The Truth Remains

by WanderingAlice

Summary

Raphael had been the third angel ever created, and he’d raised himself first with Michael’s clumsy help. Then he’d turned around and raised three more siblings, and loved them all so fiercely it hurt. He’d loved Aziraphale too, more than either of them really knew.

And then, he fell. He lost everything. The bond he held with his siblings was ripped away, leaving an aching, empty void. And while he still has Aziraphale, the angel doesn't recognize the archangel who taught him how to care about the Earth. And Crowley refuses to tell him who he was, or how Aziraphale's voice is the one thing that can soothe the ache in his soul that wants, so badly, to feel a connection again.

A story through the ages as an angel and a demon come to terms with their shared past.
I'm honestly not sure how I feel about this headcannon, but the idea took hold and wouldn't let go until I wrote it. Next chapter should be up this weekend.

Title from The Goo Goo Dolls' song *Feel the Silence*.

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And if we feel the silence
Holding this all inside us
Everything means more now than
Words could explain

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*He can feel them coming. His siblings. His family. He knows what Lucifer expects of him, what the Plan says he should do. He won't do it. He can't. He was Her healer. He can't fight. Can’t kill. Not ever. And especially, not them. He drops his blade. Dark armor follows, piling at the feet of this body that has already been broken and re-formed to Lucifer’s will. He may be Falling, may have already Fallen, but he isn’t going to fight in this war.*

*By the time they arrive, he’s wearing only his robes, black wings limp behind him. He spreads his arms, and welcomes his own destruction.*

*When it’s over, they throw his body from Heaven, expecting the boiling sulfur below to destroy what is left. He closes his eyes and lets his soul fade into oblivion.*

**I STILL HAVE PLANS FOR YOU RAPHAEL**

*His body slams into Hell, sinking, burning, down and down into the roiling pit. Fire consuming blood and bone and flesh. Soon nothing will be left.*
LIVE, MY FALLEN SON

He opens his eyes, body taking a deep gasping breath. Sulfur floods in, burning, cauterizing, changing him again. It hurts. It burns, and he screams and screams again.

The first thing he notices is the silence. An empty, ringing nothingness where once there had been six bright voices. He strains his ears for the happy chatter of Gabriel’s thoughts. The steady calm of Michael’s words. The bright sunny glow of Uriel’s dreams. Even the angry mutterings from Sandalphon. Nothing. Just silence, his own thoughts echoing in the emptiness. He reaches for the place in him that ties his siblings together, and brushes the raw bleeding wound that remains. He screams, and unconsciously tries to project his anguish through the bond. His mental cries increase the pain in a feedback loop that nearly drives him insane. There’s physical pain too, half-healed wounds that tear open anew at his thrashing. He remembers the feeling of blades sinking into flesh, of the ones he called family casting him out, of burning and dying so desperately alone. It’s all around him, within and without. He cannot tell where pain ends and he begins. He is pain, screaming, alone into the aching Silence. It could be minutes, hours, or even years that he lies there in the dirt, stuck in an endless cycle of anguish.

“Oh dear. You’re not supposed to be here.” A voice. A voice outside his own head. He keeps his eyes firmly shut, fighting the disorientation. He Fell. They cast him out. His siblings cast him out, throwing him down into the pit with the rest of the rebellious Fallen. He isn’t in the pit now. Somehow, he climbed out. He doesn’t remember that. His new body is burned in places, especially the underside where he crawled across the burning sands of Hell. It hurts, but the pain is secondary to the raw wounds in his mind.

Cool hands pick him up and he squirms, afraid. Where they touch, the hurt fades. He shakes from the shock of it, the sudden absence another kind of pain.

“Poor thing. It’s alright now. You’re safe.” The voice is soft, kind. It’s warmth flows over him, soothing the ragged edges of his shredded bond.

He opens his eyes. His physical form has become small, scaled, long and limbless. A snake, he realizes. Fitting, he supposes. Snakes had always been his symbol. A forked tongue darts out from his mouth, tasting the air. The sweet greenness of Eden surrounds him, with something else, something that tastes like electricity. Like lightning. An angel. He’s being held by an angel. An angel, who is running those cool, gentle hands along his scales, easing the burns with a touch. He moves his head, and through the dizziness he sees a face. He squints, looking at the angel’s Grace through watering eyes. It’s hard. His eyes don’t want to focus. But soon they clear, and the true
nature of the angel becomes visible, infinitely familiar and as dear to him as his former siblings. He hisses and recoils in shock. Of all the angels that could have found him like this, it had to be that one.

“What’s the most important part of being a principality?” Raphael asks, leaning forward and catching the attention of the young angel.

Aziraphale frowns at him, not, seemingly, intimidated by the sudden intensity of an archangel’s focus. “I don’t know! That’s why I’m asking!”

Raphael shakes his head and grins. The Principality Aziraphale has been asking that question of every higher-ranking angel he met since he’d been given his title. The archangel has been watching him for hours now, consumed by curiosity. It’s a flaw, he knows. He’s not meant to be curious. Be he wants to know so much, about everything. And right now, the thing he wants most to know is the answer that will satisfy the new principality.

“Didn’t your teachers tell you?” he asks. He lets his gaze drift over Aziraphale’s Grace, seeing him as he is and not just as he appears. The angel shifts uncomfortably under his gaze but doesn’t back down.

“They told me we’re meant to guide Her creations. That we must keep them on track for the Great Plan.”

Raphael makes a face. The Great Plan. Lucifer has shared what he knows of the Great Plan with Raphael, despite Her orders not to. The archangel still doesn’t know how he feels about it.

“They’re wrong.” he says.

Any other angel would have gasped and looked shocked before politely pretending he hadn’t said anything. Aziraphale just nods and smiles. “What is it then? The most important part of being a principality?”

Raphael leans in, like he’s telling a secret. “You care,” he tells him. “You care about the people you’re sent to guide. That’s the most important part of being a principality.”
Aziraphale considers his words for a moment. Raphael watches, prepared to see his answer discarded like all the others the principality has gotten so far. Instead, Aziraphale smiles, frustration clearing from his face. “Yes,” he says, relieved. “Yes, I think you’re quite right. I won’t get anywhere with them, if I don’t care about them. Thank you, this makes me feel a great deal better.”

Raphael can’t help but match that smile. “Happy to help. That’s my job, after all. You lot get to do the guiding of Her creatures. We do the guiding for you.”

“And the caring?” the younger angel asks. Raphael laughs - a bright, clear sound of joy that rings across Heaven. Though neither of them know it, it is the very first time an angel has laughed in all of Creation.

“And the caring,” he agrees, and laughs again. Unnoticed by either angel, a very specific form of caring has taken root in Raphael’s heart, so swiftly and so deep that even his Fall will not destroy it.

“Oh, oh dear, I’m sorry, did that hurt you?” Aziraphale asks, hands stilling and then resuming the gentle caress of his scales, the touch as light as a feather. “Hang on, just a little more and you’ll be done.” Where he touches the newly made demon, the angel leaves a trace of healing magic, soothing the burns of hellfire and the singed and blackened wounds from his sibling’s swords. Aziraphale talks as he works, soft, calming words that wash against the echoing silence and drive it back, holding it at a distance where the demon can feel its presence but not the ragged pain of it. The relief is so complete that he almost doesn’t realize when Aziraphale finishes healing his body.

“There,” the angel says, setting him down carefully on a sun-warmed rock. He aches again at the sudden loss of touch, of connection. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

Anger boils up in him, far too quickly. The new, aching, bitter part of him rages against the careless way Aziraphale just picked up and healed a demon. Doesn’t the angel have a shred of self-preservation? “You sssssssshouldn’t have,” he snaps, hissing around the words. He can’t do things like that. What if it had been a different demon? “Don’t you know what I am?”

“You’re a demon,” Aziraphale replies calmly. “That’s not a reason to not help you, though.”
He laughs. It’s harsh, angry. So far from the bright sound he used to make, like shattered glass in
his throat. “Angel,” he says, “that’ssss the only reason.”

“I’m a principality,” Aziraphale tells him. “I’m supposed to care about everything. I don’t see why
that doesn’t include demons.”

_Oh Aziraphale_, he thinks. _You haven’t changed a bit._ The rush of fondness is too much, on top of
everything else. He can’t do this. Can’t sit here, and talk to Aziraphale like he’s just some demon
that crawled into the garden. Can’t let the angel _care_ about him, when everything they’ve ever
been taught has said he shouldn’t.

“Don’t,” he snaps, uncoiling. “Don’t- hssssss- don’t _care_ about me.” He slithers off the rock and
into the greenery of the Garden.

“Wait,” the angel calls after him. “What’s your name?”

He doesn’t answer.

He doesn’t know _how_ to answer.

Raphael died at the end of the war, killed by the four remaining archangels. The demon that
survives has no name. She didn’t take it back. Oh, no, She isn’t kind enough for that. The old name
hangs, heavy, on his heart. It will get him killed, should the demons know it. And if an angel sees
it… he knows all too well the pain his Fall caused his siblings. Better they think him dead. Better
Aziraphale never knows what truly happened to the archangel that taught him to care for the earth.
He thinks about it, as he slithers farther from the angel. The problem takes his mind from the ache,
the burn of the silence that screams within him where Aziraphale’s soothing hands cannot heal.
Crawly, he decides eventually, when he’s crawled into a small cave near the forbidden tree. It’s
what he does now, after all. And it’s so far from his former name, no one will even think to connect
the two. He takes the old sounds, the syllables, the sigil that marks him as _Raphael_, and buries
them deep within his heart.
Please let me know what you think! <3
I should have mentioned before, the angst is going to get a lot worse before it gets better. I'm sorry.

Thank you all for your lovely comments! I've read every one of them at least three times, and they always make me smile.

I'm going to try to get the next update out Wednesday or Thursday. I've written the first five chapters completely, and most of the remaining ones, so I'm going to aim for one or two updates a week until this beast is done.

It’s a few days later, after he’s done everything that the Great Plan said he was meant to do, when he stands on the wall next to Aziraphale in human form once again. He’s taken pains to hide any remnants of his former identity, and stands secure in the knowledge that Aziraphale will not recognize him. His Grace is gone, and while the essence that remains could still be recognized, he knows how to redirect another’s gaze, how to lock the core of himself so tightly behind layers of walls that you would have to really work to see it. It wouldn’t stand up to close scrutiny by his siblings, but it will fool anyone else he might come into contact with. His new human form is different too, taller, all sharp angles and lines. He tries to think of the eyes as a blessing, snakelike and so vibrantly yellow, so different from his former soft amber-brown. They’re demonic enough that no one will even think to look for the former archangel in him. It makes him feel a bit easier about the one thing he kept from his old form. His hair is still red, still long cascades of curls. The color is darker now, like the cooling embers of a fire instead of the vibrant red of a newly formed nebula, but it’s a color he likes quite a bit. He should have changed it, he knows, but it’s comforting, to have something of his old self still. Almost like he hasn’t really lost everything. He thought it might help. It doesn’t.

The silence inside him still hurts, and he’s beginning to expect it always will. That raw place where the bond had been has not even begun to heal, and even examining it causes fissures of pain to shoot through his essence. Sometimes, when he sleeps, he thinks he can hear them still. Echoes falling down through what little remains of their bond. It’s wishful thinking, surely. The pathways between his mind and theirs are shredded, broken, incapable of holding together long enough to project a single thought. And he knows what would happen if he tried to contact them, gave them any hint that he was still alive. They would come back to kill him, and do it properly this time. He has enough self-preservation left to know he doesn’t want that to happen. It doesn’t stop him from praying that She will care for them now, since he cannot. Not that it helps. She will no longer hear his words. He’s become unforgivable. A demon. And all he’d ever done was want to know why.

“Well, that went down like a lead balloon,” he says to Aziraphale, as they watch the first humans make their way across the desert. The angel laughs nervously, and Crawly almost misses his reply as the sound of his voice washes over him. Soothing. Cooling the raw ache of loneliness. And for
that brief moment he doesn’t feel so alone in his head anymore. So he chatters. Tries to keep the angel speaking, to feel more of that blessed relief. He had contemplated going back to Hell, seeking out Lucifer, and showing him who he really was. He wants to think that their bond, at least, could be healed. But no, he knows better. He was the one that had cut the first of the Fallen from their minds in the first place. His thoughts had been so full of rage and pain, even then, with anguish and betrayal lancing through their connection until Raphael had been forced to cut it himself to protect their siblings. He doesn’t even know if anything remains of his brother in the newly crowned King of Hell. He’s not even sure much remains of himself.

“He was kind, once,” Crawly tells Aziraphale as they watch the first thunderstorm sweep across the desert. He’s warm, protected under the angel’s wings, and though he knows he doesn’t deserve it he can’t bring himself to leave. The first humans have made a small camp, and it warms him to see the sword that Aziraphale gave them, helping them find a way to survive. He doesn’t ask why the angel gave it away. He’s not sure he wants to hear that answer.

“Hmm?” Aziraphale asks, glancing at the demon.

“Lucifer,” Crawly says. “He was kind, once. Before… all of this.” He gestures to the world around them. Internally, he kicks himself for bringing this up. But it had been the first topic to come to mind as they started running out of more innocent things to say, and he can’t let the conversation die now. He’s not ready to face the silence on his own.

Aziraphale gives him a sharp look. “You knew him?”

Crawly shrugs. “Not really. Just, I talked to him a bit, yeah? He used to like talking to angels. Didn’t matter what rank we were.”

The angel at his side frowns, and turns his gaze back to the humans. “Well, I don’t know about that. He seemed like he was just doing it for appearances.”

The demon wants to be offended, but he can’t help but remember how much he’d trusted Lucifer. And how that trust had been returned. He knows Aziraphale is right. “Still, he didn’t seem like the sort to cause all of… well. That’s the Great Plan though, right?”

“Ineffable,” Aziraphale agrees. Then, after a moment of silence where Crawly tries desperately to come up with something else to keep the angel talking, to drown out the silence, he adds “Still. I guess you have a point. Raphael was kind. Really kind, like he meant it and wasn’t just trying to make friends because he was important. He could be… he could be a bit of an idiot, really, always laughing, grinning at me like I was in on some joke he’d told. But he cared. And he tried so hard to
do what was right.” He pauses, then adds, in a softer, almost broken voice, “They told me he fell, too.”

Crawly freezes at the sound of his old name, then forces himself to relax, to act as if the word means nothing to him. “Oh, I’m sure he was just as false as old Luci,” he drawls, leaning back against the wall in a way that suggests his human spine has too many vertebrae. He tries to distract himself by the feel of his new body. He rather likes it, he thinks. It lets him move with more freedom than his old form ever did. It’s not an even trade, not at all, but he’s got to take what he can get.

To his surprise, Aziraphale rounds on him with real anger, divine wrath flashing in his eyes. “If you’re going to talk like that, then you can leave. Raphael was not false. He was- he was kind, and, and good, and honest, and- and he was the best of all of them. And I won’t have anyone saying any different.”

“He Fell, angel,” Crawly reminds him, bitter, and the words taste like ash in his mouth. “Just like the rest of us demons.”

“I don’t care!” the angel yells at him. “I don’t care if he fell, if he’s a demon now. I wouldn’t even care if he was human, or, or anything else. He was kind to me, and everyone else he met. He was beautiful, and bright, and Heaven is so much less without him in it.” To both of their shock, tears form in Aziraphale’s eyes. Crawly hates himself a little more for bringing the topic up, for Falling, for causing this angel pain that he never deserved.

“Hey, it’s alright, don’t cry.” He reaches out a hand, then thinks better of it. The angel won’t want a demon to comfort him like that. “I’m sure he’s fine, down there with everyone else. He’ll be back up topside, causing trouble in no time.” Does he know? The demon wonders. Does he know what the other archangels did when I Fell?

“He’s not,” Aziraphale sobs, and Crawly really can’t help himself. He reaches out and runs a soothing hand up and down the angel’s lower back, just below his wings. “They said- they said he died. That the others, they killed him, rather than let him fall.”

A bright flash. The point of a sword erupting from his chest. Fire licking at the blood from the wound. Uriel’s screams as his vision goes black. Falling. Falling. Falling, and something in him refusing to give up. His body twisting, Grace burning away, wings burning to black, turning twisted and dark as he loses everything he’s ever loved.

“Maybe that’s for the best,” Crawly tells him gently. He’s glad they announced his death. It makes
It’s… Falling, it isn’t… well. Let’s just say there are worse things than death and leave it at that. Leastwise, if he died, he didn’t have to go through the rest of it.” He can’t help the pain that creeps into his voice at the thought of it. Death would have been preferable, he thinks. He’d welcomed death. She hadn’t let him.

“I’m sorry,” Aziraphale says, sniffing a little still. “I didn’t mean—here I am, getting all upset, but you’re the one that’s just been through, well, all of that.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about me,” the demon says, placing both hands behind his head and forcing his body to relax, like none of this means anything to him. He forces down the pain, and tries to ignore the silence in his head. “Not like I’d get to do this if I was still, you know.”

“An angel?” Aziraphale asks, and Crawly nods, latching onto the change of topic with desperation. He had always been far too busy to just sit and admire Her creations like this. It strikes him as somewhat ironic that now, when admiring Her work is the last thing he wants, he finally has time to examine it.

“I doubt I’d ever get down here, if I was still Up There. ‘S nice. Think I might hang around a while, see what more trouble I can get into.” He grins, and then laughs at the look on the angel’s face. It still sounds like shattered glass in his throat, missing the brightness of innocent joy.

Aziraphale settles down, sliding back to sit upright against the wall beside him. “What were you then?” he asks. “What kept you so busy you couldn’t come down to see Earth, if you wanted?”

“Starsmith,” Crawly says instantly. It’s not even a lie. He’d worked with the starsmiths, building stars and nebulae, whenever he got the chance. He’d enjoyed the act of creation.

“What are you doing?”

Raphael turns to see Aziraphale walking towards him, eyes on the hot bit of star-stuff in his hands. “Is that… is that a star?” The angel sounds awed, and he holds out a hand, hesitating, but clearly wanting to touch.

“No,” Raphael grins at his friend. “It’s a new kind of animal.” He smirks at Aziraphale’s expression, then relents. “Yes, it’s a star. Don’t touch, though. I don’t want you to get burned.”
His hands were made to work with pure Creation, but not Aziraphale. The principality was made to guide, not create. To touch the heart of a star would leave him with terrible burns, and Raphael would protect him from all harm if he could.

“Ah, thank you.” The younger angel retracts his hand, but still stares, awed, at the glowing fire Raphael is shaping.

“This is Alpha Centauri B,” the archangel tells him. “That’s it’s companion star, over there.” He nods to a ball of fire contained within a clear box, already complete and ready for transport to it’s ordained place in the sky. “I’ll be taking them up tomorrow, if this lot will get off their asses and finish the planets.” The starsmiths around the room protest, and he laughs, sending sparks to sting the backside of one that made a rude gesture at him.

“Oh.” Aziraphale looks away for a moment, and Raphael can’t read his expression.

“Did you need me for something?” he asks, concerned. Aziraphale has been doing well, learning from the teachers how to be a principality. Raphael hasn’t had to step in since that first question, but sometimes he’s come by, offering help to the newest members of the Heavenly Host. And sometimes he has sought the angel out, coming to him on the rare chance he gets to be in the Garden, not for any particular reason, just to talk. Sometimes Aziraphale finds him, when they both have a little time to rest. But he has never come to him in the workshops before, here in the seat of Creation.

“No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t-” the angel wrings his hands, a very human gesture that endears him a little more to the archangel.

Raphael puts down the star and reaches out, a hand still warm from holding star-fire pressing against the angel’s arm. “Aziraphale. What is it? Has something happened in the Garden?” He’s been hearing more and more rumors, awful ones, about angels turning away from Her light, something about being unhappy with Her love for the newest creatures in Eden. He wouldn’t put it past some of them to have begun causing more trouble near the source of their displeasure. A chill runs through him, thinking about what might happen to Aziraphale if the dissenters try to attack the Garden.

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. I just-” he looks down at Raphael’s hand on his arm. “You’ve been so busy lately. I thought, well. I was wondering if- But no, of course, you have better things to do than wander around in the Garden with me.”

Raphael sighs. He hates how little time he has anymore. Her Plan is swinging into motion, and he
and his siblings have been charged with the overseeing of it. It’s a great honor. And he does know how important it all is. But sometimes he wishes he could go back to the times when it was easy to take an hour or two, drop down into the Garden, and just have a quiet conversation with Aziraphale.

“I want to come to the Garden,” he tells the angel, dropping his usual air of mischief in favor of meeting Aziraphale’s eyes with complete sincerity. “I do. But She requires my assistance now, with everything going on.” It’s been so long since any of them heard from Lucifer. It’s been hard, stepping up to fill his shoes as well as his own. He and Michael trade off on Lucifer’s duties now, but every time they try to reach through the bond between them to speak to their elder brother, they are met with a solid wall. He truly doesn’t know how much more of this he can take.

Aziraphale is trying hard not to look crestfallen, but Raphael can see the disappointment in his eyes. “Of course, I understand. I’m sorry to have bothered you. I’ll just-”

“Wait.” Raphael grabs him by the hand as he turns to go. He doesn’t understand the urge. It would be far more sensible to let Aziraphale return to the Garden, to turn away and go back to his work on the stars. He had promised the starsmiths he’d get them done, anything to help with their reduced numbers. (It doesn’t escape his notice that Lucifer had worked with a great many of the starsmiths, and many of those who were especially close to his brother are now missing.) Instead, he turns the principality back towards his workstation. “If you have time, I could use a little help here. We’re falling behind schedule, and I need to get this done in time to hang them tomorrow. You could... you could help. If you want. You don’t have to.” He stumbles over the offer, cursing himself for a fool.

He’s rewarded when Aziraphale smiles, eyes lighting up in a way that touches a part of Raphael that the archangel doesn’t quite understand. “Of course. What do you need me to do?”

“Oh.” Aziraphale’s voice brings him back from the memory. He sounds disappointed.

“What? Not what you were expecting?” Crawly asks, smirking. “Wanted me to be something boring, I bet. File clerk or something.”

“What? No, no, not at all. It’s just....” He hesitates, then continues onward. “I was wondering if I knew you. Before. You just... you seem so familiar. But I must have been wrong. I didn’t really know any of the starsmiths.”
“We didn’t get out much,” Crawly says. “And I wouldn’t go around asking other demons who they used to be. Some of us can get pretty touchy about that sort of thing.” There. That ought to keep Aziraphale from asking too many more questions.

“Right. Yes, sorry.”

They don’t speak about Crawly’s past again. They do, however, talk about thousands of other topics over the course of the next 6,000 years. And each time Crawly, then Crowley, hears Aziraphale’s voice, it soothes that ache inside of him that still burns from the loss of minds joined to his. And if he makes a point of it to watch out for the angel, to do the caring and the guiding he used to be built for, in the only way he has left? Well. Nobody really needs to know. Certainly not the angel. On his better days, he doesn’t even admit it to himself.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! <3 Please let me know what you think!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I ended up adding another chapter, because I realized I hadn't planned anything revolving around "you go too fast for me", and well, we can't have that, can we?

Thank you all for the lovely comments! <3 It really helps me, to know what you think! I want to make this story the best it can be, so your feedback is very highly valued!

The thing, as Crawly rapidly finds out about himself, is that he can’t leave well enough alone. There’s an itch in him now, a drive he thinks he must have always had, even if it had been more muted as an angel. He has to poke, and prod, and test things until either he’s satisfied, or they come apart. His relationship with Aziraphale is like that. He knows he should leave the angel alone. Knows that even being near a demon is a risk to his divinity. But he can’t help himself. He’s drawn to him, like a moth to a flame. Because his world is chaotic now, full of brimstone and fire and none of the absolute certainty of Heaven. And Aziraphale? Aziraphale is nothing if not steady. Unchanging. A calm port in the storm.

At first, Crawly promises himself he’ll just watch, just to be sure. There’s so many demons about, in those early days. So very many demons, and Aziraphale is down here alone, without even a flaming sword to protect him. And nobody asks if Crawly kills a few demons that get a little too close. It’s survival of the fittest, after all. And taking care of Aziraphale scratches the other itch, the one that should have gone away after he Fell, the urge to heal, to care. He isn’t supposed to be able to care anymore. It’s counter to the new, angry, bitter parts of him, the rage that boils up all too quickly, the urge to lash out, to make everything and everyone hurt just as much as he hurts. He’s at war within himself, and the only thing that’s winning is the silence.

It’s the silence (or is it Silence?) that’s the worst of it all. The desperate, aching loneliness inside that can never, ever be filled, no matter what he does. The absence of other voices within him, minds joined to his in harmony and love. The absence of Her, too, though even that feels less acute. He was always going to lose Her, he’d known that as soon as Lucifer told him about the blessed Plan. He hadn’t been ready to lose them, too. The silence eats away at him inside, taunting, tormenting. Driving him to seek out the one being in all of creation that can soothe the raw and burning ache, if only for a time. And even then, it hurts. Hellfire and damnation, it hurts, to see those beautiful eyes widen at the sight of him, a slight step backwards taken, before his face evens out into a gentle smile. It nearly breaks him, every time Aziraphale calls him Crawly. When the edges of his ill-fitting name catch on the soft voice before hitting him like daggers to the heart. He wants to stop him, to take down the walls he’s built around his soul and show Aziraphale he’s not just the Serpent of Eden. He doesn’t. He can’t. He’s not an angel anymore. He can’t be what Aziraphale remembers. He can’t let his truth shake that unbreakable faith Aziraphale has in his God. Because he knows what happens with questions. And there’s only one thing that’s worse than what already happened. He cannot see Aziraphale Fall. He makes himself a promise. One he binds
It’s after the Flood, that the first near miss happens. They’re in Asia, a small city that’s a world away from the death and destruction they left behind. He had stayed in Mesopotamia just long enough to see the flood waters recede, to see Noah and his family step down from the ark, before he’d taken one look at the face of his angel and decided it was time to be somewhere else. Anywhere else, so long as it was far away. Somewhere where he wouldn’t still hear the screams of the children he couldn’t save, reverberating inside the aching silence. So they’d gone to China. It had been an easy choice, really. Aziraphale had shakily mentioned he’d heard of a new food seller he wanted to try, and Crawly wasn’t about to tell him no. Not when he’d seen that flash of doubt and pain on his angel’s face, the questions Aziraphale refused to allow himself to ask written plain in his wide, sorrowful eyes. Any other demon would have poked and prodded, tried to get the angel to really doubt. But Crawly knew all too well what doubting meant. What came of needing to know why. So instead, he takes Aziraphale to China, finds him a nice place to stay in a town that hasn’t seen danger or sickness in living memory, and takes him out for a meal.

It starts off well. Every new sensation, every simple pleasure, erases more of that doubt from the angel’s eyes. Crawly relaxes, listening to him go on about something called the Five Grains and the evolution of food in China, and lets the cool soothing wave of his words wash over him and quiet the screaming of the echoing silence inside. If he keeps his eyes open, it’s almost as if the past forty days never happened. And then it happens. The tattered edges of his broken bond burn, and he knows they’re coming. He has just enough warning to transform into a snake and hide beneath Aziraphale’s seat, hoping whichever one of his former siblings is arriving does not think to look. It’s Gabriel. Because of course, it’s Gabriel. His cheerful little brother, who loved to build the stars. Only, as Crawly listens, he realizes he doesn’t know this angel. It’s been a thousand years, and those years have not been kind. This isn’t the eager young archangel who helped him hang the constellations in the sky. His words are cruel, cold, without empathy. The way he treats Aziraphale makes Crawly want to drag him by the ears into an audience with their Mother and force him to explain himself. He doesn’t understand how his little brother had changed so much. How the warm, loving boy he all but raised has become a bitter imitation of an angel. Against any remaining shred of self-preservation, Crawly tries to reach through the pain of shredded pathways, tears welling in his eyes as the agony rips at his soul. He stretches out a trembling wisp of a thought, carefully, slowly, inching forward - and comes up against a wall. He presses against it, the raw pain burning in his mind, but he can’t break through. The wall is harder than marble, than stone, than a diamond forged in the heart of a collapsing star. It’s also disturbingly solid, no doors, no gates, not even a crack to let in the touch of his sibling’s minds. It’s not personal, Crawly realizes with a start. It’s not against him. It can’t be. Gabriel watched Raphael die. He wouldn’t even consider the possibility a nameless demon crawling across the earth might be his brother. No, Gabriel has put up a wall to keep everyone out, even his remaining siblings. Crawly retreats, the wounds of his soul screaming in white-hot agony while the silence echoes inside, empty and endless as the dark behind the stars. After, he realizes he cannot actually recall what Gabriel had said. All he can remember is the frightening coldness of his eyes, devoid of even a hint of emotion.
When Gabriel leaves, Crawly emerges from under Aziraphale’s chair. He’s uncharacteristically quiet, he knows, but he can’t bring himself to speak. The silence has overtaken his senses, fresher and more raw than it has been in years. He waits, while Aziraphale finishes his meal. And to his surprise, the angel doesn’t leave when the plates are taken away. He knows he’s being less than charming company. He had expected Aziraphale would want to be well rid of him, after the past few weeks they’ve had. But he stays. And what Crawly doesn’t know is that Aziraphale knows him well enough by now to understand what he needs when he gets like this. He doesn’t ask the demon why he’s suddenly in this mood, he just watches Crawly with barely concealed concern in his eyes and tries to draw him into conversation.

Finally, when the soothing presence beside him has washed away the sharpness of his pain, the demon asks a single, bitter question. “Are they all like that?”

Aziraphale doesn’t need to ask who he means. “Yes,” he says sadly. “They’ve always been like that.”

“They weren’t though,” Crawly says, desperate, before he can stop himself. “Not Before.”

The angel nods, hand moving almost as if he wants to put it on Crawly’s arm. “They changed, after the Fall. Everybody did.”

_Not you_, the demon almost says. _Never you_. He bites back the words, thoughts roiling, until one becomes so strong and sharp that it spills from his lips like poisoned wine. “How can she let this happen?”

Aziraphale, of course, looks shocked. “My dear, it’s part of the Great Plan.”

“Fuck the Great Plan,” Crawly snarls. “How can She claim to love all things and still let this-” he waves vaguely in a gesture that could mean the archangels, or the Flood, or even just the general state of humanity “-happen?” His head hurts. And even Aziraphale’s presence isn’t drowning out the echoing silence. The raw places inside him are all in flames, and he just wants to go find somewhere to sleep for a couple months. Maybe a year or two.

“I imagine it’s all coming to a point, somehow,” Aziraphale tells him. “It’s ineffable.”

The demon laughs, bitter, shattered glass, and it only reminds him of the way he used to be able to laugh, unrestrained and so full of joy. He doesn’t know if there’s an angel or demon left in all of
creation that can make a sound like that anymore.

“Don’t tell me about the Plan,” he says, angry and looking for a place to put it. “I read the damn thing, and it still doesn’t make any god-damned sense.”

“You’ve read it?” the angel asks, and Crawly cringes. There’s only ever been one physical copy of the Great Plan. He was careless, and his words almost gave himself away.

“I wanted to know what the point of it all was,” he says bitterly. “I thought, oh, come on now, it can’t be as bad as Lucifer says. But it was. It was worse.”

“Yes, but…” Aziraphale is squinting at him now, looking slightly to the side in the way of an ethereal being trying to see beyond the physical plane. Crawly slams up his walls further, hiding his essence from view. “How did you even get a copy?”

“How do you think I Fell, angel?” the demon asks, his pain and loneliness embarrassingly clear in his voice. “I took it from Lucifer.”

“What?” he stares at the small book, held so casually in his brother’s hand. Words he has been forbidden by his Creator to read. Forbidden to ever know.

“She’s going to sacrifice you, Raphael,” Lucifer says, oh, so gently, as if afraid Raphael will break. “She’s going to make you Fall.”

“That… that can’t be right. I wouldn’t, I would never-” he isn’t supposed to know this. Isn’t supposed to see Her Great Plan. He watches the book with wide eyes as Lucifer extends it towards him, and doesn’t see the sly smile that crosses his brother’s face.

“You have a part to play, dear brother,” the Morning Star says, taking Raphael’s hand in his own, drawing him closer, until he stands within the shadow of Her forbidden tree. Raphael has always felt so small next to his brother, so young, so much less than the beautiful favored child of God. “She wants you to be the one to teach them Good and Evil.”

“But…” he looks over his shoulder. He’s spent so much time here in the Garden lately, teaching
the humans, looking after Her creatures, watching Aziraphale as he learns to guide them towards Her light. There’s a wanting there, as he watches the young principality, hands gentle on the back of a small creature that has crawled into his lap. Aziraphale turns his face up into the sun, and oh, there’s a wanting there, a warmth and desire that Raphael does not understand. He should not need to understand it, for if he feels it than it must be Her will, and he will come to know the answers in time. He should be patient. But patience is something She did not make him good at.

“Why?” Raphael asks. “Why ask me to be Her Healer? Why have me teach them how to survive, if she’s just going to cast them from Her favor?” He does not ask ‘Why me’.

Lucifer’s expression is sad, and Raphael can feel the pain and conflict within him. “I do not know,” he answers, eyes dark and unfathomable in the shadows.

“What of the others?” Raphael asks. “Our siblings? Surely they?”

Lucifer is shaking his head. “They will kill you,” he tells him. “You will Fall. You will tempt the humans. And then our brothers and sisters will strike you down for your sins.” Raphael can feel his honesty. They share one mind, one connection. There is no hiding, no lies between them. He trusts Lucifer completely, and he cannot hide from this. The pain between them doubles, anguish from both of their hearts.

“It is written, Brother,” the eldest of all angels says. “I cannot change what She has decreed.” He offers the book again, and Raphael knows he can feel the desire he cannot lock away. He needs to understand, to read the words for himself and know what their Creator, their Mother, has planned for him. He should not take the book. It is forbidden. He looks back, over his shoulder, and sees Aziraphale watching them. The younger angel gives him a soft smile, and turns away, called deeper into the Garden by the needs of one of Her creatures.

“Do not forbid yourself this,” Lucifer whispers. “She has already doomed you. You deserve, at least, to know why.” Pain flows between them, doubled in the sharing, washing from one soul to the next. There is a seed of madness there, and Raphael cannot tell if it comes from Lucifer, or from him. He takes the book. And he reads.

“Crawly…” Aziraphale reaches out, hesitating, then puts a gentle hand on the demon’s arm. His eyes are on Crawly’s face, and the demon realizes with shock that he’s crying.

“I know you said you didn’t like to talk about it,” the angel says, compassion and a hint of fondness in his voice. “But you should know, you can always talk to me. If you like.”
His world narrows to a single point, every particle of his being focused on the hand resting on his skin. It overwhelms the screaming emptiness in his mind, calming, soothing, offering more than he ever hoped to feel again. He almost gives in, reaching out, until his essence brushes against Aziraphale. The shock of it jolts him awake and he recoils, cursing himself for a fool.

“I don’t talk about it,” he snaps, and pulls his arm away.

Crawly leaves his angel sitting there, and tries not to think about the hurt on Aziraphale’s face. He tells himself he’ll stay away for good this time. He also tells himself he won’t make it a point to get near the other archangels, to see if they, too, have walled themselves off from the world. It’s safer for him, that way. But he’s never been very good at self preservation. By the end of the century he knows that there are identical walls around Uriel, Sandalphon, and Michael. And Aziraphale’s voice continues to soothe away the worst of the agony in his mind.

Chapter End Notes

The flashbacks might get confusing since they’re not all happening in a chronological order, so I’m going to keep a running tab down here of where each one sits in Crowley's timeline. So far, this is what we have:

- Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
- Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
- Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri

Next update will probably be this weekend, when we see what happens when Tobit writes about his healing by a certain archangel

(Now also posted on my writing Tumblr)
Chapter Notes

I'm so grateful for you all for sticking with me this far! This is actually one of my favorite chapters to write, so I hope it's as good for you to read.

I really love all the feedback I've been getting. Thank you all so, so much. You're all lovely! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The whole thing with Tobit is a complete disaster from start to finish. Crawly hears about it first from his ‘side’, when orders come down from Dagon to assist Asmodeus during his time on Earth. Then, of course Aziraphale was assigned to heal the old blind man and protect his son from the demon. When he hears that, his blood runs cold and his human heart stops beating. He’s grateful for the bandage hiding his eyes, because they would reveal far too much of him in that moment.

“No,” he says, firmly. “Out of the question.”

“My dear boy,” Aziraphale says, exasperated and fond, a tone he’s taken more and more often with Crawly lately. “I can’t not. That poor old man will be blind forever if I don’t cure him, and his son will be killed.”

Crawly holds himself still against every single instinct he has, everything he is and was telling him that he cannot let Aziraphale go. Asmodeus is a Prince of Hell. And Aziraphale gave up his sword rather than use it in battle. The angel has never killed. Has never been forced to defend himself in battle against a foe that truly means to murder and destroy. And while Crawly has no doubt that the angel can fight, can wield a sword with intent to kill, a prince of Hell is not something on which to test his skills.

“Let me go,” he says before he can stop himself. “I’ll take care of it.”

Aziraphale stares at him, shocked. Their friendship is still new, still fragile. The angel has only barely learned to trust him after nearly three thousand years, and he longs for the ease that once had defined their relationship. The way they could walk through the Garden, saying nothing, perfectly at ease.

“I’m perfectly capable-” Aziraphale says, once he’s overcome his surprise. Crawly doesn’t let him
“I know you’re capable. It’s, what, killing some demon? Curing an old man’s blindness? Not much effort at all, I’m sure.” He shrugs, trying to appear careless. If Aziraphale realizes the danger, nothing in Heaven or earth will get him to let Crawly go in his place. “Not truly worth your skills. Let me do it.” He pauses, counts to three in his head, then adds carelessly “Or don’t. Either way. I’m just saying, if you do you’ll have time to pop on over to Egypt, take a look at those wondrous pyramids you’ve been wanting to see.”

Aziraphale is watching him, head cocked, eyes scanning his face as if trying to find a hint of what he’s hidden behind his blindfold. “Why?” He asks at last.

Crawly shrugs. “I get to kill a rival,” he says, a feral grin on his lips. The itch of chaos inside him thrums at the risk he’s taking.

“And the healing? You’ll do that too?” the angel asks, and Crawly closes his eyes against the wash of pain that brings up. Healing had been his job. Had been what he was made for. He still has the old instincts, fingers twitching when he passes an injured man, guilt picking at him when he turns away from a sick woman. He lets himself give in, when it’s children. “Let them grow up to be tempted,” he tells Hell. “No sense it letting go of potential recruits.” He’s not sure Dagon buys it, really. But he’s never been called in to a meeting with the head office about it, so at least the Lord of the Files hasn’t said anything to anyone else.

“And the healing,” he agrees. “It’s not like it’s hard.” He’s not looking at the angel, so he doesn’t see the way Aziraphale’s eyes linger on his face, trying to read the expression he hides behind the blindfold. Something in his posture must give him away though, because the angel sighs, and gives him a smile that’s full of compassion.

“Alright then. You can do my miracle for me,” he says. Crawly nods. It’s time to go kill a demon.

Asmodeus is deserving of his reputation. In his truest form, he is a creature to be feared - all fangs and thorns and claws and spines. He had been a Power once, a guardian of Heaven. Crawly remembers him, standing guard at the gates, looking down at the world She created with disdain. He’d been beautiful then, beautiful and cold. Raphael had not disliked him, because ‘dislike’ was not a thing angels had learned to feel before the war. But there had been something there, a feeling the demon would later learn to call distrust. It had been Asmodeus that had opened the gates to Lucifer’s army, letting his twisted and Falling angels into the heart of paradise. As far as Crawly was concerned, that is hardly relevant. What is relevant is that Asmodeus knows how to fight. He had been trained in it since before the first star had been born.
So he prepares. He goes to Hell, and he forges a sword. Not a flaming sword, no, he can no longer touch so holy a weapon, but a sword of Hell’s obsidian. He folds sigils of power into the sharp stone, shaping it the way a human would shape iron. Sigils of protection on the hilt, sigils of destruction within the blade. As he works, he imbues it with a Purpose. This sword, this tool of death, will be used for one reason and one reason alone - to protect what Crawly loves. He pours his power into the blade, filling it to the brim with Intent. Hell Obsidian is the one thing that can kill both angel and demon, destroying them with the same impunity as Hellfire or Holy Water. This blade is made for a more specific purpose, and filled as it is with his power, it cannot fail. When he finishes, it flickers with ghostly fire along the blade, a parody of Aziraphale’s flaming sword.

When he returns to Earth, it is time. He presents himself to Tobit as a relative, and because he wants no one to question him, no one does. His offer to escort Tobias to his wedding night is accepted, and he accompanies the young man on his journey. Crawly contemplates letting the demon kill the boy. It would be an opportune time, striking while his guard is down as he feeds on Tobias’ soul. Any other demon might have done it, too. But Crawly can’t. Tobias is barely older than a child, and Crawly likes him. He’s gentle, and kind. He laughs at Crawly’s jokes, and teaches him how to fish. He’s human, and that’s enough. Crawly will find another way.

It’s the fishing that gives him the idea, and he advises Tobias to catch a fish, and remove it’s liver and heart. On the wedding night he burns them, Crawly’s power aiding in the occult ritual to banish a demon. It almost banishes him, too, but he anchors himself within the words, and it is Asmodeus that flees first. Crawly follows, leaving Tobias and his new wife to celebrate their union. He finds the other demon halfway to Egypt, and their battle causes several natural disasters, the destruction of a small town, and the creation of a new lake. It’s brutal, terrible, and it leaves Crawly drained of most of his power. His physical form is wounded terribly, and he holds it together by sheer imagination as he returns to take Tobias and his new bride home. He saves what remains of his power to complete Aziraphale’s miracle, and tries not to think about what Hell will say if they ever find out he killed a prince of hell.

The trouble is, he’s exhausted. Worn down to the core of his being. And so when he heals Tobit, he heals the old man a little too well. He looks at Crawly, and his open eyes see past the human facade and into the occult being within. The demon freezes when he realizes how deeply the man can see, expecting terror to cross his face, expecting screams when he looks past the bandage over Crawly’s eyes and the thin human skin around his essence and sees the damned being he has become. But Tobit’s eyes look past even that, past the Fall and the emptiness that tears at his mind, past the fortress of walls he has built around his heart, and they see his truest name.

“Raphael,” he says, and Crawly shakes his head, trying in vain to convince him otherwise. But he’s seen too well, known too thoroughly the soul inside the demon.

“Not me,” the demon tries to say. “Not an angel. Not him. Not Raphael.” It does not matter. Tobit has seen him, known him, the being he used to be. It wounds him deeper than than Asmodeus’
claws, to hear himself called that name, to be mistaken for that which he once was - that which he can never be again. He does not have the strength to miracle the knowledge away. He leaves the old man and his son writing their story, and hopes to whatever power might be listening to a demon’s prayers that they do not use his name. He should have known better than to hope.

It’s two days after he returns, when he feels Aziraphale’s flare of anguish, followed by white-hot rage. It reverberates across the metaphysical plane, echoing down through Crawly’s senses, and the demon closes his eyes. There’s a name, wrapped into that rage and pain, the name that once belonged to him. He feels Aziraphale’s searching, and he doesn’t have enough power built back up to hide from him. In moments, the door explodes away from the small house he’d taken over to nurse his wounds, and the angel marches in, eyes glowing with divine fury. “YOU!” he says, voice booming with the wrath of an angel. “WHY DID YOU DO THIS?”

Crawly recovers from the shock of his entry and pretends to stretch, languidly, as if he had just risen from bed. Inside he’s shaking, the weight of an angel’s divine power burning in the air around him. The raw parts of his soul scream in protest, unable to handle so direct an assault from the holiest of light. It’s a pain so deep it nearly drowns out his injuries, the broken ribs, the cracked skull, the claw marks down his sides. He can’t let Aziraphale see him like that, can’t give in to the desire every one of his atoms is screaming for and cry from the pain of it. Pride has always been one of his favorite sins.

“Why did I do what?” he asks, stalling, because he knows what this is about. “I do a lot of things, Angel.” He’s in no condition to have this conversation, to try and explain how the old man used the name of a dead archangel as that of his savior. He’ll have to anyway, because he can feel the pain radiating off of Aziraphale. He remembers how Aziraphale cried that night on the wall, so long ago, and the guilt shoots through him, thick and hot, for all the pain he has caused his friend.

“WHY DID YOU USE HIS NAME?” Aziraphale thunders, and Crawly has never seen him this angry before. He winces as divine power washes through the room and touches the place in his soul that used to house his Grace. The shock of it sends him stumbling back, body flaring with agony. He hits the wall, and feels his face go white with pain. A small, pitiful sound escapes his lips, and Aziraphale stops, concern fluttering across his face, the divine force of his anger abruptly fading as his eyes scan the demon’s physical form.

“I didn’t!” Crawly finds himself saying, pushing back against the pain. He will not let it win. He will not let his angel see this. It’s difficult, but the terrible silence inside him is gone for now, faded into the background behind the overwhelming presence of Aziraphale that, despite the divine anger that had been consuming him, is soothing the broken bits of his soul. It leaves Crawly with just enough strength to hold himself upright.
“Angel, I ssssswear. The old man jussst sssssaw what he wanted to ssssssee.”

“I don’t believe you.” The words are devastating, but no less than Crawly expected. He is a demon, after all. He thinks, bitterly, of how Aziraphale would have trusted any word from Raphael’s lips without question. It tastes sharp and metallic on his tongue, like iron. Like blood.

Crawly conquers a spine that wants nothing more than to sink to the floor, and holds his arms out at his sides. The look Aziraphale is giving him now is torn between the sharp hardness of anger, and, even worse, a growing sense of concern. He can feel his wings itching to manifest, to take him up in flight, away from whatever that expression is. Inside, the snake is readying itself to strike, to bite, to defend itself against the approaching predator. The Fallen archangel forces his body to still, knowing, somehow, that if he doesn’t this will be it. Aziraphale will never again welcome his company.

“I mean it,” he says. “I promise you, angel. I gave him no name.” Crawly has lied, quite an astonishing amount since Falling. Part of the job, really. Sometimes it just comes out from that angry, broken part of himself. Like an exhale, he can’t help it. But there’s one thing he will never, ever allow himself to do. And that is tell an outright lie to his angel. His name doesn’t count. Raphael was an archangel, not the name of a demon. The name he gave himself might not fit, but it isn’t a lie. He knows, in that moment, that Aziraphale can see his honesty, in the same way he can see when a place or thing is loved.

Confusion clouds those beautiful sea-blue eyes, more of the anger being replaced by concern as he senses the pain the demon cannot hide. “But…” he frowns. “But you must have. How else would he have gotten it?” There’s no rage in his voice now, just a soul-deep aching hurt. “Why else would he choose to call his healer Raphael?” He closes his eyes as he says the name, missing the shiver the sound of it on his tongue sends through Crawly.

