardly ready for opening in a month, let alone a week - and he wondered not for the first time why Aziraphale had put himself on such a tight timeline for a whim. Shelves were half-installed, lights were dim in their lamps, and books remained piled in a haphazard system that was surely organized in only Aziraphale’s head. Without miracles, the shop wouldn’t open for weeks, if at all. He looked back at Aziraphale, who was still reaching out, imploring with his wide blue eyes. They made Crowley feel almost breathless. Bless it, he was such a sucker.

For good measure, he made sure to roll his eyes and grumble. “How can I help?” he asked, already mourning his afternoon nap (and indeed, possibly his afternoon naps for the next several days, and maybe even his evening slumbers). Aziraphale beamed. Perhaps Crowley didn’t need a nap in the sunshine anyway.

“Well, the shop still needs a name,” he said and gestured at the sign.

Crowley hummed, thinking. “Surely customers won’t be calling you Aziraphale,” he murmured.

The angel looked shocked at the proposition. “Customers?” he echoed, as if he’d not quite thought of them. He cast a worried look around at the old, valuable tomes. “Oh dear. I suppose not. It’s not a very inconspicuous name.”

“No, not especially,” Crowley agreed. “What is your human name, then?”

Aziraphale shrugged. “I haven’t settled on one in a while. Doesn’t feel right.” He paused, glancing at the ceiling. “And my superiors have expressed concern about my more, well. Human tendencies. Perhaps I ought to stick with what I’ve got.”

That was a fair point, Crowley supposed, though it often led to unfairness toward him. After all, Aziraphale had insisted on stopping for lunch but denied him a nap? Bastard angel. Still, Crowley didn’t like imagining a human strolling in and calling his friend Aziraphale. It was not a name that he
thought should sound comfortable on other tongues. [...] It was far too divine to deserve humanity’s claim.

Then it came to him. A name not so divine. Crowley rolled back his shoulders, cracked his spine, and grinned so wide that a passerby who peeked in the windows thought to herself This man is inhuman before scurrying away and swearing to never pass by the shop again. He gestured toward the blank sign. “May I?”

As was wont, he did not wait for an affirmation. With a sweep of his hand, he miracled a name deep into the dark wood of the sign, embellishing just enough to catch every fiftieth person’s eye and to entice every hundredth. (He was not so cruel to subject his friend to a swarm, but he could hardly allow the angel to open a shop and not cause mischief by means of simple success).

**A.Z. Fell and Co** the sign read boldly. It seemed to glimmer just slightly in the sunlight.

Aziraphale was suddenly at his side, pressing their shoulders together, eyes alight. “A.Z. Fell,” he repeated softly. It was impossible to know if he understood the irony. It was impossible to know if he approved and Crowley caught himself - *traitorous fucking feelings*, he thought to himself - hoping that he did. “Yes, I do like that. Not quite a lie, but - not quite the truth.”

“Very human,” Crowley agreed. They considered it for a moment longer.

“And company? Who is company?” Aziraphale finally asked.

Crowley hesitated, unsure. “Me,” he said simply, and was not sure if it was his fallen heart or his clever head that answered.

Aziraphale nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. “It stinks like sulfur, my dear,” he remarked and that was the last time they spoke of it.

Crowley hung the sign and proceeded to nap in the sunlight until Aziraphale woke him up for a late supper and a drink. It was, by Crowley’s estimate, quite a nice day. The day Aziraphale Fell had not been so different. Sunlight streamed. Crowley dozed on the couch. They drank and toasted and drank. The smell of sulfur hung in the air, choking out Aziraphale’s light from within.

Well, that bit was different.

“Hang on, angel,” Crowley murmured over and over as he knelt beside the twitching angel - demon - friend and tried to hold him steady. Pain had rolled Aziraphale’s eyes to the back of his head, and his mouth was parted in soundless sobs that shook the whole shop. Tears leaked, spit dribbled, leaving rugged scabs and jagged scars across the skin. Crowley, as a rule, did not think often or deeply on his own Fall, but he was certain it was not nearly this agonizing. Perhaps he’d never had enough holiness in him to burn like so.

It seemed to go on endlessly. Crowley blessed and cursed and swore, unsure what was most appropriate for the situation and banking on trying it all, when Aziraphale went limp in his arms. It’s not that he was surprised. It was only a matter of time before their superiors caught up with them and came back with a vengeance. It’s just that, well, he had been hoping that “a matter of time” meant a few more millennia rather than a few days. It was his own fault, really, for assuming their bosses were far less intelligent than they were.[****]

He took a deep breath and assessed the situation. He had no idea what to do with a Fallen angel, nor how long it would take for him to wake again. Aziraphale still trembled, though it was difficult to
know if it was from fear, pain, or cold. The angel had always felt uncomfortably warm to the touch for Crowley - a side effect of his intrinsic Heavenly glow - but now he was positively freezing. To make matters worse, tears had slid from cheeks over lips to throat and then dripped underneath the neckline, so it was impossible to know how far holy burns bubbled. Crowley manifested a handkerchief into existence and used it to wipe Aziraphale’s face dry with more tenderness than he recalled ever possessing.

Damn angel was so good that his own bodily fluids could burn a demon. It was a good thing, Crowley thought absently, that they’d never -

He didn’t want to think about it that way.

Carefully, he stripped Aziraphale of his sweat-soaked jacket and tugged his tartan bow-tie loose. In one smooth action, he lifted the man to the couch and tucked the nearby quilt around his body, wondering if it would be enough to quell the tremors and electing to remain nearby just in case, one hand resting protectively in the blond curls that were now matted down with sweat and dirt and dust from the shop floor.

If someone had told him a thousand years ago that he would be carding his hands through an angel’s locks and wishing he’d had the opportunity to do so before - well, he probably would have believed them. Crowley was impatient about the things that didn’t matter precisely because he’d been waiting for longer for the things that did.

Three thousand years ago, though - maybe he’d have laughed. Maybe he’d have given himself away by stealing looks at Aziraphale. He wasn’t so good at hiding his affection back then.

A low groan sounded from the back of Aziraphale’s throat. Crowley jumped in surprise, instinctively curling his fingers into the angel’s hair so tight that the man should have flinched had he been conscious. Any words attempted were thoroughly mangled by the sores he could spot inside Aziraphale’s mouth. There was no harm in pretending, though, that the angel had said his name, right?

“Yes, it’s me,” Crowley said. He disentangled his hands from the hair to press his palm to an unusually cool cheek. Maybe he was imagining it, but he thought he felt Aziraphale relax into his touch. “I won’t leave. I promise.”

Crowley rarely made promises and even more rarely kept them even when the recipients could hear him, so it was notable that he fully intended to honor his words to Aziraphale. He almost always did. Even if he had not felt the curling heat of guilt in his gut - which he did, because he was intimately aware of how his own influence had corrupted the angel, how their fraternization had possibly ruined him, how their friendship had clearly brought harm - he would not have left him willingly. This, he thought, was his repentance, his punishment for their schemes. He would have to stay.

To watch Aziraphale Fall was the most painful and pointed punishment even he could have imagined for himself.

Heaven and Hell had their own ideas. Crowley was plunged into a darkness of his own.

Chapter End Notes

*Crowley was, indeed, prone to raising eyebrows when with Aziraphale, mostly
because he could not rid himself of the habit of calling him “angel” any more than he could bring himself to dissuade the angel from responding with “my dear.” More than once, he had been reproached by complete strangers on his indiscretion, especially in the past.

** Aziraphale had made Crowley wash them in an effort to temporarily rid himself of the demon. It did not work.

*** True, other angels and demons called him such. It was his name. But Crowley rarely had to listen to the name in other mouths. He did not like it. Could he truly be blamed for selfishness? He was a demon.

**** It was a fair assumption, though incorrect.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale wakes up alone, reflects on his long-awaited Fall, and begins to let his new employment sink in.

Chapter Notes

First of all, I want to thank all of you for your incredible response! I really can't believe the love you're giving this fic (and me!) I appreciate it so much. You've literally made my day.

I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As a rule, angels did not dream.

Of course, this was more due to the fact that angels hardly slept and those who did were prone to sleeping lightly enough to avoid the nasty little things. Aziraphale had never been particularly fond of sleeping, and certainly not as fond as Crowley - not that he truly judged him for the vice, though he frequently scoffed at the constant performativity of yawning and stretching and snoring, God, Aziraphale was sure the snoring could be avoided - though he had been tempted to a handful of short naps in his existence out of curiosity. None had resulted in dreaming and, he confessed, it was disappointing enough a venture that he hadn’t tried again for several decades.

When Aziraphale finally woke, it was slowly, his senses filtering back to him bit by bit. First he felt pain, of course, and the tug of scabbed skin that streaked across his face in every direction when he winced at the sensation. Then it was the blood - he could taste it, acidic and sulfurous and leaking steadily from a sore inside his mouth. Finally, sound fell softly around him, the birds singing cheerily from outside, the rush of traffic, the creaks and croons of his little old bookshop and a muffled whimper that he eventually tracked down to himself.

Memory came last. He wasn’t sure if it was mercy or torture that he hadn’t seemed to lose a shred of it.

Contrary to what Aziraphale reckoned was popular belief, he was more than a little self-aware. He knew how he presented to the human world, and he knew how he perplexed those in Hell. He especially knew how he frustrated those in Heaven and, privately, he preferred it that way. At one point, he had blamed Crowley’s influence for that thrill at his brothers’ expense, but deep down, he knew it came from only himself. He was an anomaly among his peers, and he rather liked it that way.