The demon turns away. He misses how this used to be, how Aziraphale would stand beside him and they could talk without this wall of pain and loss between them. He rubs the back of his head, gingerly touching the wound there, and his fingers come away bloody. Asmodeus’s last, desperate attack had thrown him against a wall headfirst. He’ll have to answer for his actions someday, he knows. Hell might find out, eventually, despite the work he did to cover his tracks. And killing a Prince of Hell is not something they take lightly. He doesn’t regret it, though. He’ll take this pain, and whatever punishment Hell decides to give him, if it means Aziraphale is safe and whole.

“I promise, Aziraphale. I know how much he meant to you. I wouldn’t use his name, even to do a good deed.” They’ve talked about it before, sometimes. Aziraphale won’t say much, and Crawly doesn’t ask, but even if he hadn’t known the angel before it would have been easy to see how much his loss had hurt him. And every time he sees that broken look in his angel’s eyes, a little more guilt settles heavy in his soul. It’s all his fault, after all.
“I…” behind him, Aziraphale frowns, the last of his anger clearing from his eyes. “You know,” he says, taking a step closer, “I think that’s the first time you’ve ever called me by name.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” the demon prods at the wounds in his side, feeling blood drip down his fingers under his shirt. “I’ve used your name before.” He remembers the feel of it on his lips, every time Raphael used the name. And every time since then that Crawly has wanted to, and resisted. He wants the closeness they once had, wants the ability to say his name, but every time he tries it’s like he’s tainting it when the sound touches his forked tongue. ‘Angel’ is easier. It doesn’t carry with it so many memories of hours spent together in the Garden.

“Aziraphale!” Raphael watches as the angel jumps, a fond smile curling his lips as Aziraphale turns towards him.

“Oh, hello my dear.” Aziraphale’s answering smile is enough to lift Raphael’s heart and banish the worries that have filled his mind so often lately. “What brings you here?”

Raphael shrugs, looking around the Garden. “Felt like a walk,” he says. His body itched to move, to stretch, and he allowed his wings to unfurl and then close again, tight against his back. He’d needed to get out, away from the worried faces of his siblings as they investigated rumor upon rumor of angels going missing, walking away from their posts without explanation, vanishing from their Host. But more than that, he’d just wanted to see Aziraphale. They could be stuck in the file room filling out paperwork for all he cares, so long as he can watch the angel smiling at him like nothing is wrong with their world.

“Well, no better place for it than here, I think,” the angel says, coming to stand at his side. “Some of the Gardeners have added a few new plants recently. Would you like to see?”

“Yeah, okay.” He follows Aziraphale though the winding paths, losing himself in the good-natured banter that flows between them. This is what Heaven should be, he thinks. Just this. A garden, the sun on his back, and Aziraphale. No worries, no rumors, no missing elder brother, no absent mother.

“Raphael?” Aziraphale’s voice breaks into his contemplation.

“Mm?” He looks up from the flower he’d been staring at as he thought. “Sorry Aziraphale. What
The young angel bites his lip, hesitating, then forge onward. "I was- Well. You look like something is bothering you."

"It’s nothing.” He’s not going to taint this with his fears. Not here in the Garden. Not this young, optimistic angel that tries so hard to always think the best of everyone.

"It most certainly is not,” Aziraphale says, frowning at him. “You’ve been staring at that flower, saying nothing, for the past five minutes. Raphael. What’s wrong?” He plants himself solidly in front of the archangel, staring up at him with concern plain on his face.

Raphael shakes he head, schooling his features into a smile. “Really. It’s nothing. Just some rumors.” He doesn’t want to say that he thinks his brother is missing. That even within their bond, none of them have been able to contact Lucifer. That, far worse, none of them have had any contact with God since she created the female human. That he’s deathly afraid of what it means that angels are missing from the ranks.

"Raphael.” Aziraphale moves closer, holding the archangel’s eyes.

"Aziraphale.” They stare at each other, neither one backing down, until the absurdity of the situation abruptly hits the archangel and he starts to laugh.

"What?” Aziraphale looks confused, watching Raphael release bright peals of laughter. “What’s so funny?”

"Hahaha -oh, hah, you- your face!” He can’t help it. The principality looks so concerned, probably wondering if Raphael’s mind is cracking, and that makes it even funnier.

"My face?” Aziraphale’s frown deepens, though the corners of his lips are starting to twitch. “My dear, I don’t-”

It ’s too much. Raphael doubles over, putting both hands on the angel’s shoulders as he laughs. “I’m sorry,” he says through eyes that are watering with mirth. “I just -oh, haha, you- you look so serious.”
“I am serious,” the angel says, but Raphael’s laugh is infectious, and suddenly Aziraphale is laughing too. “Oh alright, fine.” Raphael rests his head on Aziraphale’s shoulder, overcome with laughter as days of tension drain from his body. Hesitantly, Aziraphale’s hands come up to rest against his waist, holding him as he shakes. He doesn’t know how long they stand like that, until the laugh fades away and it’s just them, Raphael’s head on Aziraphale’s shoulder, Aziraphale’s arms wrapped around him, forehead pressed to the archangel’s hair. A small, blasphemous thought crosses Raphael’s mind. This is better than being within Her light. He banishes it without mercy. But it was there. He had thought it. And he had meant it.

Raphael. Another’s voice inside his mind. Uriel. Calling him. He stands up, squeezing Aziraphale’s shoulders and then stepping away to a safer distance.

“Thank you,” he says, though he couldn’t really say for what.

“A- any time.” Aziraphale’s cheeks are flushed, and his eyes linger on Raphael’s physical form before slipping sideways to look at his Grace. He smiles.

Raphael can’t resist. “Like what you see?”

“You’re beautiful,” the angel tells him with complete, innocent, honestly. “I’ve always thought so.”

“I-” Raphael can’t think of a reply. Luckily he doesn’t have to.

“Brother.” Uriel appears before them. “Michael’s been looking for you.” Her eyes flick to Aziraphale, and then back, dismissing the principality with a slight nod.

“Uriel,” Raphael says, bristling. He hates when they get like this, ignoring anyone that isn’t one of them. “This is Aziraphale. Angel of the Eastern Gate.”

She frowns, then blushes, chastised, as he sends her an impression of how she seems. “Apologies, Aziraphale. I would greet you properly, but I’m afraid Raphael is needed urgently.”
“It’s quite alright,” Aziraphale says, though Uriel has already turned back to Raphael.

“I was taking a break,” Raphael tells her, almost petulantly.

“Your break is over,” Michael’s voice comes from behind him, and they turn. “There’s been an Incident.” He can hear the capital letter, even without feeling the anger and worry his siblings are projecting through their bond. “Aziraphale.” Michael, at least, meets Aziraphale’s eyes. “I’m sorry to steal him from you. I know he was looking forward to seeing you again.” She smirks as Aziraphale’s blush deepens and Raphael squawks, and projects a sense of amusement through the bond.

“I, oh, I’m sure it’s fine. He- you can come back. Any time.” Aziraphale’s eyes are sincere as he looks at Raphael. “I’ll be here.”

“Then I’ll be back.” He gives the angel a gentle, grateful smile. Then he straightens his robes and holds his hands out to his siblings. “See you later, Aziraphale.” In the blink of an eye, they’re back Upstairs, where Sandalphon and Gabriel are waiting. Sandalphon tosses him a flaming sword.

“Someone broke into the armory,” Michael tells him. “The Guardian posted there thinks she saw Lucifer with the thieves.”

He’s so lost in thought that he doesn’t notice Aziraphale approaching him from behind until the angel’s gentle hand touches the back of his head. Crawly jumps, whirling, to meet remorseful blue eyes.

“Oh my dear, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize- what happened?” He’s reaching again, healing magic coating the tips of his fingers in cool blue light.

“Don’t worry about it.” Crawly bats his hands away, not wanting his sympathy. “Give me a bit and I’ll heal it myself.” He will, but not yet. He doesn’t have enough reserves stored up that he can risk using his power. He used too much, fighting Asmodeus and then curing the old man. Better to live with the pain for a few more weeks than to use up strength he might need later. After all, it’s not as if this pain is worse than the ache inside.
“I- alright.” Aziraphale takes a step back, giving Crawly room to breathe. “I’m sorry,” he says again. “I should have noticed you were hurt. I just, when I heard who Tobit said had healed him, I thought-”

“That I’d given him the name of a Fallen archangel.” Crawly moves on shaking legs to stand by his water basin and grabs a cloth. He stares out the window while he dabs at the back of his head, unable to look the angel in the face.

“Well, I certainly didn’t think you’d give him yours.”

Crawly laughs, the shattered glass sound hurting his throat. “Not a very angelic name, now is it?”

“Oh, oh, I didn’t mean that.” He can feel Aziraphale moving behind him, coming closer. “I just meant-”

Anger boils up, burning from the raw parts of his soul. “I know what you meant.” The words come out harsh, and he can’t help the way his voice breaks at the end. He tries not to miss what he was. Tries not to think about it. He can’t have it back. And after everything he’s been through, everything he’s done, he doesn’t even really want it back. But he hates the way Aziraphale sometimes looks at him, like he wants him to be something more than what he is. Like he’s trying to look through him and find the angel he used to be. Crawly throws the bloodied cloth into the basin, and watches as swirls of red taint the clear water.

“I’m sorry,” Aziraphale sits on the room’s lone chair and sighs. “Really, Crawly, I am. I should have come here sooner. I should have made sure you were alright, after fighting that demon all on your own. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, you just thought you’d come in here and scream at me for a bit,” Crawly snaps, not quite willing to forgive just yet. He hasn’t turned away from the window.

“I…” the angel sighs. And Crawly can picture him sitting there, frowning as he tries to find the words to express what he’s feeling. That’s always been Aziraphale’s problem. He’s never quite able to find a way to say precisely what he means. The demon glances over his shoulder and finds Aziraphale slumped in the chair, elbows resting on his knees, face in his hands. “I’m sorry.” His voice is small, hurt, filled with grief and remorse.

The silence stabs at him, echoing, mocking him. He’d known the angel was sensitive about his old
self. He’d known that what Tobit saw might have brought up all sorts of emotions that Aziraphale wasn’t really equipped to deal with on his own. He’d even known that the angel might blame him for it, that he would probably assume Crawly had used the name as a joke or out of some careless whim. With herculean effort, he grips the anger inside him and shoves it down, deep into the recesses of his mind, where he can deal with it later - somewhere where there won’t be collateral damage.

“Angel. Aziraphale.” He sits down on the bed, far enough away that he can’t reach out like he wants to. “What’s so bad about the old man using- using his name?” He can’t bring himself to say it, not even after all these centuries.

“He’s dead,” Aziraphale tells him, expression cracking. “Raphael. He’s dead. He can’t- he… he isn’t. He died.” He covers his face with his hands again, wings flaring out and coming around to shield himself from view.

Something in Crawly twists at the anguish in Aziraphale’s voice. It echoes in the pain wrapped around his own infernal soul. He wants to tell him the truth. To stand up, cast aside all of his layers of disguise, take down the walls around the name at his core, and show Aziraphale that he’s wrong. That he’s not dead. But he can’t do it. He can’t do it, because Aziraphale is right. Crawly Fell. The angel he was died, killed by Lucifer pulling him downward, by the swords of his siblings as they tried to prevent his Fall, and finally by the boiling pit of sulfur that caught his broken body at the end of his light-year plummet. He’s no angel, not anymore. And he can’t be, not ever again, no matter how hard he tries. He’s learned hate now, and lies, fear, greed, even lust. His soul is tarnished by a thousand unforgivable sins. Unforgivable. That’s what he is now. Raphael is dead. And he left a broken, worthless demon with an ill-fitting name to stand in his place. A demon that can’t even reach across the distance of a few feet to hug the most important person in his long life, for fear of the reaction such a touch would bring.

“Tell me about him.” The words come, unbidden, from his mouth. He may not be able to offer the comfort he wants. But he can do this, at least.

“What?” Aziraphale peeks out from behind his wings, and another stab of anguish shoots through Crawly at the sight of his tear-stained face.

_In for a penny_, Crawly thinks, and meets Aziraphale’s eyes. “Somebody whose name can get you so worked up over three millennia later must have been someone special.” Then, to counter an image of being soft, he leans back and grins. “And if I get you talking it’ll-” he winces, the movement pulling at the claw marks along his sides.

The angel pulls back his wings, looking guilty. “I am sorry. Will you let me…” he reaches out, and for a second Crawly considers not letting him. Then his back twinges, and he feels a trickle of
blood run down his side. He gives in, moving to sit on the floor against Aziraphale’s legs and removing his shirt, baring the worst of his wounds.

Aziraphale makes a sound of dismay when he sees the damage. “Oh, my dear, I-”

“Less apologizing. More talking. Keep my damn mind off of how awful it’s going to feel with all that divine energy crawling all over me.”

“Well.” Aziraphale huffs, then chuckles, and Crawly knows he’s seen through his bluff. Gentle fingers start carding through his hair, and it’s all he can do to keep reacting to it. Healing energy flows over him, just like that day in the Garden so long ago, soothing and settling into the deep aches within.

“Talk, angel,” he demands.

“Right. Right, sorry. It’s just, it’s hard to begin, you see?” Aziraphale’s magic tingles against the edges of a wound. “He was… Well. He was an archangel.”

The mention of his title brings up memories of his siblings. “Like those dicks you report to, yeah. I know that much.” The silence stabs at him until Aziraphale’s voice drowns it out.

“No, no, not like them at all. Raphael was… he cared.” The reverent way the angel says his name stings, causing something raw and painful to throb in the corners of his soul. “He was funny. And kind. Good, right down to his core. He made me want to be a better angel than I was.” He can feel the grief in Aziraphale’s voice, along with some other emotion he does not want to name.

“He was Her healer, you know,” the angel continues. “And at first, that was what he did. He taught the humans medicine. And he healed us, whenever any of us got hurt while we worked. He taught me- he taught me how to do this.”

Crawly blinks, remembering days in the Garden, moving Aziraphale’s hands over some injured creature, feeling the healing energy flow from both of them. With a mental snarl he shoves the memory down.

Aziraphale speaks on, unaware of Crawly’s inner turmoil. “But, he was so much more important than me. He couldn’t spend all his time in the Garden, as much as I wanted him to. We started
hearing all kinds of horrible rumors, and he was away a lot, though he never could tell me why. But when I did see him, he’d laugh, and make jokes, and it would seem like everything was fine. Like it was all going to be alright, despite the things I’d heard about rebellion brewing. But…” he trails off, fingers stilling on Crawly’s neck for a moment.

“But?” the demon prompts. He’d thought he’d done an excellent job of hiding his distress from the angel. He’d been so careful to never show him anything other than a smile.

“But when he thought I couldn’t see, he looked so sad. Like he was waiting for something terrible to happen.” Healing magic sparks along his sides and scalp, knitting the skin back together.

“He probably knew what was coming,” Crawly points out, hoping it’s a reasonable suggestion. He has to be careful here. Can’t give himself away. “I imagine that would be enough to upset anyone.”

Aziraphale’s hands keep moving, prodding across Crawly’s back and scalp for more injuries. He hits a sore spot, and the demon hisses.

“Sorry, sorry.” He places a hand over the bruise, and Crawly feels his power flow over the inflamed skin, soothing like cool water. “I suppose you’re right. I couldn’t ever get him to tell me what was wrong.”

Crawly hates that ache in Aziraphale’s voice. “Maybe he knew he was going to Fall,” he suggests. “The archangels had the Plan, after all.”

The angel freezes, fingers tightening in Crawly’s hair. The demon protests, squirming. “Ouch. Ow. Hey! That stings!”

Aziraphale doesn’t seem to notice. “That’s why…” he murmurs, releasing his grip.

“Why what?” Crawly twists, trying to get a look at the angel’s face. A hand on his head stills him, and Aziraphale’s magic washes over him again.

“I’m not sure,” the angel says, voice tight and pained. “But… I think- I think I saw him, just before he Fell.”
A spot of brilliant white in the forest. Blue-green eyes wide in fright. “Aziraphale. Go. I’ll be alright.”

The demon says nothing. It takes all his willpower not to shake, to react, to give in to the way the silence feels ready to overtake him. He remembers that day in perfect clarity. The fear on Aziraphale’s face, Lucifer’s laughter, and the searing pain of the Fall. He pushes the memory away. He’s not ready to face it, it’s still too fresh, even three thousand years later.

“I was in the Garden,” Aziraphale continues, unaware of the effect his words were having. “I heard shouting, and I knew Raphael had been worried about someone breaking into Eden. So I went looking. I didn’t- couldn’t know what was going on. I found him by the apple tree. Lucifer.”

Crawly hisses at the name. His brother. The First of the Fallen. The one he had followed, blindly, into destruction.

“He was- oh, it was horrible.” Crawly feels the angel’s hands shake.

“Let me guess,” he says, trying to inject some levity into his voice. “Big, red, bat-winged bugger. Laughing about how evil he is and gloating about causing an archangel to Fall?”

Aziraphale gives him a weak chuckle. “Are you even allowed to talk about him like that?”

“Eh,” Crawly waves a hand dismissively, and grins when the movement doesn’t hurt. The angel has done an amazing job. He feels a swell of pride. He taught him well. “If he doesn’t like it, he can always come up here and drag me back down.”

The angel smacks his ear. “Don’t talk like that. What do you think I’d do, left all alone down here?”

“Ack, hey, watched the head, Angel! Aren’t you supposed to be healing me or something?” He doesn’t say Isn’t that what you want? For the demon plaguing you to go away?

“Ah, yes, sorry,” Aziraphale resumes his work, but the demon can feel his hands shake, and he knows he’s still thinking about that day.
“So,” Crawly says after a moment. “You found Himself in the Garden. What happened next?” He doesn’t want to hear this. He’d been there for it. He knows what happened next. But he can feel the angel relaxing against him, muscles un-clenching, wings falling to rest at his sides. The demon’s instincts had been right, he needs to talk about this. And if Crawly is the only one he has who will listen, then so be it. Consider it part of his punishment for damnation.

“He…” Aziraphale’s voice is shakier than his hands now. “He had Raphael on the ground. I think- I think he was torturing him. When they saw me-” he stops.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Crawly offers, half hoping he’ll take him up on it. “If it’s painful for you.”

Aziraphale shakes his head. “No, no, I… no. This is helping. Unless you’d rather…”

“No,” Crawly says. “No, it’s fine. Keep going.”

The angel pats his arm in silent gratitude. “Thank you.” He takes a deep breath. “He - Lucifer asked me if I’d come to- to watch Raphael Fall. I was… I was so scared. I didn’t understand what was happening. But I knew Raphael was in danger, so I tried- I was going to attack. It was stupid, really. I knew I couldn’t win. Not against Him, but it might have been enough to get Raphael free. But he- Raphael- well.” Crawly realizes with horror that Aziraphale is crying. “Raphael smiled at me, and he-” his voice catches on a sob. “He told me it would be alright.”

Silence settles between them, heavy and thick with grief. Crawly reaches up and puts a hand over Aziraphale’s, more than half expecting the angel to shake him off. But he doesn’t. He takes his other, and grips Crawly’s hand between the two, like a lifeline.

“I…” Aziraphale makes a pained noise. “He smiled, Crawly. But he was scared, and in pain. And- and I couldn’t help him. I wanted to, but before I could, he- he sent me away.”

Crawly stays still. He knows what he had done. And even sitting here, guilt coiled like a serpent at the base of his spine, he doesn’t regret it. “Well,” he says, hesitantly, “I’m glad he did.”

“But- but what if it was his last miracle? What if he used the last of his strength to send me away, and that’s why he fell.” Aziraphale’s hands shake around Crawly’s, fingers curling tighter around his palm. “What if I could have-”
“And what if you couldn’t?” Crawly asks, even the hypothetical sending cold tendrils of fear down his back. He forces himself up, unable to sit still. “That was- Angel, that was Lucifer. Satan. My boss, the King of Hell. If a fucking Archangel couldn’t defeat him, you wouldn’t have stood a chance. And you know it.”

Aziraphale looks away. “But he-”

“No.” Crawly looks Aziraphale in the eyes, willing him to understand. “No. You know what? I’m glad he sent you away. Because if you’d stayed, if you’d attacked him, you wouldn’t have Fallen, angel. You would have been destroyed.”

“At least I would have tried!” Aziraphale cries, standing as well. “At least I would have stood with him, instead of letting- letting him die like that. Alone. Because that’s what happened. I- I looked for him, on the battle field. I was so sure I’d see him there, see him healing the wounded, or at the very least fighting beside the others. And then- and then-” he choked off, swallowing a sob. And Crawly can’t take it anymore. He does something he’s never done, not since he Fell, not in all their long years of almost-friendship. He reaches out, and pulls the angel into a hug.

At his touch, the angel lets out a great, heaving sob, and wraps his arms around the demon, burying his face in Crawly’s shoulder. Crawly rubs a comforting hand up his back, between his wings, and releases a single pair of his own, wrapping them around them both in a feathery cocoon. They stand there, for an incalculable stretch of time, the angel shuddering with deep, aching sobs. The silence threatens to overwhelm Crawly, echoing, screaming at him, and he’s so, so glad that angels aren’t made to sense pain as easily as love, because standing there, with Aziraphale in his arms, he knows exactly what he lost when he Fell.

Eventually, when Aziraphale’s sobs have faded away to the occasional snifflle, Crawly lets him go. When he steps back, the angel’s face is a mess, covered in tears and red from crying, and even then he’s beautiful. And that’s when Crawly knows he well and truly fucked. Because he still feels that very specific form of caring he’d held for Aziraphale in Heaven. Only now, now he knows enough about human emotions to put a name to it. It’s love. Not Love, like what he’d felt from God. But love, small-l. Specific. Far more wonderful. And far, far worse. The knowledge rips him apart inside, because there’s no way, no way that Aziraphale will ever feel that way about a low, broken, crawling thing like him.

“Thank you, my dear,” Aziraphale tells him, once he’s miracled away the evidence of his sorrow.”I know that can’t have been pleasant for you.”

Crawly shrugs. “Eh. I prefer getting cried on to being thrown into walls at least. Easier to get tears out of my shirt than blood.” He pastes on a grin, letting the angel know he’s just teasing.
“Regardless,” Aziraphale says, reaching out and taking his hand in both of his once again, and giving it a squeeze before letting go. “Thank you. I... I didn’t realize how much I needed that.”

The demon opens his mouth to say something rude, maybe something about gaining points with Downstairs for making an angel cry. Instead, what comes out is “Did you love him?”

“What?” Aziraphale frowns at him, and he has the chance to take the words back, to cover it with a joke and pretend he never said anything. Instead, his traitorous mouth doubles down.

“The archangel. Did you love him?”

The angel considers his words, looking in his direction, but not at him. Eyes focused somewhere Crawly cannot see. “Did I?” he says softly. Then he smiles, and that look, the love in it, the very specific love, shatters Crawly’s heart into pieces. “Yes. I do believe I did. I do.”

“Do?” Crawly manages to ask, past the way his throat feels tight with loss and silence and pain.

Aziraphale nods. “I don’t know if you can understand it,” he says, not meaning to cause the spears of pain that threaten to break Crawly’s soul apart. “Being a demon, and all. But love... you don’t just turn it off at will, you see. I can’t not love him, once I’ve started. I might have stopped after a time, I suppose. It does happen, with humans at least. But I couldn’t stop loving him just because he Fell. Not if he was still the same person.” He sighs, and that painful, loving expression falls from his face. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, though. It’s not like I’ll ever get to tell him.”

He wants, so badly, to stand up tall, to take Aziraphale by the hands and shout that I’m here! It’s me! I was Raphael! I’m right here! He can’t. He’s not Raphael anymore. And just because Aziraphale admitted to having loved him as he had been, it doesn’t mean he could ever love Crawly as he is. In fact, it probably means the opposite. He’s suddenly disgusted with himself. How can he even entertain the idea of revealing himself to Aziraphale? He’s nothing like that kind, funny, Good-with-a-capital-G archangel Aziraphale described.

There had been a moment. One bright, shining moment, when Tobit had looked at him with newly clear eyes and said “Raphael”. When he’d felt like, just maybe, maybe he could be redeemed. That maybe he wasn’t as worthless as he felt, as unforgivable. That maybe he could shed this ill-fitting name and take back what he’d once been. And then he had seen his own reflection, dark wings hovering on just the other side of reality, the snake branded on his skin, a thin black cloth covering his very demonic eyes. He’d known the truth then. The inescapable, irreversible Truth. He Fell.
He’s a demon. At his core, he’s *capital-B-Bad*. Evil. He’s the metaphysical embodiment of sin, and he can’t hide from that even if he wants to. The truth of it stares back at him every time he looks in a mirror. He takes a step back. Away from Aziraphale.

“I’m sure he knew, angel,” he says. *And I’ll never tell you how very much I love you, too.*

Chapter End Notes

Here’s the current order of flashbacks:

- Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
- Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
- Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
- Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri

Comments and kudos make me smile and brighten my day! I’d love to know what you think, and if there's anything you'd really like to see out of the story.
Ok, fair warning, this chapter was written under the influence of vicodin and a sprained back. So if it doesn't fit well with the rest of the story, blame the pain pills.

In all honesty though, this is the chapter I'm most worried about people not liking, since it's a lot more introspective on Crowley and his feelings about tempting the humans, and Aziraphale is really only in part of the flashback and at the very end. But I feel like it's still necessary to the story I'm telling here, so please bear with me. I'll be back with the angst bat again next week.

After Tobit, his false name sits even more uncomfortably on his soul. He had never liked the name Crawly, really. It had just been the best he could think of at the time. It hung on him like a poorly-made coat that's a few sizes too small in places, and a few sizes too large in others. It was utilitarian. Useful. A descriptor, nothing more. But he finds, after so long, that he can’t stand it. He can’t stand the way it rubs against his old name, chafing, like trying to shove his feet into too-small shoes. He tries on a couple names over a period of years, but nothing really fits him as well as the name She gave him. The name he’s sworn he’ll never use again. Then he tries Crowley. And he’s never quite sure why, but it feels right, like it belongs to him. Like he’s claiming a part of himself back. He doesn’t have to be the squirming demon crawling at Her feet, but neither does he have to be Her obedient Healer. It doesn’t help with the ache inside him, but at least it gives him something wholly his own to cling to. Something to separate him from the name he can’t quite leave behind. It makes him feel… freer. More grounded, in a way he hasn’t been since Lucifer told him about the Great Plan.

It isn’t long after, that he hears about the mortal birth of the Son of God. Immediately, he signs up for any and all duties involving tempting, thwarting, or otherwise interacting with Her divine offspring. He justifies it to himself as being greedy for the hazard pay, but that’s really only an excuse. He’s read the Great Plan, after all. He knows that this boy is just another of Her sacrifices in whatever long game of solitaire She’s playing with the world. He’s not surprised when Hell agrees to give him the assignment. After all, most demons are selfish creatures at heart, and getting near the Son of God is almost guaranteed destruction.

He keeps his distance at first, and at first it is easy. Staying on the outskirts of his life, never directly interacting. His heart aches every time he sees the child, so young, so innocent, but with such ancient, immeasurably sad eyes. He’d never known Jesus in Heaven. Speaking with him was something Lucifer had always done. He does know that he knew of the Great Plan, even more than Lucifer with his forbidden copy of Her words. Crowley wonders what he thinks of the Plan now, when he stands on an earth that moves forward each day, steadily marching him towards his torment. He’s not going to ask. Especially not when he’s still a kid. Instead, Crowley does his best to ensure that the boy has a happy childhood. Nothing too over-the-top, he doesn’t want to be
noticed. But he has recognized the distinct lack of angelic presences in the area, and he doesn’t see what’s so bad about a few unexpected windfalls for the family, a few toys left where a clever boy will find them, a client miraculously changing his mind and giving Joseph’s family their business over a competitor. It gets harder to remain unnoticed as Jesus grows. He’s nearly caught several times once the boy is old enough to start really looking for him. But the first real time he speaks with the Son of God is still a surprise.

He’s watching Jesus and his mortal brothers build a house when it happens. He had thought he did a good job blending in with the crowd, pretending to sit, sightless, with a group of beggars, a dirty bandage wrapped around his head to hide his eyes. But still, the fifteen-year-old Christ child stands up when his brothers take a break, looks around, and then walks directly towards Crowley with an air of intent. The demon freezes, hoping he hasn’t been spotted, but unable to attempt an escape without compromising his disguise. Jesus comes to stand directly in front of him.

“How did I know your name? I know the names of all my Mother’s children.” He offers the demon a hand. Crowley stares at it, unable to form a proper response. “Come on,” Jesus says. “We need an extra pair of hands to lift this wall.”

“I, um…” he’s finding it hard to come up with the right words in Aramaic, or in any language, to be honest. It’s the first time in his long, long life that words have truly failed him.

Jesus smiles, and squats down so he’s on eye level with Crowley. “It’s alright,” he says. “I know what you are.” He gently reaches out and removes Crowley’s bandage, waiting patiently while the demon’s eyes adjust to the added light.

“If… you know who I was?” It’s not the most elegant way of phrasing the question, but he has to know.

“I know,” Jesus confirms. “Did you want me to call you Raphael?” He asks it like he already knows the answer, and just wants to see if Crowley knows it himself.

The demon shakes his head. “No. I’m good with Crowley.”
The Son of God holds out his hand again. “Come on then, Crowley. Let’s build a house.”

Nobody mentions Crowley’s eyes while he’s with Jesus. He supposes this family has seen enough Heavenly miracles from their oldest child that an odd man with serpent’s eyes is hardly novel. They’re more concerned with how hard a worker he is than anything as minor as odd eyes and a tendency to hiss. For the first time in a very long time, he feels welcomed. Not tolerated, not a convenient partner in a beneficial arrangement, not a loyal adversary, or even simply the only other being that’s been around for so long. He’s welcomed. Like a friend. Almost like family. It feels wonderful, even as it rips at the raw parts of his soul that crave to belong somewhere, with someone, once again.

At the end of the day, Jesus stands, and glances at Crowley. A wordless invitation to follow as he walks away.

“You don’t have to look out for me,” the boy says, once they’re out of earshot of his family.

“I know,” Crowley tells him. “Just thought someone should. Doesn’t look like your lot are putting in much of an effort right now.” Aziraphale has been ordered to stay away, he knows, so he expects all angels have been told to leave Her son alone on Earth, to make his own way as a human. That’s bullshit of course. Crowley has already taken down three minor demons, six imps, two lords of Hell, and a particularly determined succubus that all wanted to get their hands on the Son of God before he grows strong enough to defend himself. The sword he forged to protect Aziraphale is getting double the workout, and rumors are starting to get around Hell that an unknown archangel is protecting the Christ child. Crowley is highly amused at the size of the betting pool on which one it is. He currently has money in the pot on both Michael and Gabriel, and is doing his level best to leave hints that point to one or the other where enterprising demons will find them.

Jesus laughs. “I’ll tell her you said that.”

“Please. Don’t.” The demon can’t help the emotion in his voice when he says it, the raw, burning ache of anger and loss, hatred and despair, and buried deep within a broken, desperate longing. His companion stops their slow stroll to turn and look at him.

“She doesn’t hate you, you know,” he says, as if the words don’t completely rip the world out from under Crowley’s feet. “In fact, I think She likes you quite a bit.”

Crowley gives his shattered-glass laugh, bitter as the rind of a lemon. “Will I get smote for telling you I think you’re lying?” he asks.
“No,” Jesus shrugs. “I never expected you to believe me. I just thought you ought to hear it. So that, maybe some day, you’ll be able to understand.”

“Kid,” the demon says, half expecting to be struck down for calling the Christ child ‘kid’, “‘I’m a demon. I’m pretty sure that’s the exact definition of ‘things She hates’.”

“And yet, you helped me build a house today,” his companion says mildly, looking up at him with those too-old eyes. “You left me toys, when you thought no one would catch you. You kept us all safe, when my family was forced to flee into Egypt. You make sure the children of this village have enough to eat and a warm place to sleep. None of those things are very demonic, are they?”

Crowley shrugs. “’S not like I could do much else. Nobody else was gonna.” He pauses when he realizes what he just admitted to, then scowls. “And if you ever tell anyone, I’ll… I’ll make sure the sand in that desert I’m supposed to tempt you in is hot enough to burn your feet.”

Jesus blinks, then laughs. “That’s the best threat you can come up with?”

Crowley’s scowl deepens. “You’re a kid. I’m not gonna torture a kid.”

“Am I?” The Son of God asks, standing in front of Crowley and forcing him to meet those impossibly ancient eyes. His voice goes deep with divine knowledge, the edges of the words crackling with Her holy power. “I’ve been here since before there was light. I watched your creation, and your downfall. I am Her Word and Her Son. Her promise to the world that there can be redemption. I am one with Her and Her Spirit. When She speaks, there I am. And so when I say She does not hate you, I do so with Her voice and Her mind.”

“Her promise of redemption?” Crowley echoes, dragging his gaze away from the universe he can see inside this child’s eyes. He chuckles, and shakes his head. “You believe what you want, kid. But for some of us, there is no redemption.” He knows he sounds bitter, but there’s no hiding himself here. Not from eyes like that. He doesn’t think about what the boy just said. It can’t be right. If she didn’t hate him, she wouldn’t have let him Fall.

The boy’s hands fall on his shoulders, and Crowley meets that impossible gaze again, startled by the contact. “You are part of Her plan, Crowley. You read Her words. You cannot deny that this is what She planned for you. It does not mean Her heart did not ache as she cast you from Her light.”
Crowley wants to scoff, to look away, to turn and stalk off into the night. He can’t. He’s frozen. A captive to His ancient eyes. “If She cares so much, why did She make this Plan in the first place?” he asks, voice shaking from the strain of standing under that gaze. The silence inside is screaming, aching, empty and raw. “Why did She leave?”

Jesus doesn’t pull away from the pain in his voice. The only indication he notices it at all is a tight squeeze of the hands against his shoulders. “She does things in Her own way. Even I don’t always get to know why.” For a moment, he sounds like a child again, a little lost, confused. Then he smiles, his eyes clear, and Crowley sees a young man, wise beyond his years, but mortal. Human. “Her Plan will become clear in time,” he assures the demon, then drops his hands and steps away.

Crowley nearly collapses from the relief of it, of being out from under those impossibly wise, sad eyes. He forces himself to stand firm. “Yeah, well, you can tell Her I don’t think much of Her Plan. Sacrificing kids who never did anything wrong.”

Blessedly, Jesus doesn’t look at him again, instead turning his gaze to the moon. It’s a clear night, and Crowley can see some of his own stars above them. “Do you mean the Flood?” the boy asks mildly. “Or yourself?”

“Oh, the Flood of course,” the demon laughs. “I know what I did that pissed Her off. I wanted to know Why. I knew I wasn’t supposed to read the damn book. Still did. My question though, my question is, that what I did was written in the Plan. So She knew I’d damn myself, and just let me do it anyway. Let me just wander around, asking my questions, trying to get somebody up there to just tell me one blessed Good reason why I was meant to sacrifice myself for the humans. I was a goddamned -literally- idiot, walking right into this mess.” He kicks a pebble down the road, feeling a sense of satisfaction in the sound it makes as it skips over the dirt. “I just asked questions.” He sighs. “That was all I did, other than try my best to do what She asked of me. Was it so bad, to want to know why?” he hisses at himself and kicks another rock. This one makes a nice solid thunk as it hits a fence post. He’s revealing far, far too much of himself. But he also can’t seem to stop.

“Do you regret it?” Jesus asks. “Asking questions? Falling?”

Crowley shakes his head. “Asking questions? No.” He doesn’t. He still doesn’t understand why it was wrong. Everything would have been so much easier if She had just explained what she wanted. “Falling… every day.”

“Why?”

“Aside from losing Her Love?” Crowley asks. His companion nods silently. The demon considers
his answer. It should be simple. It should be his siblings that he misses the most. But even with the silence screaming inside of him where their voices used to be, it’s not. “I don’t… I’m not sure. But… there was someone. Another angel. I didn’t really know, then, but I was starting to love him. Specifically love him. More than anyone. More than Her.” He can admit that to the boy beside him, the carpenter’s son who preaches love above all else. He sighs, and runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t know, maybe that was part of why I Fell. She never did go in for… for fraternization in the ranks.”

“You still love this angel. Specifically,” Jesus observes, still looking up at the sky. Then he shoots Crowley a playful, sideways glance. “And don’t lie. I’ll know it if you do.”

“I…” for a second, Crowley considers lying anyway. But there’s no point. Not to Him. “Yeah. He’s… special. Not cold, like the others have become. He cares, he’s kind, he’s… he drives me absolutely bloody mad with how oblivious he can be at times, the trouble he gets himself in. Do you know, I had to save him last year from the bloody arena? Somehow he got himself caught up in a Roman prison and sentenced to be a gladiator! Can you imagine that? Him? Fighting? I spend half my time worrying about the daft bastard, and the other half fishing him out of whatever trouble he’s managed to bumble his way into!” He knows he’s rambling, but he can’t quite find it in himself to stop, now that he’s started. “He’d have been discorporated a dozen times over just this past century, if I hadn’t stepped in. He just…. Oh, I don’t know. He’s got too much faith in people.”

“And you don’t?” the boy beside him asks. They’ve made their way out into a field now. Beside their voices, the only other sounds are from animals and the wind blowing across the wheat. “No optimism about what these humans will do with the Knowledge you gave them?”

“None,” Crowley says flatly. His companion’s lips quirk up in a smile and he knows he’s been caught in a lie.

“She has a Plan,” Jesus tells him, after a moment. “But sometimes, I think she really just wants to see what they’ll do with it. Free will.”

Crowley considers that. “Maybe.” He shrugs. “Nothing to do with me at this point. I’m just here to cause a little chaos.”

His companion politely doesn’t point out the truth. That chaos is a critical element for self-determination.

They walk a little further without speaking. It would be nice, save for the silence inside Crowley’s
mind. It hurts more than it has in the past thousand years, standing here next to a boy that is the embodiment of God’s love. It stabs right through him, clawing at the walls he built around himself, threatening to tear them all away and leave him broken once more, a small, crawling thing meant only to be crushed beneath His feet. It would be so much easier, if he could hate him. If he could hate Her for what She did. He wonders if it would hurt less, then. The demon turns his eyes back to the stars. And after a time, he speaks.

“I meant you, too,” he says, anguished, quiet enough the boy can pretend not to hear. “She’s sacrificing you, too.”

Jesus doesn’t turn to look at him, and he’s grateful. He doesn’t know if he could stand to see those ancient eyes right now.

“Is it a sacrifice if I choose it?” the boy asks. Crowley doesn’t have a reply. Jesus squeezes his shoulder comfortingly, then turns and walks back towards the light of the village. Crowley stays out in that dark field all night, trying to come up with an answer.

Fifteen years later, Crowley comes to him in the desert. He’s tired, thin, filthy, and horribly dehydrated. He looks like a corpse, paper-thin skin stretched too tight against bones and little else. Crowley would think him dead, were it not for the determined way he’s still putting one foot in front of the other. The demon snaps his fingers and conjures a waterskin into his hands before shoving it at the Son of God.

“Here.” He’s starting this off by going off-script, he knows that, but he can’t not. He was Her healer, once, and that urge to heal has never gone away. And, anyway, how is he supposed to tempt someone who’s dying of dehydration?

Jesus’ sunken eyes snap open, so tired, ancient, and human, and he gives Crowley a small smile. “You’re meant-” he coughs, then tries again in a raspy voice. “You’re meant to-” he can’t get the words out past the dryness of his throat.

“Yeah, I know what I’m meant to do,” Crowley tells him, wrapping his hands around the waterskin and bringing it to Christ’s lips. “Small sips,” he cautions. “It won’t do you any good to just vomit it all back up.” He carefully uses a small demonic miracle to speed his re-hydration. It’s not like anyone will be keeping track today, not when he’s meant to be tempting the Son of God himself.
“There.” He steps back, pleased, when he can sense enough water has finally returned to the man’s body. “Now I can tempt you properly, without worrying your body is gonna give out on us.”

Ancient, knowing eyes sparkle with amusement. “This is supposed to be a test, you know,” he says, sounding much better now that his throat isn’t coated in sand. He still looks tired, and Crowley’s fingers itch to heal his fatigue, to conjure up some food for him, and shelter from the burning sun. His skin is burned raw, blistered in places, and it hurts the part of him that used to be Her healer to stand there and not make it right. There’s a line here, he knows, a script they need to follow, at least a little. That doesn’t mean he can’t improvise.

“I know,” Crowley says, and snaps his fingers. A stone appears on the ground between them, and he glares at it instead of looking up into that too-thin face. “I don’t suppose you’d want to turn that into bread, huh? You haven’t had a thing to eat in over a month. I’m honestly not sure how your body is still functioning.”

“If my Mother wishes me to have food, She will provide it,” Jesus answers, and Crowley rolls his eyes.

“Sure, just like she provided that water for you. Or this.” He snaps his fingers again, and a great umbrella appears in his hands, wide enough to shield them both from the sun.

The Son of God smiles. “She did. She sent you.”

“I’m here tempting you,” the demon snaps. “I’m no healer sent by God Herself to get you out of this desert.” He wants to be, he doesn’t say. He knows what he is.

“Aren’t you?” his companion asks.

Crowley freezes. “No,” he says, sharp, anguished. “Not anymore.”

“Then why give me water? Or shade? There is a reason She chose you to be my tempter.”

The demon shakes his head and refuses to meet his eyes. “I took the assignment for the hazard pay,” he says.
“Liar,” Jesus says, amused, a statement of fact with no accusation in the words.

Crowley pastes on a grin, pretending the word doesn’t hurt. “Guilty as charged. Let’s get on with this, shall we?” He doesn’t like the look of the burns on Jesus’ back. They are clearly infected, and need cleaning sooner rather than later. “You sure you don’t want to turn this into bread? I doubt she’ll begrudge you a miracle, not when you’ve just spent forty days wandering in the desert to prove your faithfulness to her.” He glowers at the sand. “Which, by the way, is a pretty shit way to treat your kid.”

His companion moves closer, further under the shade of the great umbrella. “One does not live by bread alone,” he says, stepping onto the stone Crowley summoned.

The demon shrugs. “Doesn’t have to be bread. Anything with the right nutrients will help.” He chances a look at Jesus’ face, and sees him watching Crowley with a sad smile. “Or you could, I don’t know, just… take this.” He pulls a small loaf of bread filled with dates out of a pocket. “Give you some strength for the bit where I show you all the kingdoms of the world.”

Too-warm hands take the bread, breaking the loaf in half and offering part back to Crowley. “Didn’t I Say she would send food if She thought I should have it?”

“Don’t think I’m a puppet to be pulled by Her strings,” Crowley growls. Snatching the offered loaf and tearing off a bit with his teeth. “I’m here because Downstairs says someone has to be, and I’m the one that got assigned. I’ll read Her script, but don’t think for one second I’m doing any of this for Her.”

“I didn’t think you were,” Jesus says mildly. He doesn’t make a move to eat the bread.

After a few moments of silence, Crowley hisses and tears off a chunk of bread with his fingers, and shoves it into the man’s hand. “Eat that,” he snaps. “It’s got enough vitamins in there to keep you from falling over before I’m done here.”

“And what,” his companion asks, accepting the bit of bread. “Are you doing here, if not following Her plan?”

“I’m here to talk you out of it, of course,” he says. “I may have walked headfirst into Her Great Plan, but that doesn’t mean you have to. You can still tell Her to forget the whole thing, leave you alone, skip the whole dying in agony and going to hell bit. Make someone else her sacrificial
Jesus considers his words for a moment, which is honestly more than Crowley expected. He’s also eating the bread, which eases the itch in Crowley’s bones that remember old instincts. “And if I said that I asked for this?” he asks mildly. “That I walked into my role with my eyes open?”

“I’d call bullshit,” Crowley says. “No one just walks into something like this and says ‘sign me up for unimaginable pain, please’.”

The Son of God looks at him. “And yet, if I recall correctly, you knew of Her plan. And though you hated Her for what She did, you still chose to tempt Eve.”

Crowley looks out over the desert, refusing to meet those ancient, knowing eyes. “That’s different. That wasn’t for Her, it was for them. The humans. Bloody ungrateful bastards.” How many times had he stood up on that wall with Aziraphale, looking down at the humans and wondering what they would become? How often had they walked through Eden, and found the humans, ever curious, exploring their domain? He remembers the questions in Eve’s eyes. So many questions. All with answers he had been forbidden to give.

Aziraphale meets him at the gate, eyes wide and worried. “Oh, thank goodness. I’m so glad you’re here.” He guides Raphael into the Garden. “I don’t quite know what to do, and it looks like it hurts her, the poor thing. If I hadn’t been able to reach you, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Raphael chuckles. He can feel the female human’s pain now, his power picking it up more clearly with every step. The stinging, rough sort of pain that comes from skinned knees. “She’ll be alright. It’s nothing serious,” he reassures his friend. “Don’t worry so much.”

They find her near a stream, wincing but also poking curious fingers at the bleeding wound on her leg. She looks up when she hears them and smiles.

“Hello,” Raphael says, switching from Enochian to a language more suited to human tongues. “I hear you had a bad fall.” He kneels down beside her, careless of the mud staining his white robes. Aziraphale stands at his side, shifting with nervous energy.

“It hurts,” Eve says, showing him her knee. There’s a deep scrape there, just below the kneecap. Raphael takes a deep breath, letting healing energy pool in his hands.
“It’s alright,” he says, expecting her to be scared, but she just watches him with those wide, curious eyes. “I’m going to make it better.”

She doesn ’t flinch as he touches her knee, or shy away from the contact as lesser animals would do. He concentrates, and the bright blue light of his power flows down from his hand to cover the scrape. He wills it to heal, and it does, knitting her skin back together and then flowing up, back into his hands.

Eve pokes at the place where she was injured, running a hand over the repaired flesh and scraping at it gently with a fingernail. “How?” she asks, the words still awkward on her lips. She’s barely a day old, and already she’s exploring the Garden.

Raphael smiles at her, feeling a rush of fondness for these new creatures. “I’m a healer,” he explains. “It’s what I was made for.”

“Can you teach me?” Aziraphale asks, and Raphael turns his head to see the principality watching him with hope in his eyes. “I think I should know how to do this, if I’m to guide them,” he points out. The archangel feels his smile widen.

“Go pick a flower,” he orders. “Any flower.

“A flower?” Aziraphale frowns, confused.

Raphael laughs. “Well, I’m not going to teach you how to heal on someone who feels pain, now am I?”

“Oh. No, I suppose that wouldn’t be a good idea,” Aziraphale agrees. He returns with a small white flower, carried carefully in his soft hands. At Raphael’s gesture, he comes to kneel beside the archangel.

Raphael inspects the flower. Yellow in the center, fading to a pure white in the petals. Plumeria, She had named it. A flower of new beginnings. “Now,” he says, setting it on the ground before them. “You need to feel the life in it, the pattern of the form it is meant to have.” He reaches out and wraps a hand around Aziraphale’s, drawing it out to hover over the flower.
“I don’t feel anything,” Aziraphale confesses after a moment, eyes squeezed shut as he tries to concentrate. “It’s like nothing is there.”