To that end, the suddenness of his damnation was more surprising than the damnation itself. Aziraphale was far from stupid, and he had quietly assumed his traitorous deeds in Hell would catch up with him sooner or later. He just wished he had time to prepare properly, to arrange his affairs and
perhaps pump more demonic information out of Crowley. He had briefly considered setting aside a few bottles of holy water for insurance, for safety, but even the possibility of Crowley getting his hands on another drop of the stuff made him recoil.

Strangely, doing penance for his misdeeds against Heaven had never occurred to Aziraphale. He figured it was a small miracle he hadn’t Fallen before.[2]

Regardless, Aziraphale had never actually wanted to be a demon. He liked being an angel - he liked helping people and protecting humanity from the dangers of themselves and of demons. He couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

As much as he enjoyed Crowley’s company and his wicked, lazy grins, it was not enough to actually tempt him toward Falling.[**] He had principles. He was an angel.

Was being the operative word now, he supposed.

So, it was with a certain level of resignation that Aziraphale approached his own mind, carefully sifting through the lingering shocks of pain. This, too, was surprising. Crowley had never mentioned the unique brand of agony that accompanied the Fall.

He’d have to ask Crowley if demons dreamed. He hoped not - he would surely get nightmares.

His head was mostly intact as far as he could tell, though it throbbed like never before with a stuttering, pulsing beat, as if his heart was struggling to restart.[***] With one hand braced against the couch cushion and a foot against the warped wooden floor, Aziraphale gritted his teeth, opened his eyes, and heaved himself upward.

The first thing he noticed was the darkness. For a moment, he was thrust back into the throes of panic. He fell back with the force of it, breathing raggedly. Please let there still be light in the world, he thought, and if the voice in his head sounded somewhat hysterical, he could give it a pass. Please don’t take that away, too. He reached out for Crowley, fingers grasping at air. Please don’t take him away, too.

Time slipped away again until dawn crept across the floor. His breath returned in bits with his sensibilities. Of course he would not have to live in darkness - it was simply night. He had been asleep for an awfully long time.

That brought Aziraphale to the second thing he noticed - the time. How long had he been out? Again, he pulled himself up, this time to his feet, and cautiously shuffled out of his dusty backroom in search of a hint. He kept his back close to the wall in fear of collapsing yet again as he crept down the hall. He hoped the newspaper had been delivered, or perhaps a package he was expecting - it would do well to gauge the date.

Better yet, he thought, as he inched toward the kitchenette -

“Crowley?” Aziraphale called out. ”Dear boy, are you here?”

There was no reply.

Well, the former angel reasoned, that wasn’t so odd (though he felt a twinge where his heart still pounding rapidly). Crowley was the restless type, rarely content to sit around and wait for someone to wake up despite how he expected others to do the same for him. Aziraphale smiled despite himself - he could picture the demon fidgeting on the armchair while he waited for what certainly felt like an eternity, fiddling with his shades and fluffing his hair, snoring softly as he tried to while the time
away, until finally dashing out for a quick visit to the ducks or the bar or the gardens.

He wished he’d been awake to see it.

Shredding sweat-and-blood stained clothing as he went, Aziraphale stumbled his way into the tiny bathroom installed at the very back of the shop. A shower would probably be best, he acknowledged, but wasn’t sure his legs could take him up the flight of stairs to his homely flat. A quick rinse in the sink would have to do. He flicked on the faucet with a snap - good, that still worked the same then - and ducked his head under the cool stream.

Only once the water ran clear did he dare to glance at the mirror.

The third thing he noticed was that his stomach was about to abruptly empty its contents.

Aziraphale hurled himself to the ground and made it to the toilet just in time.

Vomiting was, in a word, disgusting. Aziraphale did not envy humanity this bodily function. He had little to expel but expel it did, violently, and at length, until he was absolutely certain that nothing else could remain.

Not willing to tempt fate, he stayed on the ground and pressed his face to the cold tiles for a few moments longer and steadfastly avoided his reflection.

It wasn’t that he was vain, precisely. Vanity had never become him, though he could name a handful of angels who could not say that same. (They’d undoubtedly deny it until the end of time.) He took special care with his grooming and hygiene because the process was soothing, preferring to take care of his human vessel in human ways instead of miracling himself together in the morning, but he had never cared much what he looked like in the mirror. Neat, tidy, and kind-faced - those were his priorities.

Even so, he was content with his image, and actually a bit fond of it. Crowley had mentioned once or twice a few centuries ago that it’d be a shame if this form became discorporated, and he’d taken special care since then to avoid disfigurement of any sort in his caution.

So, to see himself in the mirror -

He considered bringing his hands over his eyes to shield them, but aborted the movement when the scabs on his once-manicured fingers tugged on his sensitive nerves.

Holy water be damned - holy tears could likely demolish armies if humans were ever intelligent enough to harness enough of them. The thought of what would have to be done to an angel to produce so many tears made Aziraphale shudder, but it did warrant thought. He was a demon now, he supposed. Might as well think like one.

His eyes had not changed all that much aside from a sunken hauntedness that he was certain would fade with time. (He decided to try to stop wondering how much time - that line of thought hadn’t been useful one bit.) Around them, though, were the scars. Some were raised and twisted, others sunken like cracks in pale and gray skin, crisscrossing in patterns over his face and running down his neck like veins. Burns still bubbled at the edges of his lips, though he felt them firm up and skin heal over in ragged lumps as he laid. His throat ached. He refused to even peek at his wings because they were surely in a state. He looked positively deathly.

Or deadly.

Maybe both.
Aziraphale felt a surge of uneasiness. Crowley had still not returned. When had Crowley left? Why had Crowley left? He’d promised, Aziraphale vaguely remembered, that he would stay.

_I will not leave you, angel._

And yet - yet -

Aziraphale had never been a model angel - much to the contrary, actually - but Crowley had Fallen for less than he. At one point, he’d suspected that Crowley stuck to him like a moth searching out light in search of Heaven again, and though he’d been dissuaded several decades ago, he wasn’t so sure anymore. Surely Crowley had seen how far Aziraphale had Fallen with the evidence clearly carved into his face. Surely Crowley had known there was no reason left to stay with Aziraphale’s goodness burned properly out.

Aziraphale puked again, retching and dry heaving, and he wondered distantly if this was it - if this was to be how he discorporated and was thrown into the depths of Hell. If so - _quite_ undignified, though inventive, he had to admit.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist and spat delicately into the trash. _It was_ a funny thought, though distasteful in the extreme. Discorporated by means of vomit and heartbreak. Humans were _so_ prone to both. Oh, if only the other side had thought of that centuries ago - he’d have never managed to thwart it!

Perhaps he did have it in him to be demonic.

A familiar voice crooned from behind him. “Oh my. You look like _shit_.”

Chapter End Notes

*This was partially correct. It was actually a large miracle. If not for the ineffable plan, Aziraphale would have been damned the moment he entered the Arrangement._ [return to text]

**Aziraphale could not deny being susceptible to other, milder temptations such as the occasional meal in a beautiful restaurant, or the expensive suit for social events, or the unbearable urge to reach out, remove Crowley’s horrid shades, and memorize the exquisite planes of the demon’s face, but none of that meant he was cut out to be a demon._ [return to text]

***It was._ [return to text]

****Generally speaking, he did not envy them _any_ bodily functions._ [return to text]
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale has a visitor.

Chapter Notes

Again, thanks so much for all your continued support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The darkness did not lift for Crowley. He was transported, beaten, and restrained as he traveled in the utter blackness through the deepest depths of Hell.

He’d never been to visit this circle before - never liked the dark in spite of it all. He stumbled along as they dragged him across a narrow, crumbling bridge - he felt how it fell apart and splintered under his bare feet - and swore as loudly as he could. With soles bleeding, wrists manacled, and wings clamped together with something that burned, he had no chance of escape if he was to plunge downward.

He’d wait to break away when they found solid ground.

They walked for what felt like eternity.

It was eerily silent the entire time, like the souls in this Hell had forgotten how to scream.

Aziraphale had forgotten how when he Fell.

Crowley closed his eyes to the darkness and pictured the angel. There was no telling when he’d wake, but he definitely would - and now he’d be alone.

He had made a promise.

Crowley blessed until his mouth bled.

Well, he thought when they finally reached their destination at the end of the bridge, his legs aching and feet more blister than skin. His captors - he still could not see them and they’d yet to say a word - kicked and scratched at him until he threw himself into the infernally burning cell that awaited. The door slammed shut and disappeared. This will make getting home more difficult.

It was an awkward situation at best, both Aziraphale and Gabriel shuffling their weight from foot to foot as they stood crammed in the kitchenette, waiting for water to boil. Aziraphale had a tableset, but he did not invite Gabriel to take a seat. Scattered papers still cloaked the surface.

Oh come on, angel, daylight is burning! Crowley always knew how to tempt him. The shops will be closed soon and then we can’t get dinner.
We’re in London, dear, Aziraphale had reminded him. We can find dinner in an hour, after I’ve finished my work. Why don’t you put yourself to something useful? Here, organize these order forms and I’ll consider letting you choose the restaurant.

Nag, Crowley spat as he took them and plopped into a chair. This is extortion.

I’ll buy the wine.

Crowley considered. He was already leafing through the pile. This is bribery. I can go without you, yknow. Pick up whatever I’d like, and damn your preferences.