“Here,” Raphael says, and reaches out again, this time with his essence. He brushes against Aziraphale’s, then waits for permission to enter. He feels a flash of pleased acceptance from the other angel, and mingles their essences together. Not enough for a true joining of minds, but just enough that he can guide the angel, show him how the healing is meant to feel. Aziraphale’s essence is warm, welcoming, a steady presence at his side, a rock to cling to against the crushing tide. He’s never felt anything quite so wonderful, and it takes all of his self control to keep from diving further, mingling their essences completely until he’s surrounded by that warm light. Briefly, he wonders how he feels to the angel, and Aziraphale catches the thought. Then he feels rather than sees the image the angel gives him - a tempest bound within an acorn, flashes of light and the birth of stars above the gently rocking depths of the ocean. He projects back amusement, and lets Aziraphale’s calm still him, calm the storm within so they can concentrate together.

He guides their hand down to touch the petals of the flower. And there it is, the pattern of life, the place where the flower knows a stem should be, roots and leaves growing strong. Raphael guides their combined power, flowing down into the flower-that-is, and through to the empty pieces of the pattern.

Aziraphale gasps as the power catches on the pattern, and then they feel the pattern shift beneath their hand. The power flows from them more easily now, filling the flower until it spills into the empty pattern, until the pattern is so full any more will cause it to overflow. Beneath their hand the roots dig deep into the earth, a strong stem grows to support the flower, and little leaves unfold along the stem. Then the pattern is complete. He withdraws their power, and, reluctantly, ends their contact.

“Oh my.” Aziraphale is watching his face, innocent eyes wide above an excited smile. “That was…”

“That was.” Raphael agrees. He doesn’t have words for it. He wants to do it again, to reach out, to mingle their essences more, until they can’t tell where one ends and the other begins, to feel that calm surround him, bring him peace and ease the itch of worry that’s been building in him more each day since they’ve heard from his eldest brother. He resists the urge, instead squeezing Aziraphale’s hand within his and then letting go.

Then he looks down at the flower, and frowns in confusion. The plant before him is smaller, with five petals of a perfect dusky blue. Three more spring from the same stem, like stars in a constellation.

“I haven’t seen that one before,” Aziraphale comments, touching the petal curiously.
“It’s new,” Raphael says, surprised. He had thought the last thing made in the Garden was to be the humans, but here, under his hands, is a new flower. “Myosotis.” He knows it’s name instantly, like he had with all of Her creations. “Forget-me-not.” A flower of love and remembrance.

“It’s beautiful.” Aziraphale looks between the flower and the archangel. “But… we didn’t do it right, did we? The healing?”

Raphael shrugs. “Not quite. But I didn’t expect it to go right, exactly. It never does, the first time.”

The angel frowns at the flower, clearly disappointed still. “What happened your first time then?”

“I, well… ah. Nothing much.” The archangel studies his hands, feeling his face heat. Michael has never and will never let him live it down. She thinks it’s hilarious, the creature he accidentally created.

Aziraphale grins. “That doesn’t sound like you mean it. Now you simply must tell me.”

Raphael looks at his lap. “I… may have created the platypus,” he mumbles. “Trying to heal a duck with a broken wing.”

“The platypus?” Aziraphale asks, eyes widening. “That was you?”

“In my defense, I was only a fledgling at the time. Sandalphon hadn’t even been created yet.”

The angel is laughing now. “But, my dear, the platypus? I always assumed that was one of Her little jokes.”

“Maybe it was,” Raphael shoots back. “She works in mysterious ways, after all.” Bitterness creeps into his voice. “She’s ineffable.” He hasn’t heard from Her in two days. Hasn’t heard from Lucifer in far longer. For a being that was used to hearing from Her all of the time, every little directive, some small task She needs taken care of, it feels like an eternity.
“Oh my dear boy,” Aziraphale reaches out, a comforting hand on Raphael’s arm. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Raphael forces a smile back onto his face. “Nothing at all. I was just thinking. But here, let’s try again.” He summons a dagger, and draws it lightly across the skin of his palm. His human corporation starts to bleed, and he grits his teeth against the sting of it.


The archangel laughs. “Don’t worry. The longer something exists, the harder it is to change the pattern. You won’t be able to change me on accident. I’ve been in this form since before time began.” He almost reaches to mingle their essences again, but thinks better of it. “Now. Do you remember how it felt, to feel the pattern?”

Aziraphale nods, eyes on the thin line of blood seeping across the archangel’s palm. “I do.” He raises a hand, and fingers brush against Raphael’s hand. Blue power coats his fingers, and Raphael watches his face as he squeezes his eyes shut, concentrating. He lets the power flow down to settle on the archangel’s palm, where it ripples across the wound. It feels cool, soothing and wonderful. It’s a feeling Raphael doesn’t want to end. But the cut soon begins to knit together, and then it’s gone. Aziraphale withdraws his power, leaving behind a faint line of a scar across Raphael’s palm.

“Oh.” Aziraphale’s face falls, and he runs a finger along the scar, sending a shiver of… something up Raphael’s spine. “I’m so sorry, I was so sure I’d got it right. Let me-”

Raphael withdraws his hand, holding it up so he can look at the faint pink line. It runs diagonally from what some humans would come to call the ‘heart’ line, crossing the ‘fate’ and ‘life’ lines to end at the base of his thumb. “Not bad,” he says, checking the depth of the healing. “You did well for your second time.”

“I left a scar though,” the angel says. “It’s not fully healed.”

Raphael shakes his head. “It’s fine.” He can feel the scar as part of his human-shaped pattern now. He won’t be able to heal it away. Strangely, he doesn’t mind. He meets Aziraphale’s eyes. “You did well. I want you to practice this, until you can sense the pattern without having to think about it.”
The younger angel looks about to say something, but he’s interrupted by a call from deeper inside the Garden.

“That’s one of the teachers,” Raphael tells him. “Sounds like they need you.”

“Oh, but…” the angel looks torn between wanting to stay, and his desire to please everyone.

“Go,” Raphael says, rising, and pushing him off in the direction of the voice. With a last look back at him, Aziraphale goes. And Raphael feels something tighten in his chest, squeezing at his heart.

“It hurts,” the human woman observes, and he jumps, having forgotten she was still there.

“What?”

“It hurts.” She puts her hand carefully against his chest, over his heart. “Here.” Her eyes meet his. “Why?”

Raphael looks away. “I don’t want him to leave.”

“Why?”

He blinks, and looks at her. She’s watching his face with those same wide, curious eyes that didn’t flinch away when he healed her. Endless curiosity, this one, he thinks. “I don’t know,” he says honestly. “I just… want to be around him.”

She smiles, like that was all the answer she needed. She turns and walks away, leaving Raphael alone to examine the flower he and Aziraphale created. Such a small thing, but beautiful, like looking at the stars from earth. He can imagine a field of these, lying warm in the afternoon sun. He could take Aziraphale and his siblings, and they could sit beneath a tree surrounded by flowers, watching Gabriel and Sandalphon bicker. Uriel would bring her harp, and coerce Michael into joining her in song. He wonders what Aziraphale’s voice is like when he sings. And Lucifer… he can’t find Lucifer in this picture. It’s been so long, he isn’t sure anymore what his brother would do on such an occasion.
“Heal?” Eve’s voice breaks him out of his contemplations. She’s back at his side now, holding to halves of a broken stick. “Make it better?

He takes it from her, extending his power, but this stick fell from it’s tree a long time ago. All the life is gone from it, the pattern lost to entropy, and with it any chance of making it whole again.

“I can’t,” he tells her. “It’s dead.”

She frowns. “What is ‘dead’?”

He opens his mouth to explain, then remembers the tree, the apples, and the Knowledge she isn’t allowed to have. “It means I can’t fix it,” he tells her.

She looks at the stick, and then reaches for his hand, turning it palm up and tracing the new scar there. “Dead?” she asks.

“No. Not that. That’s… different.”

She shakes her head, frustration in her eyes as she struggles to understand. “You can heal it?”

“No. But it’s not dead. It’s a part of me.”

“Can I be a healer?” Eve asks him, and he blinks at her surprised.

“I don’t think so,” he says at last. Humans don’t have the ability to see the patterns, not like an angel can.

She continues to frown. “Why not?”

He gives her the simplest answer he can. “It’s not how you were made.”
“Then what?” she wants to know. “What am I made for?”

“You were made to be yourself,” he says. She isn’t satisfied with that, he can tell. Not by a long shot. But he can’t give her anything more. She’s forbidden from knowing too much. And for the first time, he realizes that he hates one of Her rules. Why shouldn’t the humans know what they were made for? Why keep from them the knowledge of life and death, good and evil? He doesn’t understand Her reasons for it, and he hates that too. He wants to ask Her, to stand before Her in Her Grace and demand to know why. But She isn’t there. He doesn’t know where She went. And he isn’t supposed to ask questions. He’s as frustrated and clueless as the human woman, and he hates that too.

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It’s still beautiful in the Garden. Part of him had expected it wouldn’t be, after everything. But the war never came this far. Eden was spared the brunt of it, and one angel’s Fall is not enough to taint it’s perfection. Not even the Fall of an archangel. He almost wishes it was. It would be easier, he thinks, if it didn’t look the same. If he wasn’t able to curl up here on the edge of the river, his new scales warmed by the sun, and watch the wind blow across a small patch of those little blue flowers he and Aziraphale created so long ago.

Eve finds him soon enough. She knows this Garden well now. She knows when something doesn’t belong. He curls into a tight knot, head in the center of his coils, as she sits down at his side.

“You’re new,” she says. “What are you?”

“Demon,” he hisses, but the word holds no meaning for her.

“What’s a demon?” she asks.

He hesitates. Demons, like Good and Evil, are part of the forbidden Knowledge. The Knowledge he was supposed to tempt her into taking.

“It’s what I am,” he tells her.
“You’re from outside?” So many questions. Doesn’t she know questions are dangerous?

“I am.” He coils himself tighter, wanting to escape but also not wanting to be alone again.

“What’s happening out there? With the angels?”

He blinks in shock, turning his head to look at her. She’s looking up at the sky, where the last vestiges of the War still play across the clouds in flashes of light and thunder. He stays silent.

“Adam says it’s nothing,” she tells him. “But we don’t know what this is. I want to understand.”

“You can’t.” He doesn’t mean it to come out so sharp, but it does. “You can’t understand.”

She frowns. “But… why?”

“It is forbidden.”

“Why is it forbidden?” He can hear the frustration in her voice.

“Because it is.” He hides his head under a loop of his body.

At his side, she sighs. “That’s what the angels say.” Her hands form fists on her knees. “They say I do not need to know. That it doesn’t matter.”

“Why do you want to know?” he asks.

She grinds her teeth in frustration. “Because I don’t understand. There’s so much I don’t understand. And I want to know why.”
“It’s better if you don’t,” he tells her, anger and pain bleeding into his voice. “Ask too many questions, you’ll get burned.”

“Why?” she wants to know. That had always been his question too. Why make a Plan to cast them out? Why sacrifice him? Why lead Lucifer down this path to madness? Why create all of this if she was just going to take it away? So many whys. So many unanswered questions. And for that, he had Fallen. “I don’t understand.”

“Because…” he stops. As an angel, refusing her answers had been his duty. And now, well. Now his duty is to tempt her. But that doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing. After all, isn’t the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge supposed to impart wisdom? He looks at her, and sees himself, as he was - young, innocent, asking questions because he wants to know the answer, and being told again and again that he wasn’t allowed to know. He had taken the book from Lucifer, had read what he had been forbidden to see, because he couldn’t stand not knowing why. He didn’t get an answer then, and he probably never will. But that doesn’t mean that she won’t.

“Because,” he tells her, “you’ll have to choose. If you understand, you won’t be able to stay here. You’ll have to leave the Garden.”

“What’s outside the Garden?” she wants to know.


“Is safe better?” she asks. He doesn’t have an answer.

“If I go, must Adam stay?” she wants to know, and he follows her gaze to where the first man is standing under the shade of a tree, watching them.

“He must make his own choice,” he tells her.

“He’ll stay with me,” she says, sure in her response. She’s probably right, too. Adam looks at her, the way he knows he looks at Aziraphale. Like he’ll follow her anywhere she wants to go.

He takes a deep breath. “To get your answers, you need to eat an apple from the forbidden tree. If
you do, you’ll know. But you won’t be allowed to stay here. You will be cast out, and never allowed to return.”

She nods, and stands. He turns away, sliding off the rock and into the forest. He doesn’t want to see what happens when she takes that first bite. Will she hate him for it, he wonders? He thinks she probably should.

“You did the right thing,” Jesus says, and Crowley blinks. For a moment, he had imagined himself back in the Garden, watching it all unfold again.

“Did I?” he asks, dryly. “Do you think they would be happier, had they remained in Eden?”

“I think they deserved the choice,” his companion says. “I think choice was Her whole point.”

“Do you get a choice?” Crowley asks him. Did I?

Jesus nods. “I chose this part in Her plans.”

“And how does she repay you?” the demon demands, bitter. “What do you get for allowing yourself to be tortured?” With a snap, they’re standing atop the Great Temple in Jerusalem. “If you jump off this roof now, will She send Her angels to catch you?”

Ancient eyes meet his. ‘I do not need to test Her,” Jesus says. “She will send me what protection I require.”

Crowley scoffs. “She hasn’t sent shit. I’m the one that’s been chasing off the demons on your tail, not some bloody angel. They all have orders to leave you alone.”

Jesus smiles knowingly.

“No,” Crowley tells him. “She didn’t send me. I sent myself. And I’m only here trying to get you to back out of this stupid plan before you die in agony.”
“You cannot convince me to abandon my appointed task,” the Son of God says quietly. “It must be done, and I am glad to do it.”

“You can’t expect me to believe you want to be tortured,” Crowley says.

Jesus shrugs. “I don’t. But it’s necessary. To give them a chance at redemption.”

“Why?” Crowley wants to know. That same old question. He doesn’t expect an answer, as much as he wants one.

“I don’t know,” Her Son tells him, for a moment sounding just as lost. “She never does explain Herself.”

They watch the city in silence as the sky goes dark. People hurry to and fro, lanterns coming out as the sunlight fades. A family wanders past their perch, a young father with his arm wrapped around his wife’s shoulders, their daughter clutching his hand.

“You told me once you think She let you Fall because you were falling in love,” Jesus says into the silence. The demon jerks away from him as if slapped.

“Part of the reason,” Crowley tells him. “It was part of the reason.”

“No,” he says. “It isn’t. She would never make you Fall for feeling love.”

Crowley watches the young family on the street below. “Don’t.” His voice is bitter, angry, and more than a little terrified. “And don’t tell anyone. I won’t risk him for my stupidity.”

“He is safe,” Jesus reassures him. “He won’t Fall.”

“'Course he won’t. He’s too Good. Still loves Her. And… you know, Raph- the archangel. You won’t catch him falling in love now. Especially not with a demon.” Especially not with me. He means it to come out sharp, but the words just sound broken.
Thankfully, Jesus says nothing. He just steps a little closer, until Crowley can feel the heat radiating off his skin. The demon frowns, allowing himself to be distracted by the itch to heal.

“Come here. Let me fix that,” he says, careful fingers turning the Son of God until he can see the expanse of his back under his thin robes. The uncovered skin is blistered and raw, and he flinches automatically when the demon’s fingers brush against it.

“I suppose those angels that are supposed to come minister to you when this is over will be surprised,” he muses, letting the healing energy flow through him. “Since you’re not supposed to use miracles.”

“Well,” Jesus says, and Crowley can hear the smile in his words. “I won’t tell them if you don’t.”

Crowley takes him to see the kingdoms of the world. A snap of his fingers, and they’re wandering through a palace in China. Another snap, and they stand dwarfed in the shadow of the Great Pyramid at Giza. They walk through Rome in all its glory, and lose themselves in the crowds of a Mayan marketplace. It’s amazing to Crowley still, even after four thousand years. He’ll never get tired of seeing what these clever humans come up with. True, he thinks, they do some truly terrible things as well. But just when I want to give up on them, they do something brilliant.

“I agree,” Jesus says, and Crowley realizes he spoke his thought out loud. “They really are remarkable, aren’t they?”

“Not enough to be worth sacrificing yourself,” Crowley tells him, but his argument lacks the conviction it had before.

“I think they are,” the Son of God tells him. “You won’t get me to change my mind, Crowley.” He pauses, and he must see the conflict on the demon’s face, because he turns and looks him in the eyes.

Crowley meets that ancient, knowing gaze, and does not back down. “It’s Hell, you know,” he says. “You don’t just get tortured on Earth. You’re walking into Hell. And you know what that means. Beelzebub has already ordered a torture chamber prepared for you. They’ll torture you until you crack, until you break right down the middle and there’s nothing left to return to Her in Heaven. It won’t even take three days. Belial has been preparing for this since we received news of
“I will not break,” Jesus assures him. “I know what I must endure. And still, I choose it freely.”

“You don’t even know Her reasons for forcing you through this!” Crowley says, wanting to reach out and shake him, but unable to move under the weight of those eyes. For the first time, he wonders if mortals feel like this when faced with his stare, transfixed, helpless.

“I know enough,” Jesus says, and his expression closes off. “I have made my choice, Crowley. It will not change.”

“Then I won’t watch you walk into this,” the demon tells him. And with a particularly difficult wrench of his will, he leaves the Son of God standing alone on a mountaintop.

He doesn’t watch the rest of Jesus’ ministry, nor the events leading up to his crucifixion. He does go, on that last day, and stands beside Aziraphale as the humans nail him to the cross. The wounds inside him burn as he watches.

“Did you ever meet him?” Aziraphale asks, and Crowley almost laughs. He has spent the better part of thirty years watching over this man, only to be standing here, helpless, as he dies far too young and walks willingly into Hell. Inside, he’s a mess. The silence roars at him, tearing at the shattered pieces of his soul, demanding that he do something, anything, to make it stop. Outwardly, the only sign of his turmoil is the way he’s clasped his hands together, fingers digging into the flesh of his palms. He can feel the faint line of a scar on his right hand, and that only makes it worse. Because Aziraphale is right here, at his side, that warm and steady presence. But Crowley has so many more scars now, the tempest inside has become far too strong. While Raphael might have been able to cling to Aziraphale’s rock in the storm, Crowley’s tempest would shatter it into a thousand pieces.

Crowley turns away when Jesus cries out in pain, asking the question that has been on Crowley’s lips since the day he first read Her plan. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Four days later they stand together outside his tomb, and watch in awe as the Son of God steps out. He turns to them, and Aziraphale bows deeply.

“My Lord,” the angel says. Crowley just grins.

“I didn’t think you’d make it out,” he says, and Aziraphale gasps at the irreverence of his words.

Jesus only laughs. “For a few moments there, I almost didn’t.” Then he smiles. “It was worth it,” he says, and holds the demon’s eyes with his own, eyes ancient and knowing, and somehow just slightly less sad than they had been before. Looking into that ancient gaze, Crowley remembers.

She sits by the fire in their camp, Aziraphale’s flaming sword at her side. Adam leans against her, asleep with his head on her shoulder. She holds their son to her breast, belly already swelling again with their second child. She looks happy, despite the loss of Her love, despite being banished from the Garden. He stays, watching from the shadows as she rocks her baby.

Then Eve looks up, and meets his eyes. He freezes, waiting for her to take up the sword and chase him off. Instead, her expression softens, and she smiles.

“Thank you,” she says.

He hisses in shock, pulling back, deeper into the shadows. “You sssshouldn’t thank hssss me.”

“I should,” she tells him firmly. “You are the one that gave me knowledge.”

“I got you kicked out of the Garden,” he hisses.

Eve nods. “You gave me a choice. I chose knowledge over ignorance.” She smooths a hand through her baby’s hair. “I did not know then, what love was. I could not know, until I knew the absence of it. But now…” she meets his eyes again. “Now I know what love is. I know how to love. And I know I am loved in return.”
“She loved you,” he tells her. “She kept you safe in Her Garden.”

“She kept me from choosing. From even knowing I could choose.”

“You were happy,” he counters, not understanding how she isn’t furious with him for this.

“I didn’t know what happy was,” Eve says, and he realizes he hasn’t seen her frown today. She’s not frustrated anymore. Whatever answers she got, they seem to have been enough. “I know now. That wasn’t happiness. That was… complacency. Contentment, I suppose. But this,” she gestures to her child and her husband, the small camp they set up that is gradually turning into a home. “This is happiness. My happiness. And so I thank you.”

He doesn’t respond. But he thinks that, maybe, he did do the right thing after all.

“Yeah,” Crowley agrees, when the memory releases him. He can feel a lightness to the world now, like something that had been very wrong was suddenly very right. “Yeah, I think it was.”

Jesus nods, and turns to the angel. “Aziraphale, Angel of the Eastern Gate. I have heard a great deal about you.”

“Lord?” Aziraphale asks, and Jesus reaches out, drawing him upright from his bow. Crowley shifts just a bit closer, just enough that his arm brushes the angel’s, letting him know that he’s there, and feels a bit of Aziraphale’s fear ease.

“It isn’t as hopeless as it might seem,” the Son of God says. “You are not alone.”

Aziraphale nods. “I know.” He glances at Crowley, and there’s a soft sort of smile on his face that the demon hasn’t seen before. Then he catches himself, and the smile fades into something more neutral.

“Take care of each other,” Jesus tells them both. And then he is gone.
The angel stands still for a moment, and then turns to Crowley. “Well then,” he says, offering a hesitant smile. “Lunch?”

The demon doesn’t respond right away, lost in thought as he considers what it means to choose. He thinks, with some wonder, that he can choose, now. Has been making his own choices for the past four thousand years. And maybe it doesn’t make him any less damned, doesn’t make the raw and aching places inside him any less painful, but it’s not nothing. It’s something to hold on to, at least.

“Crowley?” Aziraphale asks, using his new name for the first time. The sound of that name in his voice makes something else slot into place, something wrong becoming something right. And for the first time in over four thousand years, he allows himself a little bit of hope.

Chapter End Notes

The flower Aziraphale picks is Plumeria, which is said to mean “Perfection, Springtime, and New Beginnings”. They flower they create is a Myosotis/Forget-me-not, which means “True and undying love, remembrance after parting or death”. According to wikipedia. I’m not a botanist or very familiar with the language of flowers, so if one of you knows of better flowers for me to use here, please let me know!

Flashbacks in Chronological Order

- Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
- Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
- Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
- Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
- Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
- Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

This chapter was supposed to be longer, but it ended up split in half. I haven't decided if that means I'm combining the next half with my planned chapter 7 or just adding another chapter yet.

I also learned this chapter that I really hate writing prophecies, so apologies if the wording of the Plan is a little stilted. It fought me every step of the way.

Thank you so much for reading this far, and thank you for all the wonderful feedback. It makes me so happy to see people enjoying my work!!

Fair warning - this chapter is pretty dark. If descriptions of the plague bother you, you might just want to skim it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sometimes, Crowley has days where he wonders if he made it all up. Heaven. The archangels. Aziraphale. When he starts to think that maybe he’s wrong. Maybe all of this, the pain, the silence, even the careful new friendship he’s managed to regain with the angel are all part of something cooked up by Hell just to torment him further. When the fragile candle of hope the Son of God gave him starts to flicker and fade, leaving him floundering in a sea of anguish. Those are the really bad days. The days when not even Aziraphale’s voice can settle the screaming silence within him. When he feels the ache of it shredding the corners of his mind, picking away at his sanity until one day the only thing left will be a feral beast that knows nothing but silence and pain.

Those are the days when he takes to the skies. When he flies high, and far, and fast, as if trying to outrace his own thoughts. Over five thousand years, he’s been a demon. Five thousand years on Earth. Five thousand years watching the humans come up with new and inventive ways to kill and torture each other. And that’s when the damn planet didn’t do it for them. He had thought that he had seen the worst that She could throw at them, after the Flood. That even She couldn’t be more cruel than to drown young children. That’s what makes the fourteenth century such a surprise. He hadn’t thought it could get any worse. He’d been wrong.

It’s the plague that does it. Yersinia pestis. What would come to be known as The Black Death. It starts in Kyrgyzstan, in a small community of Nestorians. And before he even has an inkling of what’s to come, it becomes a pandemic. He walks the silk road in the trail of Pestilence, watching sixty percent of the population falter and die, the flesh rotting from their bodies even before they take their last breath. And he tries to stop it. He does. He can’t not. He may be a demon, may be damned, but he was a healer once. Whatever he’s done, whatever he’s become, it’s still a part of him, bound into his being. He tries to teach them how to cope, how to keep their dwellings clean and free of the biting insects that spread disease. How to avoid getting sick, and how to ease the passing of those that fall ill. Because they don’t have the ability to treat it. Medicine has only come
so far, and he can’t make them move any faster. They don’t **listen**. They never do. So he drinks, and he flies, and then he comes down and does it all over again, a hopeless cycle of useless miracles that can’t make even the tiniest dent in the tide of death.

Aziraphale finds him in a hospital near Genoa. The plague is in full swing in Italy, and every day sees another pile of bodies, interred in a mass grave like so many rotting sacks of flesh. Crowley concentrates his efforts on the children, the little ones who haven’t even had a chance to live yet. He tells Hell it’s so they can live to fall into their hands. He tells himself that if he can save even one, it’s a victory. And every time he loses one, his shattered heart breaks a little more.

“Terrible,” he mutters to himself, looking over the dwindling stores of ‘medicine’ the hospital keeps. “Humors. Pah.” He’s spent the last six weeks here, trying to show the physicians here how to properly treat the symptoms. It’s all he can do at this point. There’s too many ill in just this one hospital, for even his miracles to help. Once they start showing symptoms, they die before a month is out. He’s calculated it. Ten days from infection to death, on average. Some, the mostly healthy, last longer. Some, especially the very old and the very young, don’t even make it a week. Crowley very deliberately tries not to think of the little boy that looked just like Uriel. Vito, his name had been. He had died in Crowley’s arms less than an hour ago. “Fucking ‘physicians’. Useless, the lot of them.”

“They are doing their best, my dear.” The familiar voice washes over him, and just like that the echoing in his head is silenced, for a time. He straightens, turning, and there he is. Aziraphale. Angel of the Eastern Gate.

“Not good enough,” Crowley tells him, trying to sound merely irritated instead of anguished. He can’t quite control the tremor in his words. “Not nearly bloody good enough.” He had taught them better, he knows that. After the Garden, after the Fall, when Eve had welcomed him and Adam had drunk in his knowledge. They had learned well, even without an angel’s healing powers. But somewhere down the line his instructions had gotten lost and corrupted, just like he himself had been. Corrupted, and changed beyond recognition.

Aziraphale looks at him, the disheveled state of his clothes, the long tangles of greasy copper hair that fall down his shoulders, the fresh tear-tracks cutting through the grime on his face. Crowley tries on a smile, but it falls from his lips before it’s even begun to form. He’s shaking, his power drained so low he doesn’t even have enough left in him for a single miracle.

“Oh my dear boy,” Aziraphale says, with such empathy. And Crowley knows he’s seen. The angel understands him far too well these days. Far too well, and yet, nowhere even near well enough. And the thing is, he wants to be understood. He wants to be **known**, not as he was, but as he is. Something that wasn’t Good enough to stay an angel, but can’t quite manage to be Bad enough to be a proper demon. He wants to pull Aziraphale close and hold him tight, to let him in, beyond the layers and layers of walls he’s built these past millennia. He wants. But he can’t **have**. Because he
knows what he is. He’s a creature of Hell. And he can be friends with Aziraphale. He can work with him, spend time with him. He can even let himself forget, sometimes. But he knows what his truth would do to the angel. The questions it would bring. And he knows all too well what questions can do.

How did you make us? Where did you go? What’s the point of this? When will you come back? Why did you go away? Why did you let this happen? Why me? Why?

He’s being selfish even letting the angel get this close. Any closer, and the risk is too great. And he can’t take it. He knows he can't take it. If Aziraphale fell, because of him, it would break him in ways he couldn’t patch back together. And he tries, he does. He tries so hard to stay away, to keep away from Aziraphale, keep him at arm’s length, keep him safe. But they always come back to this point. Reaching out. Finding each other, no matter how much distance they try to put between themselves. They keep coming back together. And Crowley knows why. Because Aziraphale is is his constant. His magnetic north. And like a compass, he cannot help himself from pointing home.

Aziraphale is watching him now, worry plain on his face. And the worst part of everything is that he doesn’t even think Aziraphale would mind the risk. He’s just... he’s that Good. He’s got kindness in his bones. He hasn’t changed at all from the angel that picked up a broken demon in the dirt of the Garden and soothed his torment just because he could. Because he couldn’t stand to see another creature in pain. Crowley doesn’t deserve his kindness, or the warm compassion he can see now in his eyes. Crowley is broken. Twisted. Unforgivable. Incapable of saving even one small child. He thinks of Vito’s face as he looked up at Crowley, eyes wide in fear, as he begged the demon to save the life of his sister. His little sister, whose lifeless body had already been taken to be buried. How he'd smiled, when Crowley had said she would be fine, the light fading from his eyes.

“Crowley.” Aziraphale reaches out, fingers brushing Crowley’s arm before pulling back. “Are you alright?”

“Are you alright?” Aziraphale’s hand on Raphael’s shoulder is warm, comforting.

Raphael forces his worries from his face. This is his burden, and he will not force the younger angel to bear it. He slides Lucifer's book back into a pocket, where it can’t do any more harm.

“I’m fine,” he says, and manages a genuine smile. “Just tired.”

“Ah. That’s why you’re sitting on my wall. You’re hiding from Michael, aren’t you?” Aziraphale teases him, sinking down to sit beside him on the wall. Their shoulders brush, and Raphael can feel
the edges of their Graces mingling. He laughs.

“I wouldn’t be doing a very good job of that, if I were. In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re out in the open up here.”

The angel leans against him, just a little. Just enough that he can feel that steadiness, his rock to cling to in the storm. “Well,” he says, “Let’s take a walk in the Garden, then. I won’t tell her you’re here, if you don’t.”

“Helping me play hooky? Really, Aziraphale, what are they teaching you?” He grins, and he can feel the answering laughter in Aziraphale’s Grace.

“It’s not ‘playing hooky’, my dear,” the angel tells him. “It’s letting you get some rest before they work you to death.”

The archangel snorts. “They can’t work me to death. In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re immortal.”

“Still. You’re no good to anyone if you’re bone tired. How long has it been since you even had five minutes to yourself?”

He loves the way Aziraphale fusses over him. His siblings all treat him like he’s unbreakable, like he’s stronger than all of them. So he makes himself be strong, because that’s what they need him to be. But here, with this gentle angel, he can relax. He can be himself here. He can even be soft, if he wants to. He lets his head fall to Aziraphale’s shoulder, and feels an arm wrap around his waist, pulling him closer. He-

Crowley shoves the memory away. He can’t do this. He can’t let the past rule him. It’s gone. It’s gone and it can’t come back. The memory of it, here, surrounded by death, it’s too much. The room suddenly feels too small, like the walls are closing in on him. He needs to move now. To run. To fly. Anything, anything at all, that gets him away from those wide, kind eyes that still look the same after all these years. From this place that used to be a place of healing, that now smells like rotting flesh, blood, sickness, and death. He can’t stand here, can’t see Aziraphale looking at him like that. Not now, when he’s just proved, once again, that he’s nothing but a failure.

“Goodbye, angel,” he says abruptly, and stalks from the room. He knows he’s being unspeakably rude, but he can’t help it. He needs to be somewhere, anywhere else. So he leaves. He walks through the hospital, past the dead and the dying, past piles of bodies and dead-eyed men digging
holes, past weeping widows and broken husbands, past friends and lovers and strangers and enemies, clinging to each other in the face of the greatest equalizer man has ever known, for death has come for them all. He keeps walking, out into the wilderness, alone, like he has been for the past five thousand years. Like he will always be. Alone, with the echoing silence.

When he’s far enough away that no one will hear, Crowley turns to the sky and screams - a wordless expression of all the pain and anguish that’s been building inside of him for far too long. The pain of a Fallen angel, the agony of his shredded bonds, and the longing for what he can never allow himself to have. All of it, wrapped up and amplified by the broken soul of a healer that has lost far, far too many patients. He screams himself hoarse, until his raw and aching throat can’t force another sound from his mouth. It’s a release, of sorts. But even his loudest cries can’t drown out the silence inside. The way the emptiness catches on the walls around his heart and reverberates back into the void of his soul.

“My dear,” that familiar voice says when he stops for breath. “I’m so sorry.” Crowley whirls, and Aziraphale is there, standing in a ray of sunlight, watching the demon with worry written clear on his face.

Crowley looks at him, then turns away from the kindness in those sea-blue eyes. “I couldn’t do anything,” he rasps, the words causing pinpricks of pain along his abused throat. He means I couldn’t save him, as much as I couldn’t do this to the world, even though Hell will thank me for it. It also means I couldn’t prevent it. I couldn’t teach them enough, prepare them enough, to prevent this. And I couldn’t stop it. Couldn’t stop any of this. It means I couldn’t stop myself from Falling. I couldn’t stop asking questions, even when I knew where it would lead.

Gentle hands press against his back, turning him again. “Oh my dear, of course you couldn’t,” Aziraphale tells him softly. He rests his palms on Crowley’s biceps, fingers curling into the fabric of his sleeves. And Crowley can’t help himself. With a strangled sob, he stumbles forward, falling against Aziraphale’s shoulder. The angel gathers him in, pulling him close. It would be so easy, he thinks, to let go here. His walls are so dangerously close to falling down. He clings to Aziraphale’s warmth, his kind, steady presence, but he bites his lip and holds his breath and swallows the sobs that shake his body, fists clenched at his sides.

“Shh, it’s alright. You’re safe here,” the angel murmurs into his hair. “You’re alright.” Crowley doesn’t hear the prayer in those words, the way the angel speaks them as if willing it to be so. “I’m here. I’m here. Just tell me what you need.” The demon doesn’t even contemplate the fact that, for all the times he has been drawn to the angel’s need, this time, Aziraphale was drawn to his. That perhaps, Aziraphale sensed his pain from halfway across the world. And that, maybe, the angel came here, to this place, at this time, because he could feel that Crowley needed him.

The pressure to cry out subsides, easing back into a manageable pain, and Crowley allows himself to relax for just a moment, to lean against Aziraphale and breathe in his unique scent of old books,
cocoa, and myrrh. He takes a deep, shuddering breath, and then forces his pain back behind his walls. Aziraphale shifts then, pulling back just enough that he can look Crowley in the eyes.

“Can you try and tell me what’s wrong, my dear?” he asks, and the demon looks away from the Love (big-L, general, not specific to Crowley) in those eyes.

What isn’t? He doesn’t say. Instead, he steps back. He’s taken enough. Risked too much. “I’m fine. This is… an aberration.” An aberration, only in that he allowed the angel to see.

Aziraphale sighs, as if disappointed. “Really, dear boy, I would have thought after all these years, you would know that you can trust me.”

“It’s fine. I’m fine,” Crowley tells him, already cursing himself for letting the angel see his pain. “This whole… plague thing. I don’t like it.”

Understanding dawns on Aziraphale’s face, and Crowley knows he shouldn’t have said that. “It is a mess, isn’t it?” the angel asks, glancing back through the trees in the direction of the hospital. “I don’t know if even Raphael could have cured this.”

The demon flinches at the sound of his old name. “The thing I don’t understand,” he says, an edge of desperation in his voice as he frantically tries to shove the pain deeper behind the walls inside, “is why would your lot let this happen?”

Aziraphale frowns. “We didn’t ‘let’ anything happen, in the same way your lot didn’t actually cause it. It just… happened on its own, I suppose.”

Crowley starts to pace, unable to stand still under his steady gaze. “But why? You’ve got, what, a hundred thousand angels up there? If you got all of them down here, maybe you could do something about all of this.” He spins around in a wide gesture that indicates everything around them. “Why doesn’t She just command them all to fix this?”

“Well…” Aziraphale draws the word out, thinking through his answer. “I suppose, we must be vigilant against your lot. We can’t just go around exhausting our forces in case Lucifer decides it’s time to restart the Great War.”

Crowley’s pacing grows more frantic, back and forth across the little clearing, his thoughts going in circles. He hates this fucking century. “I… ugh.” He tugs on a lock of his hair until it hurts, just to feel something other than the turmoil inside of him. “So they’re just going to sit there, useless in
case my b- my boss just up and decides to start Armageddon?” He catches himself, thankfully, before he can call Lucifer his brother. “What’s the point of it all, Aziraphale? Why did She do this?” Why cast him out, let him tempt the humans, if all that was waiting for them in the end is this? Part of him grips tightly to the words uttered by the Son of God - It was worth it. There must be more than this. Hadn’t his Fall been meant to give them a choice? He hasn’t felt this conflicted since the day he stood before Her throne and asked the questions that will never be answered.

“Lord,” he says, bowing before Her throne. He doesn’t expect an answer, though he hopes for one. No one has heard from Her since before Lucifer vanished. In a softer voice, he asks “Mother?” He hears nothing, feels no presence in the room. She isn’t here.

“Where are you?” he calls out, listening to the echo in the empty chamber. “Why did you leave?”

He paces in front of the dais, heart in turmoil. He feels too much, hurts too much, to stand still. “Why are you doing this?” he calls. Nothing. “Answer me!” he demands, a flash of anger boiling too fast to the surface. He takes out the book and considers it, the weight of it in his hands and in his heart. The bitter anger he feels is new, ugly, a shadow on his soul.

“I did my best for you!” he yells. “I did everything you asked.”

She’s gone. She left him, here, alone, with this terrible forbidden Knowledge, and he has no one else to turn to. “Why me?” he cries. “Why throw me away?”

The Morning Star is gone, so far away now that not even Michael can feel him through their bond. He curses his brother for doing this to him. For giving him this copy of Her plan. And for leaving him here, without answers, in a Heaven where suddenly nothing makes sense. The words are there under his fingers, a black stain on the page.

**Concerning My Archangel Raphael:**

The healer who questions my authority and wisdom

His questions shall lead him to descend unto the fires of the Fallen

He shall give freely that Knowledge which has been forbidden

He shall face his kin in combat and lose all that he is

And he shall Fall for the final time in beloved hands
What does that even mean? ‘Fall for the final time’? Death? How much further can one Fall than Hell? He doesn’t want to ‘face his kin in combat’. Or ‘give freely that Knowledge which has been forbidden’. Or... any of it, really. What he wants is to go on as he has, making stars, loving his family, spending time with Aziraphale. He sees no reason for it to change. In frustration, he rips the pages with his name out of the book, and throws the crumpled ball of paper at the empty throne.

“I won’t do it!” he shouts at the place She should have been, betrayal and rage thick and hot within. “I can’t!” He throws the book, which his the chair with a satisfying thud. “You can’t ask this of me! I- I refuse!”

Abruptly, all the fight leaves him. He sinks down onto his knees before Her throne. “Please don’t ask this of me,” he whispers. “Anything but this.”

Lucifer’s words from the Garden come back to him. “She wants you to teach them the difference between Good and Evil.” He’s not so sure he even knows that difference himself. “Why me?” he asks again. “Wasn’t I Good enough?” He chokes down a sob. He won’t cry. Not here. Not where anyone could walk in and find him. “Didn’t I do everything you ever asked?” He doesn’t want to Fall. He doesn’t want to lose everything. What he wants is to understand. To know, beyond doubt, why she’s put this path before him. But he will get no answers from an empty throne.

“What’s the point?” Crowley asks again, once more shoving his memories away. Heaven is lost to him now, and along with it any answers he may have gained.

“The point of... what?” Aziraphale asks him, confusion and concern written in every line of his face. Standing there in the sunlight, framed by the trees, Crowley can almost see him in the Garden, the way it used to be. For a very bad moment, the want overtakes him, loss swirling up and choking him, keeping him from reaching out.

“The point of... of everything!” he shouts. “The whole blessed mess of it all!” What did I even Fall for, if all free will gets them is this?

“I don’t understand,” the angel says. “Crowley, this- it’s the plague. It’s not meant to have a point. Her plan is-” His eyes are impossibly blue, watching every move the demon makes from across the clearing.
“Don’t you dare say ‘ineffable,’” the demon growls. Aziraphale looks so confused, and Crowley wants nothing more than to go to him, to touch his Grace, to join their essences until the angel just knows what he’s trying to say here. Until he knows him, inside and out, fully and completely. He’s halfway across the clearing before he catches himself. He freezes, still as a statue. Aziraphale takes an involuntary step back, hands clasped tightly together against his chest, eyes wide as he watches the demon stalk towards him.

Too much. You’re getting too close, Crowley’s mind screams at him. Without another word, Crowley unfurls his wings and launches himself into the sky.

Chapter End Notes

I would really love to hear what you think!

Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
2. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
3. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
4. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
5. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
6. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
7. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve

Now reblogable on my writing Tumblr. Feel free to stop in and say hi!
Chapter 7

This is actually the second half of chapter 6, but it got big enough I felt it needed its own chapter. Which is great, because it meant I got to write what has become one of my favorites of the flashbacks.

There may or may not be an update next week, as I'll be out of the country for vacation and I don't know how much writing time I'll get. I'll try, but if worse comes to worst, next update will be the week of the 20th.

Thank you all so much for reading so far. Really, your comments are the best part of my day!

Crowley flies up. Up and up and out. Away from Aziraphale. From the humans. From the plague, from death, from all the questions he wants to ask and all the answers he knows he'll never get. It's hard work on his already exhausted body, using only his wings to breach the atmosphere. It takes his whole being, every ounce of concentration he has, every muscle and bone and sinew working in concert to lift him in flight. Even his racing thoughts quiet as he works to rise higher, pushing against gravity. All he can hear is the rush of the wind, the beat of his wings. A passing thought - if he goes fast enough, can he leave himself behind? His speed is nearly 7 miles per second. Over 25,000 miles per hour. Escape velocity. It should be enough. It would be. Except that there is one thing that he can never, ever escape. And that’s himself.

The cold of the Mesosphere shocks his body as he passes through. He keeps going. Up through the Thermosphere, through the Exosphere, and then he’s out. Free. The pull of the earth lessens, gravity releasing him as he travels higher still, out into the stars. He could travel forever, if he wanted. All the way to Alpha Centauri and beyond. He could. But he won’t. He still has things he can’t leave behind. One thing. One person. If he leaves, then who protects Aziraphale? Who will be there, the next time Heaven sends him into danger unprepared? Who will come to pull his feet out of the fire, the next time he walks into a dangerous situation with nothing but his blessed faith that everything will turn out right? Nothing Crowley could find, out there in the universe, would be worth the risk of leaving the angel behind. He knows it in his bones. The only way he leaves Earth is if Aziraphale comes with him.

He lands on the far side of the moon. It was full on Earth when he left, so the far side is completely in darkness, away from the life-giving rays of the sun. He can see the stars, so clear without the atmosphere in the way. Beautiful. Making them had always been one of his favorite duties. He could lose himself in the details, then. The swirl of light around his fingers, holding the heart of a red dwarf in his hands. He doesn’t know if he’s capable of that, anymore. He’s a hell-thing now, made for sulfur and ash and death. He doesn’t know if his hands can even hold the fires of new life anymore. Doesn’t know if there’s anything left in his twisted soul that is able to produce such
Crowley heads for the mountain chain the humans will come to call Montes Cordillera. It’s a perfect ring around an impact crater, one that, before time began, he had created by accident, during the very first game of tag. He likes to go there sometimes, when the aching loneliness starts to get the best of him but he’s still strong enough to resist going to Aziraphale and letting the angel’s voice soothe the ache inside. It reminds him of happier times. Of chasing Gabriel across the skies until his little brother teams up with Uriel and Michael and they turn on him, laughing, the three of them chase him together and tackle him, falling in a tangle of limbs until they collide with the moon.

The demon has a favorite spot in the range, a peak on the southern hemisphere with a slightly flattened top. Michael had shown it to him, the first time he’d come here. They had stood together on the mountain top and planned the constellations they were going to hang in the sky. There’s a couple boulders there that make good seats, and he’s spent hours there, alone, watching the universe dance in the sky above him. He starts to go there now, half-formed plans of staying up here until the plague runs it’s course flitting across his mind.

He gets halfway up the mountain before he feels it. A Presence. Someone else is here, on his mountain, sitting in his spot. In over 5,000 years, he’s come up here hundreds of times. And never once has he encountered anyone else. He didn’t think anyone else would be interested. There’s no life here, no change, it doesn’t even produce any light of it’s own. It’s critical for the planet below, but on it’s own it’s nothing more than a giant rock. Demons, as a whole, don’t do space. It scares them to look up, and see so much nothingness above them. They’re more comfortable in the cramped, labyrinthine complex of Hell. And angels barely acknowledge space. There’s no room for it in the divine machine his siblings have created in Her absence.

So he keeps going, because now Crowley needs to see who it is. It can’t be a coincidence, he thinks, that they picked his spot. He’s careful, moving slowly as he nears them, until they finally come into sight. And he stops in shock. Michael. The archangel Michael. His older sister. Her divine Warrior. She’s taken one of the boulders and sits with her head down, eyes on the crater below. At the sight of her, the silence inside him screams, the pain so acute he almost falls to his knees, assaulted by memory.

He can feel their laughter through the bond, flowing between them behind the carefully crafted veneer of calm they’re holding between them and their elder siblings. Gabriel is giggling at his side, peering out around the corner into the hallway. Across from them, Uriel hides behind her own corner with Sandalphon, sneaking glances around the wall to see if they’re coming yet. Raphael holds a small ball of orange fire in his hands, not quite warm enough to burn, but good enough to give a good shower of sparks. The real power of the flames is what they do when they touch skin. His younger siblings hold it’s cousin, in colors ranging from gold to a soft sort of blue.
“Where are they?” Gabriel whispers, impatient.

“Where are who?” a voice asks behind them, and they jump, turning, to see Aziraphale standing in the hall at their back, watching them with open curiosity.

“Shh,” Raphael cautions him, holding a finger to his lips. “You’ll give us away.”

He grins when the principality kneels down next to them. “What are we doing?” Aziraphale asks, and Raphael feels a surge of affection at how quick he is to join them.

“Lucifer’s back!” Gabriel whispers, his joy spilling out and making it hard to keep his voice soft. It echoes through the younger archangels, and Raphael’s smile widens. He reaches out and tangles a thread of his essence with Aziraphale’s, letting his friend in to their bond just enough to hear their thoughts. Gabriel tenses beside him when he feels another in their link, but Uriel rolls her eyes and makes a face at him. One of these days he’s going to need to ask them what those looks mean. Not now though. Now they’ve got a plan to enact.

We’re waiting for Michael and Lucifer, he explains through his link to Aziraphale. Last time he came home, Lucifer tricked Uriel into thinking she was getting put on armory duty for the next thousand years. He still remembers how upset she had been, until Lucifer explained the joke. This is our plan to get back at him.