Aziraphale would sooner clip his own wings than allow Crowley to get the last word over dinner. He hummed, plotting. That’s fine, dear. Say, while you’re out, do you mind picking up a terrarium? I’ve been thinking of getting a snake that doesn’t talk back.

Crowley’s eyes glowed with either anger or pride, but when he picked up a pen and started labeling pages in his messy scrawl, Aziraphale knew he had won. Always knew you were a bastard, Crowley muttered.

Pride, then. Aziraphale smiled to himself. I learned from the best.

Aziraphale shook his head to rid himself of the memories of Crowley, slumped in his kitchen chair, perched on the edge of the counter, climbing into the cupboards in search of a hidden treat, grinning at him with teeth bared. The space was oddly empty with him gone and he wondered yet again when exactly he had left. Was it when the burning finally stopped and settled into his skin? Was it when his wings turned black? Was it when Aziraphale was writhing on the floor, praying for not salvation but for the comfort of nothingness?

He tried to push away the pang in his chest, though he was once again nearly blinded with grief. How ironic, he thought, for the demon to abandon him as he Fell and an angel to come to call.

Anyway, he didn’t feel too inclined to offer Gabriel a chair.

The angel cleared his throat. His gleeful smugness at the sight of Fallen Aziraphale had faded into uncomfortable duty. “The tea is unnecessary, brother.”

“Nonsense,” Aziraphale scoffed, though Gabriel was right. Alcohol was maybe a little necessary but he didn’t think he’d want to share, and he was nothing if not a polite host. The kettle began to scream. “Do you have a preference?”

“Aziraphale, I-“

Aziraphale fixed him with a stare.

Gabriel sighed. “Chamomile, if you have it. And none of those teabag atrocities, if you would. An invention of their side.” He paused. “Or your side, I should say. Regardless, loose tea tastes better.”

Aziraphale discreetly vanished all of the loose tea in his cupboard and plunked a bag into his most chipped mug. “’Fraid I’m all out. Sugar? Cream?” he asked while pouring the water over it. It was at precisely 100 degrees Celsius.²

“Just a pinch of sugar, thank you.”

Aziraphale had already dumped a tablespoon in. He passed it to Gabriel with a wan smile. “Here you are, then.”
Gabriel took a sip, barely concealing a grimace - he’d always been a decent sport, Aziraphale admired that, but a terrible actor - and set the cup down on the counter beside him. “Unfortunately, Aziraphale, I’m not here for pleasantries.”

“Who’s being pleasant?” Aziraphale asked.

Gabriel opened his mouth as if to retort, then snapped his jaw shut and sighed. “You were always the most annoying, did you know?”

Aziraphale shrugged. “I think it was rather my job as a younger brother. That’s what the humans say, at least, about their siblings.”

“Your job was to guard Eden, Aziraphale. And to thwart the whims of Hell.”

Wincing, Aziraphale let his wings unfold. He’d yet to bring himself to look at them, but he knew how they would appear - ash black and shadowed. “It’s irrelevant. I believe I’ve been relieved of that position.”

Gabriel’s mouth twisted into something foul. He glanced around the place with wary eyes. “Where is that damned demon, anyway? He’s always afoot when you get yourself into trouble.”

“Not sure,” Aziraphale admitted. He gnawed on his bottom lip before he remembered the scabs. “He was gone when I awoke.”

Gabriel’s jaw went slack. “Really?”

“Not a trace,” Aziraphale confirmed quietly. To literal hell with manners. He summoned the last of the merlot with a snap and pulled the cork out with his teeth. He spat it into the sink and took a long drag from the bottle. “Suppose he only liked me for my wings.”

Gabriel swore. “Always thought he was a dick. Waste of your time, in my opinion.”

Aziraphale could not make head nor tails of this visit. He took another swig. “Why are you here, Gabriel?”


“I don’t expect you’re waiting for me to thank you for the compliment?”

“Look, Az,” Gabriel said and ran his hand through his hair in a distinctly human move. He was losing his touch. “Management wants to make sure. We need confirmation.”

Nobody had called him ‘Az’ in at least five thousand years. Fear curled in his gut. He decided to handle it the only way he knew how - infinite stalling. “That I Fell?” He spread his wings and arms wide. “Here you go, my dear. Your confirmation, if you please. Do you need a notarized statement? A photo? Would Metatron appreciate a video clip? I’m sure there’s a camera tucked away somewhere, it -“

“Aziraphale.”

Less infinite than he’d hoped, then. Aziraphale was fully backed into a corner and desperately wishing he hadn’t let the kettle go cold. Worst case scenario, he supposed, the bottle could be a weapon, but really that was so messy and would only give him a moment at most and -

Aziraphale wanted to tell himself that it was his new demonic nature driving these thoughts, but
really, spending extended time with his older siblings was bound to send him spiraling into survival mode.