Is… is that really a good idea? Aziraphale asks. I mean, Lucifer, and Michael, they’re -

Pricks, Raphael finishes the sentence, letting his love for his siblings color the word and take away it’s bite. Divine pricks. He can feel the principality’s astonishment, and the anxiety he’s projecting about whatever it is Raphael and his younger siblings are planning. He rests a comforting hand on the principality’s shoulder. Don’t worry. I’m sure they’ll find a way to get us back for this. And then we’ll have to think of something else to do for them. It’ll be fun.

Aziraphale blinks at him in astonishment. Fun? He asks. What about attacking the archangel Michael, the leader of Her armies, is going to be fun?

They’re coming! Uriel sends, and Raphael straightens.

Just watch. You’ll see, he tells Aziraphale, and lets the little ball of flame in his hands burn a bit
brighter. Michael steps into the hall, deep in conversation with Lucifer. Raphael holds up a hand, lifting first one, then two, then three fingers. At the third finger, all four hidden archangels launch themselves from around the corners, fireballs already flying at their older siblings.

“Attack!” Gabriel yells, charing forward with Sandalphon at his side. Raphael and Uriel follow right behind, conjuring a second set of fireballs to launch. Michael and Lucifer freeze in surprise, and then they’re bowled over by their siblings. A dark, furious expression crosses Lucifer’s face as he goes down, and Raphael is momentarily shocked by the force of rage in his eyes. And then it’s gone, and his eldest brother is shouting curses in-between laughs as Gabriel and Uriel force him to the ground with the flickering fire that tickles whatever it touches. Raphael must have imagined it, he thinks, when he recalls this moment later. After all, the only thing he feels through their bond is shock and then laughter.

An instant later, he and Sandalphon reach Michael and he’s shoving a ball of tickling flames down the back of her robes. She squirms, yelling, and the three of them land in a heap on the floor, feathers flying as the halls of Heaven ring with laughter.

Later, when the laughter has faded, he stands, flushed from exertion and laughter. He extends a hand to Michael, and she takes it, allowing him to pull her to her feet.

“Raphael,” Lucifer says, from where he’s already standing beside Uriel and Gabriel. “Why do I think this was all your idea?”

Raphael grins, and shoots a look down the hall to where he can see Aziraphale standing awkwardly. He looks so worried, but Lucifer would never hurt them. “Well,” the healer says, brushing an errant lock of copper hair from his eyes. “I’d say you have the wrong angel, but you and I both know Gabriel couldn’t come up with a good prank if his life depended on it.”


“It could have been Sandalphon,” Uriel suggests, grinning. “But I think we’re all aware of how our dear baby brother’s grasp of subtlety is… sadly lacking.”

“I resent that,” the youngest of them says, glaring at them all. “I’ll have you know that I resent that.”

“Could have been Uriel,” Raphael says, winking at his little sister. “She’s smart enough.”
Lucifer frowns at him, attempting to look stern and utterly failing. His beautiful face twitches, and then he breaks into a laugh. “Fine. Fine. Don’t admit it. But I’m watching you now, little one.”

Raphael shrugs. “Well, if you’re that concerned about me, take me with you next time you go out.” He means it. He’s always wanted to see where Lucifer goes when he leaves. What She has him doing, out there in the universe.

“Well, if you’re that concerned about me, take me with you next time you go out.” He means it. He’s always wanted to see where Lucifer goes when he leaves. What She has him doing, out there in the universe.

“Hmm. We’ll see,” the Morning Star tells him, which is as good as a no. Raphael tries not to be disappointed. It had been a shot in the dark anyway.

Michael leans against him, and he looks at her, startled. She smiles, and brushes their shoulders together again, comforting. “It’s alright,” she tells him. “When he leaves again, I’ll take you out to hang some stars.”

He grins, grateful. She knows how much he enjoys building the stars, but she’s never offered to let him help her hang them before. They stand there, side by side, as Uriel says something that makes Lucifer laugh. Gabriel is pouting at his side, trying not to react while Sandalphon needles at him to make him smile. God above, he loves them. His surge of emotion echoes through the bond, doubled and redoubled as they all take it in and send it back, an endless feedback loop of love.

A touch on his elbow. He blinks, and Michael looks significantly down the hall, where Aziraphale still watches. “That one cares for you,” she says quietly, and Raphael feels his face soften.

“I care for him, too,” he admits. “He’s one of Her better creations.”

“He’s one of Her better creations.”

“Ahhm,” she says, but unlike Lucifer her hum is thoughtful, not dismissive. “Well, little brother, right now he looks a little lost, don’t you think?”

Aziraphale looks around, shifting awkwardly, still so far away. Michael’s hand presses against Raphael’s back. “Go to him,” she says. He hesitates, glancing at his siblings, and she laughs. “Go,” she says again. “We’ll all be here when you get back.” She doesn’t need to prompt him a third time.

He’s halfway down the hall when she calls after him. “Sparkler!”
Raphael turns, making a face. He hates that nickname. “What?”

“You might want to check the Garden. I hear the gardeners have made some improvements lately. Good place for a walk.”

Raphael rolls his eyes and crosses the last few feet to Aziraphale.

“Sparkler?” the angel asks, curious, and Raphael groans. She did that on purpose.

“I blow up a star one time,” he grouses, shoving his hands into his robes and leading Aziraphale back towards Eden. A walk does sound nice, now that he thinks about it.

Michael. The older sister he had always looked up to. He still remembers the way her hands had trembled, when she’d picked his limp body up off the battlefield and thrown him over the edge. How she’d clutched at him for just a moment, before letting go.

She hasn’t seen him yet, thank Someone. He should leave. She’s Her Warrior, the way that Raphael had been Her Healer. She’s the one who leads in the war against the Forces of Evil. Her whole reason for being is to smite things like him. She could destroy him without a second thought, and never even realize who he used to be. He turns to go, wings ready to take off, muscles tensing, and… he can’t He knows the slump of those shoulders. The way she carries her pain in the curve of her spine and the tightness of her jaw. An old instinct, half buried and all but forgotten, flares to life in his chest. Raphael had always been her sounding board, her conscience, the one she turned to when she needed to talk. He had asked her the questions she couldn’t ask herself, got her out of her head and helped her focus on the problems before them. Crowley supposes he had hoped she would find someone else to turn to after he Fell, but if she had she wouldn’t be sitting here alone.

He makes a decision. It’s a stupid decision, and later, when his mind isn’t fogged by pain and misery, he’ll wonder what he was thinking. In the moment, however, he’s only thinking that she’s still his sister. And he still misses her. So Crowley takes his power and wraps it around his essence, reinforcing the walls around his core so that even she would have to look hard to catch a glimpse of his ancient name. He’s suddenly very grateful for how drained he’s been lately. His power isn’t recognizably more than your average demon, as low as it is. Michael won’t be able to tell that he normally holds the strength of a Fallen archangel in his essence. He pastes a smirk on his face and saunters closer.
“Well well, what have we here?” Crowley asks, moving into her line of sight. She stiffens, hands wrapping tightly around an object in her lap, and glares at him.

“Well, demon,” she snaps.

Crowley laughs. “Why? You going to smite me?” He almost asks with what?, but the words die in his throat. He’s close enough now, he can see what is in her hands. She’s holding a staff. Dark red wood, polished to a high shine, the carving of a serpent lined in gold and twining around the pole. He knows that staff. Knows the feel of it in his hands, the way the grip fits his fingers just so, the weight of it when he spins it carelessly in the air. It was his, so long ago. Left abandoned in a place he has long since stopped calling home.

Her eyes flash, and he can smell the burnt ozone scent of an angel’s wrath. “I said leave.”

“No,” Crowley grins. He should be terrified. He’s a creature of Hell, and the Warrior of Heaven is looking at him like he’s just one step away from being struck from existence. He’s not though. She’s won’t kill him. Not yet. He knows, because while he can smell the wrath on her, he can’t feel it. Not even with senses fine-tuned to pick up the darker emotions. And not with the barest tendril of thought he snakes through the burning tatters of his bond to brush against the walls surrounding her soul. All he can feel is loneliness, and an ache in her that mirrors his own.

“That’s an order, creature,” she threatens, but there’s no force behind the words.

Crowley shrugs, moving closer. “It’s a free universe,” he tells her, even though it isn’t. “And this just happens to be the best spot in it to watch the stars.” He snaps his fingers, and the boulder beside her suddenly becomes a throne, angled so that, if he were sitting in it properly, he’d be looking away from her, into space. He doesn’t sit in it properly. Instead, he throws his legs over the arm and slouches, sideways, in the seat. Then, to all intents and purposes, he turns his head and looks up at the dark expanse before them.

She’s never done well with silence, he knows. And as much as things have changed since he knew her like the inside of his own mind, Crowley doesn’t think this is different. All he has to do is wait, letting the silence grow between them, and she won’t be able to resist. He watches the stars, but out of the corner of his eyes he also watches her. She’s running her fingers over the impression of his hands on the staff, placing her own in the void of it, her smaller fingers framed by the place his own used to rest. He holds a hand in front of his face, examining the long fingers with a critical eye. They will no longer fit so perfectly into place, he knows, no matter how much he might want them to. He turns his attention back to the stars, and his gaze drifted to Centaurus. To the very last stars he had ever made, hanging there in a binary orbit.
“Demon.” There’s ice in her voice, but he can see the shake in her hands that are gripping his staff like a lifeline. He hides a smile. She hasn’t changed at all.

“I have a name,” he says petulantly. “We don’t all just go around calling each other ‘demon’ and ‘creature’.”

“Hmph.”

Crowley rolls his eyes theatrically. “What, you don’t even try to know the names of the people you’re killing? Demons are people too, you know.”

Michael glares at him. “If your names were worth knowing, I would know them.” He makes a face at the cold certainty in her words. She doesn’t automatically know his name, and therefore it is of no consequence.

“What?” he asks. “Like you know the names of all the angels under your command?” He had. He still does. Ten thousand angels, more names than a human brain is capable of holding, but he remembers them all. Aside from a few hundred he can’t find, he knows what happened to each of them after the war, too. He’s still looking for those few hundred. Three hundred and twenty-three, to be precise. He knows from Aziraphale they’re not in heaven - two centuries ago he’d finally gotten the angel to get him a register of all angels currently in or working for Heaven. Just their names - the angel still doesn’t trust him enough to give him anything truly sensitive - but he’d poured over the list, comparing it to the rosters of Hell. He’d been in Aleppo when he realized that he couldn’t find them all. He still feels guilty about the earthquake he’d caused.

There’s a flash of guilt on Michael’s face, when he asks about the names of her angels. It used to upset him, when they hadn’t cared as much about the other angels as he wanted them to. Now, it just makes him sad. The humans think so highly of them. Of Her. He wonders what they would do, if they knew how callous Heaven could be. How little they cared for those beneath their place.

“What is it then?” she asks him.

Crowley blinks at her, surprised. “What?”

“Your name. What is it?”
“Crowley.” Part of him wonders at how easily the name comes to him. He almost thinks that here, with her, his old self should be closer somehow. Instead, it was only after he’d already spoken that he remembered his ancient name. “No need to ask who you are,” he adds, giving her a sly grin.

Her eyebrow twitches and he hides his amusement. Her tells are still the same, too. Crowley looks back up to the sky, watching the slow march of stars as they spin with the earth in another turn around the sun. She’s silent at his side, but she hasn’t chased him away yet.

“What was it like?” she eventually asks, then stops, as if surprised to hear the words come from her lips.

Crowley frowns at her, confused. “What was what like?”

Michael glares at him. “Falling. What was it like?” she demands.

‘Ah.’ His gaze tracks Alpha Centauri and he orders his body not to shake. Burning. Bleeding. Bones breaking with a sickening crunch, reforming only to be broken again. Lucifer standing over him, laughing as he writhes on the ground.

He could refuse to answer her. If it were anyone else, he would have. But he knows her. Knows how much it cost her to ask. To bear something of herself, even if only curiosity. Especially to a Fallen creature like him.

“It’s different for all of us,” he says carefully, navigating a minefield of pain in his thoughts. “Some of us, the more powerful ones, usually, went mad from it. Others seem like it barely even touched them. And it’s not like it happened all at once. Not for all of us.” He had Fallen twice. Once when Lucifer dragged him down. And a second when his siblings cast him from Heaven with a sword in his back.

“I see.” Michael is watching the stars now too, very deliberately not looking at him. He can tell she wants to ask more, but can’t bring herself to. If not for the feet between them, it would almost be like it used to, when she would seek him out with the questions she knew he could put a voice to. He looks at the staff in her hands. His staff. And he wonders if she knew, when they came to kill him. If any of them had known, had understood, what Lucifer had done.

“It was the worst for the first of us,” Crowley finds himself saying, needing to ease the bone-white grip of her hands and the tight unhappy expression on her face. “For the ones Satan chose
personally.” He sees her flinch at the sound of their brother’s new name, but she’s watching him now instead of staring at the staff, so he continues. “He came to us, before the war. Alone, in groups, hiding, waiting for him. He found us. And he changed us. Bound us to his will.” His wings ache from the memory and he shoves it away. Even now, he’s not ready to face it. He doesn’t think he ever will be.

Michael scoffs. “You expect me to believe it wasn’t your choice to Fall?” she asks, and he looks away from the emotions warring in her eyes.

“That’s some. Most, really. Welcomed it. Thought it couldn’t possibly be worse than a universe in which everything is already decided for us. Nobody realized, then, we were just trading one master for another. Different name, same story.”

“God is not the same!” she protests, shifting to face him fully. Her eyes blaze with heavenly anger.

“Isn’t She?” Crowley asks, and holds himself still as that holy anger flares in her gaze. “Seems to me we’re all just following orders. You lot do a few blessings there, we do a few temptations here, we both fill out the paperwork and do it all over again. Unless your lot actually get a say in what you’re told to do.” He raises an eyebrow at her, above his dark glasses, watching the fire of her rage flare higher and then fade.

“What would a demon know about God?” the archangel snaps, but there’s doubt in her eyes now. Instantly, he regrets putting it there. Michael, like Aziraphale, likes her absolutes. Black and White. Good and Evil. God and Satan. Crowley has spent millennia protecting Aziraphale’s chance at having that certainty, because he knows what questions come when you can look at a thing and see shades of grey.

“I know enough,” he says carefully, “to know that Her plan isn’t clear to anyone else but Her. Don’t know how you lot stand it, not knowing why you have to do something.” He grins and props his feet up on her boulder, lounging back and tilting his face up towards the stars. “Least with old Luci I’ll only get a few thousand years of torture for disobedience. Can’t do much more to a demon than’s already been done.” There. Mention the consequences. That should remind her enough to pull back, to look away from the shadows he had thrown on her black-and-white world.

“Did it hurt?” she asks, and he sits up to see her looking horrified at herself for asking the question.

“Did what hurt?”
Michael scowls. “Never mind.” Her hands grip his staff to her chest.

Ah. *That.* The demon slouches back in his seat. “Yeah.” *It still does,* he does not tell her. The aching, lonely void in his soul beats against the walls he’s constructed around it. Layers upon layers of walls, and they’re still just *barely* enough to keep the pain inside from reaching out and destroying him.

Silence settles between them, and part of him wonders if it screams at her the way it does at him. If the torn edges of the bond where his mind used to meet hers cry out, if she can feel the silence where his soul used to be joined with hers. Or if it’s cauterized, tucked away in a corner of her mind and forgotten like an ugly pair of shoes. He doesn’t know which would be better.

She’s thinking. He can see the thoughts flow across her eyes. They’ve always been too alike in that way. Neither of them have ever had trouble controlling their expressions. But their *eyes,* well. Those will betray them every time.

“You’re thinking too loudly,” he tells her.

“Then leave,” the archangel snaps back. “I’m not keeping you here.”

“Nah.” He tips his head back again. The stars really are lovely, no matter what angle he sees them from. “M comfortable now.”

She sighs, an angry release of air, but she doesn’t get up, or threaten him to make him leave.

“Come on,” Crowley needles her. “What’s got the great Archangel Michael all caught up in a twist?” He doesn’t see the way she glares at him, but he knows the look.

“It’s nothing a creature like you could understand,” Michael says, but the demon hears the uncertainty in her words.

“Try me,” he offers, leaning up to look at her over his glasses. “Unless you have someone else to go ask all your uncomfortable questions?” Michael turns her face away. “Not like I’ll be able to tell anyone. Who would believe me when I say I met an archangel on the moon and *didn’t* die?”
“You still might,” she threatens, but there isn’t bite in it. Her hands turn his staff over, fingers tracing the lines of the serpent. If he were still Raphael, he would laugh, and poke at her, tease her, do his best to annoy her until she either snapped and screamed at him, or rolled her eyes and laughed and told him what was wrong. He’d always worried about how tense she got, how tightly controlled she kept herself. He’s still worried, but none of his old tactics will work anymore. To her, he is a stranger, a damned creature she just happens to be tolerating. He lets himself sink deeper into his slouch.

“Are you-” she stops, and he sits up again, giving her his full attention.

“Are you still the same person?” she asks. “As you were in Heaven?”

Ah. So that’s it. This is about him. About Raphael. She must have seen the plague, the sickness washing over the world, and remembered it should have been his job to stop it. He closes his eyes as his own anguish rises up. If he were still the archangel he’d once been, he would have stopped it. All of it. He would have led an army of healers down from Heaven and marched them through the streets of the world, until Pestilence lay dead and the plague was nothing but a memory.

“No,” he tells her. “I’m not.” He’s Fallen so far, been beaten, broken, twisted, and changed. It’s been over five thousand years, now, and even if he hadn’t Fallen, he still wouldn’t be the same. Time, as She designed it, will do that to a person. Even an archangel, if they let it.

“Are you?” he asks her. “Are any of you the same as you were before?”

She gives an almost imperceptible shake of her head. She knows she has changed. They all did. And the worst symptom of it is that she’s here, alone, and not sharing her pain with the siblings that used to share her mind. If he reaches out just a little, though the pain of his own broken bond, he can feel how high her walls have become. Always, she had been guarded. Now, her mind is a fortress, walled off, isolated. It makes him angry, furious, that she - that any of them - should still have the option to share their bond, to live within each other’s minds, and choose to lock it away. To wall themselves off from the beings She created to share their burdens and their joys.

“Don’t mourn the Fallen,” he tells her, bitterness in his voice. “We know what we lost. Sometimes I wonder though, do you?”

She stares at him. And then, in the heartbeat between one blink and the next, she is gone.
Crowley remains, though the throne he created for himself shatters into thousands of pieces and he finds himself sprawled in the rubble. He came here to find some measure of peace. A moment within which he could ground himself. And now, the pain is fresh once again. Scars ripped open by memories he tried so hard to bury. He closes his eyes and breathes, focuses on the pain, on pushing it back, away, until it’s safe behind his walls once again.

Hours later, he wakes from a fitful sleep to find Aziraphale at his side. He blinks sleepily up at him, not quite ready to believe he’s awake, and Aziraphale smiles.

“Good morning,” the angel says, when he notices Crowley’s eyes on him.

“Angel?” the demon asks, still trying to shake the fog of sleep from his mind. “What’re you doing here?”

“I was worried about you, my dear,” Aziraphale explains, as if that tells Crowley why he’s sitting here, next to him, on the moon of all places. “You left so suddenly, and then, when I couldn’t find you on earth, I well. I suppose I just needed to know you were alright.”

The demon sits up, and is impossibly grateful that his glasses didn’t slip from his face as he slept. Because he doesn’t even know what his eyes would be giving away right now. “’M fine,” is the best he can manage to say, blinking stupidly as his tired brain adjusts slowly to the new information. “I just… just needed some space, is all.” He grins, inviting Aziraphale to laugh at the double meaning behind the words. Space, as in distance. And Space, as in the cosmos around them.

And Aziraphale does laugh. He chuckles, giving Crowley an amused, fond look that can’t possibly be for the demon. “Well, you certainly have it out here,” he says, looking up into the sky above them, giving the demon space to wake up and collect himself. Then, when Crowley has rubbed the sleep from his eyes and wrapped his long limbs into a semblance of a seated position, Aziraphale turns back to him. His eyes scan the demon’s face, looking for any hint of the agony he’d seen before, in that tree-lined clearing in Italy.

“I’m fine, angel,” Crowley is quick to reassure him. Anything, to get that pinched, worried expression off of Aziraphale’s face. “You don’t need to worry.”

The angel frowns at him. “Clearly I do. Or are you going to tell me you didn’t come here to avoid talking about it?”
He sighs, and scrubs at his face. He should have known he wouldn’t get off that easy, not after the way he’d left. He almost wishes the angel would go away and leave him alone. It would be easier, then. He wouldn’t have to pretend he doesn’t want more than he’s allowed to have. Wouldn’t have to stop himself from giving in to the hope that someday the angel could love him in that very specific way. Wouldn’t have to remind himself, again, and again, and again, of exactly what he is.

“It’s nothing,” he repeats. “You just… caught me at a bad time.”

“Are you… are you sure?” Aziraphale asks, and Crowley knows that he knows this isn’t the whole truth. The demon meets his eyes, and is startled by the depth of feeling in them.

“I know I’m just an angel,” Aziraphale continues, and Crowley is still too stunned by the look in his eyes to protest. “But, well, we’ve known each other for over five millennia now, and I rather like to think I know you well enough by now to know what you’re talking about. If you want to tell me.”

The demon blinks at him stupidly, for a moment. Then he smiles and shakes his head. Of course. Of course his angel would be so kind, even to a demon. It didn’t mean anything beyond that. But still, he leans forward, as if to drink in some of that warmth. It soothes the aching parts of him, bleeding and raw from his most recent encounter with his past.

“It’s just not fair,” he finds himself saying. “The humans. The plague. They didn’t even do anything to deserve it this time. And I know my lot go in for that sort of thing. But yours is supposed to be better than that.”

Aziraphale looks away, and the loss of those sea-blue eyes hurts. “I don’t know,” the angel says. “I don’t think this is divine punishment. We weren’t ordered to stand by, like we were with the Flood. But we weren’t told to intervene, either.”

“That’s my point,” Crowley tells him. “Where is God in all of this?”

“I suppose the archangels -” Aziraphale says hesitantly, and Crowley laughs like breaking glass.

“The archangels were never Her conduit. They’ll be as clueless as you.”
“But,” Aziraphale’s brow furrows. “But I know She spoke directly to them. She must still, mustn’t she?”

The demon shakes his head. “She stopped speaking to them, angel,” he says, remembering how it had hurt, how it had hurt them all, when they realized. “Sometime after the humans were created, they stopped hearing Her voice.”

Aziraphale’s eyes narrow, and he frowns at Crowley. “How… how do you know that?” He moves as if to look into the metaphysical plane, at Crowley’s essence, before catching himself and focusing on the demon’s face.

Crowley freezes. Fuck. He really has to be more careful with his words. He’s been getting too relaxed around the angel lately. “I worked with Lucifer. Spent a lot of time together in the star factories.” He tries to sound casual, but it’s hard, the fear of discovery squeezing at his heart.

“And Lucifer just happened to tell you that the archangels weren’t hearing God anymore?” Aziraphale asks mildly, expression unreadable.

“He answered my questions,” Crowley counters. It’s true, mostly. Or it was, until his elder brother had taken to vanishing for large chunks of time and not telling anyone where he was going. “He didn’t mind that I asked them. Not like the others.”

“Is that why you Fell?” Aziraphale asks, and the question, in that familiar voice, snaps something inside of Crowley. He closes his eyes against the tidal wave of pain that rise up from the innocent question. Beside him, then angel gasps. “Oh, my dear, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to ask that, I know it upsets you. I’m so sorry, it just slipped out.”

He gets himself under control. It’s easier, with Aziraphale sitting next to him, his gentle voice filling the empty void within.

“I didn’t mean to bring it up. And of course, you have every right to be cross with me. I really should watch what I say more-”

“Angel,” Crowley says, once he’s shoved the pain back behind his walls. “It’s ok.” The torrent of words stops, and the worried, shamed expression clears from the angel’s face at Crowley’s encouraging smile.
“It is?” Aziraphale asks, relief clear in his voice.

“It’s ok,” the demon confirms. “I’m ok. It was just… a little much, there for a while.”

“I see.” Carefully, as if afraid Crowley would pull away, the angel reaches out and puts a hand on his arm. “Will you… do me a favor, then?” he asks, as if Crowley’s whole being hasn’t suddenly focused on the single point of contact.

“Yeah?” he manages, trying very very hard not to react. He wants to lean into the touch. He should pull away. He does neither.

“Next time it gets to be too much, will you call me? *Before* you take off for the moon?”

In that moment, with Aziraphale’s hand warm on his arm, the angel looking at him with such concern in those kind sea-blue eyes, he could have asked for the sun and Crowley would have given it to him.

“Yeah, ok,” he agrees. Then the demon watches as Aziraphale’s face lights up, relief and joy mixing with other, unnameable emotions on his face. It’s so bright, there on the dark side of the moon. And Crowley wonders if this is how it might have felt, when God stood alone on the earth and watched the first sunrise.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! <3 Please let me know what you think!

**Flashbacks so far**

1. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
2. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
3. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
4. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
5. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
6. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
7. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
8. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry, I know I said 12 chapters, but I was writing this one, and it hit 10,000 words on the first writing before I was even half done with what I had planned. So I broke it into two pieces, which should be a bit more manageable to read. What would have been chapter 9 is having similar problems, so I'm just going to expand it to two chapters as well right now, to avoid adding more later. I don't think this will happen to the later chapters though, as they're all pretty well contained scenes.

Thank you all so much for sticking with me so far! I really love your comments, I can't tell you how many times I've gone back and read them, and each time they make my day a little brighter :)

I'm still on vacation, and plan to get back from Ireland sometime mid-week, so I should be able to put up the next chapter on Sunday like usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is a reason why Raphael alone, of all the archangels, wielded a staff and never a sword. Most assume it is because he couldn’t. That, as Her Healer, he was meant to see the battlefield only after the war had been fought. That he would only heal the wounded, and not stand beside his siblings in a fight. That it wasn’t his choice, but rather the inability to use a weapon that lead him to refuse a blade. They would be wrong. The staff is not a symbol of any lack of skill. It is a mercy. A choice that Raphael made, when he understood what war would mean.

Because the thing is, Raphael did not fight with the strength and skill of Her Warrior, Michael. He did not have the wild brashness of the Morning Star. He could not claim to Uriel’s swift grace, Sandalphon’s savagery, or even Gabriel’s bravado. He was never powerful, in the traditional ways of the warrior. What Raphael was, what Crowley is, is ruthlessly efficient.

The pattern of life is all around him. He cannot help but see it. The critical points in the pattern, the places where injury weakens and wounds throb, calling out for healing. He sees where the patten has gone wrong, where he could fix it, if he chose. But he can also see other points, places upon which the whole pattern hangs, the points where a single well-placed blow can tear it all to shreds. He does not need to overpower an enemy with brute strength. He does not need guile or trickery. What he needs is an opening. Just one single, solitary moment in the larger pattern dance of moving bodies and iron and blood. A chance to dart in with his weapon, and then watch as the light fades from his enemy’s eyes.

Crowley moves deliberately, carefully, like the predator he is. Pacing, circling, watching the pattern. The demon before him curses, dripping blood and breathing hard. They step over the bodies of it’s legion, a band of more than twenty demons. They eye each other warily, and Crowley
can see the fear in it’s eyes. There. An opening. He moves with the precision of a surgeon and darts in to slide his blade home. The pattern comes apart and then disappears. This one doesn’t even scream. It just goes limp and falls, dead, to the cold stone floor.

“That’ll teach you to go after what you don’t understand,” Crowley mutters, kicking the corpse. His sword glows with the ghost of sickly green flames, lapping up the demonic ichor it’s drunk so much of this night. With a snap of his fingers, the room is engulfed in hellfire. He stands in the inferno, directing the flames, until every last bit of evidence has been consumed by the fire. He’d learned, some two thousand years before, that even a demon’s body will burn, once the life is snuffed out of them. He appreciates that. It makes his cleanup so much easier.

He’s careful with the evidence he leaves. This time, it’s a piece of a suit jacket - the fabric stolen from Gabriel’s tailor for just this purpose. Let Hell assume Her Herald is the one protecting Aziraphale. For now, at least. He’s also got one of Michael’s shoe laces and a pair of Sandalphon’s socks to leave at other sites like this. He’ll have to get more soon, though. He’s out of Uriel’s things completely, and at the rate things are going he’s got at least three more legions that will try to kill the angel this century. It’s a shame. He thinks he’d quite like the 1800’s, if it weren’t for all of Hell suddenly deciding that killing angels is the newest way to win favor with Lucifer.

“Well, well, well,” says a hoarse voice from behind him. Crowley turns, raising his sword once again, eyes scanning the shadows for the source of the sound. A dark figure steps forward, and the demon’s eyes widen in surprise.

“Prince Paimon,” he says, bowing low. “Your highness. To what do I owe this pleasure?” His mind is already racing, searching for a way out of this. Paimon is no Asmodeus, no warrior trained to fight from birth. But he is still a Prince of Hell, one of Lucifer’s special favorites. Worse, his domain is knowledge. Secrets. He’s a demon that prides himself on answering any and all questions put to him. Answering them truthfully, because, he says, the truth is always so much more destructive than a lie. If he’s here, it means Hell is closing in on Crowley, and there’s only one way out of this alive. He has to kill the prince, and make it look like an archangel did it. And he doesn’t know if he has enough energy left. Not after fighting so many of his legion.

_Run. Run run run run run._ The fear pulses in his veins, in the frantic beats of the heart which has never been as optional for him in the same way it is for Aziraphale. He can’t run, and he knows it. If he does, Paimon will follow. And then he will break him, draw out his weaknesses. And when he does, he will go after Aziraphale. He knows how the prince works. He will catch Crowley, but not kill him. Not until he watches Aziraphale’s death at the hands of Hell.

“I hadn’t quite expected to find _you_ here, of all people,” Paimon says, circling Crowley like a vulture coming in to feast. “The little snake that crawled up from the pit and sent the humans scurrying away from the garden like little mice.” His voice is raspy, like sandpaper on the ears, and he follows Crowley’s every movement with the colorless, empty eyes of a shark.
“Why not?” Crowley shoots back, trying to sound braver than he is. Like there’s more than a hair’s width of a chance he’ll leave this conversation alive. “I sensed a legion on my turf, and decided to come down here and see what’s what. Not my fault they got a little uppity and forced me to teach them a lesson.” The pattern of Paimon’s life flickers before his eyes, ever-changing, weak points sliding away before his gaze can catch even one. Asmodeus had been the same. It had taken serious physical wounds before Crowley had been able to see a way to kill him. He knows he doesn’t have the strength for such a prolonged battle now.

“Oh, I think you know better than to lie to me, Crowley,” the prince says. Then his eyes shift and a delighted grin snakes it’s way up his face. “Or should I say Raphael? Oh, our Lord is going to love this. His missing brother has been hiding right under his nose all this time.”

Crowley grips his blade tighter, the nails on his free hand lengthening to claws. “That is not my name.”

“Isn’t it now?” the prince asks, still circling. “I can see you, you know. All those walls you’ve thrown up around yourself. Such a dense labyrinth in your mind. They do nothing to hide you from me, Crowley. I see it all.”

“You’re wrong,” the demon protests, fear turning to panic inside. He drops into a crouch, blade held between them like a barrier as he slowly turns on the spot in the center of Paimon’s ever-narrowing spiral.

Paimon laughs, like gravel crunching undefoot. “Oh, I can see you child. The Fallen archangel, so quick to question. You never did fit in, really, did you? That bright mind of yours, always racing, always looking for answers, so thirsty for knowledge.” The prince’s cold eyes shine with amusement. “I see it now, how you could never be content, could you? Couldn’t remain still at Her side until she released you to fix what she allowed to break? You needed to know why, didn’t you?” He steps out of the pattern, closer to Crowley. “You wanted to understand Her. And look where all those questions have gotten you now.” He leans down, to whisper in the demon’s ear. “All alone, trying to pretend you can still be something other than what you are.”

He steps back, and surveys the damage. The way Crowley is shaking, vibrating so hard he might crack. The fear and pain radiating off of him in waves. He’s so alone here. No help is going to come for him now. No siblings connected to him mind-to-mind. No Aziraphale swooping in with his steady determination. Just Crowley, his sins, and his pain. And if he fucks this up, if he dies here, then so too will his angel. He bites down on the inside of his cheek and shoves the pain away.
“Oh, and what is this?” Hellfire flickers in Paimon’s dead-eyed gaze, and his grin takes up more of his face than should be humanely possible. His sharp teeth seem to crowd his head, far more than should fit in the prince’s mouth. “Oh my,” he says, like a cat that spilled the cream. “And you were in love. Oh, and isn’t that forbidden? Such a rebellious little angel you were. It’s no wonder our Lord was able to drag you down so easily.”

“Sssshut up,” Crowley hisses. “Jussssst ssshut up.” She would never make you Fall for feeling love, Jesus had said. He clings to the words against the rising tide of pain.

“But I’m having so much fun,” the prince crows, resuming his circling. “Oh so very much fun, looking at all of you like this. Your pain is so delicious, I just, mmmm, can’t get enough.” He takes a deep breath, savoring it, and the emotions he can smell on the air. “Still so fresh, even after all these years. It’s a wonder you haven’t destroyed yourself from it. Oh, and look at this! There’s a name! I do so hope I know who it is. Let me see, starts with an A-”

Crowley launches himself at Paimon, slashing blindly at the shifting pattern with sword and claws. The prince counters, drawing his own blade in one swift, fluid motion. Sparks of hellfire fall from the place where obsidian meets obsidian and Crowley jumps back, only to rush forward again, and again. The patten before him continues to shift, weak points vanishing even before his eyes can catch on them. He pours as much power as he dares into his senses, strengthening them, searching for anything at all that he can use to turn this in his favor. Paimon laughs angrily, batting his blade away like a large fly.

“Such a pathetic excuse for a demon,” the prince says, a vicious snarl in his words. “Trying so hard to cling to the light when you know, deep down, that She will never take you back. That your Aziraphale will never see you as anything more than exactly what you are.”

“And what am I?” Crowley demands, searching for any break, any weakness he can use to turn this in his favor.

Paimon stops his circling, and looks at Crowley with a gaze cursed to see only the truth. “Unforgiveable,” he whispers. “Damned. You are that which can never be forgiven.”

Crowley does his best to ignore the words. He’d known the answer before he’d even asked, after all. That didn’t make any difference to the screaming void of silence inside. “And you?” he asks instead. “How are you any better? I know who you were before, Paimon. You were a Dominion, a lord in Heaven, second to my brother Lucifer. And now look at you. Reduced to sharing power with the other Princes and answering to the whims of a madman.”
“I, at least, know what I am,” the prince rasped. “And where my loyalties lie.”

An idea sparks in Crowley’s mind. One desperate chance. Paimon, as the prince of secrets, cannot lie, even to himself. His power allows him to know the answer, or the way to find the answer, to all questions posed to him. Crowley has been very lucky that Lucifer never asked ‘Who is protecting the principality Aziraphale’ to Paimon. If he had, Crowley would have been dead before he even had a chance to realize he was in danger.

“What does that loyalty get you?” Crowley asks. “When all is said and done, if Hell wins, what will you have? Lucifer does not share power. So what will my brother give you, for your millennia of loyalty?”

The prince opens his mouth, the answer coming to him as Crowley hoped it would. Then his eyes widen, and for just a moment, the pattern stills. It’s less that a breath, but it’s all that Crowley needs. He strikes before Paimon can register his movement, blade sliding home into Paimon’s chest. The prince stares at him with those cold, dead eyes, mouth dropping open in surprise. And then something suspiciously like relief settles onto his face.

“Here’s another question for you,” Crowley growls, pulling his blade free of the prince’s body. “Out of all demons, why am I the only one that still has any hope?” Any other demon would have given up by now. Left Aziraphale alone and retreated into the comforting embrace of mindless evil. Doing their duty and no more. Not Crowley. He couldn’t. Not when that small flame of hope the Son of God had given him still burned within his heart.

Paimon looks at him, life force fading, and his eyes go wide with shock. “Six thousand years,” he murmurs. “So very, very long.” The prince sinks to his knees on the cold stone floor, sword clattering to the ground at his side. He reaches up, touching trembling fingers to the ichor pouring from his chest. “So very long,” he says again, holding the shaking hand before his face. “When does it end?” he asks Crowley. “When do you stop this charade?”

Crowley hisses, and raises his sword. “It ends when he is safe from our kind, forever,” he tells the prince. Then, with a practiced motion, he removes the prince’s head from his body, and watches the pattern of his life fly apart.

Unforgivable. The word echoes in Crowley’s mind. It is, of course, the truth. He betrayed Heaven with his search for forbidden knowledge, and was damned for it. He has betrayed Hell, over and over and over again, destroying his fellow Fallen in a fool’s quest to save the life of one angel. He does not repent, not for either crime. He does not seek forgiveness for them. And yet, the word still sends echoes of pain through the void in his soul. There is only one entity whose forgiveness he seeks. Only one crime worth begging for absolution. He has put his angel in danger, and one day, perhaps soon, that danger will be more than he can prevent.
He burns Paimon’s body. It won’t be enough, he knows, to keep Hell off of his trail. The prince was one of Lucifer’s favorites, his personal friends. One of the very first to Fall. Crowley knows his eldest sibling well enough to know that he will not let this go. That Paimon was on earth at all is proof that they were looking for answers, trying to find the reason so very many demons have perished in this region. His death will give them a reason to look harder. They’ll send out the hunters next. They’ll investigate deeper, look harder than ever before. And soon enough, the trail will lead them right to Crowley. It might take a thousand years, or it might take a decade, but his reckoning is drawing closer, and his list of victims is far too long. He needs a backup plan. A nuclear option. Something that will ensure that, should the worst happen and they come for him, Aziraphale does not fall victim to Hell’s schemes. An idea starts to form as Crowley scours the room of all demonic traces. An insane idea, but one that might just work. The only thing is, he’ll need the angel’s help to do it. And Aziraphale is not going to like what Crowley is about to ask him for.

Crowley goes to St. James’s Park. And Aziraphale arrives to meet him, like he always does these days. Their meetings have become more frequent as the years go by, from conversing once every few hundred years, to now where they barely go a few months without seeing each other. And each time they meet, it lasts longer. Walks in the park, nights at the orchestra, visits to the little restaurants the angel likes so much. It’s wonderful. And it hurts the demon more than he has the words to describe. Because it’s so close to what they used to have, to walks in the Garden and laughing together on top of the wall. And yet, it’s not anywhere near close enough. There’s times when Aziraphale will look at him, and it’s like he’s trying to see through the demon, past the sin and damnation, to the angel he was before. Times when he seems to expect the demon to be more than what he is. And even when he doesn’t, there’s still the distance between them. A careful line that the angel holds to like a lifeline.

Crowley knows that distance well. Knows the strength and the give of that line intimately. He dances along it with every word, tipping over the edge just a little with a touch, with a gesture, a brush of elbows, a pointed look, or a careful word. Silently begging the angel to retract the line just a little, to lessen the distance between them just a hair’s breadth. He shouldn’t, he knows he shouldn’t. But lately, he cannot seem to resist. The pain inside has only grown with time, until even just hearing the angel’s voice is not enough to calm it. But for almost every overture he makes, almost every chance he takes to close the remaining distance between them, the angel pulls back just as far. A step in the opposite direction, holding his arms tighter to his sides, looking away and ignoring invitations to come nearer. It’s the almost that kills him. The rare and wonderful times when Aziraphale doesn’t pull away.

Because it’s not as if Crowley has forgotten what he is. And what he is not. He can’t forget, not ever. Not while the pain inside gnaws at his walls like so many rodents, determined to knock them down and let the full force of it out to drown him. It’s just that, after all these years, it seems less important. He’s a demon, yes, but Aziraphale has always been the best of all the angels. His Grace hasn’t tarnished in the slightest after centuries on earth. He doesn’t think it will dim now, just
because he admits to friendship with a demon. And friendship is all Crowley wants. Just as Aziraphale refuses to allow himself to cross that line between them, Crowley refuses to cross his own mental barrier and allow himself to want what he knows he can never have. The angel is still in love with the archangel-that-was, and the distance he so carefully maintains between them is proof enough that he’ll never be able to feel that way for the demon-that-is. And any time the distance between them shifts, even the slightest bit closer, Crowley has to re-learn how to strike that balance within himself. How to allow himself this friendship, without letting that flame of hope take root in his desire for anything more.

And now Aziraphale is here, standing beside Crowley and feeding the ducks. They have plans for later, tickets Crowley procured for an orchestra. A young Russian professor of music named Tchaikovsky who is quickly growing in popularity. Crowley had heard his work by chance on a job in St. Petersburg, and has a feeling that in the next few years his career will really take off. He had offered the tickets without truly believing that Aziraphale would accept, and had been both shocked and delighted when the angel had agreed to accompany him. But that is for later, after business has been attended to. This is now, and he has something he needs to ask for.

*Please have meant it*, he thinks. *Please be okay with me coming to you for this.* He’s been good about not letting things get too much again. He hasn’t had an episode like the 14th century *since* the 14th century. Not even during the bloodshed of the revolutions that took place in the latter half of the 18th. But now, just hours after his close call with Paimon, he’s terrified. And he can do one of two things with that terror - he can bottle it up inside with all his pain and hope that the volatile mixture doesn’t explode, or he can take action. Put his fall-back plan into motion to protect the angel even if the worst should come to pass. It’s no contest really. Not when Aziraphale’s safety hangs in the balance. If Crowley dies, there will be no one to protect him.

“Look, I’ve been thinking,” he says, carefully neutral, as if he hasn’t just come from a duel with a prince of Hell. “What if it all goes wrong? We’ve got a lot in common, you and me.” He stops there, unsure of how to go on, how to ask for what he needs. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the way Aziraphale looks at him.

“I don’t know,” the angel says slowly. “We may both have started out as angels, but you are Fallen.”

Yeah. Okay. He’d deserved that one, even if the words send daggers through his heart. He is Fallen. And he knows that the things they have in common terrify Aziraphale, if he’s given any time at all to contemplate them. And not for the first or the last time, Crowley wonders how it is that, of the two extremes, Heaven is the one that rules with the iron fist of fear.

“Oh, I didn’t really *Fall*, so much as… saunter vaguely downwards,” he says, trying to cover for the way the words knock holes in his walls and let the pain flow through him freely. He sighs. Sauntering was the last thing his Fall was like, but the angel doesn’t have to know that. “I need a
favor.” Best to be direct. Get it over with. Like ripping off a bandage.

“We already have the agreement, Crowley,” Aziraphale reminds him. “Stay out of each other’s way, lend a hand when needed…” he trails off, uncomfortable as he always is when they discuss this.

“This is something else,” Crowley says. “For if it all goes pear-shaped.” You told me to come to you, when it started to get too much, he doesn’t say. Well this is me, coming to you.

Aziraphale won’t look at him. “I like pears,” he says, a desperate attempt to change the topic. And the demon knows he should take the out, step away. He’s crossing the line too far. But the angel had offered, hadn’t he? Maybe he didn’t mean it, says the voice inside Crowley’s head that always sounds a little too much like Lucifer.

“For if it all goes wrong,” Crowley tells him. Because it can. It can go so, so terribly wrong. And right now the only thing standing between Aziraphale and legions of bloodthirsty demons is Crowley. If Paimon’s deputies come for him, if Hell figures out who killed the prince of secrets and decides it’s time to look into punishment? Crowley knows he won’t be able to defeat them. Not with the legions at their command. His only hope, Aziraphale’s only hope, is for him to neutralize himself before they torture him. Before they break him, and find out the reason he killed so many demons. Because if they do, nothing in the world will keep Aziraphale safe from Hell’s wrath.

“I want insurance.” It sounds so simple, when he says it like that. Like he’s not asking for a nuclear option here. Something so unstable that one mistake will destroy him utterly.

Aziraphale turns to him then, startled. “What?” he asks, and Crowley can smell the fear that rolls off of him. Too close. He’s well beyond too far over the line now. But he’s committed. He has to do this. Both of their lives depend on it, if not now then certainly within the next few centuries. He pulls the small slip of paper from his pocket, and orders his hands not to shake. You’re a fool, Crowley. You’re about to ruin everything, that voice in his mind tells him.

“I wrote it down. Walls have ears. Well,” he looks around, at the distinct lack of walls around them. He’s an idiot, just like always. But he hands Aziraphale the paper with carefully controlled hands. “Not walls. Trees have ears. Ducks have ears. Do ducks have ears?” He’s just babbling now, he knows. He needs to get himself under control, before he slips and says too much again. “Must do. ‘S how they hear other ducks.” Smooth. Really smooth. Moron. Damned, Paimon’s voice reminds him. He swallows his nerves and waits for the angel to read. Two words, in his own spidery handwriting. Holy Water. Crowley stares at the water, and does not see the flash of pain in the angel’s eyes as he takes in the words, or the tremble in his fingers as he looks up at the demon and back down again at the paper.
“Out of the question.” There’s a hard edge to Aziraphale’s voice when he speaks, though the fear is there too, coloring the words.

“Why not?” Crowley demands. It’s only dangerous to demons, after all. The angel should have nothing at all to fear from Crowley having it.

Aziraphale crinkles the paper in his grip, trying to hand it back like it’s a bomb that might go off at any second. “It would destroy you! I’m not bringing you a- a suicide pill, Crowley.”

The demon’s heart hurts at the way the angel’s voice sounds when he says ‘suicide pill’. There’s too much there, too many emotions, and he can’t tell if he’s hearing fear for him or just a general sort of horror at the idea of it. Aziraphale will never see you as anything more than exactly what you are. The echo of Paimon’s words stir the maelstrom of pain inside Crowley, and he tries in vain to shove it back behind his walls.

“That’s not what I want it for.” Well. Not exactly. It’s a last resort. Insurance, only. A way for him to know that even if Hell figures it all out, even if they come for him, the angel will be safe. “Just insurance.” Even as he says it, he smells the fear in the air and knows he’s lost. Unforgivable echoes in his skull and he can’t bring himself to look Aziraphale in the eyes.

“I’m not an idiot, Crowley,” Aziraphale says. And Crowley knows he’s not. He’s the smartest being he knows. And, fuck, he loves him far, far too much. He wants nothing more than to ease the notes of fear in the angel’s voice. But he can’t. He can’t even explain, not without frightening him more. “Do you know what trouble I’d be in if- if they knew I’d been- been fraternizing?” The demon doesn’t miss the way his voice catches, and he can’t help it, he turns. And then the meaning of the words hits him. Fraternizing. That’s all this has been to the angel. Something daring, something forbidden, a private little rebellion. He’s not worried about Crowley, he’s worried about what Heaven will do to him if they find out about their arrangement.

Anger flares in the demon, hot and thick, burning through the pain. “Fraternizing?” he repeats. He’d thought - well. He’d been wrong, hadn’t he?

“Or whatever you wish to call it.”

Friendship, he thinks, somewhere deep under the rising anger. I wanted this to be friendship. Like it used to be. He’s furious, but it’s not with Aziraphale. He turns his anger inward, towards himself. He’s been an idiot. Again. He let himself hope. Let himself dream. And here, once again, is yet
more irrefutable proof that the hope he cannot quite put out is one day going to be the thing that destroys him. *He’ll never see you as more than a demon.*

Aziraphale turns away. “I do not think there is any point in discussing it further,” he says, and his tone makes it clear this is his final decision.

“I have lots of other people to *fraternize* with, angel,” Crowley says before he can catch himself. Aziraphale glaces at him again, and for a moment the demon sees the hurt that crosses his face at the words. It only fuels his anger. He’s hurt the angel. *Again.* Six thousand years of trying to get to the point where they can stand together, side by side. Six thousand years of slow, painful progress. And now he’s standing here, watching it all slip away once again. Under the anger, the pain wraps tight around his soul.

“Oh, of course you do,” the angel says, though it’s clear he knows the truth. Crowley has no one. Not a single soul in all of creation. The only being he trusts is turning his back on him and walking away.

*Next time it gets to be too much, will you call me?* The angel’s words, spoken nearly four centuries ago, reverberate in the screaming silence inside.

“I don’t need you,” he says, vicious, a firm denial. He’s not certain who he’s trying to convince. The angel? Or himself?

Aziraphale stops, and turns. Crowley can’t read the expression in his eyes now. Anger, yes. And hurt. But something else, too, something hidden behind the angel’s own walls, out of reach of his demonic senses.

“And the feeling is mutual. Obviously,” he says, and leaves, tossing the paper aside like it means nothing. Just a scrap on the wind. Crowley tells himself it’s the truth. The paper means nothing, nothing at all. He sets it on fire with a glare, and watches it burn, ashes sinking down beneath the pond. He should have known better. *He’ll never see you as anything other than exactly what you are.*

*Hope is a foolish emotion,* he tells himself. *And I am a fool for allowing it in.* Raphael had meant something to Aziraphale. The angel would have brought the archangel holy water in a heartbeat. But he can’t see the remnants of the archangel in the demon. And Crowley has never wanted him to, even if he could. Not that it matters now. He’ll likely never speak to him again. Forever is a long time, but angels are very good at holding grudges.
Unbidden, a long buried memory floats to the surface of his mind. Just touching the edges of it hurts, but he finds himself examining it anyway. And suddenly the pain all but consumes him, drowning him within the void inside.

It won’t be long now. Raphael can feel it in his bones. He’s starting to Fall. Not much, not enough that anyone else would be able to tell. But he can feel it in his Grace, in the way he seems less connected to Her with each passing day. He asked too many questions, he knows. He read the book when he knew it was forbidden. It does not comfort him to know that it was all a part of Her plan. That she had planned to cast him down from the start. He wants to rage, like he had that day in the throne room, but there is no point to it. She will not hear him. And no one else can save him from his fate.

133,316,665 angels have gone missing. Nearly half the soldiers, nearly all of the starsmiths and every one of the watchers, at least a third of the seraphim. Somehow they have lost none of the thrones, and very few of the cherubim or those in the Second Sphere. However, most of the principalities are gone, leaving only Aziraphale assigned to the Garden. And they’ve lost one archangel. Lucifer. He has vanished from their minds, almost as if he never was. And the reports they have of his actions... it’s hard to believe the angel now calling himself Satan is their eldest brother. Raphael can feel Michael raging at the betrayal. His younger three siblings press at their thoughts, desperate to understand what is going on. He deflects, walling himself off. He wants to protect them from this, for as long as he possibly can. Until that number rises by one more archangel.

War is coming to Heaven. It is inevitable now. And Raphael does not know how long he has left. He just has one thing he wants to do, before it does. One being, in all of creation, that he needs to see, before he returns to his siblings and prepares for what is to come.

He drops from Heaven, flying down to Earth, just to feel the wind against his wings. He wonders if he’ll still be able to fly, when all is said and done. If, as a demon, he’ll even want to. He shoves the fear away and concentrates on his flight, until he can see Eden in all it’s glory.

Aziraphale is there, standing on top of the wall, exactly where Raphael expected to find him. He turns as the archangel lands, a smile lighting up his face. Raphael starts forward, then freezes. Aziraphale is wearing a sword. Somehow, someone gave him a flaming sword.

“Raphael?” Aziraphale asks, smile faltering.
“You have a sword,” he says, stupidly, staring at the weapon.

The angel looks down, as if making sure it’s still there. “Oh yes, so I do.” He shrugs, settling the belt into a more comfortable position on his waist. “Michael gave it to me.”

“Michael gave it to you?” He had asked her to keep Aziraphale away from the fighting. To station him anywhere at all where he wouldn’t see the battle. Where there would be no chance that Raphael could encounter him, after he falls. He lets the sting of betrayal flow down their bond and gets a flare of anger in return.

What did you want me to do? She demands. Keep him back while every other angel in Heaven goes out to fight? When I’m already missing half my forces? I can’t do it, not even for you.

“They’re issuing them to everyone now,” Aziraphale tells him at the same time. And all Raphael can think of is this kind, gentle angel, thrown into the thick of battle, forced to raise a weapon against angels he had once called brother and sister. Of Aziraphale falling, dying, at the hands of one of Lucifer’s legion. Raphael’s fear courses through their bond, and he feels Michael soften.

I put him on the Eastern Gate for the duration, she says. He’s to guard Eden from any attack from the East. It was the best I could do. He can see that. They can’t play favorites. Not now. But she’s done the best she could for him anyway. He sends back a pulse of apology and gratitude, and feels her love in return.

“Do you know how to use that thing?” Raphael asks the principality, staring at the way the flames dance along the blade at his side. His staff is heavy in his grip.

Aziraphale nods, confident. “Of course. It’s been part of my lessons, after all.”

“Show me,” Raphael orders, and he does. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, really. The angel has always tried to excel at everything he does. Swordplay is no different. He can fight as well as any of the other principalities. Maybe even as well as a guardian, if he really concentrates. They’ve taught him well. That fact should come as a relief to Raphael, but it doesn’t. It terrifies him.

“Aziraphale?” he asks later, standing beside him on the wall, looking out over the desert beyond the Garden.
“Hmm?” the younger angel is watching him, he can feel his gaze on his face. “What is it?”

“Can you promise me something?” Raphael asks, suddenly desperate, though he keeps his voice carefully controlled.


Raphael takes a deep breath. “Something… bad is going to happen soon,” he says. “Something very bad.”

“Is this about the missing angels?” his friend asks, and Raphael nods, almost imperceptibly.

“That and more,” he tells him. “But, look. I want you to promise me one thing. Promise me that whatever happens, you won’t let it change you. That when all of it is over, you’ll still be you.” Still the same, still kind, still careful, still Good. He can’t Fall, Raphael thinks. Please Lord, let me have this one thing, he begs Her, though she hasn’t heard his prayers in a very long time. Please let him remain as he is. Images of Aziraphale in battle march through his mind, showing him a future in which the gentle being beside him has become a battle-hardened warrior.

“Of course,” Aziraphale agrees easily, and Raphael looks at him in surprise. He smiles, and leans against the archangel. “How can I be anything else but me?” he asks.

Raphael doesn’t respond. How can he explain what’s coming? Especially when that knowledge is still forbidden to the lower ranks of angels?

“Raphael?” Aziraphale prompts, concern creeping into his voice.

The archangel sighs. “I… I may have to go away for a while,” he says, ignoring the angel’s question. “Somewhere far away.”

“I see,” the angel says, then his eyes widen as a thought occurs to him. “But, you’ll come back though, yes?”
“I…” he’s thought about how to do this, how to prepare his friend for what’s coming. He finds he can’t do it. Can’t admit to this being who is so Good that he’s broken the rules one too many times, asked too many questions, gone too far off course from his place. Can’t tell Aziraphale that their Creator has planned for this since his birth, has created Raphael with intention of throwing him away. He knows that Aziraphale could handle the truth, perhaps handle it far better than even his siblings. But it would lead him to questions. To doubt. And that’s the last thing Raphael wants, when even the wrong word could get an angel a one-way ticket to Hell. Better to not talk about this. Safer, that Aziraphale not know until it’s too late.

“I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m sorry.”

Aziraphale grabs his arm, forcing him to turn at look him in the eyes. “Are you going to come back?” he demands, sea-blue eyes determined, almost desperate, searching Raphael’s own amber-brown.

“I…” Raphael opens his mouth to lie. To give a comforting falsehood. To tell him that of course he’s going to come back. But he can feel it, how close it is to the end. This could be his last conversation with Aziraphale, and, whatever else may come, he will not have the last thing he says to his angel be a lie.

“I don’t know,” he says, and watches the fear chased by pain and then sorrow cross Aziraphale’s face. “I’ll try,” he adds suddenly, although he’s not sure he’ll even remember this conversation. “I’ll do what I can. Try to come back to you, no matter what. You have my word.” It’s an impulse, one he doesn’t understand, but he says the words and burns them into his being. He will try. Whatever happens, whatever he becomes, he will try to come back for his angel. He will defy everything that tells him it’s impossible. Fuck the Great Plan.

The Great Plan. Lucifer. His impending fall into the fires of Hell. Raphael’s hope gutters out just as fast as it had risen. He might come back. But what will he be, when he does?

“What is it?” Aziraphale asks, still watching him with those wide blue eyes. “Raphael?”

The archangel breaks his gaze away, turning back to stare into the Garden, where he’s meant to tempt the humans into eating the Fruit of Knowledge. “I…” he doesn’t know how to say it. Doesn’t know if he even can.

Aziraphale makes a noise of frustration, and reaches out, a gentle hand on Raphael’s cheek turning his head back to where he can see his face. “What’s wrong?” he asks softly. “You can tell me.”
“If I come back...” Raphael says, choking on the words. “Where I’m going, it’s not...” He closes his eyes, and tries again. “I might not be me, anymore. When I come back. I might not be Raphael.”

Aziraphale pulls him close, and Raphael is surprised by the warmth of him. They've so rarely done this before. Hands on shoulders, a guiding grip on an elbow, leaning up against a warm shoulder, simple gestures of affection. Those have become common between them, true. But even so, hugs have been so very rare. They've always been aware of the difference between their ranks, though it has hardly ever seemed to matter. Raphael has crossed that line, many times, heedless of what it means for them, and been met with warm acceptance every time. But this is one of the few times that the principality has reached across, bridging the distance between them on his own.

“You’ll always be yourself,” Aziraphale tells him, and Raphael can feel the way the words rumble in his chest. Soft white wings wrap around him, comforting and warm. Aziraphale looks up, and their eyes are so close now, barely an inch between them. “No matter what happens,” he says, certainty in his gaze. “I know you. You cannot be changed so much that I no longer recognize you.”

“How can you be sure?” Raphael asks, overwhelmed by the faith this angel has in him. “You don’t know what is going to happen.”

“I know you,” Aziraphale tells him. “I know your heart is Good. I know you hate to see anything suffer. I know the love you have for your siblings, and the way you care for all of God’s creations. I know you make terrible jokes.” He grins and Raphael cannot help the small laugh that falls from his lips. “I know your essence,” Aziraphale continues. “I know your Grace, the way you feel like a storm bound tight in a shell. All of that is a part of you. It makes you who you are, and that won’t change. Not any more than the things that make me, me.” He says it with such certainty that Raphael almost believes him. Almost.

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can,” Aziraphale tells him, and his eyes are full of certainty. “If you promise to come back to me, however you can, then I promise you, Raphael. I promise to know that it’s you.”

I promise to know that it’s you, Aziraphale had said, so very long ago. And yet here he stands,
watching the angel’s back as he walks away. Crowley has kept Raphael’s promise. He came back. Changed, yes. Fallen. But he still came back. And almost six thousand years later, Aziraphale still hasn’t recognized him. And he’s glad of that. He really is. There are so many reasons why being recognized for the archangel-that-was are a bad thing. That doesn’t make it hurt any less. And the worst part is that that stupid flame of hope is still there, burning in his chest and giving light to all of the places his soul has cracked and shattered.

He wants to run. To fly. To get away from the way his heart feels like it’s shattering into smaller and smaller pieces every second he stands here. But he can’t. He doesn’t know where to go. There isn’t a place in this universe, now, that wouldn’t remind him of Aziraphale. Not even the moon is safe. Not when the last time he’d been there, the angel had put a hand on his arm and told him to come to him when the pain became too much. There’s nowhere he can go that doesn’t have memories of the angel. He could, he supposes, go back to Hell. But there, there are memories of his Fall, and Hell isn’t a place one tries to escape to. It’s far more a place to escape from. And even if he went back, who would protect Aziraphale? No, that’s out of the question too. And he can’t just leave, anyway. He still has to find a way to turn Hell away from his scent.

He’s so tired. Not physically, not really. It’s a soul-deep aching tiredness that shrouds Crowley’s mind in exhaustion, making it difficult to think. He’s been carrying this pain for nearly six thousand years, and even now it’s almost a daily struggle to keep his walls up, to maintain the labyrinthine fortress he’s created in his mind to house the broken pieces of his soul. He needs rest. He needs sleep. And then it comes to him. He can hide in plain sight. Lay low for a while. It doesn’t have to be long, just long enough to… recharge a little, to let his body rest, to regain all that power he’s been expending lately. Maybe a couple years. Maybe decades. Hell won’t come for him, if he’s not an active threat. They won’t even notice him. The trail will go cold. The idea of it is enough to make him lightheaded with relief. It’s not a permanent solution, but it doesn’t need to be. He’ll figure out a way to get the holy water once he wakes up.

So Crowley returns to his flat - a large, empty space that he’s kept deliberately impersonal, save for a few pieces of art. After all, it’s not like he’s ever going to invite the angel here. He keeps it clean, uncluttered, as far from Hell as he can get. The only things he has any attachment to are his plants. His garden. His pathetic little attempt to recreate something lost so long ago. Eden, he knows, no longer exists. She’s taken it from the world, just as She took Her Grace from him. And this isn’t really the Garden, in the same way his obsidian blade is no heavenly flaming sword. It’s an imitation, a poor one, but it serves it’s purpose for Crowley. He terrorizes his plants, screaming threats and abuse at them if they even so much as think of displeasing him. They’re terrified of him, the way the angels are afraid of disappointing Her.

That’s the front room, though. There’s also the back room, a place those plants never see, the one from which he makes the wood-chipper sounds. This is where he keeps the ones that grew imperfectly, developed spots, or weak stems, or otherwise displeased him. These plants still get his shouts, his threats, but also specialized care. He tends each one carefully, seeing to it’s needs, encouraging it to grow in the way he wants. There’s more variety here, more color. Flowers. Delicate plants that can’t thrive under harsh words alone. Carnations of every color. Pansies. Lavender. Zinnia. Morning Glory. Poppy. Violets. And, in their own little corner, a small patch of
Forget-Me-Nots.

Near the Forget-Me-Nots is his work bench, his office. His real one, where he does his best work. The other one, with the hard golden throne and stone table, that one is for show, for when Hell calls, when he can sense them watching him. They’re not watching him now. They haven’t been for centuries. If he plays his cards right, he’ll be able to buy himself a few more before anyone thinks to cast suspicion on him.

This office has a few books. Some arcane texts, a few works of fiction he’s stolen from the angel, a couple astronomy textbooks. He pulls a thick tome down from the shelf and flips through the pages, until he finds the spells he wants. Then he stands, and manifests his wings. They flare behind him like large black shadows, feathers shining like the obsidian of his sword. He takes a second to look over them, and allows himself a surge of pride. He knows he’s meant to hate them, this second most visible symbol of his Fall from Grace. He doesn’t. The colors suit him, he thinks. They match his sword, and the red of his hair looks so dramatic against the inky black. If he angles them just right, he knows, the light will reflect off the feathers, giving them a slight rainbow sheen. Vanity is another sin he allows himself to indulge in. Standing there in his well-tailored suit, wings unfurled behind him, he knows his physical form looks stunning. It’s only when the lenses come off, when he can see his eyes, and, behind them, the shape of his mangled essence, that he hates what he sees in the mirror.

He reaches out carefully, and runs a hand over a wing, fingers smoothing the soft feathers. He keeps them clean, spending hours meticulously grooming them after every visit to Hell so that they stay free of the ash and sulfur. He knows too well that if he doesn’t, the detritus of Hell will coat his wings, killing his feathers and taking away his ability to fly. He traces the shaft of one of his primaries, fingers picking out the smallest of the ten and following it to the base. There, he grips it delicately between two fingers and, with a grimace, plucks it from the wing. Another will have grown in to take it’s place by the time he wakes from this nap. In his hand, the large feather shrinks to a more manageable size. It would have been nice to use one of his secondaries or teritories for this, but the primaries, he’s learned, hold the magic the longest. And he doesn’t want to take a chance on this.

Crowley holds the primary up to the light, admiring the way the sun shines through it. Then he takes a deep breath and touches a finger to the shaft. When he pulls it away, a golden thread of power follows. Like a master weaver, he manipulates it, twining it through other strings of power pulled from his own essence until it forms a base pattern from which the rest of his spells will take place. He anchors everything into the feather, making it glow with an otherworldly light. Words in Enochian flow from the demon’s mouth, calling up ancient knowledge from the depths of his soul. He casts wards, weaving them from the pattern and tying his power into the fabric of the world, setting it to warn him when anyone - occult or ethereal - comes near. He weaves it tight over his flat, adding another pattern - a spell to keep all but the strongest out. And a curse, buried within, to attack anyone who tries to touch his spells. A final touch - just a bit of power to keep his plants watered and healthy until he can look after them again.
He hesitates here. He can stop, leave it be. He’ll be safe, while he sleeps. But even with the pain of losing him again burning raw and fresh within, Crowley knows he can’t leave Aziraphale unprotected. So he grabs at the edges of the spell pattern and casts another bit of magic out into the world. A small, innocuous bit of power that not even the angel will notice is following him through the universe. Something that will alert Crowley the moment any danger comes close. He weaves in something stronger, to lie inert behind the other spells, something that will activate upon an alert and follow it back to it’s source, informing Crowley of exactly what danger is stalking his angel. Then the demon ties it all together, casting his magic out into the larger pattern of life, letting it flow from him, out across the world - a safety net that will keep his angel protected wherever he goes, even as Crowley sleeps. And the best part is that it is undetectable, unless one can see all the patterns of the universe, and know what changes have been made. It’s such a complex weaving that it would take even Crowley years to find the strand that connects it all back to him.

A final burst of demonic power, channeled through the feather of a Fallen archangel, and everything is set into motion. He feels the magic snap into place around him, joining and blending with the fabric of the world. He feels the power flow through him, and watches as it leeches the color from his feather until it is clear as the finest crystal. In his hands, it becomes as cool and hard as stone. A snap of his fingers, and it’s bound to a silver chain that he drapes around his neck, where it settles over his heart. He can feel it’s weight against his chest, a comforting reminder that he is not leaving his angel unprotected.

The work done, Crowley is even more exhausted. He doesn’t know how long it took him to weave his spells. It was light outside when he started, and dark now, but that tells him nothing. It could have been hours, but it was probably days. The wards draw from his power, limiting him from the full range of a Fallen archangel to something more like the lesser demon he pretends to be. That’s fine. Better than fine. It will help to throw Hell off his scent. Only someone with the power of an archangel could have killed Paimon. Unless they detect the spells draining his power, they will not believe Crowley capable of such a feat. It’s one more thing that will help keep Aziraphale safe as he sleeps.

Crowley gets up, and drags himself to the bed on the other side of the room, placing his sword against the headboard, where he can reach it with ease if he needs to. He has barely enough energy left to miracle himself into something more comfortable, before he falls into a deep, decades-long sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think!

Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
2. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
3. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
4. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
5. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
6. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
7. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
8. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
9. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This chapter was particularly difficult to write, though I'm not quite sure why. It also has one of my favorite scenes from this story. (I wonder if you can guess what it is?)

Both of the "flashbacks" in this one happen after the Fall, but I felt like this was a much better place to include them than where they would have fallen in the beginning chapters. I also hadn't actually planned a real one for this chapter, since it wasn't supposed to be it's own chapter at all but the second half of chapter 8.

Thank you all so much for continuing to stick with me with this monster! I really really love hearing from you, all of your comments make me so very happy. <3

Update: holy spelling mistakes batman. I'm so sorry, I think I've caught most of them now, but please feel free to let me know if you find one that got away from me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Asleep, Crowley dreams.

He’s on the battlefield again. At least, what’s left of it. He picks his way past corpses of beings that were once angels. It doesn’t matter now, which side they fought on. In death, they are all the same. He shouldn’t be here, he knows that. This isn’t Heaven, but it isn’t Hell either. It’s not even Earth. This place, this bloodstained piece of land, had once been part of Heaven, but the violence of what happened here has split it apart. It is a realm of its own now, a place where only the dead remain.

He had come because he had to. Because, despite everything, despite his Fall, despite the loss of Her love, he was once Her healer. And his job should have been here, walking the battlefield, tending to the wounded. Only, there are no wounded left here anymore. Those Fallen who still lived when Lucifer was cast down, shortly after his own million-light-year plunge into the Pit, they Fell with him. It was in Hell that they either succumbed to their wounds, or were transformed so completely and so deep that old injuries no longer mattered. And the rest, the wounded angels that survived long enough to be returned to Heaven, had already been taken back to the halls of healing, where his own apprentices would heal them, under the command of another. Whatever remains here is beyond saving, even with the skill of an archangel. It all belongs to Azrael now.

He makes his way slowly to the edge of the plane. To the place where the Fallen had been thrown from the field. He should leave, now that he knows he is not needed here. He doesn’t. Something pulls him onward, and he makes his way slowly along the rim of the battlefield, until he can see a single, lonely tree. The place where he stood and watched the battle, refusing to take part. The place where Raphael had died, murdered by his own siblings who would rather have seen him
dead than let him Fall.

As he nears, he sees a figure kneeling in the bloody grass beside the tree. Curious, he shifts, taking on the form of a serpent. He crawls across the ground, until he can slither up the trunk of the tree and hide himself in a coil along one of its leafy branches. Slowly, he inches out until he’s over top of the kneeling figure. His tongue flicks out, tasting the air, and he recognizes the scent of blood, misery, and Uriel. Crawly looks down, and sees his little sister. She’s on her knees beside of pool of blood he knows must be his own, head bowed as if in prayer. Before her lies her sword, still dripping with the ichor of a Fallen archangel. On Crawly’s back, a scar burns with pain. It’s mate, a thin white line on his chest, above his heart, pulses in harmony. He almost calls out, chastising her for leaving her weapon in such a state. He doesn’t know how long it’s been, but he knows it’s been weeks at least since he Fell, and even Heavenly blades will rust if left unclean.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, and the void inside him screams. He can hear the pain in her voice, his flickering tongue picks up the scent of her regret. He can’t feel any of it rolling down their bond, the way he used it. She is all but gone from his mind. Still, he wants to go to her. To comfort her. To draw his little sister into his arms and hold her in a tight embrace until her pain fades away like a terrible nightmare. He can’t. He’s no longer her brother, or anything she would even recognize. He’s a demon now, and she will kill him on sight.

“Uriel.” Gabriel’s voice. Or, it sounds like Gabriel’s voice, but harder, lacking the undercurrent of joy that Crawly remembers.

She looks up, eyes streaming with tears. “Brother.” Her voice is weak, choked with grief. “I-"

Gabriel moves into Crawly’s line of sight, dressed in a perfect white robe, free of the splattering of blood that stains his sister’s clothes. “We have need of you, sister,” he says, stopping before he enters the shadow of the tree. “Your angels are leaderless and afraid. They need your guidance.”

“How can I?” Uriel asks him. “How can I lead them, when I- when Ra- he is-”

Gabriel’s hard expression cracks, just a tiny bit, and he raises a hand, but it falters, dropping back to his side, and his face closes off, goes unreadable again. “You do what he would have wanted you to do,” he tells her.

Hug her, you idiot, Crawly thinks. She doesn’t need motivation, she needs support. Do you not know her at all? Even without her mind in his, he knows how to help her. It kills him that he can’t.
Uriel stands, fist clenched and eyes now flashing with anger. “And what is that?” she hisses. “To go back to Heaven and tell everyone that this is all part of Her Great Plan? That She took our brothers and sisters from us on purpose, went silent and let it all happen for a reason? That She’s left us to pick up the pieces on our own and hold it all together against our former siblings until it’s time to wipe each other out at the end of the world?” She takes a step towards Gabriel, who takes a step back, away from the sudden force of her wrath.

“Yes,” he tells her. “That’s exactly what he would want us to do.”

No. No it’s not, Crawly hisses in frustration, the sound covered by the wind that blows through the trees. I want you to heal this, not just hold it together. To stop the end of her plan from coming to fruition. To bloody well take care of each other.

“Is it?” Uriel asks, ice in her words. “Is it really?”

Gabriel frowns at her, suddenly looking as lost as Crawly feels. “How should I know?” he demands. “I’m not the one he confided in!”

“Well neither was I!” Uriel spits. “I don’t know any more than you do, what we’re supposed to be doing here. All I know is that our brother is gone, and we’re the ones that killed him.”

The other archangel reels back as if slapped, purple eyes wide and pained. “Uriel-” he says, but she’s not done.

“And before you presume to tell me how I should feel about it, you should know that I still don’t forgive you for what you did.”

“If we’re going to play that game, then I should remind you who cast the first blow,” Gabriel retorts. “Or have you forgotten that it was your blade through his back?”

Uriel launches herself at Gabriel with a wordless scream. Weaponless, she claws at her brother with her fingernails, leaving bloody scratches down his face. Gabriel stumbles back, reaching for a weapon he doesn’t wear. Her assault is so vicious, so unexpected, that he can do little more than block her blows. He cries out, then somehow manages to catch her wrists, lifting her into the air by his longer arms. She squirms, kicking out at him, inarticulate in her rage and grief.
“Stop this. Now.” Michael’s voice sounds from behind them, and Crawly watches as she strides into view. “Gabriel, release her.” She’s wearing a clean cream-colored robe, as spotless and perfect as Gabriel’s.

Their brother stares at her, surprised. “But, Michael, she-”

“Now, Gabriel,” she says, in the voice they all knew better than to disobey. “Uriel won’t attack you again. Will she?” This last is addressed to Uriel, now hanging limply in Gabriel’s grip. Mutely, she shakes her head, and he lowers her to the ground.

“Good. Now. Someone tell me what started this,” Michael orders, frowning at them both.

“Uriel isn’t keeping up with her duties,” Gabriel all but whines. “So I came to get her, that’s all. And she just attacked me!”

Michael looks at Uriel. “Is this true?” she asks calmly.

Uriel doesn’t meet her eyes. “He said- he said that I-” she stops.

“Go on,” their sister says. “What did he say?”

Uriel just shakes her head, unable to answer.

“Gabriel?” Michael turns to him. “What did you do, really?” Crawly knows that set to her jaw. She’s in no mood for games.

Gabriel seems to realize that too, because his eyes harden and he glares at them both. “She was shirking her duties. Coming back here and moping about - about him.”

“As is her right,” Michael snaps, and thunder claps in the distance. “As is all our right. Raphael was our brother.”

“He Fell,” Gabriel says, stubborn. “He wasn’t our brother anymore.”
Michael slaps him. The sharp crack of it startles Crawly. He jumps, and nearly falls from the tree. Below, Gabriel and Uriel both gape at her.

“You will not speak of him like that,” she says, anger in every line of her body. “Whatever he became, we will remember him as what he was to us.”

“To us?” Gabriel asks, purple eyes glowing with his own rage. “And what, exactly, were we to him there at the end? He didn’t even come to us, did he, when he knew he was Falling. He tried to get to Eden. To him, that principality he was always ignoring us for.”

“And why should he have come to us?” Uriel snaps back. “Considering what we did to him in the end? He knew what was coming, you said it yourself.”

Crawly closes his eyes, and wishes he was anywhere but here. He doesn’t need to see this. The silence in his mind rages and screams at him. He had known, objectively, what his Fall would do to his siblings. But knowing and seeing are two different things. At the time, all he could think of was Aziraphale. Of getting to him to say goodbye one last time. He hadn’t even thought to go to them. Hadn’t wanted them to see the damage the Fall was doing to him, to see him Fall and know it was too late to stop it. Hadn’t wanted to be there, when they got the orders to destroy him.

Below him, Gabriel makes a noise of frustration and turns his back on his siblings. “He could at least have said goodbye,” he says, bitterly.

“He did,” Uriel snarls. “You were too busy condemning him to listen.”

“That- that thing wasn’t Raphael anymore.” Crawly holds back a sharp wave of pain. Gabriel is right. He’s not Raphael anymore. He won’t ever be again.

“Just because he Fell, that doesn’t mean it wasn’t him!” Uriel shouts.

Gabriel growls. “That’s exactly what it means!”

Crawly’s eyes shoot open, and he watches his siblings turn to her. “I will not have you fighting. If you have nothing better to do, you will get back to work. Gabriel. You’ve been placed in charge of Earth operations. In this, and in this alone, I report to you. I suggest you get back to it.” Gabriel nods curtly, and stalks away.

Crawly would have frowned, if he’d had the lips for it. As it is, his tail twitches. Michael, placing herself under Gabriel’s command? He wants to hear more about that, but Michael turns to Uriel.

“Uriel. I know this is hard, but we need you to take over command of Raphael’s legion. The scientists and artists need direction.”

The younger angel nods. “I’ll- I’ll try.” She, too, turns and walks after Gabriel.

Michael starts to follow, then stops, bending down. She picks up something small and glittering from the ground. Crawly watches as she wipes it free of blood and dirt with the hem of her robes and then holds it up to the light. A ring, glittering golden in the sun. He knows the pattern - a pair of angel wings that wrap around the wearer’s finger to meet at the tips, the well-worn metal having taken the shape of his ring finger after years of wear. He’d thought it had been destroyed in his Fall, but here it is.

“Uriel,” she calls out, and their sister turns. Michael goes to her, and holds out the ring, placing it carefully in Uriel’s outstretched palms. “Take this,” she says, so quietly Crawly almost doesn’t hear her. “To remind you.”


“If you don’t think you can keep it,” she tells her, “then pass it on to someone who needs it.” She curls Uriel’s fingers closed around the bit of jewelry. “His Fall caused more pain than ours, after all.”

Uriel nods, and they walk away, out of Crawly’s line of sight. It won’t be until later, that he learns his little sister gained a new title after his Hall. Uriel, Archangel of Repentance.
The dream changes. He’s back in Hell, standing in Lucifer’s throne room. His brother paces upon the dais, overlooking his troops. Crowley forces himself to stand straight as his once beautiful eyes pass over him. He tells himself that he’s never been noticed before in these inspections. There’s no reason he should be noticed now. But then Lucifer pauses, and he sees the madness that burns like hellfire in the depths of his gaze. There’s no twinge, no pull from the shredded remains of Raphael’s connection to his siblings. He cut this bond himself, and Lucifer burned it closed in his rage. The silence aches within him, but there’s anger there too. So much anger, he’s almost overflowing with it. If only Lucifer had never come to him. Had never told him what he knew. Hadn’t given him that copy of the Plan. He’d still be an angel then. Still be whole.

“Do I know you, little snake?” the being that was once his brother asks, but there’s no real recognition in those eyes. There’s barely any sanity. “You remind me of someone…” the emotion on his face is almost sorrow. Then his expression clears, and recognition flickers in his gaze. “Ah. But you are the one called Crawly. You have done well, tempting the mortals. Yes, most well. I will see you rewarded, when I take back what is rightfully mine.” He turns away, and Crowley can breathe again. The silence, for the moment, is comforting. His mind, at least, is safe from Lucifer’s reach.

They’re released hours later, and Crowley takes his time making his way back up through the halls of Hell. He hates it here. It’s so dirty, so crowded, full of hopeless, tainted things that only serve to remind him that he, too, is tainted and vile. He wants to be gone from here, but if he hurries, if he looks like he wants to be anywhere else, somehow Hell will contrive to keep him here. So he takes back passageways, winds through lesser used rooms in the places where the masses of lower demons fear to travel due to the close proximity to the Pit. It’s this that leads him to enter a darkened torture room on the very edge of the abyss, and stumble upon Lucifer. The devil is standing precariously at the point where solid ground gives way to the bottomless pit, listening to the screams of damned souls that echo up from the depths. When Crowley sees him, he tries to back away. If he’s lucky, Lucifer won’t have noticed him. He’s not lucky.

“I see you there, little snake,” Lucifer says, eyes never straying from the darkness of the Pit. Crowley can hear something down there growling, a harsh, guttural sound.

“It galls him to do it, but Crowley bows before his elder brother. “My Lord,” he says, the words burning his throat. Satan is not a stable ruler. Any sign of rebellion is quashed immediately, and with no sense of remorse. As much as the demon hates making obeisance to his own brother, he would prefer it over destruction. “I apologize, I didn’t know you were here.”

“Do you know what is down there, little snake?” his brother asks, ignoring Crowley’s words.

The demon glances into the Pit, and then away. “I do.” He wishes he didn’t.
“S’el fu sì bel com’elli è ora brutto, e contra ’l suo fattore alzò le ciglia, ben dee da lui procedere ogne lutto.” Lucifer says, almost as if to himself.

If he were beautiful as he is hideous now, and yet did dare to scowl upon his Maker, well from him may all our misery flow. Dante’s Inferno. Crowley had helped him write the Divine Comedy, lounging beside the poet, making jokes about what might be seen on a trip through Hell. He hadn’t realized how much he’d revealed, until Dante had presented him with the first copy of his work.

His brother turns to him then, and this close Crowley can see the full extent of the damage done in his Fall. It’s not just the eyes, which had once been warm and welcoming, a deep black that he remembers sparkling like starlight. They’re so cold now, like chips of ice at absolute zero. His face is wrong too, vermilion skin drawn tight across features twisted and warped from the familiar lines he’d once known so well. In this light, the color of his skin could have been that of blood.

“Do the humans remember what we did for them?” Lucifer asks. “Are they grateful?” His words are almost lost under a cry from the abyss.

Internally, Crowley raises an eyebrow. We? That’s exactly like the Lucifer he remembers, there at the end. Taking credit after the fact for someone else’s actions. Lucifer hadn’t rebelled for the humans. Hadn’t meant any of this as a way to give them free will. He’d wanted more power, more notoriety. He hadn’t been content with just sitting at Her left hand. He wanted a throne. As far as he was concerned, the humans gaining their freedom was merely a side-effect.

“Some do,” Crowley tells him, not daring to say more.

The Thing in the Pit thrashes and screams.

“Pitiful creature,” Lucifer mutters, throwing a disgusted glance at the dark hole. Crowley closes his eyes against a rush of pain. He can hear the anguish in that tortured voice in the abyss, and the healer in him wants nothing more than to soothe it. Here, he can feel something clawing at the scarred connection between them, a mad scramble of claws and teeth trying to open up the burned and cauterized bond. He’s too close. He needs to get away. Soon. Before Lucifer realizes what’s happening.

“Sometimes,” his brother muses. “Sometimes I wonder if it was worth it.” His voice is sad, and the demon thinks he hears an echo of his own pain there. He tries to take a step away, back the way he came, but Lucifer raises his eyes to Crowley’s, pinning him to the spot with his gaze. Something in him is burning, and it’s all he can do to stand under the assault. It’s not the bond. It’s something else. Something that connects all demons to their lord and master.
“Tell me, little snake,” Lucifer says, a cruel smile twisting his features. “What do you think? Was Falling worth it?”

Crowley is compelled to reply, trapped by those ice-cold eyes. “No,” he says honestly. “It wasn’t.”

Lucifer throws back his head and laughs, loud and sharp like gunshots. The thing in the pit echoes the sound until the whole room shakes with it. Crowley can’t help it. His eyes are drawn to the abyss. There, in the darkness, he sees him. A creature the same vermillion color as the King of Hell at his side, but larger. So much larger it could crush whole armies with one hand. Six great wings spring from its back, constantly flapping, drafting a cold wind over a lake of ice that engulfs it up to its waist. Three heads thrash, gnashing teeth, while tears of pains fall from each of its six eyes. Lucifer’s true form, imprisoned still where She had bound him when he’d been cast down. What Lucifer has done horrifies him, deliberately splitting his essence, leaving the chained pieces of himself within in the Pit, a raging, mindless beast, while the rest of him walks free.

“I had a brother, once,” Satan tells him, staring down at his other half. “He would have ruled at my side, before our former siblings killed him.” His face twists in a snarl when he speaks of their siblings. “He would have had your place on Earth, my little snake.” Crowley shudders, wondering if Lucifer would have done the same thing to him, splitting his essence, chaining the broken parts of his soul in the Pit. He thinks it would have driven him mad.

“You have pleased me so far,” his brother says, and lays a heavy hand on Crowley’s shoulders. It burns where it touches him, and he forces himself not to react. “If you continue to do well, perhaps you may take his place in Hell.” His hand clenches, nails like claws cutting into Crowley’s flesh. “If you displease me, however…” Lucifer looks back down into the Pit, where his feral self chews on the soul of a sinner. The warning is clear enough. If Crowley displeases Satan, he will find himself cast into the Pit again, and this time there will be no crawling out. If they ever find out what he’s been doing on Earth, this will be his fate.

The dream shifts again, away from the realm of memory. Crowley is back in St. James’s Park, watching the ducks. He throws some seeds for them, and frowns up at the blood-red sky. It’s nearly sunset, and Aziraphale has still not arrived to meet him. The angel is never late. He turns, about to go to the bookshop to check on him, when Aziraphale appears.

“Aziraphale! I was just-” he stops, relief turning to confusion. The familiar figure of his angel is
radiating divine rage and hate. The emotions flow before him like the heralds of an oncoming storm, washing over Crowley. The demon freezes, mind blank at the pure hatred he sees on Aziraphale’s face. Hatred directed at him.

“Demon,” the angel spits, and there’s no kindness hidden in his voice, no recognition, no indication that he knows Crowley. “You will not speak my name.”

Crowley’s mind scrambles for a thought, a word, anything that could explain what he’s seeing. In front of him, Aziraphale draws his flaming sword.

“Angel, what-?” He chokes on the words, watching Aziraphale with wide eyes.

“You killed him,” Aziraphale says with white-hot fury shaking in his words. “I trusted you, and you killed him.”

Crowley instinctively holds his hands up between them, open and nonthreatening. “I haven’t killed anyone!” he protests, and Aziraphale laughs, a cruel, harsh sound through the tears streaming down his face.

“Don’t lie to me, fiend. I know your ways. You killed him, and tried to take his place. As if I could ever love a creature like you.” The angel’s beautiful face contorts into a sneer. He takes a step forward, and Crowley retreats back.

“No, I don’t- angel, I don’t even know who you’re talking about!” All of his instincts are screaming for him to run now, but he can’t. This is Aziraphale. And Aziraphale would never hurt him… would he?

“Raphael,” Aziraphale says, and Crowley flinches. “You murdered the Archangel Raphael.”

He checks his walls at the mention of his ancient name, and to his horror he finds them gone. The symbols that name him Raphael are visible for all to see. But they’re not right, not the clear, clean lines he remembers. They bubble, thick and viscous, corrupted almost beyond recognition. A rot covers the old sigil where it hasn’t decayed away, and the whole thing makes him sick to look at.

“No, no, Az- Angel, I swear to you, please-”
Aziraphale watches him with blazing eyes. He advances slowly, sword raised. “Demon Crowley. You have sinned against your Creator.” The angel takes a deep breath, before uttering his divine judgment. “Your sentence is death.”

Crowley runs then, pure terror spurring him to action. It’s too late. Aziraphale’s sword finds it’s mark, piercing his back in the same place Uriel’s sword had been, cutting easily through flesh and bone and sinking into his heart. Crowley screams, falling as his angel shoves the blade deeper, through his heart and out the other side. He turns it viciously, then pulls it out. Crowley gasps, feeling the blood bubbling up in his throat and spilling onto the grass that’s pressed against his face. Aziraphale kicks him over onto his back and raises the sword again, hovering over his neck. He brings it down, and the ground opens up beneath them. The demon falls. Down and down, past the circles of Hell, dropping down into the Pit, surrounded by Lucifer’s laughter. His brother’s feral form scoops him up with one hand, and the last thing he sees is three sets of sharp teeth, coming far too close.

Crowley wakes with a start, covered in the sticky sour sweat of fear. The key to his wards is hot against his chest, pulsing an urgent warning. Danger danger danger. He sits up in a panic, already reaching for his spells. Danger. All his wards are broadcasting danger. But nothing specific. Nothing targeted, neither at Aziraphale nor himself. Nothing demonic in origin at all. He takes a deep breath, and pulls back. The wards demand attention, but it’s not immediate. He has a moment to breathe, to try and forget his dreams. Most of them had been memories. Painful memories, happy memories, things he’d seen or done. They were fading away now. But that last dream hadn’t been a memory. It was a nightmare, a private fear that one day Aziraphale would decide to do what he should have done at the very beginning and smite him from the earth.

He sits and focuses on breathing for a few moments, grounding himself in the soft sheets under his fingers, the cold stone beneath his feet, the sounds he can just barely hear of the world outside, filtered through his windows. It’s not the sound of the city he remembers. It’s changed while he’s been asleep. He reaches out with all of his senses, to find a world he almost doesn’t recognize. He’s been asleep for just over half a century, and in those five decades so much has changed. He can feel the pace of human civilization accelerating. Time was, he could sleep for a century and wake up to a world that was hardly any different from when he had gone to bed.

His wards are still going off, insistent. Crowley stands, stretching muscles and joints that haven’t moved in decades. It’s only because of his demonic nature that his body hasn’t wasted away while he slept. He walks on stiff legs to his kitchen to make himself some coffee. Just the smell of it has him sending a blessing to the descendants of the Yemeni family that first discovered the drink. He’s not hungry - he’s never been quite as fond of that aspect of humanity as Aziraphale is - but the hot, bitter liquid is something he’s always appreciated. He hums in contentment, then notices a stack of letters on the kitchen counter, each one addressed to him in the angel’s careful
handwriting. Crowley’s lips curve in a small smile as he flips through the envelopes. There’s no postage. Aziraphale must have miracled them into his flat instead of sending them by regular mail.

Awake now, Crowley takes the letters back to his workbench. He casts a longing glance at the soft bed, but he knows if he gets back in he’ll fall asleep again, and he wants to look into the wards, find out what’s set them off. With a sigh, he lowers himself into his seat at the desk, and puts the letters aside. Wards first.

Crowley casts out with his mind, sinking through the feather that anchors it all and expanding out into the network of patterns, feeling for the world around him. What he finds is an entire planet on the brink of war. Chaos and fighting plague most of Europe, while colonialism proceeds apace in Africa and South America. Alliances are stretched thin, and fragile peace is being tested in more places than he can count. Crowley can read the pattern here, can predict what will happen. The world is a powder keg. It will only take one match to set it off.

The demon withdraws from his wards, quieting them, tuning them towards specific dangers. He has a feeling just being alive is going to be a danger for a while. Before he pulls back completely, he quickly checks on Aziraphale. The angel is settled into an armchair in his bookshop, a cup of cocoa at his elbow and a book open in his lap. Crowley smiles fondly, and returns to himself. At least Aziraphale is still safe. He’ll have to make sure that remains the case during the war that is to come. The memory of their last conversation echoes in his mind, and he shoves it away. The pain is miraculously quiet for now, a background hum, constant, clearly there, but manageable. His mental walls are holding strong, holding back the worst of it.

He stretches, yawning, and his gaze falls on the stack of letters. As he flips through them, he sees they’re all dated on the corner, telling him when the angel sent them. The first is from 1863, a little more than a year after their last meeting. For the next decade, there’s one every couple of years. As time wore on, they came more frequently, until the past decade, where he has one every few months. He decides to start with the most recent, and work backwards. It’s dated June 14, 1914 - two weeks before he’d woken up. Crowley breaks the seal on the letter, and reads.

My dear Crowley,

It has now been over 50 years since we last spoke, and I find once again that I deeply regret the way our conversation ended. I can’t imagine why you asked for what you did, but I regret that my words may have led you to believe that I do not care for your company. In case this is the first of my letters you read, I will say once again that I value your companionship far more than I believe you know. I have missed you these past decades, and I would very much like it if you were to return to me soon.
I know you are in there. I can feel your presence when I come to your door. But, as always, there is something that keeps me from entering. I understand if you do not wish to see me, but I worry about you. I haven’t felt your presence outside of this flat for decades, and I can only assume you are taking another one of your long ‘naps’. If that is the case, then, I hope you will see these letters when you get up. I know I have no right to ask this of you, but should you feel so inclined, I would appreciate it greatly if you could let me know when you wake, and if you are alright.

Nothing much has happened to me, since my last letter. The bookshop continues to do well. I have not sold a single book in months, and it seems my opening hours have done a good job convincing potential customer to go elsewhere. A rare book dealer came by the other day, and I managed to convince him to part with a particularly good first edition of Don Quixote. I know you said you do not read novels, but I believe you might enjoy this one. Perhaps one day, I can loan you a copy.

On a more unsettling note, I had a visit from Gabriel the other day. Uriel accompanied him this time, though I noticed that they did not seem particularly pleased with each other. I remember you telling me, once, that you thought they all seemed extremely cold, both towards myself and each other. I find I must admit that you are right. I remember Uriel as being fond of her brothers. Raphael would tease her mercilessly, and she would always laugh and give as good as she got. She had a wonderful smile. I don’t think either she or Gabriel were particularly pleased about my friendship with their brother, but I had hoped with time I would come to know them better. Raphael always spoke so highly of them both. Perhaps that is too much to ask. I’m just a principality, after all. I just wish, I suppose, that they could understand how wonderful Earth is. All the fantastic things humans come up with. They spend so much time in Heaven that they’ve lost touch with the rest of Her creation. I think it would benefit many angels to spend time down here, to understand what it is we were created to take care of.

Enough of that. I’m sure you don’t want to read about my boring interactions with the archangels. I’ve had a few jobs lately, minor blessings mostly, but my current assignment is simply to observe. Gabriel says big things are starting to happen in Europe, and I am to watch them. I’ve been ordered specifically not to interfere, though with what, I have yet to find out. I can feel a tension in the world, and I worry about what that might mean. I am certain you would know, but of course I cannot ask you.

In any case, I am at loose ends for a while. I almost miss doing your temptations for you. (Do not assume this means I wish to take on more of your work. You do little enough as is, you wily demon.) It is far too quiet, without you here to thwart. Please be alright.

Sincerely yours,

Aziraphale.
P.S. I went to a concert the other day - Tchaikovsky. You were right, his work has become quite popular. I particularly like his *Romeo and Juliet*, though, given your current activities, you might prefer his ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*.