Gabriel’s voice sounded tired. He’d always known his tricks, even before Crowley had him worked out. He reached into his pocket with one hand and held out the other, palm up. “Come here, please.”

Between his fingers dangled a small vial, its contents clear and pure. Aziraphale’s breath caught; it would not be enough to permanently harm him, but it would hurt. It would burn.

He was not prepared to burn again.

All pretense and bravado fled, yipping at one another’s heels. He slumped his shoulders and let the dark wings shadow him. “Isn’t this enough?” he asked quietly. “Am I not a sight to behold? Would I not terrify the masses with my presence? Forget what’s inside - I hardly appear angelic anymore.”

“Aziraphale.”

“It just seems unfair, is all. I’ve lost him, too - don’t suppose you expected that, though maybe I should have - and now this? Can’t I live in ignorant bliss and be left alone?”

Gabriel uncorked the vial and beckoned him closer. “It will be quick. Just a drop to make sure - no funny business this time. You understand.”

“No funny business?” he echoed. “Didn’t you hear me? He’s gone, Gabriel.”

“Brother, I don’t mean to be cruel, but your broken heart is the least of my concerns right now.”

“And this isn’t cruel?”

Gabriel’s hand was still outstretched. “This is a just punishment. Aziraphale, I must ask that you comply or I will have to take drastic measures.”

Aziraphale considered making him. He was vaguely curious what the drastic measures would be. Calling Michael? Summoning Hell? Neither seemed worth the fuss for him.

With limbs that moved like lead, he trudged forward and deposited his hand in Gabriel’s. He hissed in pain and drew back. “You burn!”

Gabriel looked amused. “Did your dear demon never tell you? I imagine it made things, ah, difficult.”

It didn’t hurt, not badly, but the sting was in the surprise. “I haven’t a clue what you mean.” He squirmed a bit, getting used to the sensation. It wasn’t that bad, not really. Almost kind of pleasant, actually - he’d been feeling so cold. “Well, get on with it, if you must.”

Here, Gabriel hesitated, the vial tipped a few inches above Aziraphale’s hand. “You may want to brace yourself,” he warned. “It’s potent.”

Aziraphale met his eyes and drained the bottle of merlot. “Now, please,” he croaked.

Boiling water sloshed in the cup of his palm and sunk into its lines and creases, sizzling as it went. The skin turned black and charred by his thumb - just a few drops had settled there - and Gabriel held him by the wrist tight, pulling him closer for examination. Aziraphale’s legs trembled and he felt a sheen of sweat break out on the back of his neck, but thankfully he stayed upright.

Finally, he was released. With a shaky breath, he lowered himself into a chair. “Satisfied?” he asked.
Gabriel pressed a finger to the wound and it turned from black to pink, new skin. “I took no pleasure from that, you know.”

Aziraphale did. “I imagine that’s why Raphael convinced you to volunteer.” He wrinkled his nose. “Why didn’t he come?”

Gabriel shrugged. “You know him, Healer of Man. Too soft for this sort of work. I tried to talk to Tzadkiel, but - she wasn’t feeling very up to her station. I know you’re not fond.”

That was true. He didn’t find her very reasonable. He cradled his hand to his chest. “And Michael?”

“She wanted to join me,” Gabriel admitted. He took the other chair, the one usually reserved for Crowley, and sipped at his tea. Clearly, he had turned off his taste buds. “But most of us decided that would be ill-advised. She’s in a terrible mood.”

Aziraphale let the thought turn over in his head. “I’d be dust,” he acknowledged.

“Most likely.”

Aziraphale miracled Gabriel’s tea into something more drinkable. “I owe you my thanks, then.”

Gabriel lifted the mug in toast and closed his eyes against the steam. “I’m not sure demons are supposed to thank angels.”

“I’m not sure what demons are supposed to do at all,” Aziraphale muttered, though Gabriel was probably right. He picked idly at a loose thread on his trousers.

They sat in silence for a long time.

Gabriel had never been one to hang around unnecessarily. Always busy, always running - the stillness made Aziraphale uncomfortable. Perhaps this would be the last time they could spend in companionable silence. Perhaps next time they met, they’d be tasked with destruction.

He didn’t think Gabriel would be as amenable to an Arrangement as he had been. Brothers, yes, but Gabriel knew his duty. He wasn’t the one who’d Fallen.

“Aziraphale,” Gabriel said softly, a break in the quiet. “You’re sure Crowley left you on his own?”

It was the first time in centuries that Aziraphale could recall Gabriel using the demon’s name.

He didn’t understand.

“I thought your torture was done here,” Aziraphale murmured. It was like a hot knife in his gut. Alone and abandoned by a demon - he felt like such a fool for expecting anything else. “I think it’s time you left.”

Gabriel stood, acquiescing, and miracled his mug clean. “Dumah visited Upstairs recently.”