The rest of the letters are much the same. Notes about significant events taking place, updates on the bookshop, comments on interactions with various humans and, occasionally, the archangels, musings on the current state of the world, all interspersed with entreaties for Crowley to wake up. Two other letters also offer apologies for the way they parted, though in several more the angel reprimands him for seeking so dangerous a thing as holy water. Crowley breathes a sigh of relief, some of his pain fading away. Aziraphale doesn’t hate him. Or, at least, he isn’t ready to be completely rid of him just yet. The knowledge eases something that had been tightened around his heart.

He contemplates going to the bookshop and talking to the angel. He can picture his expression, the way his eyes would light up, the small smile that would appear on his face before he could banish it in favor of a look of admonishment. He’d probably then launch into a lecture on sloth. It would be good to see him again, Crowley thinks, but he doesn’t know if he could take it if the conversation devolved into another argument so soon. If Aziraphale walked away from him *again*. So instead, he pulls out his own paper, miracles some ink for his pen as everything he had has gone dry, and writes a quick note.

*Angel,*

I ’m up. Had a great nap. Thanks for the letters. Sorry I missed the Titanic, it sounded like a fun time.

See you around,

-Crowley

He seals it with wax and his personal seal, then miracles it into the angel’s letter box. He’ll go to him when he’s ready. That done, Crowley gets up, deciding he’s spent far too long inside these walls. He wants to get up, and see what this new century is all about. The demon spends some time
wandering around, getting a feel for life in 1914. He quickly picks up on the fashion of the times, and miracles himself a more modern suit and haircut. Then, properly outfitted, he sets out to find some trouble.

It isn’t long before war breaks out, and Crowley is swept away in it. Without Heaven or Hell picking a side in this one, Crowley is left to determine who he supports on his own. It’s a freedom he didn’t expect, but with his only orders being ‘promote evil’, well, there’s a lot he can do with that. After all, he barely has to lift a finger to promote evil in this war. Human ingenuity has created weapons of violence that far exceed the tried and tested battle tactics, and the end result is carnage far beyond anything even the most twisted minds of Hell could have dreamed. Old strategy is useless in the face of modern weaponry, and the humans scramble to find their footing in a game where all the rules have changed, and the consequences of losing are unimaginable.

Crowley visits a battlefield, and decides at once he can’t do it. Being on the front lines, it’ll be a repeat of the Black Plague all over again, and he can’t have that. Can’t let himself get so close to falling apart again, when there’s a chance Hell could find out what he’s been doing. So he decides that the best way to keep up with the amount of chaos going on is to join the fledgling British Secret Intelligence Service. He picks the first name Anthony for the paperwork, and weasels his way into a job as a field agent. A few quick miracles and some quick thinking in the field see him rapidly climbing the ladder. And it’s… it’s fun. The itch to create chaos inside him pushes him to take the dangerous assignments, the risky ones that get even the best agents killed. The thrill of it thrums through him. He’s never felt more alive, more human, than when he’s running from gunfire, desperate to get some bit of information back across enemy lines. It’s glorious. The adrenaline rush through his borrowed body is addicting. It’s better than the taste of fine wine, or the high from certain drugs. And the best part is, when he’s working, the silence and the pain fade away, pushed aside. There’s no room for them when it takes all of his concentration to get out of a situation alive. Sure, discorporation wouldn’t be too bad, he’d just have to get another body and come back topside. But it could be years before he gets through the paperwork, and, really, there’s always the risk they’ll decide he’s spent too long on Earth and send someone else. Better not to risk it.

Through it all, he keeps tabs on Aziraphale. The angel stays in London during the war, running his bookshop and observing as ordered. Sometimes, he finds an excuse to go over to the continent, and when he does Crowley always follows, remaining carefully out of sight. He has to take action on a few occasions, diverting attacks or sending a bomber off-course, but there’s never anything that demands his personal, physical intervention at Aziraphale’s side. They exchange a few letters - long and rambling on the angel’s part, quick and casual from Crowley - but the demon brushes off any suggestions of meeting in person. He’s still not ready.

The Great War ends. Crowley stays on with the SIS. In 1926 he gets a car, a Bentley, and finds something else he loves. The speed is like nothing he’s ever known. He’s flown faster, of course, but there’s just something about the rumble of the engine, the feeling of the road passing underneath the tires. Behind the wheel, driving 90mph down an empty highway, Crowley thinks he finally understands why Aziraphale loves his bookshop so much. It’s amazing, the things humans can come up with.
When it’s been long enough that his fellow spies start to get suspicious about his lack of aging, Crowley fakes his own death on a mission. It’s dramatic, involving him getting a critical piece of information out just before the enemy catches and ‘kills’ him. In reality, he miracles away the bullet, and plays dead until they bury him. Then he rises from his grave and returns to his car, driving back to his flat. A year or two later, his ‘son’, Anthony J Crowley, appears at the SIS, promising to live up to his ‘father’s’ legacy.

When World War II breaks out, he spends a lot of time out in the field. He can’t resist making a name for himself, foiling England’s enemies in increasingly spectacular ways. He passes it off to Hell as inspiring the Axis powers to try harder to be evil, but really it’s just fun. He can’t help wanting to make a fool out of the Nazis. He hates what they’re doing, hates it with a passion. If he could, he would stop it all at once with a snap of his fingers, sending Hitler down into the Pit with Lucifer’s great beast. But not even an archangel, Fallen or otherwise, has the power to stop a war this big on his own. So Crowley contents himself with a series of exploits that would astonish even the most hardened secret agent. Later, he will boast that he was part of the inspiration for James Bond.

It’s 1941, before Crowley hears rumors of a local Soho bookshop owner working for the Germans. A little more digging, and he’s certain that it’s Aziraphale. He’s positive the angel wouldn’t willingly work with a genocidal regime, so he knows he must have been duped into it somehow. He volunteers to take the case, citing a need for a bit of downtime before going back out into hostile territory. From there, it’s not hard to work out what the angel is doing. A pretty young woman, who Crowley instantly hates, has him convinced she’s an SIS agent. He’s going around gathering books on prophecy, believing he’s doing it to lure a couple Nazi spies into a trap. Then Crowley learns exactly what they have planned, and his blood runs cold.

He follows the fake agent to the church. And of course, the whole thing is taking place in a church. He watches the agent go in, then takes a deep breath. Consecrated ground. It’s not fair, that the place most connected to his Creator, his Mother, is forbidden to him. Not fair, that the holiness that once felt like home now burns his body, raising blisters on his feet where they touch the ground and turning every molecule in his body sensitive and raw. He hesitates right on the threshold between safe and holy, and feels Her light on the building, illuminating the yawning void inside him.


It burns. Like being on a beach in bare feet, yes, but a beach where the sand has the heat of a volcano underneath and the very air is almost too hot to breathe. He has to step quickly, trying his best to keep contact with the floor to a minimum. His mental walls strain and crack against the pain, the sharp sting of rejection. It’s almost too much. And then he sees Aziraphale, standing there
with guns trained on him, ready to discorporate the angel. It’s almost a physical relief when the
woman holding the gun turns it on him instead. Aziraphale’s face goes unreadable, and Crowley
tries not to miss the welcoming, relieved smile he’s seen, the last few times the demon has
swooped in to save him.

“What are you doing here?” Aziraphale hisses, watching him with guarded eyes.

He supposes he deserves that. They haven’t seen each other face-to-face in nearly a century, even
though he’s sometimes gotten close enough to see the angel himself. He hadn’t been ready for it.
He still isn’t, truth be told.

“Stopping you from getting into trouble,” he tells him, distracted as he tries to assess the danger in
the room. Three hostiles, at least two with guns. How to get rid of them?

“I should have known, of course,” Aziraphale says, and the accusation in his voice stings almost as
badly as the stones beneath his feet. “These people are working for you.”

“No!” Crowley protests, almost offended. “They’re a bunch of half-witted Nazi spies, running
around London, blackmailing and murdering people.” If he’d been a good
demon, they would have
been his agents. But he’s not exactly a good demon, is he? “I just didn’t want to see you
embarrassed.” Didn’t want to see the angel discorporated. Didn’t want to risk Heaven refusing to
return him and sending down someone else. He knows he won’t ever have the angel’s love, but it
still might kill him if Aziraphale goes back where he can’t follow.

“Mr. Anthony J Crowley. Your fame precedes you,” one of the two men says, and Crowley spares
him a glance as he paces in a circle. He won’t be able to walk right for the better part of a week
after this.

“Anthony?” Aziraphale asks, and Crowley remembers he hasn’t let the angel know about his new
name yet. He feels a stab of worry, barely noticeable on top of everything else, that his friend
won’t approve.

“You don’t like it?” He casts his senses wide as he speaks, searching for something to save them
now that he’s rushed in without a plan.

“No, no, I didn’t say that,” Aziraphale says, and there’s a softening in his features, his walls
lowering. “I’ll get used to it.” Crowley relaxes a bit. Maybe their friendship really isn’t un-
salvageable after all. And, ah, there. He spots a solution to this situation. One quick demonic miracle, and a plane goes just slightly off course.

“The famous Mr. Crowley,” the woman says, and he hides a grin. Famous. “Such a pity you must both die.” She’s eyeing him appreciatively, but he never really has time for that sort of thing. Especially not with people who plot to murder his angel. Plus, all three humans are going to be dead in less five minutes now.

Aziraphale looks at the humans, then back at him. “What does the J stand for?” The demon would have laughed, if he wasn’t so busy keeping his feet moving. It’s just like the angel to avoid the important issues at hand in favor of trying to figure out what his initial means.

“Er,” he says, realizing he hadn’t ever actually decided what it stood for. He’d just used it to distinguish his current secret agent persona against the older, ‘dead’ agent from the first World War. “It’s just a ‘J’, really.” He circles again, and his eyes catch on the font of holy water, sitting there right in front of them. “Oh, look at that. A whole font full of holy water. Doesn’t even have guards.” It’s a pity it’ll probably be completely destroyed. He’ll have to be careful that none of it splashes on him when the church explodes.

“Enough babbling. Kill them both,” one of the humans says, turning away from them. Crowley feels the flash of fear from his angel, and around his neck his spell anchor pulses, confirming the danger. He has to stall them.

“In about a minute,” he says, “a German bomber will release a bomb that will land right here.” He has their attention now. “If you all run away very, very fast, you might not die. You won’t enjoy dying. Definitely won’t enjoy what comes after.” His dramatic delivery is spoiled a bit by how he can’t stand still, but he’ll take what he can get. It’s not like anyone but he and the angel will survive this to tell anyone about his poor performance.

The human that had ordered their deaths smirks. “You expect us to believe that? The bombs tonight will fall on the East End.”

It’s starting to get too much. He can’t stand much more of the pain in his feet, or the way even the air hurts his lungs as he breathes in. He doesn’t need to breathe, of course, but the air is important for talking so he can’t just stop for now. He’s going to have to stand in Hellfire for a while to recover from this.

“Yes,” he says, voice strained from the pain. “It would take a last-minute demonic intervention to throw them off course, yes. You are all wasting your valuable running-away time.” They won’t
understand what he’s saying here, but Aziraphale will. Time is limited, and with the way the holiness of this place is burning away at him, he’s not sure he has enough power to shield them both from the bomb. “But if,” he adds, “in thirty seconds, a bomb does land here,” he meets Aziraphale’s eyes, praying to someone that the angel will get what he’s saying here. “It would take a real miracle for my friend and I to survive it.” He doesn’t miss the way Aziraphale’s eyes widen at the word ‘friend’, the way his lips twitch in a way that suggests that, were they not in such immediate danger, he would be smiling.

“A- a real miracle?”

“Yes,” he confirms, projecting confidence. It feels like parts of his essence are burning now. The bomb coming will be a welcome relief.

“Kill them,” one of the human men orders, and the woman raises her gun again. “They are very irritating.”

Crowley feels his errant bomber arriving, and points up. The humans all freeze, hearing the tell-tale whistle of a falling bomb. Silently, Crowley counts to three, then closes his eyes, trusting in Aziraphale to bring them through this safely. The world explodes around them. As it does, he remembers the books. And that Aziraphale will probably not remember them. It takes only a small bit of power to shield the bag of them, but he almost doesn’t have enough.

The smoke clears, leaving them both standing in the wreckage of the church, and Crowley nearly sags in relief as the consecration evaporates and he can breathe again.

“That was very kind of you,” Aziraphale tells him.

“Shut up.” Crowley responds, cleaning debris off his glasses and sliding them back on, safely hiding his eyes. He doesn’t need or want thanks for this. Still, it warms him when Aziraphale insists.

“Well, it was,” he says, then the demon watches as the realization dawns on his face that he’s forgotten about protecting his books. “Oh, the books,” he says, and the heartbroken expression is enough that Crowley would have reversed time just for him, in order to save the books. Thankfully, he doesn’t have to. “I forgot all of the books. They’ll have been blown to-”

Crowley stands and walks on blistered feet to where the dead body of one of the humans still
clutches at the bag. He pries it free, handing it to his friend. He avoids looking at the angel’s face when he does. He thinks they’re still friends, but he’s so afraid that he’ll look at the angel and see rejection in his eyes.

“Little demonic miracle of my own,” he says, as if it were nothing. As if, moments ago, he wasn’t terrified he would be too late to save the angel this time. He stalks away, tossing back an offer for a lift home. He doesn’t see the complicated expression that crosses Aziraphale’s face, or the way the angel’s eyes linger on his from as he moves towards the car. He doesn’t expect him to take the offer, especially when he doesn’t immediately follow, so it surprises the demon when the angel climbs into his passenger seat.

“New car?” Aziraphale asks him, and Crowley grins.

“Yeah. Isn’t she great?”

Aziraphale hums an agreement, looking over the interior of the Bentley. Crowley pulls out of the lot across from the ruined church, and his headlights fall on the one thing still standing from the explosion. The dove-shaped lectern. He thinks he’ll come back for it later. It will look nice in his apartment. A reminder of what happened here tonight.

Silence falls between them. Crowley briefly considers apologizing for the holy water incident, but decides against it. He’d been right to ask for it. Hell will still come for him, and he still needs a plan to face them when they do. If he can’t get it from the angel, he’s going to have to steal some himself. Now isn’t the time to bring it up again, however. Not when they just reunited after almost a century apart. He can also tell something is worrying the angel. Aziraphale’s never really been able to control his expression, and right now it’s doing a complicated dance as thoughts cross his mind. Crowley sighs, and gives him time. It’s hard. His burned feet scream at him, and he can almost count the individual blisters by the way they throb. His lungs hurt too, like he’s inhaled too much smoke. He needs to go home, conjure some hellfire in his fireplace, and stand in it until it heals all his holy wounds.

“Crowley,” Aziraphale finally asks as they speed through the darkened streets.

“Yeah angel?” The demon glances over at him, and sees his hands clenched in his lap.

“I… never mind. It’s nothing.”
Crowley rolls his eyes behind his glasses. “Come on angel, I can feel your gears turning from here. What’s bothering you?” He’s not sure he really wants to know. From the way Aziraphale is looking at him, he knows this is going to be a painful conversation. But he’s never really been able to deny the angel anything before. He sees no reason for that to change now.

“There is something… something I’ve been wondering about, for quite a while now,” Aziraphale says carefully, eyes looking anywhere but at Crowley’s face.

“Yeah? Like what? Whether Satan wears underpants?”

“What? No,” Aziraphale looks surprised, then frowns at Crowley’s grin. ‘Oh, do shut up.’

Crowley’s smile softens, and his eyes fall again on the way the angel’s hands are tangled together in his lap. “It’s alright,” he says, sincerity in his voice. “Whatever it is, you can ask.”

“But…” Aziraphale sighs. “I don’t think it’s exactly the kind of question one asks.” And the demon knows him well enough to hear the words he doesn’t say. I think this question might hurt if I ask it. He’s not sure if he’s afraid it’ll hurt Crowley, or himself. On hand on the wheel, he turns his full attention to the angel. He expects the car to keep driving and not hit anything, so that is what it does.

“Angel,” he says firmly, and Aziraphale raises his eyes to meet his. Or at least, to meet his glasses. “You never need to worry about asking questions with me. Can’t promise I’ll answer. But you can ask.”

“I… alright.” Despite his words, the angel doesn’t seem inclined to go on. His eyes turn towards the road ahead, but Crowley can tell he isn’t seeing a thing. He returns his attention to the wheel, and waits for the angel to be ready.

At last, Aziraphale gives a small sigh, and the demon knows he’s ready to talk. “I was… wondering. Do- do demons feel love?”

_Do demons feel love?_ Crowley scrambles to throw up more walls against the rush of pain those words stab into him. Of all the questions the angel could ask, he hadn’t expected that. The emptiness inside bleeds, the void where Her love used to be an aching, empty pit. _Do I?_ Of course he does. It isn’t effortless, like it had been when he was an angel, to feel it around him. But he can, if he tries. He does now, reaching out with another set of senses and feeling for the love that
always radiates from the angel. He finds it right where he expects it, warm, comforting, a genuine sense of love for all things great and small. It steadies him, soothing the aches inside. For a moment, he almost gets a hint of something else, before it slips away, slotted carefully behind a wall in Aziraphale’s mind.

“Do you mean in general, sensing it around us?” he asks, when he has a hold of himself again. “Or specifically, love for something?”

“Both. Either. I don’t know.” The angel won’t look at him now.

“I see.” He considers his words carefully. It’s…” There’s an easy answer he could give here. He could lie, say no, he doesn’t feel love. Or he could say yes, and leave it at that. Simple and honest, which he expects the angel wants. Something in him balks at the simple answer. He finds that he wants Aziraphale to understand this. To get where he’s coming from here. He’s not even sure why it’s so important to him, suddenly but it is.

He’ll have to be careful though. He can’t go too far here, can’t reveal too much of himself. If Aziraphale even thinks Crowley might feel that more specific kind of love, might feel it for him, well. Crowley knows him well enough to predict what would happen. He would run. And this tentative friendship between them, rekindled less than an hour ago now, would be gone, lost, possibly for good.

“Feeling love, other people’s love, yes, we can do that. But it’s… different for a demon. It’s like…” he frowns. How to describe it. Ah. He remembers the great orchestras of Heaven, how they would play, and the sound would fill Heaven and he could let himself be carried away by the melody. They’ve tried to replicate it in Hell, but they just can’t quite get it right. Somehow, he doesn’t think the angels can do it anymore either. Not the way it used to be.

“What’s that instrument in an orchestra?” he asks. “The big stringed one. With that deep sound that sort of carries all of the others on its back?”

Aziraphale’s brows knit in confusion. “Bass. Or cello, I suppose. But what does that have to do with-”

“Yeah, bass!” Crowley nods. “That’s the one.” He snaps his fingers, and sound flows around them from the radio in his car. “It’s like this. You lot, you don’t even really have to listen to hear the music. It’s just… there. A part of you. All the violins and cellos, pipes and drums and harps. Every little piece of it.” He meets Aziraphale’s sea-blue eyes, willing him to understand what he’s trying to say here. “That’s love. All the different kinds of love, from passionate, romantic love, all the
way down to the simple, honest love of an animal. And at the core of it all, so low and steady you forget it’s even there, there’s Her love. Like bass in an orchestra. It supports all the rest, gives it life, color.”

“Now,” he snaps again, and the music changes. The deeper bass and cello notes falling away. “When I - when someone Falls, it’s like… like going to the concert, and expecting it to be like always. But you listen. And the bass is gone. You can see the bassist, and the cellos, but you can’t hear them. You can see other people who you just know can hear it, but you can’t. Everything else comes through just fine. Violins and violas, trumpets, flutes. It’s all there, all beautiful. But the bass is missing. And you know it will always be missing, no matter what you do.” He doesn’t say he thinks there might be something better than the bass. That he would forgo the whole fucking orchestra, if only he could hear one very specific instrument. One that will never be played for him.

“Oh, Crowley,” Aziraphale’s voice is mournful, and when Crowley looks at him, he’s shocked to see tears in the angel’s eyes.

He turns away, uncomfortable. “Don’t look at me like that, angel.”

“I just…” Aziraphale’s hand stretches towards him, hesitant, before he retracts it, twining his fingers together instead. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Well.” Crowley shrugs, trying to convince his shoulders to relax and not feel the need to be up around his ears. “Now you do.” He sighs, wondering if he should have just lied.

“And… being able to love? Is it… can you?” There’s something in the angel’s voice there, a question Crowley doesn’t know how to understand.

“Demons in general?” He shakes his head. “I don’t think it’s that we can’t, really. It’s just… what’s the point. We’re damned, angel. Unforgivable. Even if we did, it’s not like anyone is ever going to be able to love us back.” Not like someone was ever going to return his love.

“That’s not true!” Aziraphale protests, and Crowley can’t help but laugh at him. It feels like a church window shattering in his throat.

“Sure it is. Name one being, just one, that can honestly say that it loves a demon.” He feels that unnamed feeling from Aziraphale, surging against the angel’s barriers until he grips it and puts it
away.

“I-” Aziraphale starts, then stops, and Crowley’s pain roars to life, swamping his own mental walls.

“Don’t say you do,” he warns, trying to keep his voice light and free of the echoes screaming inside the silence. “You’re an angel. It’s part of the job description. You love everything. You love demons in the same way you love ducks, or flowers. ‘All God’s creatures’ and all that rot. I mean specifically. As a person, not an angel.”

Aziraphale opens his mouth, then sighs, and closes it again. “What about you, then,” he asks quietly. “Can you love, specifically?”

Crowley’s knuckles go white on the steering wheel. He doesn’t answer, which, in itself, is answer enough.

Twenty-six years later, he returns to his car from finally setting up the job to get the holy water, to find Aziraphale sitting in the passenger seat. His heart constricts, and the way the angel won’t meet his eyes practically screams that something is wrong. He’s leaving you, whispers the voice that sounds too much like Lucifer in his head. He’s come to say goodbye.

“What are you doing here?” Crowley asks, hoping against hope that he’s wrong.

“Needed a word with you,” Aziraphale tells him, and his voice opens cracks in the demon’s walls, letting the pain and silence bleed out into his mind.

Crowley lets out one carefully controlled syllable. “What?”

“I work in Soho,” the angel says, still not looking him in the eye. “I hear things. I hear, that you’re setting up a… caper. To rob a church.” Ah. So that’s it. Crowley forces his body to relax. He’d known this was coming, but he has to do it. If he doesn’t get the holy water, and soon, he’ll be completely unprepared when Hell comes for him. And he can feel them searching. Ligur and Hastur have been poking around. Not to mention Paimon’s two deputies who are on the warpath, determined to kill something in revenge for their leader’s death.
“Crowley, it’s too dangerous,” Aziraphale cautions. “Holy water won’t just kill your body. It will destroy you completely.”

Safe behind his dark glasses, Crowley closes his eyes. There’s fear in the angel’s voice, open and obvious. He hates that he’s the one that put it there. That he can’t just ease it away, tell the angel he won’t try and get the holy water. Can’t even promise he won’t use it the way Aziraphale fears, if it comes down to it. But if the choice he has is between his life and Aziraphale’s, he knows what choice he’ll make. Every time.

“You told me what you think,” he says, “A hundred and five years ago.” He doesn’t need to be yelled at again over this. He’s made up his mind. It’s the only way.

At last, Aziraphale meets his eyes. He wonders what the angel sees, when he looks at him. Can he see past the dark glasses? See the way Crowley’s serpentine eyes are drinking him in, memorizing his face, just in case this conversation ends the same way the last one did. Just in case this time they don’t come back together again if it does.

“And I haven’t changed my mind.” The angel’s voice is sad, but also resolved. “But,” he says, “I can’t have you risking your life. Not even for something dangerous.” He looks down, and Crowley can smell the fear and pain rolling off of him. “So…” he produces a thermos. Crowley can feel his heart beating in his throat. He forces himself not to read into this. This is just Aziraphale giving him what he asked for so he won’t go getting himself hurt and put their arrangement in jeopardy. Nothing more.

“You can call off the robbery,” Aziraphale tells him, and Crowley’s eyes flicker between the angel’s face and the thermos in his hands. Carefully, he reaches out, taking it from the angel. Softly, Aziraphale warns him not to unscrew the cap. He orders his hands not to shake as he pulls it close.

“It’s the real thing?” He shouldn’t have asked. He knows it is.

“The holiest,” Aziraphale confirms.

There’s a lump forming in his throat, making it hard to speak. “After everything you said?” The memory of Aziraphale’s words that day in the park are still fresh, floating in his pain alongside all the other little reminds that he’s not good enough. Will never be good enough. Aziraphale will never see you for anything more than exactly what you are. Unforgivable. He can’t be the
archangel Aziraphale still mourns.

The angel nods, but he can’t even look at Crowley now.

“Should I say thank you?” the demon asks, already knowing it’s a bad idea.

“Better not.”

He closes his eyes against the pain in the angel’s voice. He curses himself for doing this to him. For ever putting them both in such a position that this is the only way to be sure the angel will be safe.

“Can I drop you anywhere,” he offers, hoping he can at least do this for him. Aziraphale’s gaze is skittish, flickering to Crowley’s face, then away again.

“No, thank you,” he says, and Crowley would do anything to make him stay. To have a few more moments with him, so he can unfreeze his brain enough to think up something to say that will make the angel laugh. Something to make him smile, and wipe that heartbroken look off of his face.

“Oh, don’t look so disappointed,’ Aziraphale chides gently. “Perhaps someday we could… I don’t know… have a picnic. Dine at the Ritz.” And now Crowley knows he’ll move heaven and earth to make both of those things happen. If it kills him, he’ll do it. If it will make his angel happy again, he’ll do anything. Anything at all, except give him back this precious lifeline in a tartan thermos.

“I’ll give you a lift,” he says, one last try. “Anywhere you want to go.” He means it. Anywhere at all. The bookshop. That crepe shop in France. Up into the stars.

Aziraphale meets his eyes again, and the look on his face is devastating. Crowley braces himself, but even still the angel’s next words set the silence inside him to screaming.

“You go too fast for me, Crowley.”

The demon is still trying to find a reply, still trying to understand what that even means, when the
angel gets up and closes the door behind him, leaving Crowley alone in the silence. Too fast. They both know he doesn’t mean the car. Another thing to add to the list of things he is. Demon. Unforgivable. Fallen. Too fast. He holds the thermos and takes a deep breath. It doesn’t matter, he reminds himself He’s known since that first day in Eden, when they stood on the wall and watched Adam and Eve walk away, that he can’t be what Aziraphale needs. It doesn’t matter. As long as the angel is alive, it is enough. It doesn’t stop the way the silence echoes inside, reverberating with Paimon’s words from over a century before. You’re all alone, trying to pretend you can still be something other than what you are. He’s no spy, no secret agent. He’s not James Bond. He’s not an archangel. Not Raphael. To Aziraphale, he’s just an inadequate shadow of an angel. He turns the thermos over in his hands. None of that matters. It’s not anything he can change. He takes a deep breath, and slowly shoves the pain back. He’ll just have to focus on what’s in front of him.

Chapter End Notes

Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
2. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
3. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
4. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
5. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
6. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
7. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
8. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
9. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael

[credit to https://www.mappingdante.com/inferno/ for Italian text of Dante’s Inferno]

Please let me know what you think!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I changed up the summary, since I'm actually shit at those, and this feels a bit more fitting for my story.

Thank you all for sticking with me this far! I really really love hearing from you, your comments seriously make my day over and over again.

I'm sorry this is a week late, but some Seriously Shitty Stuff has been happening in my work, and I sort of feel like something /broke/ inside me this past week. So I had a bit of a hard time writing this chapter. I'll try and get the next one out on time, but I may have to switch to bi-weekly updates if I can't get my head screwed back on right.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If someone had told Raphael that there were things he would enjoy about being a demon, he would have laughed at them. Laughed long, and loud, until they started to look a little uncomfortable. And then he would have directed them to the halls of healing to get their head looked at. That doesn’t change the fact that the truth of it, so many centuries later, is a comfort. Because it’s true. There are things that Crowley enjoys about being a demon. As much as he hurts, as much as he misses his siblings, and his connection to God, and most of all the easy friendship he had shared with Aziraphale, there are things he has now that he doesn’t think he could give up. There’s a freedom to his life now, a freedom that he could never have in Heaven. There are rules, yes, and consequences for disobeying. But he’s not bound to them, body and soul. Not the way he used to be. He can get away making mistakes, disobeying the rules, without fear that he’ll rip himself further away from Her Grace. Lucifer isn’t omniscient or omnipotent, even as he pretends to be, and it’s a relief not having that kind of presence looking over his shoulder at every moment. He’s not always on orders, now. He has time to go where he wants, do what he wants. There’s no conforming to the image of an archangel now, either. He doesn’t have the eyes of all Heaven on him, just waiting for him to slip up, to be a little too much himself, and get punished for it. He’s not being told at every turn to accept his place and set a good example for the others. He’s not being told not to ask questions.

He has time to be alone now, too. That wasn’t something he’d ever had, before Falling, not for a single moment. He’d had five siblings living in his brain, and as much he loves them, there were many times when they would come into his consciousness just when he didn’t want them there. Even with the silence inside raging and screaming at him, the void where his siblings used to be tearing away bits of his soul, even then there are times where being on his own helps. It becomes necessary, sometimes, when the silence gets too much. When the ache of it all threatens to send him spiraling into madness. When everything he feels, everything he is becomes more than he can handle. He can take time to go off on his own, and sit, and think. Construct stronger walls within his mind, slotting the puzzle pieces of his broken soul back together as best he can. He’s built himself a labyrinth now, layers upon layers of walls. It would take someone years to unravel them, but that, he knows, will never happen. There’s no reason he’ll ever lower his walls again. It’s better that way. And when he can quiet the screaming of his own internal silence, there’s something
soothing about solitude. About the ability to know that no one is around, no one is watching, and no one will judge you for being yourself.

Still, above even that, the thing he really loves about his life now is the ability to cause chaos. There’s just something so immensely satisfying, about sending bits of chaos out into the world. About causing something to happen, and letting the humans decide where it goes. He loves the moment of not knowing, of wondering what will they do with this? He gives them an option, and lets these brilliant, bright creatures of Hers forge their own paths. He loves giving in to the itch to cause chaos, not because it wins him approval in Hell, but because of the ways humans take that chaos and make something more of it for themselves. What will they do, he always wonders, with the challenge he has given them? How will they react to that coin he’s stuck to the ground? Will they grit their teeth and growl in frustration, sticking their nails under the coin until the break and bleed? Will they shrug and turn away, hurry on to some other task? Or will they think about it, and find some sharp, flat object to work under the coin and pry it from the ground? He doesn’t tell Hell he rewards the smart ones, the ones that find a way to pry the coin loose. He’s always liked humans with ingenuity.

It’s this itch for chaos that finds him in the BT tower one beautiful summer evening. In the elevator, he wonders what people will do without cell phone service. How long will it take them to fix it? How will they communicate, when the tool they all rely so much on is suddenly useless? Fights, he expects. Millions of people taking out their frustrations on each other. And the creative ways they’ll find to do that will be interesting enough. But then there will be those who figure out a way to get around the block, somehow. He’s not sure how, exactly, but he knows that for those people it won’t be the spark of evil his actions tonight will nurture, but the spark of brilliance. It’s a good night. Or, at least, it was. Until he returns to his car and finds a summons to an old graveyard. And then Hastur hands him a basket. And the world begins to end.

He’d be lying if he said he hadn’t known it was coming. He hadn’t known when, of course. But it was all in the plan, written down in a battered old book he’d tossed away in anger, throwing it at the place She should have been but wasn’t. He’d had six thousand years to come up with a plan. And the best thing he’s come up with is this - convince his angel to help influence the kid. He’ll be held to a higher standard than normal with this job. Hell will keep tabs on him, make sure he does it right. So he can’t just skip out on it all and leave the kid without any evil influence whatsoever. Neither can he try and influence him for good - not only is he unsure it’s even possible for a demon to be a good influence, but he knows Hell will figure it out if he tries. He certainly can’t kill the Antichrist, not the way he has so very many other threats. At the moment, the child is an innocent. Not quite good or evil, despite its parentage. And Crowley isn’t a monster, he won’t kill an innocent, not unless it’s a last resort. And even then, he’s not sure if he even can. If he could bring himself to do it, even with all the world at stake. But he thinks, he hopes, that if he can get Aziraphale to help him, they can influence the boy together. He’s never met anyone as relentlessly Good as the angel. He loves everything - and not in the cold, detached way that most angels do. He loves the universe and everything in it in a very real way, one that actually means something when he says it. And sure, he can be a bit of a bastard at times. Sometimes he can even be thoughtlessly cruel. But he tries his best to be everything She always said an angel should be, to guide the world towards light and love and kindness. And Crowley loves him for it.
So he calls Aziraphale. From a pay phone, since his little bit of chaos has taken down the cell networks. He doesn’t even have to wonder if he’ll answer. He always does, these days. They’ve been seeing each other a lot more in the past few years, sometimes even two or three times a week. It’s a welcome change from those centuries where they could go decades without running into each other. And Aziraphale even initiates their encounters now. Calling Crowley, dragging him out to dinner, insisting on regular meetings in the park. Sometimes, he thinks it’s the angel’s way of keeping watch over him, making sure he doesn’t use that thermos of holy water he’s got sitting in his safe. He’s not sure why though, unless Aziraphale is worried about being left alone or forced to deal with a worse (better?) demon than Crowley. Still, sometimes he can pretend that it’s because the angel cares about Crowley, that he’s just as worried about the demon’s safety as Crowley is about the angel.

So he calls. And they meet to talk. And it goes the way it always does, when he’s trying to convince the angel of something. Aziraphale refuses. Protests. Points out all the reasons why it won’t work. But he still stays. And he listens. And while the silence screams inside him when the angel talks about Heaven winning as if he doesn’t realize -or care- what that will mean for Crowley, at least he’s still there. He lets Crowley talk. And Crowley takes him to lunch, as if to say see, don’t humans make the most fantastic food? Don’t you love this? Then he walks with him through the city, commenting on all the wonderful, fascinating things the humans have come up with, pointing out again and again that it’ll all be gone once the world ends. They end up at the bookshop, like they’ve done more and more often lately, and they break out the good wine. And with each new human experience, each little wonderful thing about the world that the demon brings up, Crowley can see his angel’s resolve weakening. He keeps his words carefully light, away from pointing out what the end of the world will mean for them, personally. Aziraphale’s pointed words about his demonic nature sting, and he knows he isn’t going to win any arguments by appealing to any fondness the angel might have for him. But finally, in the end, he succeeds. Aziraphale allows himself to be convinced. And soon after that, they take on their respective roles at the Dowling’s residence.

As it turns out, Crowley is actually really good with kids. He shouldn’t be surprised, considering he had raised three of his siblings practically by himself. He can remember holding Sandalphon’s hand as the newly-minted archangel took his first steps out into the light. Cradling Uriel in his arms when she stumbled trying to run. Throwing Gabriel into the sky and being there to catch him the first few times, when he fell instead of flew. He’d shown them each how to use their wings, how to fly with six of the appendages instead of the more usual two. It had been Raphael that had given Sandalphon his first sword, and Raphael that healed him after that first disastrous training session with Michael. He’d given Gabriel his first lessons in Creation, holding his hands gently between his own and blowing, helping him pull from Her light to start up the heart of a star. It had been Raphael that first heard Uriel sing, and it was he that had taught her the magic of science. He’d been the third angel ever created, and he’d raised himself first with Michael’s clumsy help. Then he’d turned around and raised three more siblings, and loved them all so fiercely it hurt.
And then She started bringing more angels into the world, not one at a time, but whole batches of them. Thousands of new, young fledglings trying to find their feet in the chaos of the nursery. It had been a mess of wings and limbs and power, tripping over each other as each new angel opened their eyes and took in the collected knowledge of those that came before. Raphael and his siblings had looked after all of them, from their first moments in the nursery of Creation until they took their first faltering flight out into the sky. He’d lead each of them, walking on unsteady feet, to the chamber of Naming, where every new angel was given a name and a purpose. Guided them out to their posts, to the ones who were tasked with teaching them all how to be, and then continued to guide and teach and love every single one. That’s what had hurt the most, after he’d learned of Her plan. Aside from the knowledge that he had been created to Fall and be cast out or killed, he’d ached with the realization that half of those bright, shining beings he’d first led from the nursery, who had drunk in his knowledge in their very first moments of life, whose hands he’d held as he led them to be named, that they were going to be torn from Her light and forced to suffer forevermore. That knowledge had bled inside him like a wound between Her Grace and his soul, festering and tearing wider with each question he asked.

After all of that, Warlock is easy. He’s a good child, which really should have been their first clue. He’s easy to care for. Easy to love. He’s easy to teach too, so bright and curious about everything. His first word is ‘why’, and Crowley has never felt more proud.

The boy takes to causing chaos like a duck to water. Crowley barely has to suggest something, before Warlock is off and running, causing as much mischief as possible for a child of his age. It gives them both hope, though, when he’s never outright cruel. He does cause quite a lot of trouble, though, which often causes his human parents or the house staff to reprimand him. Sometimes far more harshly than Crowley feels he deserves.

One afternoon, Mrs. Dowling catches Crowley on his way back from some hours off.

“Miss Ashtoreth,” she says, placing a hand on Crowley’s arm. The demon looks at it, then back up at the woman, and pointedly raises an eyebrow. She removes her hand, shivering with a sudden chill of fear. “Miss Ashtoreth,” she begins again, shrinking back under the demon’s stare. “I know it’s your afternoon off, but could you please check on Warlock? I’m afraid I lost my temper with him a bit earlier, and he ran off before I could catch him. I haven’t been able to find him since.”

Crowley resists the urge to snap at her, to tell her exactly what he thinks of her, and of her ability to be trusted with a small child. He doesn’t. It wouldn’t do to get himself fired yet, not when the boy is only three. There are eight more years to go yet, and he intends to see this through. It has nothing to do with being attached to the boy. Nothing at all.

“Of course,” he says calmly. “I’m certain I know exactly where he’s gotten off to.” He turns to go, knowing his words hit a bit too close to home for the human woman, who was realizing that the nanny knew her son better than she herself. He can’t resist making little jabs like this, from time to
time. And especially not times like this, when all he really wants to do is show her how piss-poor of a parent she is, and rub her nose in it like a bad dog. And if a few of his more demonic acts bring frustration to the Dowlings more often than others, well, he’s never been good at keeping that itch for chaos inside. It has nothing whatsoever to do with his feelings on parents who neglect their children. There’s nothing personal about it.

He finds Warlock exactly where he expected to, curled up under a bush in the garden. The boy is weeping in that silent way that tells him he’s been at it for a while, and Crowley feels another flare of anger for a mother who will let her son cry alone like this. In the house, Mrs. Dowling trips and drops her favorite teacup, which smashes to pieces on the floor.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Crowley asks of his charge, arranging his skirts so he can sit beside the boy in the dirt. Warlock stiffens, curling in tighter on himself when he hears Crowley’s approach, but sits up when he hears his voice, all but flinging himself into his nanny’s arms. He starts sobbing, loud, gasping, hiccupping sounds. And the demon knows he should push him away, tell him to learn to be strong and take care of himself like a good demon. But the boy is only three. Just a kid. And this isn’t asking for a bedtime story. It’s not lessons, or a walk in the park where Crowley can teach him how to rule in Hell. This is a three-year-old child sobbing his heart out in the demon’s arms like the world has just ended. So Crowley does what he’s always done at times like this. He ignores his duty and pulls Warlock close until his face is buried against his shoulder, rubbing his back and making soothing noises until the boy quiets down and pulls away.

“There now,” he says, when he’s calmed. “What’s all this about?”

Warlock looks up at him with wide, trusting eyes, still wet with tears. “Mo- Mommy said,” he hiccupps, then starts again. “M-Mommy said I a- asked too many questions. Sh- she said I’m d- dumb.”

Crowley sees red. Mrs. Dowling, looking around to find one of the staff to clean up the shattered teacup, suddenly gets a bloody nose.

You ask too many questions, Raphael.

He takes a deep, steadying breath, and shifts so that he can look Warlock in the eyes. “Now you listen to me, young man,” he says. “Your mother is wrong. You are not dumb. And there is never any such thing as too many questions.”

Warlock shakes his head, confused. “Bu- but, but Mommy said-” the poor boy looks devastated, his face a mess from crying for so long. But the tears are slowing now, here in Crowley’s gentle
“No.” Crowley shakes his head, holding Warlock’s gaze, trying to impress upon him how important this is. “No. She is wrong. Questions are so important. I don’t care what your mother - or anyone else - says. If you have questions, you ask them, do you understand me?”

Warlock nods, sniffling. “But-”

_Do not ask questions, Raphael._

“No buts,” he tells him, more tenderly. “No one who asks questions is ‘dumb’. In fact, the more questions you ask, the smarter you are. And the truly smart people ask the best questions.” It’s true. Of all the intelligent humans he’s met over the years, the best have always been the ones that wonder, that question, that look at the world and don’t just see what it is, but want to know the **why** of it all.

“Okay…” Warlock says. His eyes are still wet, but he looks at him seriously. And Crowley loves him. This nephew of his. This child he’s helped to raise. This inquisitive little _terror_ that’s growing up pulled between the forces of Heaven and the forces of Hell. Go- Sa- _Somebody_ help him. He loves this boy like he loves his own siblings.

“I mean it, Warlock,” he tells him. “I want you to promise me this- if you have a question, even if you think it’s silly, I want you to come to me. I promise, if you do, I will never laugh at you for it. I will never yell. I will _never_ tell you not to ask. I _want_ you to ask me your questions. Can you do that for me?”

_Do not question Her, Raphael._

Warlock nods again, wiping at his eyes with a dirty sleeve. Crowley places a soft kiss on his forehead, and produces a handkerchief that hadn’t existed until a moment ago, using it to wipe away the dirt and tears on the boy’s face.

“There now, that’s better,” he says when he’s done. Warlock’s face is as clean as it’s possible for a three-year-old to be. “Now. Why don’t you tell me what question you asked your mother?”

The boy hesitates, and Crowley may or may not start planning his revenge on the Dowlings for the
fear that they’ve taught this child. He speaks though, which means the damage is not yet so bad he cannot fix it.

“Why is Daddy always gone?” Warlock asks.

*Why did She leave us? Where did She go?*

Crowley pulls him into a hug. “Your daddy works very hard, dear,” he says. “But one day when you rule over the Earth, you can make it so he never has to work again. Would you like that?”

“Mm-hmm,” Warlock mumbles into his shirt. “But why can’t I do it now?”

*Why can’t I fix this? Why can’t I make Her plan better?*

“You need to learn how to rule over the Earth, dear,” the demon tells him, stroking his hair. “That’s what your nanny is here for, after all.”

The boy lifts his head, searching Crowley’s face with bright, curious eyes. “You won’t leave me, will you?” he asks.

*Will She ever return to us?*

“No, dear,” Crowley promises. “Even when I’m no longer your nanny, even if I have to go far away, I’ll always be right here if you need me.” He means it, even if he shouldn’t. Even though he knows that far too soon, Warlock will no longer need him. He won’t need anyone, once he comes into his full power.

Later that night, after Warlock has been calmed and put to bed, Crowley allows himself to give in to the pain that flared inside him at the mention of questions. He closes his eyes, there in the darkened nursery, and remembers what it was like before there was time. When he’d been young, and innocent, like Warlock is now. A clean slate, new made from Her forge. And, like Warlock, he’d asked his Mother far too many questions.
The white stone halls of Heaven stretch before him, still a labyrinth to the young archangel. He’ll learn them well in time, he knows, but for now he has no idea how to get back to Michael in the training grounds. He could reach out through their bond, and ask her to come get him, but he’s determined to do this for himself. The halls are so empty, still and waiting for the millions of angels She has yet to create. There is no one here to ask where to go. So he picks a direction at random and sets off. Before long, he’s hopelessly lost. He wanders the echoing hallways, increasingly frantic, until his feet lead him into a courtyard where a small group of new-minted angels sit clustered around a table with Lucifer at his head.

His ruby-bright wings are spread wide as he gestures emphatically, voice low like they’re speaking of secrets. For a moment, Raphael is confused. There’s so few of them now. Why would anyone need to keep secrets? But then Lucifer’s love flows down their bond and into his mind, and his older brother looks up and smiles like the sun breaking through the clouds.

“Raphael,” he calls, holding out a hand. “My dear brother, what brings you here?”

Raphael moves closer, and Lucifer’s arm wraps around his shoulders, warm and heavy and comforting. He looks into those eyes like starlight and then away, ashamed. “Got lost,” he mumbles.

“What?” Lucifer laughs. “Speak up, little one.”

“Got lost,” Raphael says, louder, and the other gathered angels laugh too.

“Lost?” his brother repeats, voice just this side of mocking. “Why not just ask for directions?”

“Why make Heaven a maze of hallways that all look the same?” Raphael retorts, which elicits a pleased grin from Lucifer.

“Ooh, it bites! She made you with some fire in you, little one.”

Raphael blushes. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No, no,” Lucifer pulls him closer, wrapping a ruby-red wing around him. “I like it.”
Raphael feels warm, loved. Lucifer’s affection for him is strong, flowing through their bond. Comforted, he asks something else that’s been on his mind. “Why is Heaven so empty?”

A startled noise passes through the lesser-ranked angels around them, but Lucifer just squeezes him briefly with a wing. “She’s waiting,” he says calmly.

“Waiting for what?” Raphael demands, not realizing that in asking these questions, he also questions Her.

“Waiting for us to be ready,” Lucifer tells him. “Waiting for Her Archangels to be ready to guide the new angels She’ll create.”

Later, Raphael tries to ask Michael a different question. They’re in the workshop of the starsmiths, building a galaxy together. It’s soothing work, watching the swirls of color and light come together under their hands. He just doesn’t understand the why of it, why they have been tasked with this, why so very many stars and galaxies and planets must exist.

“Michael,” he asks, “Why are we creating the stars?”

His sister frowns at him. “You don’t enjoy it?”

“I didn’t say that.” He does enjoy it, very much so. He loves watching the fire grow within his palm, brighter and brighter until it’s gone from a spark to something so much more. “I was just wondering why. I don’t understand why it’s necessary.”

“We don’t question Her orders, Sparkler,” she tells him, grinning when he makes a face at the nickname. “It’s not given to us, to question Her. Only to obey.”

“But… why?” he wants to know.

Michael freezes, then fixes the full force of her stare on him. There’s fear hidden behind the steel in her gaze, masked with anger and a stern air of command. “Do not question Her, Raphael,” she says. He does not ask her questions like that again.
He asks another question with Lucifer, standing out on an open field of Heaven, overseeing the construction of the Garden walls. “Why should Eden have walls?” he asks.

Lucifer smiles fondly at him. “I don’t know, little one. Why do you think?”

Raphael frowns. Below them, some angels chase a lion away from half-formed walls.

“I think it’s to keep dangerous things outside the Garden,” he says, thinking aloud, and watches a little longer. “But,” he wonders, “if that’s so, then why create the dangerous things at all?”