He wrinkled his nose. Dumah was one of Aziraphale’s least favorite sisters. She was an angel far too comfortable in Hell - she took a perverse pleasure in it, and frankly, it creeped even Crowley out.

Gabriel continued. “I overheard her with Azrael. They spoke about punishing a demon, bringing him Downstairs for a proper reckoning. Frankly, I thought they were talking about you -“

“So kind to warn me, then, so long after the fact.”
“- but I’m not so sure anymore.”

It didn’t make sense. “Azrael and Dumah aren’t concerned with punishing our sort, though - and yes, I mean the collective our, we’re of the same stock technically.”

“True,” Gabriel conceded. “But I’m sure they weren’t talking about humans. And the only demon I can think of Heaven taking matters into their own hands for is -“

Aziraphale didn’t need for him to finish the thought. The blood in his veins went icy - unfortunately, his sister was very good at her job. He could imagine the eternal fates to be met, had attended enough workplace cocktail hours to know how she operated, to know punishment was really her calling. It was almost enough to make him retch again.

He snapped a bottle of tequila from Crowley’s flat into his hand and slammed it down on the table so hard the walls shook. “Tell me, Gabriel. Do you know how a demon gets to Hell?”

He had a lot of planning to do.

Chapter End Notes

*This was about ten degrees too warm to properly brew chamomile and would lead to it tasting just slightly bitter, somewhat like Aziraphale’s mood, or his relationship with his heavenly siblings.[return to text]

**This station being benevolence and mercy. Let it never be said that angels could not harbor grudges - Tzadkiel and Aziraphale had bad blood between them since the third century, and even if neither of them could remember the cause of the falling out, neither were willing to rush to the others’ aid until proper retributions were made.[return to text]

**Other notes:** According to Wikipedia, Tzadkiel (also known as Zadkiel among other spellings) is the angel of benevolence and mercy, Azrael's job is transporting the souls of the dead, and Dumah is the angel with authority of wicked humans once they've died. It's does not appear that Dumah is a Fallen angel, but he DOES have dominion over Hell. He's popular in Yiddish folklore and, interestingly enough, in Singer's 1964 collection of short stories, is depicted as carrying a flaming sword.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Crowley meets the Lady of Heaven and Hell and does not enjoy the experience.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your continued support! This is a slightly shorter chapter, but I felt that Crowley deserves a little spotlight here as we learn what's going on with him. Just a quick warning, there are some mild depictions of torture (specifically burning and references to such) in this chapter. I've also gone back and added it to the general tags for the fic because I realize that Aziraphale's Fall isn't all that pleasant either.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Crowley had the common sense to know he ought to keep his mouth shut. He was, after all, a demon. He knew what demons were capable of. He knew how they got their thrills, and he highly suspected he was about to become prime time entertainment. Keeping his mouth shut was the smart thing to do.

But the thing is - and really, it’s a trivial fact in most demonic circumstances - that he was also on fire. More importantly, he was a bit of an asshole and wanted nothing more to make sure they knew it.

Therefore, though he had the sense to stay quiet, he also had to guts to make a scene.

“No offense,” he called out and laid himself on the floor, letting the flames lick up his clothes. Had he been human, he supposed he would have been embarrassed at how his modesty was literally crumbling to ash, but he had bigger fish to fry. “But this infernal fire stuff is kind of - well - LAAAAME.”

There was no response, obviously. They had left him in the darkness for so long that he had managed to count to six million twice - once for himself, once for Aziraphale, the years they had spent on Earth. He had been considering going for a third for the world (no - the world in the way Aziraphale said it with wavering syllables and soft eyes, as if he was saying something else entirely) when it occurred to him that maybe he ought to be behaving a little senselessly.

He was being burned alive.

“It’s a nice trick and all, trust me, I did my all my professional development hours on hellfire in - oh, ’43, I think? 1343, I mean, not the most recent ’43. Bit busy with a war, then, made up my hours later.” He wasn’t sure anyone could hear him - maybe the other prisoners, if there were any. He still had not heard even a whimper in these depths.

Tentatively, he poked a finger through the bars of his cell. They were spaced so that he could fit his thumb through if he wanted to risk it getting stuck. He definitely would not be able to slip through,
even if he could transform. Hypothetically, he’d be able to see out, but there was only emptiness.

Emptiness and fire.

It wasn’t exactly *un* painful. Just because he was immune to being killed by hellfire didn’t mean being left in it for so long wasn’t going to sting. Contrary to popular belief, infernal flames didn’t slide off demons like holy water off a duck.*** Instead, the demon burned and healed simultaneously. He felt his skin grow and knit back together at the same time as it melted.

It was unpleasant. Still. “It’s just - *unoriginal*!” Crowley shouted as the smell of singed hair hit his nose and smoke stuck in his eyes. “Don’t you lot have an ounce of imagination without me?”