“Perhaps it’s a test,” Lucifer muses. Raphael looks at him, and sees his gaze is distant, sad. “After all, it is all part of Her plan.”

“What is your plan for him?” Raphael asks Her, standing in Her presence as she creates the fourth archangel. “What will you do with us, once your universe is complete?” It’s been bothering him lately. Every day they make progress towards some sort of goal. But what that goal is, and what will happen to them when it’s done, he doesn’t know. And he doesn’t like not knowing. Especially now, when he’s to be responsible for more lives than just his own. Wants to be able to answer all the questions his new brother might think to ask.

_Hush now_, She tells him. _It’s all part of my Great Plan_.

“But I don’t understand,” he says. “What is our purpose, after the world is made?”

_Do not question me, Raphael_, she warns. _If it is for you to know, you will know in time._

He leaves, holding the hand of his newest sibling, and wonders what else she isn’t telling them.
Lucifer lounges by a stream in the Garden, and Raphael can’t help but laugh at the sight of him.

“Brother,” he says, “did you know, you look ridiculous like that?” Lucifer’s six wings are out and stretched across the ground, looking like nothing more than a massive feathered rug laid out around him. His long dark hair is dripping wet, robes hanging in soaked folds from his lithe frame. He holds an apple in one hand, but the other he’s flung out along the arch of a wing. It’s a dramatic pose, or it would be if Raphael couldn’t see the smugness on Lucifer’s face, or the way he keeps cracking his eyes open to see if he’s been noticed yet. He rolls his eyes. Lucifer has always been an over-dramatic bastard.

Raphael turns to Aziraphale to share a grin about his brother’s theatrics, only to notice a worried frown creasing the principality’s face.

“Hello little one,” Lucifer drawls, fully opening his eyes and smiling at them. “Is this the friend of yours that Michael’s been telling me about?”

He nods, leading Aziraphale forward gently by the elbow. “This is Aziraphale. Aziraphale, Lucifer.” He shoots a warning look at his brother. “Be nice.” Lucifer knows full well how much he scares the younger and lower-ranked angels, but he doesn’t seem to care. In fact, sometimes Raphael is beginning to believe he enjoys it.

The Morning Star levered himself up off the ground, and with the snap of a finger he’s dry and in far more impressive robes. “Aziraphale,” he says, and Raphael feels a flash of jealousy at the starstruck look on the principality’s face.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” Aziraphale says, but he shifts just a hair closer to Raphael. The younger archangel tries not to feel satisfaction at that.

“The honor is mine,” Lucifer drawls. “I’ve heard so very much about you. Sparkler here seems quite fond of you.”

Raphael rolls his eyes. Leave it to his brother to be dramatic about everything. “Right. Why are you here, Luci?” he asks, deliberately using a nickname he knows Lucifer dislikes.

“Raphael!” Aziraphale cries, shocked.
Lucifer laughs. “Oh, don’t worry about him, Aziraphale. He’s been asking questions since the day he was made. Personally, I think Mother didn’t make him quite right. Her hand must have slipped on the curiosity when she was pouring it into him. Gave him a little too much.” He shakes his head, showing them an exaggeratedly sad expression. “It’s sad, really. He’s such a bright thing, otherwise.”

“And you’re any better?” Raphael asks. “I love you, brother, but we both know Mother gave you too much ambition.”

Aziraphale is looking between them both, fear in his eyes. “You- you aren’t…”

“Questioning Her?” Lucifer asks. “Oh yes. We are.”

“It’s alright,” Raphael reassures him. “It’s just questions. She doesn’t mind.”

The principality grips Raphael’s arm, hard. “You’re safe?” he asks. They’ve all heard rumors of Her displeasure. But this isn’t anything like that.

“He is,” Lucifer tells them. Aziraphale does not look convinced.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Raphael wants to know. Aziraphale doesn’t have an answer for him.

Watching the newly made humans, Raphael feels Her presence in his mind.

You must love them, She tells him.

“I do,” he says, voice echoed by thousands of others. She speaks now to every angel there is, and every one of them responds as She commands.

You must love them more than you love me, She says. These creatures I made in my image.
“I will,” Raphael responds, one voice in thousands. More than Her? He keeps his question silent, even from the siblings in his mind.

“Why?” Lucifer demands, and the assembled host falls silent. Not once since She first spoke them into creation, has anyone stood up to Her like this.

“Why,” his elder brother continues, “must we love them more than you? You are our God, our Mother.”

_Because I said so_ , She tells him. _Because that is what I wish for you to do._

“I don’t understand,” Raphael says, his voice a quiet whisper compared to Lucifer’s shout. “You say to love them, and we do. But why can’t we love you, our Mother, more?”

_Do not question me, Raphael_ , she tells him, and he looks down in shame.

“Why?” Lucifer demands again, coming to stand at Raphael’s side. “Why can’t he question? What’s wrong with wanting to know your reasons?”

They feel a wave of anger from Her, and Raphael presses himself against his older brother, wings flared wide as if to protect him from Her wrath.

_I am the Lord, your God. And you will do as I command_ , she orders.

“Why?” Lucifer demands. She does not respond.

_“Tell us why!” The Morning Star shouts. Her presence wavers, and then, in an instant, She disappears from around them. Lucifer growls in frustration and launches himself into the sky. He is gone for a long time, and the next time Raphael sees him, he stands beneath the Tree of Knowledge, and gives the healer a small leather-bound book that contains Her Great Plan._
“Why test them like this?” he prays to Her, that night. He’s sitting still beneath Her tree, hands shaking on the faded binding of the book. “Why give them so much, only to lead them to destruction?”

He gets no answer. He never will. She has gone.

“Why do you think the humans are so important?” he asks Aziraphale one day, standing on the wall and looking down into the Garden where Eve sleeps, curled against Adam’s side.

“I don’t know,” the angel says. “I imagine She must have some plan for them, though.”

“That’s just it,” Raphael tells him. “Why does she need a plan for them? Aren’t we enough?”

Aziraphale looks at him, horrified. “Don’t question Her,” he almost shouts, voice breaking in panic. “They say bad things are happening now, to angels who question Her.”

Raphael turns away from him. “Right. Yes. Sorry.” He won’t be the cause of that terrified look on his angel’s face. “It’s all ineffable anyway, isn’t it?”

“Yes, quite.” Aziraphale relaxes. Raphael makes a point after that, to keep his questions to a minimum around the principality.

Lucifer returns to them one night, landing with a thump outside the rooms She had given them for their own. Raphael looks up, a joyous greeting on his lips, when he takes in the haggard appearance of his brother’s form. There are dark circles under his eyes, his normally pristine robes hang in wrinkled folds from his body, and his normally sleek wings are all ruffled and messy like he’d flown through a tornado to get here.

“Lucifer!” He stands, supporting his exhausted elder sibling and guiding him to a seat. “What happened? Where were you?”
“Away,” Lucifer says, his voice dripping with exhaustion.

Raphael gets to work on his wings, gently running his fingers through the soft feathers, guiding them back into place. His brother sits in silence as he works, head falling forward onto his chest. As ethereal beings, they don’t need sleep exactly. But they can run themselves down into an exhausted state, one that requires an extended period of inactivity to recover from.

“You need rest,” Raphael tells him. “What were you doing out there?”

Lucifer only grunts in response. Raphael sighs. He can feel his brother’s exhaustion, and his own body aches in sympathy. Carefully, he reaches for their patterns, thinking to inject some of his own energy into Lucifer’s essence. He has more than enough to spare. But his fingers barely brush his brother’s pattern before he recoils in shock. The clean lines he knows so well are twisting, writhing around each other, turning dark and foul where they haven’t outright frayed away to nothing.

“Brother!” he gasps. “What-?”

Lucifer whirls on him with sudden energy, walls going up between their minds, his pattern vanishing from Raphael’s sight as if it had never been. “You ask to many questions, Raphael,” he snarls, throwing him against a wall and holding him there with one arm. “You ask too many fucking questions.” His eyes are deep and colorless, anger eclipsing any of the warmth Raphael might have found within. They’re like twin black holes, bottomless, absorbing any light that falls into them.

“Lucifer-” Raphael wraps his hands around his brother’s arm, tugging at it, trying to get free. This is not the Lucifer he knows. Not the elegant, experienced elder brother that he loves and admires. This Lucifer is raw down to his last nerve, ready to snap at a moment’s notice. He’s angry, and whatever block he’s kept between them to hide the worst of his emotions is cracking, leaking flashes of rage and a bitter desperation.

Then Lucifer’s expression shifts, turning feral. He leans in, pressing on what would have been Raphael’s windpipe, if he were in a body. “You’ve forgotten, haven’t you, little one,” he asks, the heat of his breath hitting Raphael in the face. “Where all your questions are leading you.” He bares his teeth, sharp canines on full display. His other hand lands on the wall beside Raphael’s head, and his smile widens at the sharp flash of fear that courses through the younger archangel.

“You’ve done it to yourself, you know,” he says, suddenly gentle, as if he wasn’t holding Raphael
against the wall. “Each time you question Her, it puts that much more space between you. I can see it now, the gap between essence and Grace. One day soon it’ll be wide enough that I can work my way in, and rip you right out.”

“Why?” Raphael demands. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because,” Lucifer tells him. “I read Her plan. And I don’t want to be told what I must or must not be.”

He lets himself hang in his brother’s grip, toes just barely brushing the floor. It’s uncomfortable, but even now he doesn’t truly believe Lucifer will hurt him. “And isn’t that exactly what the Plan says you’ll do?” he asks, meeting that black-hole gaze with his own steady honey-amber eyes.

The flashes of emotion from his brother abruptly shut off, like a wall dropping down between them. He can’t even feel Lucifer’s exhaustion anymore.

“For your sake, little one, you had better hope not.”

“Lucifer? Raphael?” Gabriel’s voice. Just over Lucifer’s shoulder, Raphael can see their little brother looking at them in confusion. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Lucifer snarls, removing his grip and dropping Raphael to the floor. Six ruby wings spread wide, and he glares at them both. “Watch yourselves, brothers,” he warns. “Remember what happens to those who question Her.” And then, in the blink of an eye, he is gone.

“What was that about?” Gabriel asks. “What did he mean, about questions?”

Raphael climbs to his feet, pushing away his fear and worry so that Gabriel will not feel it. “I’m not sure,” he lies.
When he opens his eyes again, Warlock is snoring softly in the bed beside his chair, curled around a stuffed bear that is almost bigger than he is. Crowley allows himself a fond smile, and smooths a hand over the boy’s hair before standing and turning off the last light. The void is screaming at him tonight, and his mind is so achingly empty of other voices. He hadn’t known, when he started asking questions. Hadn’t understood what it was, to question Her. It didn’t seem fair to him, to be forced to Fall for that. It had never seemed fair, none of it, not the forbidden tree, not ejecting the humans from Eden, and certainly not this plan for Armageddon.

His feet take him down to the garden before he’s even aware of where he’s going. His head is full of thoughts, and pain, and that awful ringing silence. He walks out into the emptiness of the night, and there, above him, are the stars. The star factories are shuttered now, he knows. Empty husks of buildings that once held such promise. If he hadn’t Fallen, would he have continued to create? Or would he have turned as cold and passionless as his siblings? It’s a pointless question, of course. He had always been meant to Fall.

“Crowley?” Aziraphale’s voice - his real one, not that terrible fake accent- flows into the void of his mind, soft and worried. The demon frowns, lowering his eyes from the heavens, and sees the angel standing before him. “My dear, are you alright?” He’s holding a pair of garden shears and a watering can, and is absolutely covered in plant debris. Even in that ridiculous disguise, he’s the most wonderful thing Crowley has seen all day.

The demon forces a smile for the angel. “Course I’m alright. Always am, you know that.” His eyes stray to the boxwood hedge the angel must have been working on, and he lets the absolute disaster of it distract him from his thoughts. “What have you been doing to that bush, anyway? It looks like you’ve tried to murder it.”

“Well, I should think it’s obvious,” Aziraphale pouts. “I was trimming it.”

“Angel,” Crowley says, barely able to restrain the fondness for the angel from seeping into his voice. “If I didn’t know better, I’d have said you did this trimming with a chainsaw.”

“Oh, and you could do better?” Aziraphale asks him, frowning, and Crowley remembers that the angel hasn’t seen his private garden, the green space he’s let take over a large part of his Mayfair flat. He probably doesn’t even know that Crowley keeps plants. The demon grins.

“I think so, yes.” He normally prefers to heal his plants with more natural methods, but Crowley finds he can never resist a bit of showing off in front of his angel. He brushes his hands across the decimated shrubbery, feeling the pattern of its life and feeding power into it, forcing months of growth, repairing the damage done to the poor thing. Then he shifts his concentration, twisting the pattern a bit, feeding a little more power here, a little less there, until he’s grown a perfectly manicured boxwood.
“Tell me you could do that with shears, angel,” he says, letting pride in his accomplishment chase away the lingering ache of memory. He steps back, grinning, to see a strange expression on Aziraphale’s face.

“What?” he asks, squinting through his glasses to decipher the look.

“No one can do that.” The angel’s eyes flicker from the regrown bush, to Crowley’s covered eyes, to his hands, and then back again.

Crowley quickly re-runs his actions in his mind. He’d healed the plant, then adjusted the healing until it grew the way he wanted. Simple. “I just healed the damage you did to it. What, didn’t think a demon could heal?”

Aziraphale shakes his head. “No, it’s not that. I’ve seen you heal before, my dear.”

“You have?” the demon blinks, momentarily confused.

“The plague,” he clarifies. “And some of my miracles. But that was just healing. You just pour your power into it until it’s repaired. You changed the pattern as you went, made it grow how you wanted.”

Crowley frowns at him. “And?” It was easy. He’d taught Gabriel and Uriel to do it before they were days old. Sandalphon had never quite managed to grasp the finer points of healing like the other two, but even he could do it in a pinch. He hadn’t had time to teach Aziraphale though. He’d Fallen before he could.

“And,” Aziraphale continues, “Not even Raphael’s healers could do that. Only the archangels can.”

Crowley’s blood runs cold. “Oh, I’m sure others could do it.” He tries to think. Hadn’t he trained his healers in this, before he Fell? He can’t remember now.

“No, that’s my point. They can’t.”

Some of his pain must have leaked into his voice, because Aziraphale blinks and shakes his head. “Yes, of course. My apologies, my dear.” He shifts the shears in his hands until he can play with the ring on his smallest finger, a nervous habit Crowley’s known he had for ages. Tonight though, for the first time, his attention catches on the ring instead of Aziraphale’s hands. It’s familiar, and he almost reaches out to catch the angel’s wrist, wanting to pull his arm closer so he can get a better look.

“That ring,” Crowley says, frowning. He knows it. He knows he does. Angel wings, in a pure soft gold.

“Hmm?” Aziraphale looks at his hands, twisting the ring around his little finger. “Oh, this? Yes, well.” He traces the line of one of the golden wings. “It was a gift. After I was appointed to Earth.”

“Yeah, but that style. I know that style,” Crowley insists. He squints at it, and… oh. There it is. He touches the base of his ring finger, where a very similar band had once belonged. “That’s an archangel ring.” He looks back up to the angel’s face, knowing his confusion is evident even with his eyes hidden away. “I mean, I haven’t seen one since the War, but I remember. They all had one, and it was definitely that style. Angel wings, in solid gold. Wore ‘em on their left ring fingers, all six of them.” Uriel has his, he thinks. At least, he remembers watching Michael give it to her. Had one of the others give Aziraphale theirs? Why? He doesn’t understand. “What are you doing with an archangel ring?”

“If you must know,” the angel says, sounding a bit affronted at being questioned like this, “Uriel gave it to me, just before I left Heaven.” He slips the ring from his finger, holding it in his palm. “It belonged to Raphael.”

“What?” He must sound like an idiot, sitting there with his mouth gaping open. How had he never noticed this before?

“Is it so strange?” Aziraphale asks him, voice going soft and sad. He lifts the ring up so the light of the moon shines behind it. “That I might want to keep something to remind me of him?”

“No,” Crowley admits. “But Uriel is m- his sister. She didn’t want it?”
The angel shakes his head. “No. She said it hurt too much.” Then he sighs. “She, ah, came to me. A few days after, well, after I met you.” Crowley tries very hard not to read into the way Aziraphale’s lips quirk up in a smile at the mention of their meeting on the wall. “I’d never seen her so upset, which is understandable, of course, I can’t imagine what it must have been like, to - to see-” he stops. “In any case. She said he would have wanted me to have it.”

Crowley nods. She was right. He hadn’t even considered leaving mementos, hadn’t thought it would mean anything to anyone until that day he’d found Michael on the moon with his staff. But he’s been thinking about it since then, wondering if he should have left something for his siblings. If he should have left something for Aziraphale.

The angel slips the ring back onto his finger, twisting it until it slots into the place it’s conformed to against his palm. “That was before they all turned cold though,” he says sadly. “Gabriel laughed at me, the last time he saw it. Said I was being too sentimental.”

“Gabriel’s an ass,” Crowley tells him, and means it. He knows his siblings are in pain. He knows the loss they suffered - not just of him, but of Lucifer too. But the truth of it all is that they had choices. And they chose to become what they are. There’s a lot he can forgive, but the way they treat his angel, well. That’s way over the line.

“Crowley!” Aziraphale looks at him, aghast. “You can’t just say things like that!”

The demon shrugs. “Sure I can. Demon, remember? Don’t much care what those winged dicks think of me.” He tries very hard not to remember Gabriel’s voice. That thing wasn’t Raphael anymore.

“Winged Di-!” Aziraphale gapes at him, astonished by his casual irreverence.

“Dicks,” Crowley repeats with a grin. “Face it angel, your bosses are grade-A assholes.”

“Well, I- I-” the angel splutters. “Like yours are any better?”

He laughs, though the sound is brittle and bitter. “Oh, mine are much worse.” As cold as his former siblings might have become, he still doesn’t think they’re as bad as Lucifer or his princes. The thought sobers him. If they get this wrong, he won’t be able to worm his way out of this one. If Hell finds out he’s trying to prevent the apocalypse, he’ll be dead - really dead, not discorporated-before he can even draw his blade. And that’s if he’s lucky.
Of course the angel would catch the change in his mood, damn him. “Crowley,” Aziraphale says, eyes wide and so full of empathy.

“It’s fine, angel,” he waves his concern away. “Like I said. Demon. Comes with the territory.”

“If this, I mean, what we’re doing here, if it’s putting you in danger—” the angel starts, and Crowley can’t help but laugh, this time it’s harsh and sharp, like nails on chalkboard. He’s been in danger of one thing or another for so long he can’t even remember what it’s like to not have something hanging over his head.

“Don’t worry,” he tells Aziraphale. “By the time either of our sides works out what we’re doing here, it’ll be too late. One way or another.”

Aziraphale sighs. “I do hope you’re right, my dear. I do hope you’re right.”

After that night, Warlocks’ questions never seem to end. And Crowley takes each and every one as seriously as he wishes his own had been. He just wishes that the boy’s favorite questions didn’t tend to the more personal nature. “Why is your hair red?” “Why do you wear sunglasses even in the dark?” “How old are you?” “Why is your skin so cold?” “Why do you look so sad?”

“What?” Crowley frowns, surprised by that last question.

“Why do you look so sad?” Warlock repeats. He’s eight now, almost too old for a nanny, and so, so full of questions.

“I’m not sad, dear one,” Crowley tells him, trying to school his face into calm indifference.

“Yes, you are,” his charge insists. “You were looking at Brother Francis, and you looked like you wanted to cry. Like Mum does sometimes, when she looks at Dad.”

“How do you know I wanted to cry,” Crowley counters, checking to make sure Aziraphale is well out of earshot. He had been feeling a little morose, watching the angel putter around the Dowling’s
rose garden like had in the Garden. He’d been hit with a strong feeling of nostalgia and longing for the way he used to walk with the angel through Eden at watch him work. The feeling had come up on him without warning, and clearly he hadn’t succeeded in wiping the evidence of it from his face.

Warlock rolls his eyes. “I’m eight, Nanny. Not dumb.” And not for the first time, Crowley wonders about this child. This boy he’s spent the last eight years raising. He’s almost too human, too empathetic. Even with the angel around to cancel out his infernal influence, some of the Antichrist should have started showing through by now. Reality should have been warping around Warlock’s whims without the boy even thinking about it. But it doesn’t. And while Warlock could certainly be rude, and he did seem to take a perverse sort of joy in causing chaos, he wasn’t in any way what Crowley might have called ‘evil’. He was just… a kid. A normal, inquisitive kid.

“No,” he tells the boy with a small smile. “No dear, you certainly aren’t that.”

Warlock grins, pleased by the praise. “Then tell me. Why does Brother Francis make you sad?”

Crowley considers his words carefully. He could lie, he knows. But he promised Warlock to always answer his questions. And a lie, while technically an answer, is not what he promised.

“I used to know Brother Frances,” he says slowly. “A very long time ago.”

“Like before you were my nanny?” the boy asks, and Crowley chuckles.

“Yes dear, long before I was your nanny. I was a doctor then. And he… he was supposed to be a soldier, but he never was very good at it.” It’s not a lie, so much as a very careful stretching of the truth. “And sometimes, when I had a little free time, I would sneak away to the place he’d been sent to guard, and we’d take walks through a garden just like this.” He shakes his head, snapping himself out of the memory before it can take him over. “But,” he says, looking seriously at Warlock over the top of his glasses, “that was a very long time ago. And we were both very different people. He wouldn’t remember me now. And you won’t bring this up with him.” He laces the order with a bit of power, and feels it sink in. Yet another thing that worries him. His power should have rolled off Warlock like water off a duck. Instead, it took hold, assuring him that the boy would forget this conversation if he ever tried to talk to the angel about it.

Warlock glances down the lawn, to where Aziraphale is kneeling next to a rose bush, and makes a face. “Please don’t tell me you wanted to do the kissy stuff with him.”
Crowley thinks back to mingling essences, brief touches of Grace against Grace, watching the brightness of Aziraphale’s smile as he stood in Her light. “No,” he says honestly. “It wasn’t ever about ‘the kissy stuff’.” It had been about so much more than that. It still was. Oh, he wanted the angel. Lust was no stranger to the demon, not at all. But even if all he ever got was that gentle smile and the briefest touch of his hand, it would be enough. So long as Aziraphale was happy.

“Good,” Warlock says firmly. “Because that’s just gross.”

The demon laughs, a true, honest laugh that only just catches on the edges of his pain. “Gross, eh?” he asks with a grin. “And what about you and that girl from your judo class? Sally, I think you said her name was?”

“Eeeeeeeew!” The boy makes a gagging noise. “No, that’s gross, Nanny. No way.”

“Well, give it time,” Crowley smirks. “By the time you turn thirteen, I guarantee you won’t think kissing is gross.” He can read it in Warlock’s all-too-human life-pattern. He’ll find love with all genders when he’s older. If he lives that long. And if he doesn’t end the world, first.

“Won’t,” the boy promises. “Not ever.”

Crowley smiles indulgently, and tries very, very hard not to think about what might happen in the next three years.

“Angel,” Crowley says quietly, sitting on a bench with a new haircut and clothes that fit his male-shaped body almost as tight as his skin. He’d forgotten how good he felt, dressed like this. Even if he is a hell-thing, at least his physical form is something nice to look at, if you can get past the eyes. Don’t get him wrong, he looks stunning in a female form too. But the nanny clothes had been unfashionable when they were new, let alone the decade he was wearing them. Even so, playing a nanny had been fun. He’d loved- he stops the thought before it can form. Can’t think like that. Not now, not when all of Earth is on the line, hanging in the balance against one innocent life. “I think we got it wrong. He’s too… normal.” Agree with me, he almost prays, the thought reverberating around inside the silent void. Tell me I’m right. That Warlock isn’t the Antichrist. He doesn’t know what it means if he’s right. But if he’s wrong, if it really is Warlock, he doesn’t know if he can do what knows needs to be done.
“Yes,” Aziraphale says. “You’ve said. But doesn’t that mean we got it right? If he’s normal, then-”

“He should still have powers. Warping reality, smiting his enemies and all that. We should have at least seen _something._” If they’re wrong, and Warlock _isn’t_ the Antichrist, then he doesn’t have to think about what he might need to do to prevent the end of everything. But if it is true, if he’s just a normal boy, then they’ll have lost already. They have six days, if it all goes to Her plan. There’s no way they could find a missing Antichrist in six days. And even if they did, what then? Once he has the dog, it’ll be too late.

He watches as Mrs. Dowling comes into view, Warlock walking at her side. He wants to be down there with them, like he has been for the past eleven years. Wants to point out how fantastic the big scary monsters like dinosaurs are, and watch Warlock grin and ask him questions. Briefly, in this daydream, he looks up from a laughing Warlock to see Aziraphale smiling at him with the same open affection he always had when he watched Raphael with his siblings. Then Crowley bites the inside of his cheek, hard, and that pleasant vision evaporates like so much smoke.

“Well,” he says slowly. “We’ve done everything we can. All we can do now is wait for his birthday.” He thinks about the message from Hell he’d gotten that morning. “The Hellhound will be the key. Shows up at three on Wednesday.”


Behind his glasses, Crowley closes his eyes for a moment. He can do this. He has to. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, they’re sending him a Hellhound. To pad by his side and guard him from all harm. Biggest one they’ve got.” He can’t help but glance at the angel’s face as he speaks, watching the minute shifts in his expression. Aziraphale is worried. As worried as Crowley. And the demon _wants_ to tell him he doesn’t need to be. That, no matter what happens, he doesn’t need to worry at all. Because even if it all goes bad, even if the war does start, Crowley will do everything in his power to make certain that at least Aziraphale makes it through intact. He doesn’t have any other back up plan than that. He doesn’t say it. Instead, he watches Warlock walking away with his mother, and tries not to think of him as Warlock at all. He’s the Antichrist. The end of everything. Not a small boy Crowley couldn’t help but love.

“Won’t people remark on the sudden appearance of a huge black dog? His parents, for a start?” Aziraphale asks. Crowley can see the angel looking at him in his peripheral vision, but he can’t turn to face him just yet. He needs another moment to get his mind together. To slot the pain away behind yet another wall in the labyrinth of his mind. He can’t do what needs to be done. He knows himself too well. He’s killed so many times, but killing demons isn’t like killing a child. Killing an innocent. Every demon he’s ever fought deserved what it got. They’d been proper demons, unlike him. They’d let all the good in their souls wither away to nothing, leaving behind nothing but empty husks of sin and evil. Something vile. Something he could convince himself to hate. He can’t hate Warlock, for all he knows what the boy could do. And he can’t kill what he can’t hate.
Even if it means saving the world.

He turns his face to Aziraphale, and forces down the desperation building inside. “No one will notice anything,” he tells him, as Aziraphale looks away. They can’t meet each other’s eyes today. They both feel too much, he thinks. Something in them is broken, compared to other angels and demons he’s met. “It’s reality, angel. And young Warlock can do what he likes with that, whether he knows it or not.” He stops. Not Warlock. The boy. The Antichrist. A nameless, anonymous enemy. Not for the first, or last, time, he curses the heart he isn’t meant to have.

“It’s the start of it all,” he continues, shoving that thought, that uncertainty, away. “The boy’s meant to name it. Stalks-by-night, Throat Ripper, something like that. But,” he says, and Aziraphale finally looks at him. He can’t read the emotions behind his eyes, but his face is worried. The fate of the world hangs on them, and he’s sure his angel is very aware of that. “If you and I have done our job properly, then he’ll send it away. Unnamed.” It’s the only hope he has. It’s not enough.

“What if he does name it?” Aziraphale asks, and Crowley looks away from the fear in those sea-blue eyes.

“Then you and I have lost,” he says, staring out at the park, at the humans around them. “He’ll have all his powers, and Armageddon will be days away.” He can’t bear to see whatever expression is on his angel’s face now. He keeps his eyes forward. On the boy that is the adversary, destroyer of worlds.

Aziraphale follows his gaze. “There must be some way of stopping it,” he says, desperation leaking into his voice. Crowley can taste it in the air around them, when he opens his mouth to reply.

He takes a deep, steadying breath. “If there was no... boy,” he says, watching Aziraphale’s face. “Then the process would stop.”

Aziraphale turns to look at him in shock. “Yes, but there is a boy,” he says. “He’s over there, writing a rude word on a description of a dinosaur.”

Crowley glances at Warlo- no, the Antichrist, and turns away. “There is a boy now. But that could change.” He watches Aziraphale’s face. Please, he almost prays. Please understand what I mean.

Aziraphale looks at him in confusion.
“Something could happen to him,” Crowley tells him quietly. *Please don’t make me say it.*

The angel’s face is clouded. He doesn’t understand. He’s too good for that. Even as it breaks him, Crowley feels a flash of fondness for his angel. For someone so good they wouldn’t even think of the words about to come from his mouth. A distant, aching part of him wonders how horrified Aziraphale would be, if he were ever to learn of the blood on Crowley’s hands.

“I’m saying you could kill him,” he says bluntly. The words rip at half-healed wounds inside, setting the silence afire with pain. He watches as Aziraphale’s expression falls, the angel turning to look at - no. He can’t look over there. Can’t think about what he’s saying, or he won’t be able to do this. He never wanted Aziraphale to become a killer. That had been the whole point, after all, of making sure he was kept away from the battlefield. Of keeping him sheltered, all these years, from anything that wanted to kill him. He never wants that sort of violence to tarnish his bright light. But now it’s come down to it, he doesn’t know what else to do.

“I’ve never actually… killed. Anything.” The angel fidgets, hand going to the ring again, turning it around and around on his little finger. He sighs, and Crowley can feel his turmoil. “I don’t think I could.”

The demon’s heart breaks a little more at that. He wants to drop this now. To say they’ll find some other way. But he can’t. He can’t see any other way. Not now. Not when they have six days left before *everything* ends. He leans forward.

“Not even to save *everything*?” he asks, voice just barely above a whisper. Aziraphale won’t look at him. “One life. Against the *universe*.” *Please angel. I can’t. I know I can’t. Not this time.*

“The- this Hellhound. It- it’ll show up at his birthday party?” the angel asks, voice shaking. He finally looks at Crowley, the conflicting emotions on his face clearing into a kind of resolve.

“Yes,” Crowley turns away, pulling back in on himself. He’s failed.

“Well then,” Aziraphale continues. “We should be there. Maybe I can stop the dog.” It’s a thought, and Crowley looks up, trying not to let that treacherous flame of hope flare up inside. “In fact!” Aziraphale looks excited, grinning, like they hadn’t just been discussing cold-blooded murder. “I could entertain!” He starts to practice his magic tricks, and Crowley groans, squirming in his seat. He tries to project disgust, but he can’t help but watch as the angel lights up with joy, pulling a coin from a pocket and pretending to do a trick. He’s never understood why a being that can do actual
magic would stoop to such a level, but even as it baffles him, he still loves how it makes his angel smile.

He represses a shiver as Aziraphale’s hand brushes his ear, pretending to pull a coin from it. If you asked the demon then what he’d said, he wouldn’t be able to tell you. He’s lost in the feeling of love he’s never been able to put away as neatly as his pain. They relax into their old pattern of good-natured squabbling, and as much as Crowley is terrified, even with the weight of the universe hanging over their heads, he allows himself a moment to just appreciate the way Aziraphale seems to glow when he’s happy. As if all the light in the sky decided to shine on him for that moment. He loves him. Oh Somebody does Crowley love him. He loves this angel far more, and far more deeply, than any demon has a right to feel.

The birthday party goes about as well as could be expected. Which is to say, it’s a complete disaster. But the dog doesn’t show. He can’t smell even a hint of Hellhound on the air, and he doesn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified. Warlock isn’t the Antichrist. But now they have four days until the end of the world and the Antichrist is missing. He leaves the party without even really thinking about that he’s doing, on auto-pilot as he heads back to his car. Aziraphale follows, trailing behind as he tries to clean his suit of the debris of the chaos he unwittingly created inside.

“It’s late,” the angel says, retrieving a dove from up his sleeve. The poor thing is dead, or nearly, and Crowley steps closer to the angel to take a look.

“Comes of putting it up your sleeve,” he says, examining its life-pattern. It’s fading fast, but not quite gone. There’s still some sparks of electricity in its brain - just enough for him to reach out and latch on to its soul, keeping it in the land of the living. Taking the bird gently from Aziraphale’s hands, he breathes and lets the healing magic flow. In this plane it isn’t visible to humans, but his demonic eyes can just make out the ghost of the power flowing from his hands and his breath, covering the dove in a faint blue glow. It’s the work of seconds to rebuild the pattern, weaving it back together until it can hold on its own. He breathes again, and those few remaining sparks of life catch fire. When he opens his hands, the dove flies away.

Aziraphale is watching him with an odd look on his face, but then he shakes his head, and his expression clears. “No, I mean the Hellhound. It’s late.”

“Right.” He has to check. Just to be sure. He slides into his Bentley and turns on the radio. It starts off on some talk show, but then, soon enough-
“Hello Crowley.”

He makes a face. He *hates* communicating by radio. One of his worst ideas, convincing Hell to use modern technology. He’d thought they could all just get cell phones. Lucifer had liked this better. Said it had more style.

“Uuhh, yeah, hi. Who’s this?” He’s never actually been very *good* at lying, despite being a demon. Not when it counted, at least. Not with this much hanging on Hell not realizing what’s going on. If they realize he’s lost the Antichrist… Well. The end of the world will be the least of his worries.

“Dagon,” the radio says. “Lord of the Files, Master of Torments.”

Well. That’s not great, but it could have been worse. He’s never known Dagon to be particularly good at catching liars. “Yeah, uh, just checking in. About the Hellhound…” That doesn’t sound suspicious at all. Not a bit.

“It should be with you by now,” Dagon tells him. There’s an ominous pause. And then… “*Why?* Has something gone… wrong, Crowley?”

“Wrong?” Crowley says, going for casual and missing it entirely. “Nothing’s gone wrong, what could be wrong? Oh, no I can see him now. What a lovely big… hell-y Hellhound. Yes, okay, great talking to you.” He turns off the radio and sits back in his seat.

“No dog,” Aziraphale observes.

“No dog,” he agrees. He was *right*. Warlock *isn’t* the Antichrist. A part of him, one he’d viciously locked away, stops screaming in pain. The walls he’d placed around it crumble with his relief. The child he raised is safe. But that means-

“Wrong boy,” the angel says.

Crowley nods, and a different kind of fear overtakes him. “Wrong boy.”
On some unspoken agreement, he drives them back to the bookshop to regroup. They have four days. Three, if you don’t count the rest of this one. And then, if they don’t get this right, Armageddon will begin.

That night, when Warlock returns to his room, he finds a gift from his nanny, and a goodbye note. One that gives him a number to call, if he ever has need of her. Crowley doesn’t know if he’ll ever use it - if he’ll even have the time to use it, before the world ends. But it makes him feel a little bit better, like he’s not just fucking off to who-knows-where and leaving him there, alone. Like he’s not just abandoning the boy. He knows far too much of abandonment, after all. He won’t be the one that abandons the people he cares about. Not ever.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think! I could really use something to make me smile right now.

Oh, and brace yourselves. The next two chapters are really going to hurt.

**Flashbacks so far**

1. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
2. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
3. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
4. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
5. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
6. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
7. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
8. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
9. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
10. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael

This story is now rebloggable from my writing tumblr
And you're all welcome to come say hi on my personal tumblr
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the lovely comments, they really cheered me up and helped me get through the past two weeks. I love hearing from you all, I seriously cannot stress enough how much your comments make me smile. <3

Work is sending me on a very last-minute business trip to Miami, so I’ll try and get another update next weekend, but it might end up being another week before I get it done depending on if I get to use my evenings in the hotel for writing or if I have to work extra hours this week.

On Thursday morning, Crowley takes a walk. It’s early, far earlier than he would usually like to be awake, but he hasn’t been able to sleep since Monday and he’s not entirely sure when or if he’ll ever be able to again. He has two days to find the Antichrist, if he wants to save the world. And he has no idea where to even start. So when the dawn light starts to filter through his windows and he still can’t think of a single plan, he gets up and heads to the park. There, he lets his feet guide him down familiar paths, the usual route for his preoccupied wanderings. This early, there’s no one around but the occasional jogger, and it’s comforting to pace down the quiet green pathways. Songbirds call to each other in the trees above him, falling silent as he passes by and then starting up again when his demonic aura is gone from their primitive senses. Squirrels chitter in their nets, calling a warning to each other when they sense his approach. Danger. Predator. Snake. Only the corvids call out to him in welcome, but then they’ve always been his favorite sort of birds. He loves their penchant for mischief and their wild sort of intelligence. They make excellent partners in crime, and he prefers to work with them above even rats and serpents when the nature of his demonic wiles allows.

Now, a crow drops down from the trees to hop beside him for a few paces, eyeing him with curiosity.

“Hullo,” he tells it. Might as well be polite.

Danger, it caws at him, a warning. Predators by the water.

Crowley frowns. Predators by the water… demons? Or angels? That’s the only kind of ‘danger’ a crow would warn him of. Anything else and the mischievous things would have lured him over to get rid of it for them.
“Thanks,” he tells the crow. It caws a farewell and takes off, back to its nest. Crowley considers just turning around and going back to his flat, but it’s not like he has anything else to do right now. Or, at least, not like he was making any progress at all on the one thing he needed to be doing. So instead he takes a smaller version of his serpent form and glides through the grass until he can taste the scent of angel in the air.

He feels them before he sees them, the tattered remains of his bond to them screaming in the silence. Two of his siblings, the raw edges of his connection to them burning him from inside. He follows the pain, and there they are. Gabriel and Sandalphon.

If you had asked Raphael if he had a favorite sibling, he would have shrugged and told you not to be daft - he loved them all equally. And this was true.

He loved Lucifer’s poise and strength, the way his elder brother could walk into a room and immediately all eyes were on him. He loved his dramatics too, the way everything about him was just a little bit too much. He felt cared for, by Lucifer, the brother that answered all of his questions, no matter how silly - or how dangerous. He loved how he could make Lucifer laugh at the littlest thing, even if sometimes he feared the cruelty he could sometimes see hidden behind his brother’s eyes.

He adored Michael. He was her confidante, the one she told her secret worries and hopes alike. He admired her bravery, the way she could face down even the most horrifying disaster with a calm eye and a steady hand. And he loved the deepest heart of her, the places where the steel in her soul didn’t quite reach - the parts of her that worried about whether or not she was doing the right thing. He wished he had her resolve, her ability to see things through no matter how much she worried about doing it.

Gabriel, he loved for his energy, his relentless positivity and good cheer. He loved how his little brother never seemed to be without a smile. How eager he was to learn, to see, to do all that there was in the universe. He cherished Gabriel’s enthusiasm, the way he threw himself into any task with single-minded abandon. How he could focus so entirely on one thing that all else got blocked out.

Uriel was the sister of his heart, with her quick wit and quicker tongue. They sung together in the place that stars were born, matching wits in verbal sparring matches that rang across the Heavens. Uriel was so very like him, in so very many ways, but she was steadier than he, calmer. Where he wondered, she knew. Where he asked, she had answers. And he’d loved her for her certainty, even when he knew those answers were incomplete. He loved her laugh, and her smile. With Uriel, he wanted to protect that joy, because every time she expressed it, it felt like something precious.

And then there was Sandalphon. Where Uriel complimented him, Sandalphon was his mirror
image. Where Raphael loved, Sandalphon hated. Where he healed, Sandalphon destroyed. The one thing they had in common was an endless desire for approval, to know that they were doing a good job. That they were loved, and appreciated. Raising Sandalphon had been a challenge, but Raphael had loved him even as he struggled to find common ground with his youngest sibling. He’d loved his tenacity, the way he refused to give up on anything. And he’d loved how committed Sandalphon was to keeping his family safe, how he practiced for hours with Michael until he could wield a sword almost as well as she.

So no, Raphael did not have a favorite sibling. And Crowley doesn’t either, for all he hasn’t spoken to them in six thousand years. He loves them all, even as their actions make him furious and terrified all at once. He wants to hate them. It would be so much easier if he could hate them. But he can’t. He looks at them now, and sees the little brothers he raised. The eyes that looked to him for guidance, hands he held in his own a thousand times. He remembers taking them into the universe and pointing out his stars. Games of tag played across planetary systems. Arguments that shook the earth, and songs that filled the heavens. He remembers Sandalphon’s grip on his arm, the fear in his eyes, the first time they witnessed a supernova up close. Gabriel’s fingers squeezing his as he fought the pain of a broken wing, his grip easing as Raphael filled him with healing energy and love.

But these two angels aren’t fledglings anymore. They’ve grown cold. Aloof. They hold themselves apart from Her creations and think it good. Crowley doesn’t understand the impassive wall of Gabriel’s face, the appearance of good cheer that melts into something solid and ugly the moment he thinks no one is looking. And he fears the clear and ever-present anger that radiates from Sandalphon, a feeling more at home around a demon than an archangel. He wonders if there’s anything that either of them loves, anymore. The thought is enough to send an echo screaming through the void, letting it tear at the raw and bleeding parts of the demon. It doesn’t stop him from trying to get closer, trying to see just what they’re doing here, now, so close to the end of everything.

“-don’t see why you insist on doing this down here,” Sandalphon is saying as Crowley slithers into hearing range. “We can train at home.” He’s got gold in his teeth now, Crowley can see. Vicious, sharp gold, studded with diamonds.

“But not like this,” Gabriel says, sounding for once like the enthusiastic little brother Crowley remembers. “Not with the planet under our feet, that atmosphere, the way it affects the corporations. This, Sandalphon, is what it will be like when we fight. If we don’t train for it now, we won’t be ready when the time comes.”

“I see...” Sandalphon sounds less than impressed, and for once Crowley agrees with him. It makes him sick, hearing Gabriel so excited, almost giddy about Armageddon. This was the planet their Mother created specifically. These were the creatures She had commanded them to love above all else, even her. And now, Gabriel was so eager to see it end.
Gabriel turns, frowning at Sandalphon, and Crowley is reminded of a hundred different arguments he witnessed between his little brothers. “Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts now, Sandalphon?”

“Of course not,” the younger archangel growls. “I look forward to taking our revenge on Hell.”

“Then what’s that look for?” Gabriel demands, planting himself in front of his brother, unknowingly blocking him from Crowley’s view. “Come on, it’s the apocalypse! I thought you’d be excited!”

Sandalphon pauses, and Crowley wonders if he’s considering his answer. “You…” he starts, then makes a noise of frustration and pushes past Gabriel. The look on his face is full of contradictions, so different from the serenely confident face he’s shown every other time the demon has had occasion to see him in the past six thousand years. It’s a face that’s more comfortable with a sneer than a smile, but right now there isn’t a hint of either.

“Sandalphon,” Gabriel calls, turning but not making any move to follow.

His brother whirls around, eyes sharp and angry. “You!” he snaps. “You act like this is all a game. Like you forgot what this means.”

Gabriel gapes at him. “What?”

“Did you forget?” Sandalphon asks him. “Did you forget who we will have to fight?”

Gabriel’s expression doesn’t change, it vanishes. He stares at his brother with hard violet eyes, set in the face of an alabaster god. “I don’t see why that matters,” he says, his voice as dead as his eyes.

“It matters,” the younger archangel says calmly, “because it will be us against Lucifer. And I don’t know if you have it in you to kill him.”

They stand there in the dawn light, staring each other down, anger crackling between them. The air smells of ozone, and even the birds have gone silent. It will take so little, now, to push them into a fight. Her Herald and Her Messenger, Crowley’s little brothers. And all he can do is hide in the grass and watch.
“I killed the traitor Raphael,” Gabriel says flatly, and Crowley flinches at his old name. The void echoes with the words *I killed the traitor Raphael.* “I can kill Lucifer too, for his betrayal.”

“Uriel killed that demon,” his brother tells him, words dripping with disdain. “You slit it’s throat when it was already dead.”

The demon in the grass remembers the feeling of a blade sliding across his throat as he dies. *Hot, wet tears fall on his face. Uriel screams in anguish somewhere behind him. Blood flows from his wounds, staining his skin red.* He shudders, shoving the memory away before it can rise up and claim him. Even in this form, he can feel the scars. He hides them, in his human corporation. But he can’t fully heal them away. They’re a part of his pattern now, along with the rest of his pain.

“What Uriel did was an accident,” Gabriel sneers. “She thought that thing was still our brother. If you’re worried about any of us having the balls to destroy Lucifer, worry about *her.*”

Their words make Crowley feel sick. How can they stand there, so easily discussing this? How they’re going to destroy their eldest sibling. How they had killed *him.* Gabriel’s expression hasn’t changed since Sandalphon started yelling at him, while the youngest of the archangels is glaring up at him, the look on his face more fitting for a demon than an angel.

“Uriel knows what to do,” Sandalphon replies. “She agrees it is necessary.”

“And what about you?” Gabriel asks, face melting into a nasty smile. “You’re the one that hesitated last time.”

Their younger brother laughs, a harsh, cruel sound, like a knife being drawn across glass. “Bring out your sword,” he dares Gabriel. “I’ll show you if I hesitate.”

Crowley wants to cover his ears, to look away. He can’t stand the sound of his siblings fighting. He never could. He remembers so many times where he’d have to step in and pick up the pieces, healing them after yet another violent argument.
He’s lounging in their rooms, playing with a ball of star-fire when Sandalphon comes to him. He feels his pain before he even sees him, extinguishing the fire and sitting up from his lazy sprawl and bracing for something bad. He’d felt the flair of anger from both Gabriel and Sandalphon earlier, and knows it must have been a bad fight. He’d almost gone running for the practice yards then, but Michael had asked him to remain where he was. Now Sandalphon limps into their rooms, an angry red wound in his side. The body he’d so recently been given is bleeding, and he’s favoring his left leg. Raphael’s hands are already reaching for his brother before he’s taken more than a step into the room.

“Come here,” he orders, gentle hands guiding his little brother to stand in front of him. He probes the wound, and Sandalphon winces.

“Michael told me to come,” the younger archangel says, tone heavily implying that he wouldn’t have even thought of it if he hadn’t been ordered. “I’m fine. I can fix it.”

“Sure you can,” Raphael tells him, though privately he knows his youngest sibling is not adept enough at healing to fix a wound this large. “But I’m going to do it anyway.” He looks his brother over with a critical eye, inspecting his life pattern for other wounds and finding a multitude of minor scrapes and bruises, along with a sprained ankle and dislocated shoulder.

Sandalphon shifts uncomfortably under his hands, glaring at his shoes. “I don’t need it.”

Raphael hides a smile. Stubborn, Sandalphon is. They all are, in a way. Perhaps it’s a family trait. “Will you tell me what happened?” he asks.

“Why?” Sandalphon wants to know.

“Because I asked,” Raphael tells him, summoning his power. His brother shivers as he touches his pattern, tension easing from his body as healing energy flows in, filling up the places where the pattern has broken, knitting the torn parts of him back together. “And because if you don’t tell me, I’m going to assume you started another fight with Gabriel, and I’m going to drag you both up in front of the Metatron to face Her judgment.” They both ignore the pain that causes, that they can’t even speak to their own Mother anymore, they have to go through Her intermediary.