The fire was intensifying, smoke in his lungs, in his throat, and he was choking and retching on the smell of his own burning flesh and he had to wonder if maybe, just maybe he’d been wrong to think he was invincible to infernal fire -

And what exactly would that mean? That he was *angelic*? That thought alone made him want to choke. He was no angel. He had no desire to be anymore.

If Aziraphale - *Aziraphale* - could Fall, what was the point in being good?

He laughed. He laughed and laughed and laughed until he cried and the tears turned to steam in the fire.

And then the fire went out.

Crowley laid on the cold ground for a few moments, unmoving. New pain crept in - his wrists, chafed and bruised from the chains that weighed him down; his wings, clipped and broken; his soles, blistered and gently weeping blood - but he closed his eyes and tried to breathe through it. The dark seemed to seep into his bones.

“Let there be light,” a voice said softly and for an instant, Crowley let himself hope.

A soft blue glow fell around the cell.

“*They warned me about you,*” a cool voice spoke, smooth and curious and decidedly not Aziraphale. *Whoosh. There went hope,* he thought with little humor and shut his eyes against the light.

He could hear the prisoners in the darkness now, all their moans and cries and pleas, if they had suddenly awoken to their hell.

A door that was not there a moment before creaked open and in stepped an angel. “*They said you were a firecracker,* to put it in kind words,” the angel said as if trying to be tactful. Crowley twitched as a surge ran through the clamps on his wings, crackling. “*I can see what they mean.*”

Another surge, this one longer, more powerful. His eyes flew open, unable to control his muscles any longer, and from the corners of his vision, he could see sparks.

“Oh, you poor dear,” the angel said as the pain subsided. He hissed.

At first glance, there was not much that set her aside from the average angel. She knelt beside him and folded her long legs underneath her, using the backs of her hands to smooth out her skirt. Her hair, which was cropped short to the head and styled neatly, was a light, unassuming brown that Crowley would have even dared to consider mousy. Her lips were pressed into a thin, disapproving line but - well, she *was* in Hell.
But her eyes - her eyes made Crowley suddenly feel very, very cold. They were sea-glass green - could have been complimentary of Aziraphale’s - except they held no kindness at all.

She wore gloves. Gently, the angel stroked Crowley’s hair back from his forehead and, to his utter horror, it almost felt nice. “There we are,” she murmured and he couldn’t help the release of a sigh as he leaned into the touch, almost against his will. “I told them that you needed kindness. Too soft for all this fire and brimstone torture thing, aren’t you, Crowley? Even under all that bravado. You’re still an angel at heart.”

Crowley’s common sense returned. He kept his mouth shut.

The angel touched a wing with a fingertip, frowning at the singed feathers. “I told them not to start without me. Useless demons. They’ve gone and mucked it up,” she muttered, then started as if remembering something. She folded her hands in her lap and smiled. “I’m afraid I’ve been rude. I haven’t introduced myself.”

“That’s all right,” Crowley muttered against his better judgement. His head was spinning too fast to consider the consequences for running his mouth. “Didn’t really wanna be friends anyway.”

She laughed. It was like icicles clinking together. “Oh, you are funny. I like you.” She didn’t seem surprised. “I am the angel Dumah. I am a Lady of Heaven and Hell alike, and my duty is to punish the wicked dead for eternity. In another life, I think we could have been fast friends.”

Crowley couldn’t help the sound that escaped him. “Ngh,” he said as he jerked away from her touch. Dumah frowned and daintily removed a glove. “Oh, come now, don’t be overdramatic. I’ve hardly been awful yet. Besides, there’s no one to put a show on for down here. It’s only us and the most wicked souls - and it’s not like they’ve got anyone to tell.”

They moaned as if on cue.

Before Crowley could protest - *what* he would protest, he wasn’t sure - she laid her bare palm on his cheek in what was most certainly a mockery of a lover’s caress.

Through gritted teeth, he began counting to six million again. *For the world.*

Chapter End Notes

*Regret curled in his stomach - he never should have told Dagon about reality TV. He had taken to it entirely too quickly.* [return to text]

**He was the fish. This was a private joke he told himself to ease some of the pain. It only made him giggle, though, which increased the pain and was maybe an indicator that he was losing his mind. That was a concern for later.* [return to text]

***Holy water slide quite smoothly from ducks - geese were a different story.* [return to text]

****Crowley would have mocked her over-the-top performance if it didn’t terrify him to his core.* [return to text]

**Other Notes:** Thank you so much for reading and commenting! Y’all make my day,
and I hope I can repay the favor by breaking your heart and slowly building it up again.
Next chapter - back to Aziraphale!

End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'd love to hear your thoughts! You can also find me on Tumblr at theirdarkreturning, where I occasionally scream about writing and ineffable husbands.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!