“I didn’t start a fight with Gabriel,” Sandalphon says, sullen now. “Gabriel started a fight with me.”
Raphael sighs. “What was it about this time, then?” On the physical plane he can see Sandalphon’s wounds closing, glowing faintly blue with healing light.

“I don’t want to tell you,” his brother says, and won’t meet his eyes. He can’t hide from their bond though, and Raphael reaches out, brushing against his mind and projecting as much love and safety as he can.

“Of course, you don’t have to. But I can’t fix what I don’t understand.”

Sandalphon shakes his head. “You don’t need to fix it. We worked it out.”

The healer represses a grin. “Who won then? You, or Gabriel? Am I going to have to go put him back together in the practice yard?”

“Michael’s healing him,” his brother says, and they share a wince. Michael can heal when she has to, but it’s never a very pleasant experience. “She said he didn’t deserve to come to you.”

“Hmm.” Raphael frowns, prodding at the healing pattern. It’s not going deep enough in one corner, which could leave a part of the wound unhealed. It’s a nasty cut, the edge of it cauterized by the heat of a flaming sword, and he doesn’t want to see his brother left with lasting damage.

“That must have been some fight,” he adds, just before the silence started to get uncomfortable.

“It was!” Sandalphon brightens as he talks about the bout. “We were practicing, see, and Gabriel came at me with his sword like this , ” he gestures with his good arm, growing more excited as he narrates how the fight had taken place. The healing is almost finished when he frowns and growls “And then Michael got in between us and made us stop.”

“I’m glad she did,” Raphael tells him, disturbed by how violent this fight sounded. They’d never gone so far in anger before, and he doesn’t like what it means. “You could have seriously hurt each other.”

Sandalphon sniffs. “He deserves it.”
“Why?”

His brother looks away again. “I said I don’t want to tell you.”

“Alright,” he sighs. “I’ll let it go this time.” Michael will tell him later, he’s sure. “But you have to promise me you’ll try to talk to Gabriel first, next time. Violence isn’t always the answer.”

“It can be,” Sandalphon insists.

Raphael laughs, the bright sound drawing a smile from his taciturn sibling. “Ok, fair enough. But it isn’t always the best answer.” He checks his pattern and nods, satisfied.

“There,” the older archangel pulls back from his brother’s pattern, the wound healed without a scar, torn muscles grown back together, and shoulder sitting back in place as if they had never been damaged at all. “You’re all fixed. Do you think you can promise not to need healing for at least another week?” He wonders, not for the first time, if he should withhold healing from them when they fight like this. If the instant fixes to their wounds keep them from learning that fights don’t solve everything. He doesn’t think he could do that, though. He’s never yet been able to turn away from anything that was in pain.

Sandalphon shrugs, rotating his shoulders and checking the motion of his arms. “Maybe?” he says, giving Raphael a small grin that says ‘probably not’.

The healer sighs. He knows all too well what pushing this will do. His little brother will just turn sullen and sulk and pick another fight with someone as soon as he possibly can. “Then, at least promise me that next time you’ll have someone come get me. I’d like to be on hand in case something happens.” He knows neither of his brothers would willingly do serious, permanent injury to the other, but they can get carried away. So far they’ve only managed to harm their physical forms, but it’s only a matter of time before one is left with a lasting wound in their essence.

“If he gives me enough warning, maybe,” Sandalphon tells him. It’s the best he’s going to get.

“Alright then. Off with you. I know you have duties to get to.” He gives the younger archangel a gentle shove, pushing him back towards the door.
His brother gives him a disgusted look, and starts off. He stops, though, halfway across the room, and turns back to the healer with something raw and worried in his gaze. “You won’t replace us, will you?” he asks, voice uncharacteristically uncertain.

Raphael stares at him, shocked by the question. “What? Of course not. I could never.”

His brother nods and starts off again, only to turn back once more. “It’s only-“ he starts, then scowls and turns away again.

“It’s only what?” Raphael asks quietly. What would make him even consider the idea that Raphael could replace them? Guiltily, he thinks of the book he left on their Mother’s throne. He won’t be able to help leaving his family, in the end. But replace them? Never.

Sandalphon faces him, hands curling into fists at his sides. “It’s only that Gabriel said you’d rather share a bond with that principality.”

“With Aziraphale?” Raphael asks, stunned. “Why would I-” Although. He knows why. He felt it when he taught Aziraphale how to heal, that longing to mingle their essences, to bring some part of himself into contact with the angel and never let go. But it’s not like he wants the same sort of bond with Aziraphale that he shares with his siblings. It’s not the relationship of a brother that he wants with the angel.

“We never see you anymore,” Sandalphon accuses. “Not even when you’re here.”

“Of course you do! I’m right here, aren’t I?” Raphael asks, standing. He can feel anger and pain washing down the bond from his brother, echoes of the same feeling coming from Gabriel and even Uriel.

Sandalphon shakes his head. “You’re blocking us out. Just like Lucifer. There are parts of you we can’t reach anymore.” He growls, and his face turns ugly. “But you open yourself to him, don’t you?”

Raphael’s eyes widen in understanding. He’s locked pieces of his mind away, hiding everything he knows about the Plan from them. Hiding the pain that knowledge causes. He hadn’t realized they could tell. Guilt floods through him, and he opens his mind to his siblings, all but the parts hiding the Plan. Those he shoves down deep, where they won’t think to look.
“I like Aziraphale,” he tells them, and shows them what he feels. The very specific way he cares about the principality. He hasn’t put a name to that feeling yet, but it isn’t one he thinks one should have for a sibling. It’s different, here in the light of his mind. Stronger in some ways, less so in others. He lets them in to it, lets them see that it’s not what he has with them at all. Sometimes it reminds him of the way Adam looks at Eve, full of devotion. It’s a strong emotion, powerful, and wholly unlike anything else he’s ever known. But there’s room in his heart for more than one person. Whatever he feels for Aziraphale, his siblings will always be a part of him. He shows them how he feels about them, the warm, all-encompassing, unconditional love. The joy and pride he feels when he sees them, that sense of belonging, of being a part of something whole and wonderful.

“You see?” he says, as they settle deeper into his love for them. “I care about Aziraphale, quite a bit. But that doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

“He’s not one of us,” Sandalphon says. “He’s not part of our bond.”

“Yes,” Raphael looks at him, honey-amber eyes earnest and full of emotion. “And we will always have that. I’m not replacing you with him. I never will.”

But you’re never here, Gabriel almost whines through the bond. You’re always off hanging stars, or down in Eden with him.

Hush now, Michael says, flooding their link with her quiet, steady belief in their bond. We’re all busy now.

Raphael nods. “We’ve all been taking on extra duties.”

Because Lucifer left us! Uriel cries. And Raphael can feel it, the hurt in him responding to his sibling’s pain. Lucifer left them. He hasn’t even been in contact through their bond. He just... gave Raphael a copy of the Great Plan, told him he was going to be cast out, and then went off somewhere, leaving them all behind.

He left us, his little sister continues. And you were always his favorite. He spent more time with you than any of us. So what are we supposed to think, when you start going off on your own like he did?

Raphael can feel her hurt and fear, the way it echoes between them all, even Michael. Sandalphon
“Listen to me,” he says to them all, moving forward to grip Sandalphon by the shoulders. “Listen carefully.” He projects his love down their bond, flooding it with everything he feels. “I promise you, all of you. I promise that I will never choose to leave you. Aziraphale is special to me, yes. But you are my family, and that’s not a bond I will ever want to break. If I have any choice in the matter at all, I would stay with you forever. I won’t go off on my own like Lucifer. I won’t leave you alone here. You’ll have to kill me first.” A sharp spike of pain escapes his control, anguish torn from the heart of him, where he hides the knowledge of his own fate. He won’t leave them by choice. He won’t want to. But he will leave them. And then, they will kill him. It’s all part of her plan.

“I’m sorry,” Sandalphon tells him, projecting remorse and his own love through the bond, trying clumsily to soothe his older brother’s pain. “I didn’t want to hurt you. I was just worried.”

Raphael pulls him closer, wrapping his arms around him and unfurling all six of his wings, cocooning them both in soft golden feathers. “I know,” he says, projecting his warm comfort down the bond to his listening siblings. “I know.”

In the park, Gabriel and Sandalphon stand, staring each other down. Crowley braces himself to witness a fight between them, the way things like this had so often gone in the past. And then Gabriel laughs and shakes his head.

“I know you won’t hesitate,” he tells his youngest sibling. “Want to know why?”

Sandalphon smiles, a nasty, vicious thing that exposes the metal on his teeth. “It’s finally time to take our revenge on Lucifer,” he says. “For taking Raphael from us.”

A roaring fills Crowley’s ears, the void screaming at him. His fault. They’re making this his fault. They’re justifying this whole thing as revenge, a retaliation against Hell for the Fall of an archangel. His siblings are going to destroy the Earth and everything on it, not because She said to, but because they can use Armageddon to take some measure of retribution from their former brother. And it’s not for the War. Not for the Fall of half of all Heaven. Not even for the pain and suffering that Lucifer and Hell have caused. They’re doing this because of him. Because of Raphael. Because of the angel Crowley used to be.
By the time he’s quieted the echoing screaming inside, Gabriel and Sandalphon have gone.

It’s lucky that Aziraphale has an idea, because Crowley can’t think of a blessed thing. The silence inside won’t stop screaming at him, the empty ringing nothingness reminding him of the siblings he lost when he Fell. In the silence between words, all he can hear is Sandalphon’s voice. It’s finally time to take our revenge on Lucifer. For taking Raphael from us. He drives towards Tadfield like he’s being chased, trying to put distance between himself and those words he wishes he had never heard.

When they arrive, the first thing he notices is that the hospital doesn’t really look like a hospital. Not that it ever really did, being a convent for satanic nuns and all. Crowley frowns at it, remembering that night eleven years ago, when he carried a baby in a basket onto these grounds and started off the apocalypse. He’s not expecting it when Aziraphale reaches out and grabs his arm, stopping him in his tracks, and for just a moment he lets the angel’s hand rest there, warm and comforting. Then he steps back, just out of reach. He feels exposed, like a raw nerve, and even the gentle touch of his angel is too much right now. Everything he feels for Aziraphale surges at his barriers, and he has to work to keep it all inside.

“It feels loved,” Aziraphale says, and Crowley looks around. He imagines the buildings in the dark, the moon bright and looming overhead. And yes, this is the place. He can’t feel the love that Aziraphale mentioned, but he doesn’t want to reach out and try, either. He can’t open himself up to emotions like that right now. Not when his pain and loss is so sharp. He’s afraid that if his barriers come off, that sharpness inside will find someone else to cut. He’s on edge, nervous, unable to really focus.

He’s still distracted when he feels the shot. There’s a flare of pain, but he’s had bullet wounds before. He knows before the sharp clap of sound has vanished that it’s not a real gun. Despite the burning pain of impact, the wound goes no deeper than the skin.

“Blue?” Aziraphale asks, and with a shock of terror, Crowley realizes that the angel was shot too. If this had been real, Aziraphale could have been killed - discorporated. And here he was, distracted, not even paying attention. It doesn’t help that the spell-key around his neck is pulsing with a general warning, and has been since Wednesday. He needs to shake this off, if he wants to be ready for the more specific danger to either of them.

Crowley loses a bit of his control when a human has the nerve to come and yell at them. He can’t help it. He’s wound too tightly, trying to contain too much, and he loses his hold on his mortal form for a second. The monstrous shape of his power breaks free and he only has a split second to guide it into something that isn’t quite a snake, and isn’t quite a dog, but is at least an earthly
enough form that it won’t destroy the sanity of every human that sees it. He’s done it before, exposed part of his monstrous self to humans that needed a lesson or two. It’s… well, *usually*, it’s fun. It feels good to let even a piece of himself free like that. And he’s amused by the way the human’s eyes roll back into his head, the thud as he drops to the ground. But he’s never done it in front of Aziraphale before. He’s never shown the angel even a piece of the twisted essence he hides beneath his favorite human shape.

“Well that was fun,” he says, and a glance to the side shows that the angel isn’t even paying attention to him. He’s looking at his coat, trying to see the blue stain splattered across his back.

“Yes, fun for you, maybe,” Aziraphale’s voice is dry as he looks over the damage done to the soft cream fabric. Crowley circles him, feeling his stomach drop as he sees how very close he came to losing the angel. Because while it wouldn’t have truly killed him, discorporation now means they won’t be getting back to Earth. Not in time for the end of the world. And he knows that just one of them, on his own, will not be able to stop the apocalypse. He’s been stupid, careless, and the angel almost paid the price.

“You could miracle it away,” Crowley tells him, and gets the full force of the angel’s wide, pleading sea-blue eyes.

“Yes, but, well, I would always know the stain was there. Underneath, I mean.”

Crowley blows it away, leaving not even a trace of the dark color on his angel’s clean white coat. Privately, he wonders if that’s how Aziraphale sees *him*, his human form just a miracled illusion over the dark and all-consuming stain within. A stain that, however he might cover it up, will always be there. Underneath. The taint of the unforgivable. But then Aziraphale smiles at him, and his human heart skips a beat, because whatever else is true between them, that smile is his favorite thing in the whole world.

Inside, Tadfield Manor is still the same building he remembers. Or, well, not exactly the same. The decorations are different, less religious and more... field combat. But he can smell it now, the scent of satanic worshipers. It’s faint, faded, but it still makes that itch for chaos flare up inside him, becoming more than just a background hum. A human runs around the corner, demanding to know who was winning their inane game. What did it matter who won? They had two, maybe three days left. And then, they were *all* going to lose.

He gives in to the itch. With a gesture, all the guns on the premises shift in their wielder’s hands, balls of paint becoming bullets as the first real gunshots ring out. Chaos starts to flow around them almost immediately as the humans realize what they now have in their hands.
“What the hell did you just do?” Aziraphale demands, and he has to work to ignore the disappointment in those sea-blue eyes. He’s a demon. The angel should know better than to expect him to refrain from giving in to temptation.

“Well,” he says, that chaotic part of him enjoying the startled cries from outside. “They wanted real guns. So I gave them what they wanted.” It’s his job description, after all. Letting the humans have the things they want, especially if it will hasten their destruction. It’s not like he’s letting any of them get truly hurt. That kind of chaos isn’t fun. It just makes the part of him that was once Her healer cry out far too loudly.

He keeps walking, looking into any room they come across for signs of the nuns, or even the hospital records. Aziraphale, however, is distracted by the gunfire outside. Crowley supposes he can’t blame the angel. After all, he doesn’t know they’re all going to come out alright in the end.

“There are people out there, shooting at each other,” he says, watching Crowley’s face now.

“Well, it lends weight to their ‘moral argument’.” Crowley can’t help but to get in a bit of a jab. Guns, in his opinion, solve exactly one problem. That something is alive, and something else wants it dead. He kicks in a door, and feels a sick satisfaction as the sound of something shattering reaches his ears. There’s too much going on inside, too many conflicting emotions, and he wishes he could just… default to factory settings. All of this would be so much easier, if he were the kind of demon he’s supposed to be.

“Everyone has free will,” he continues. “Even the right to murder.” Even the right to kill one’s sibling and then wage war over who should take the blame for his death. “Just… think of it as a microcosm of the universe.”

Behind him, Aziraphale stops. “They’re murdering each other?” he asks, shock in his voice, as if he’s just realized that’s what gunfire usually means. And Crowley knows what a good demon would do now. He’d let the bullets find their marks, smirk, and ask the angel what he expected. But Crowley isn’t a good demon. He never has been. Chaos is his thing, not wanton murder.

He sighs. “No, they aren’t. No one’s killing anyone.” He doesn’t want to see what Aziraphale’s face is doing while the angel takes in this information. He’s probably looking at him in that way of his, the one that screams he’s trying to find the angel Crowley once was, that he’s looking for something, anything, to use as a sign that the demon can be redeemed.
“They’re all having miraculous escapes,” Crowley adds, trying to think about anything else than the way Aziraphale is looking at him. “Wouldn’t be any fun, otherwise.”

Aziraphale smiles, the worry on his face easing, and he moves forward. Closer. Too close.

“...Aziraphale has just added yet another item in his exhibit of ‘things that mean Crowley is redeemable’. It hurts, deep inside, where the howling silence of the void reminds him of everything he is and can never be. And yet, he can’t look away. He stands, frozen, as the only person whose good opinion matters looks at him and sees so many things that aren’t there.

Such a pathetic excuse for a demon, Paimon’s words echo in the silence. Unforgivable. Damned.

“I’ve always said that, deep down, you really are quite a nice-”

He snaps. It’s too much. It’s all too much. He Fell. He betrayed them all. It’s his fault this war is about to happen. His Fall that his siblings are using to justify Armageddon. You are that which can never be forgiven.

“Shut it,” he hisses, surging forward, pressing Aziraphale against the wall and dragging him up by the fabric of that precious coat of his, until their eyes are level with each other and he can see the flecks of deeper color in his clear blue-green eyes.

“I’m a demon,” he growls, baring his teeth and snapping like an injured predator about to become the prey. He hasn’t been this close to the angel in thousands of years, and a distant part of him notes how he still smells like vanilla, cocoa, and old books under his cologne. The length of his body burns where he’s pressed against Aziraphale, burning in the echoing silence that’s screaming for more and closer, and he can’t contain himself, it’s too much, he’s going to come apart right here. He’s going to pieces inside, and he’s sure the angel can feel how badly he’s shaking. Words spill out from his mouth, carried on waves of pain. “I’m not nice. I’m never nice. Nice is a four-letter word. I will not have-”

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” a voice intrudes, and he turns, ready to send a stream of Hellfire at anyone who would dare to interrupt this, but - it’s her. It’s the nun he gave the baby to. And the shock of recognition breaks him out of his spiral. He steps away from Aziraphale, and his whole body protests, but he’s back in control of himself now. He won’t go to pieces just yet, though he expects that after everything, if they live, he’ll have to continue this breakdown in a private place. Somewhere the angel won’t be around to see. Someplace he can be alone, when he can no longer
hold back the tears and the pain.

All they get from the former nun is that the baby was switch with someone who was decidedly *not* the American ambassador, unless Swindon became its own country while Crowley wasn’t paying attention. There are no records, Hastur made sure of that, the bastard. They’re back to square one. Again. And it doesn’t help when Aziraphale starts talking about sensing love in the car, reminding him painfully of their conversation from 1941. It had been nighttime then, too, when the angel had asked if he could love. If he could *sense* love. And the trouble isn’t that he doesn’t, that he can’t. It’s that, right now, he’s feeling far too much of everything.

So he drops Aziraphale off at the shop, after their run-in with the woman on the bicycle, and doesn’t even mind when the angel doesn’t invite him in for a drink. He needs time alone, to breathe. He locks himself in his workshop for the rest of the night and loses himself in the task of refining his wards. With the end of the world coming, *everything* registers as ‘danger’. He has to fine-tune it, shift the spells so that they reflect only immediate danger of discorporation or death. He tries not to think about how it felt to be so close to Aziraphale. How the scent of him surrounded him, tasting of comfort and love. The way Aziraphale’s eyes had gone wide and shocked, but he still hadn’t made an effort to push him away. Hadn’t protested the closeness.

The next day, he hires Shadwell to look into the Antichrist, though he doesn’t hold much hope that he’ll find the boy. They don’t have enough time. He’s got to do *something*, but for the life of him he can’t figure out *what*. It makes him restless, itching with pent-up energy he can’t find a place for. He goes back to his apartment to pace, swearing at his plants and wracking his brains for any little bit of useful information. He can’t let it end like this. He *can’t*. But as the day fades into dusk, he still has no idea what to do. It’s almost Friday. And Saturday is the end of the world.

The knock on the door surprises him, and he’s distracted enough that he forgets to check who it is before opening it. The feather spell-key around his neck grows *hot* when he puts a hand to the handle. It gives him just enough warning to duck out of the way of the Hellfire that streams past the place his head had been just a second before. *Danger*, his wards pulse at him. *Danger danger danger*.

Behind the Hellfire stand two demons, dukes of hell - but not the ones that Crowley might have expected.

“Your Grace Duke Bebal, Duke Abalam.” Crowley greets Paimon’s deputies with a deep bow, reaching out for the place he keeps his sword, hidden in the same pocket of reality where he keeps his wings. “I wasn’t made aware you were coming, or I would have prepared a proper reception for you.”
“Cut the crap, Crowley,” Bebal sneers, shoving his way past the demon and into the apartment.

“We know what you did, Abalam adds, following his twin.

Crowley’s spine turns to ice and he tries to back away, into the open area of his ‘living room’. “And what would that be, exactly?” he asks, fingers just brushing against the hilt of his sword. If they know he killed Paimon he’s as good as dead. They’ll have brought all of his remaining legions to kill him. But if they don’t know, if they’re just speculating, he has a chance.

“You knew Paimon was in danger, and did nothing,” Abalam tells him, and he has to carefully control his face to not let his relief show. “You let him walk into an attack from an archangel and said nothing.”

“Your actions cost Prince Paimon his life,” Bebal adds. The pair of them step to the side, trying to flank him. They’re dressed in identical black suits, each with a sleek grey rat riding on their shoulders. The only way to tell them apart is which shoulder the rat rides on - Abalam on the left, Bebal on the right.

“We want to know why,” the chorus. “Why you let our prince perish.”

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” Crowley says, and his hand curls around the hilt of the sword, ready to pull it out at a moment’s notice.

“No misunderstanding,” Abalam says.

“You’re a traitor,” Bebal adds, and shows Crowley the briefcase he carries, dark leather stained with red. He knows what’s inside.

Abalam smiles as Crowley begins to sweat. “You’ll sing for us, little crow.”

Bebal draws closer, and the latches on his case click open. Crowley draws his sword. The dukes don’t even blink.
“If you kill us, Hell will know,” Bebal says.

“If you kill us, Hell will kill you,” Abalam tells him. “Did you think we wouldn’t tell them where we were going?”

“It’s nothing personal,” Bebal adds. “We don’t want to end up like our Prince.”

Crowley brings up his sword, a thin steel barrier between them. He steps backwards, retreating until he can see both dukes without turning his head.

Abalam stares at the weapon. “He has a hell-blade, brother,” he observes.

Bebal’s eyes widen. “A hell-blade killed Prince Paimon, brother.” His case falls from his hands, spilling the tools of a torturer across the floor.

“I think we made a mistake,” Abalam says, taking a step forward.

“I think it wasn’t an archangel attack at all,” Bebal adds.

“Traitor!” they cry together. In unison, they draw their arms back and launch twin fireballs at Crowley. The demon dodges, and two of his plants go up in smoke.

They attack together, moving as one, and he dodges again, dropping to roll under the table and come up on the other side. With the barrier between them, he has a moment to think. How to get out of this? Bebal and Abalam split, coming around the table on opposite sides. Crowley back up again, and hits the wall.

“I think he looks guilty,” Abalam says, a steel blade appearing in his hands.

“I agree,” Bebal says, an identical blade appearing in his.

“Now-” they raise their weapons, and Crowley spots his chance. He kicks out with all his strength, driving the heel of his show deep into Abalam’s gut. While the duke is distracted, Crowley raises
his sword and cuts the rat from his shoulder. Abalam screams, his pattern going ragged and fraying. Bebal growls, moving to his brother’s rescue, but Crowley hears him before he gets very far. He whirls, blocking his attack, and letting the momentum complete the turn. Facing Abalam again, he sees weakness in his pattern, a broken point he can exploit. He ducks Bebal’s next attack, blocks another, weaker, one from Abalam, and stabs. His blade slides home, and Abalam drops.

Bebal screams as his brother dies, the edges of his pattern going ragged and raw. Crowley takes his moment of distraction and whips his blade around, beheading the other duke. Bebal’s body drops, his pattern flickering out, and Crowley is alone once again, two very dead dukes of Hell on his floor.

“Shit,” he curses. “Shit shit shit.” They told Hell where they were going. When Hell finds out that they’re dead… Crowley’s wards pulse against his essence. Danger. Danger. Danger. Danger.

He calls Aziraphale with one thought on his mind. Panic. They need to leave. They need to get away from this planet, before Hell has a chance to retaliate against him for his actions. Before Heaven starts the war, and all that goes with it. If they stay here, it’s certain death for them both. He’s desperate, and cornered, and the only thing he wants now is to be certain Aziraphale is safe.

So he goes to the bandstand and waits, hoping that maybe this time, this time, he can convince the angel to look after himself for once. That, if Aziraphale has no new information, he’ll be able to convince him to run away with him. He’s not… he knows he’s not going to convince him to go because of the danger to Crowley. He doesn’t know if the angel would even really care if Hell did get him. But there has to be something he can say, or do, to convince him. He’ll do anything, really. Anything at all.

When the angel arrives, it’s like a weight physically lifting off of his shoulders. He hadn’t even realized he’d been worried, until he could see him and he knew that Hell hadn’t sent anyone to the bookshop. The demon takes a moment to look him over, to reassure himself that he’s not injured. He’s not limping, not favoring any part of him, and his pattern blazes bright in Crowley’s vision - whole and clean and beautiful. He looks worried though, frightened. But aren’t they both?

“Well,” Crowley asks, “any news?”

“Um.” Aziraphale clasps his hands together, fingers running over his ring - the ring that had once belonged to Raphael. It warms Crowley to see it on him, as always, even as it hurts because he knows he can never mean as much to Aziraphale as the archangel that once wore that ring.
“What—what kind of news would that be?” Aziraphale asks, clearly distracted. How hard must this be for him, this gentle creature that has only ever loved the Earth? Crowley wants to be frustrated with him, wants to roll his eyes behind his glasses and call him an idiot. But he can’t, not when he’s having such a hard time breathing at the thought of something happening to Aziraphale.

“Well,” he says, trying for a joke. “Have you found the missing Antichrist’s name, address, and shoe size yet?” He’s aiming for light, but his tone comes out harsh, angry. There’s so much fear in him right now, it leaves hardly any room for levity.

Aziraphale frowns, still playing with his ring. “His shoe size? Why—why would I have his shoe size?”

“It’s a joke. I’ve got nothing either.” Crowley hates how nervous he looks, almost as if he’s scared of Crowley. And that hurts, sending echoes of pain through his mind. It reminds him of those first few centuries, when Aziraphale’s initial reaction to his presence had always been one of fear.

Aziraphale nods. “It’s the Great Plan, Crowley.” And, fuck it, he’s heard far too much about this Great fucking Plan to listen to Aziraphale parrot the party line at him like it explains everything. Her Plan has ruled his life from the moment he was born. He’s lost more to Her Plan than anyone else in the history of the universe, and now, here, at the end of everything, even Aziraphale is willing to hide behind those words.

“Yeah?” he all but growls, pacing, because standing still is suddenly too much for him right now. “For the record, great, pustulent, mangled bollocks to the Great blasted Plan!” He shouts it at the sky, at Her, at all those who follow it so blindly and don’t ask whether it’s right. His voice is rough, raw, and he can’t seem to get a solid grip on the raging silence within.

His angel watches, shocked, and the words that come out of his mouth cut Crowley to the core.

“May you be forgiven.”

You are that which can never be forgiven.

“I won’t be forgiven,” he tells him. “Not ever.” As he says the words, something inside him cracks. “That’s part of a demon’s job description.” He looks into those familiar sea-blue eyes, and sees fear there. The crack widens. “Unforgivable.” Paimon’s word for him, the truth of him that the
Prince of Secrets spoke, “That’s what I am.”

And Aziraphale is looking at him with that searching gaze, the one that tries to see beyond the taint of Hell, looking for the angel-that-was. The angel that died on the blades of his siblings six thousand years ago. And this time, this time he has to say it.

“You were an angel once.”

The words strike the crack that’s forming in Crowley’s heart, tearing it wider, breaking away another piece of him.

“That was a long time ago,” he says, willing the angel to understand. He can’t be what he once was. He’s changed in far too many ways, been burned and broken and scarred in so many places. Even if he could go back, it wouldn’t ever be the same. They don’t have time for this discussion. It’s barely a day away from the end of the world, and the Antichrist is still missing. If they can’t act, if they can’t stop it, they have to leave.

Please, angel, listen to me, he silently prays. Please let me save you. I can live without saving the rest of the world, if only you’ll let me save you.

He moves closer, into Aziraphale’s space, watching his sad, frightened eyes. “We find the boy,” he says, because he has to present this option, even though he knows it’s the one that neither of them are capable of. “My agents can do it.” That may be giving Shadwell too much credit, but it’s his last hope if he can’t get the angel to leave.

“And then what,” the angel asks, hitting the nail on the head. And then what? There’s only one thing they can do. “We eliminate him?”

Crowley nods. “Someone does,” he says. “I’m not personally up for killing kids.” Understand what I’m saying here, angel, he prays. I can’t do it. I know I can’t do it. You can’t do it. You know that, too. They’re standing so close, almost touching now. He can smell cocoa-and-books-and-holiness in the air between them, the scent of home. But it’s contaminated, tainted, weighted down with the heavy sour scent of fear and pain. His own sulfur scent must overwhelm the angel, it’s a small mercy he doesn’t cover his nose from the stink of Hell that must cling to the demon like cigarette smoke.

“You’re the demon,” Aziraphale reminds him, and oh, that makes the silence inside him scream.
Behind his glasses, Crowley closes his eyes. He’s never, not ever killed a child. He can’t. Not even for Aziraphale. He tries to stop the angel, before the flood of words he can feel building up comes out, opening his mouth to remind him that it was God that killed children during the Great Flood. It was God that stole the lives of all the firstborn in Egypt. It was God that sacrificed Her only son. It’s always been God that does the killing. Her orders. Her plan. But he can’t get his words out, and Aziraphale continues.

“If you kill him,” the angel says, “the world gets a reprieve. And Heaven does not have blood on its hands.”

*If I kill him, I die,* Crowley thinks, and knows it to be true. *If I kill him, Hell kills me. Do you know that? Are you aware of what you’re asking of me? Don’t you understand what it would mean for me to do this? It’s not like Paimon or Asmodeus. Lucifer will know who killed his son. And I’ll be dead before you even realize what’s happened.* Anger flares up inside him. He’s on borrowed time already, and Aziraphale doesn’t even seem concerned by what killing the Antichrist would mean. The void surges inside him, raging against walls that are starting to crumble.

*Of course he doesn’t care about you.* Demon. Filth. Foul fiend, the voice inside tells him. He never did.

“Oh, no blood on your hands?” Crowley asks, thinking about Mesopotamia. About Sodom and Gomorrah. About Egypt. And Golgotha. And all the other times throughout their long history that Heaven has caused the deaths of innocents just to prove a point. “That’s a bit holier-than-thou, isn’t it?”

“Well, I am a great deal holier than thou. That’s the whole point,” Aziraphale tells him. And oh, oh that burns inside him. It’s confirmation that all Aziraphale sees when he looks at him is a demon. A damned soul that can never - and will never - be worthy of his, or anyone’s, love.

“You should kill the boy yourself,” he hisses, anger burning within his pain. “Hol-i-ly.” It’s icy, the anger that flares in him now. The burn of frostbite, not fire. It makes his face numb and his hands shake. It hurts. Somebody, does it hurt.

“I’m not killing anybody,” Aziraphale says. And there’s a moment when their eyes meet. And he looks… sad. Sad, and determined. And Crowley knows he’s lost. This is it. This is the end. Six thousand years, and this is where it all falls apart. His fault, yet again. His Fall, and the gulf.
between them he can’t quite convince the angel to reach across.

“This is ridiculous,” Crowley snaps, backing away, putting distance between them. “You’re ridiculous.” The words are cruel, reflexive, a dying predator striking out, trying to wound anything that nears it. “I don’t even know why I’m still talking to you.”

“Well, frankly, neither do I,” Aziraphale tells him. And that’s it. He can’t do this.


Through his own pain and rage, he feels a spike of anguish from the angel. “You can’t leave, Crowley,” he says, and oh, the pain in his voice. “There isn’t anywhere to go.” It’s enough to make him pause, that small, treacherous flame of hope rearing its ugly head inside. He stops at the very edge of the bandstand, knowing that if he steps off it, if he walks away, he won’t be able to come back. He’s on the edge of falling again, and this time there won’t even be a pool of sulfur to catch him.

“It’s a big universe,” he says, remembering the stars. All the planets he built and hung in the sky. “Even if this all ends up in a puddle of burning goo, we can… go off together.” Please. Please, angel. Say yes. He’s offering himself. Everything he is, everything he ever was or yet could be. He’s holding his heart in his hands and asking Aziraphale to take it. And for a second, he almost believes the angel will say yes.

“Go off together?” he asks, voice full of so many emotions. But there’s sorrow on his face. Pain. “Listen to yourself.” The crack in Crowley’s heart widens, sending fissures out through the core of him.

“How long have we been friends?” he asks, desperate to keep hold of the pieces, to keep his heart from shattering in his hands. “Six thousand years.”

“Friends?” the angel won’t meet his eyes now, and that’s almost worse because now he can’t see the emotion in his gaze. “We’re not friends. We are an angel. And a demon. We have nothing whatsoever in common.”

Each word is an arrow right into Crowley’s shattering heart. His walls are cracking and bleeding, thousands of years of pain leaking out, swamping him.
“I don’t even like you!” Aziraphale almost shouts, turning from him. And it’s… he can’t. He can’t let him walk away like this.

“You do,” Crowley says, but it’s more hope than fact. Reflexive. *Please tell me you didn’t mean it.*

>You’re a demon,* the voice inside says. *Of course he doesn’t like you. He hates you. You’re a fool for even starting to think otherwise.*

The angel turns back to him, truly yelling now. “Even if I did know where the Antichrist is, I wouldn’t tell you! We’re on opposite sides!”

“We’re on our side,” Crowley growls, voice low, insistent against the angel’s shout. *Don’t leave me,* he wants to say. *Don’t make me go through this alone. You don’t have to love me. You don’t even have to like me. Just please, please don’t leave me.*

“There is no ‘our side’, Crowley.”

Crowley stops. And all his walls break open. He knows nothing but pain.

“Not anymore. It’s over.”

His heart doesn’t shatter. It crumbles into dust.

“Right.” There’s nothing more to say. Nothing that *can* be said. Six thousand years. All that love. All that hope. He was a fool. A moron. A complete and utter idiot. He had thought… well. It doesn’t matter what he thought. He’s alone. And whatever else it might have felt like at the time, he has *always been* alone. The pain rises up inside, a giant wave the threatens to carry him away, leaving only a feral creature that knows only rage and agony.

He takes one last, long look at Aziraphale. Trying to memorize his face, committing every line, every color to memory. He mourns that he can’t see his eyes. He’ll never get to see that clear sea-blue ever again.

“Have a nice doomsday,” he says, with a detachment he does not feel. And then he turns, and he
walks away.

Chapter End Notes

**Flashbacks so far**

1. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
2. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
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Wow, thank you all so much for sticking with me so far! I really love hearing from you, it brightens my day so much. It's one of the only reasons I've made it out of the past few weeks with my sanity reasonably intact.

This chapter was the one that hurt the most to write, so please be warned. There is no comfort here. I'd plan to have something super fluffy to read or watch after this. (I'm personally going to go dive back into a favorite childhood series for a few hours after posting this. Gods, it even hurt to write.)

edit: Now with fanart from the amazing Ellezaria!! <3

CONTENT WARNING: This is the chapter that earns the Graphic Descriptions of Violence tag. The second flashback features a very dark interaction between Raphael and Lucifer. If this sort of thing is upsetting to you, I've linked the first word to the endnotes, where you can see a summary of what happened.

His hands hung the stars, once. They cradled the fires of creation as his fingers shaped lines of light into the patterns of pulsars and blue giants, black holes and red dwarfs. They painted the colors into nebulae, shaping the burning gasses into something wonderful, something that humans would look at, thousands of years later, and stare in awe at the beauty of it all. His hands had healed, too. Taken the broken, the dying, things damaged beyond all repair, and knitted them back together, filling their patterns with light and life. They were strong hands, and steady, never shaking as he reached into the forge of Creation and brought forth new life. The hands of an artist, of a healer. He’d never meant for them also to become the hands of a killer.

Crowley thinks about it, as he cleans up the bodies he had left on his living room floor. So many deaths, over the years, can be traced back to him. It’s no wonder the angel finds him disgusting. “Will all great Neptune’s oceans wash this blood clean from my hand?” he mutters, suddenly understanding how Macbeth might have felt upon realizing what he had done. It’s not the dukes’ deaths. Or at least, not specifically. Everything he’s ever killed has been a threat, an immediate danger to his angel or himself. He regrets the necessity, not the action. But how could he expect Aziraphale to love him, when he’s spilled enough blood to fill an ocean? He thinks of Lady Macbeth’s reply, chiding her husband for his weakness. *My hands are of your color, but I shame to wear a heart so white.* His own heart isn’t white. It’s charred black and broken into thousands of pieces. But she wasn’t calling out the color of Macbeth’s heart. She was calling him weak, worthless, made useless by his own guilt. Just as Crowley is weighted down by his own pain and regret, by the void and the silence screaming within. *Demon,* the voice inside hisses. *Tainted, Unforgivable, Unworthy.* It’s no surprise that Aziraphale hates him. He’s a fool for not realizing it sooner. It was only his own stubborn pride, or maybe his too-soft heart, that kept him blind to it, let him hope. God must surely be laughing at him, wherever She is. The son She created only to be cast out, daring to hope that he could hold on to one good thing.
His walls are broken still, all the pain he’s locked inside washing through him, making him shake with it. He can barely pick up the silver tools of torture that Bebal dropped on his floor, the tremors in his hands causing him to drop the delicate instruments time and again. At last he’s gathered them all, shoving them in with the bodies in the fireplace that hadn’t existed this morning. Then he summons Hellfire to burn it all away. For a moment he stands in the flames and considers letting go. Unraveling his pattern and letting the fire consume him too. But something in him rebels at that, the stubborn streak inside that refuses to give in. It wouldn’t let him die when his siblings tried to destroy him. It wouldn’t let him die when Lucifer dragged him down and tore his Grace from his soul. It won’t let him die now, when everything he is is cracked open and bleeding into the silence. He’s not sure if that’s a curse, or a blessing.

He steps out of the flames, and watches them consume the last evidence of his murders. His mind is in shambles, the labyrinth inside wide open and leaking his pain. Only one set of walls remain standing. The innermost barrier, the high, strong walls he built to protect the very core of his being. Even these are cracked and bleeding, but Crowley breathes a sigh of relief when he sees they did not fall. There’s too much pain within them. A memory he still cannot face. A name that no longer fits in the place it once belonged. He shores up the walls, stronger this time. He can’t risk them crumbling like the rest. He doesn’t think he’d survive it.

The rest of his walls are easier to rebuild, patching over the damage the angel’s words have done. His mind is used to the lines of them, the maze-like pathways familiar and comforting, keeping the pain at bay. With each wall repaired, the ache in him lessens. Each barrier locks more of it away, until they’re all rebuilt, and the agony is at a manageable level once again. The void still screams at him, echoing within the silence, but it’s muted, muffled by the solid slabs of pure willpower he’s placed around it. He takes the dust and shards that remain of his cursed heart and shoves them behind one last barrier. Walls them up like everything else, to be dealt with at some other time. He could make these walls permanent, he knows. Make them stronger, higher, until he can’t feel anything at all. Become as detached from his own heart as his siblings have become from theirs. The thought horrifies him. What would he be, if he didn’t have his heart to guide him? What would he do, if he could be as cold and uncaring as Gabriel?

An image crosses his mind - him, eyes fully yellow, fangs extended, hands clawed and vicious, face contorted with all the hatred and fury of a true demon. He rejects it, violently pushing the thought away. It’s not something he’s even willing to entertain. It is enough, for now, to push the pain back. To keep it from swamping him. He can think, like this, but his heart is not so far away that he forgets what it feels like. He can breathe again. It won’t be forever, he knows. His walls were put back up with too much haste for them to truly last. But they’re enough, at least, to get him through the next forty-eight hours. After that, well, if he’s still alive he’ll have to come up with something. He doesn’t really expect to be alive, though.

Crowley’s hands are steady once again, when he lets his awareness return to the world outside. The hands of an artist. A healer. And a killer. He looks at them, callused, strong, accustomed now to the grip of a sword. He could still fight, he thinks. Still try to end this before the world is destroyed. But what hope has he, against all the forces of Heaven, and all the forces of Hell? With
Aziraphale, he could hope, could begin to think that they could be enough. Alone? Alone, he’s nothing. A broken demon that used to be something greater. No, if he wants to live, he needs to leave. He needs to leave now. Where though? That is the question. His globe holds no answers. Soon enough, all of this will be a boiling puddle of sludge. Nowhere on Earth will be safe. He considers the moon, but even that’s still too close. And too personal. He couldn’t spend eternity there in the silence, the echoes of the void in his head would drive him mad.

Alpha Centauri catches in his thoughts. The last star system he ever created. He remembers Aziraphale coming to him, there in the star factory. Not because he needed anything. Not because of any arrangement, or duty. But because he’d simply wanted to spend time with him. With Raphael. He hadn’t been able to let Aziraphale handle the star, the fires of Creation had burned too hot for anyone not built to touch it. But he’d still helped in other ways - holding Raphael’s tools, commenting on the shape and color as he worked, making him smile and keeping him from falling so deep into the act of creation that he forgot who and where he was. He remembers the angel’s smile, as he’d held up the newly formed star for inspection. They’d both been pleased with the orbit, the way the other smiths helped them set the planets around the twin stars. And when they had finished, he’d taken Aziraphale by the hand and led him through the star factory, showing him all the wonders of creation.

He could go there. There was a planet at just the perfect orbit that it could host life. He’d put it there himself, knowing that life would not remain bound to Earth and the Garden forever. It would be green, now. A garden world, with perfect blue oceans and tall snow-capped mountains. Things would have developed a little differently, with a second star so close by, but with the right mix of tides and elements, life might have begun. Life outside the control of God and Heaven. For a moment, he imagines going there with Aziraphale, settling there with his angel and watching that new life flourish around them. And the angel could guide it to a kinder path, while Crowley himself delighted in causing chaos that harmed no one. I don’t even like you. A sharp spike of pain reminds him that this pretty daydream will never happen. Could never happen. Aziraphale will never go anywhere with him.

And… the humans. What would happen to them, after Crowley left? These wonderful, terrible, extraordinary beings that populate the Earth. What would Armageddon do to them? They’d die. All of them. Not a single child of Eve left in all of the universe. He remembers her bright smile, her questions. The way Adam had held her, like she was something precious, his dark eyes filled with love. Their children, whom he’d watched as Adam and Eve built their world from nothing, the little ones he’d loved as if they were his own siblings. All of the people, every single blessed human, could trace their line back to the woman that asked too many questions, and the man who loved her enough to follow where she led. He thinks of the choice he had made, before it all even really began.

He’s standing before the Metatron, listening as news of angels Falling starts to trickle in. Lucifer’s doing, all of it. But so many are Falling now because of his oldest brother’s words, his explanation on what is going to happen to the humans She commanded them to love.
“I don’t understand,” he says to the angel that stands as Her voice. “Why test the humans at all, if she knew it would cause all of this?”

“She has Her reasons, child,” the Metatron says, in a way that implies he’s more than a bit dim for asking. “I wouldn’t presume to question Her.” And it rankles something deep in Raphael, that this angel can talk to him like that. He’s older, far older, than the Metatron. But, he supposes, he doesn’t have his wisdom. His direct connection to Her.

“But why?” Raphael demands. “If She didn’t want them to have knowledge, why put the tree there? If She didn’t want us to care for them, why tell us to love them more than Her?” Give me an answer, he prays silently. Please. Give me something to hold on to before I Fall too.

The Metatron glares at him, clearly frustrated. “She has Her plan. I suggest you obey it.”


“But they will. It is written.”

“It doesn’t have to be, though!” He can’t help himself from trying to reason with Her, even when She no longer hears his voice. There’s no reason to test the humans like this. No reason for any of the plan to happen the way She has written it.

The Metatron’s frown deepens, and Raphael knows that if he were wise, he would drop this now. He’d go back out, try to be the perfect little archangel, try to conform to whatever She wants of him, though it might be too little too late. He should be doing everything in his power not to Fall. And yet here he is, trying once again to convince someone that this isn’t right. That Her plan is flawed and unjust.

“You must choose, Raphael,” the Metatron says angrily. “Loyalty to your God, or whatever it is you feel for Her creations.”

“She said to love them,” Raphael reminds him. “More than Her, she told us.”
The Metatron shakes his head, glancing at a book lying face-down on the desk. Raphael freezes, staring at it. He recognizes the cover, the gold-leafed pages, the way one corner is crumpled inward where he ’d dropped it in shock as he read the words within. He knows those words by heart, as much as he wishes he’d never read them. He’d last seen this book when he’d held it in his hands, standing before Her throne, begging for them not to be true. When he’d thrown it at Her seat and left it there, terrified and angry over everything the book contained. The only written copy of Her Great Plan.

His companion doesn’t notice his preoccupation, and continues to speak with callous indifference to the universe around him. “That does not absolve them of the punishment, should they disobey. She is testing them. She will continue to test them, for as long as She wishes to do so.” He writes down the name of another angel. One more who has joined the ranks of the demons. “Make your choice, Healer. Remain true to Her, and She may yet save you from your fate.”

Raphael thinks about his family. His siblings. He thinks about all of the angels that look to him for command. His mind skates around Aziraphale, avoiding thoughts of the principality and how very much he wishes he could just remain at his side. He thinks about the Plan. This blasted Plan that they ’re all caught up in. About God, his Mother, who made it clear how easily she could cast him out. About Adam, and the way he looks at Eve like she is his everything. About Eve, with her bright eyes and quick wit, forever asking questions he is not allowed to answer. About an eternity spent asking questions himself, and getting no answers in return.

“I shouldn’t have to,” he tells the Metatron firmly. He has enough love for all of them. And if he can love them all so much, why, then, can’t She? “But,” he adds, “if I must, then my choice is clear.”

He thinks about Her Plan. About what it means for him. He ’ll be walking headfirst into it, doing exactly what She said he would. But in that moment, thinking about questions and non-answers, about love, and tests, and free will, he doesn’t care. He can’t stay here. Not when staying means turning his back on what he believes is right. He meets the Metatron’s eyes.

“I choose them.”

The Metatron nods, and turns to write another name on the list of the Fallen. Raphael walks away. He can feel the gap between his essence and Her Grace widening within him, leaving a space that is wide enough, now, for Lucifer to work his way in and drag Raphael the rest of the way down.
He’d chosen humanity once, even knowing where that choice would lead him. Could he really abandon them now, after all of that? Tempting Eve. The Flood. Jesus’ birth, death, and resurrection. The plague. All the wars, little and great, where one side or the other claimed to fight in Her name. All of his temptations. All of Aziraphale’s miracles. Concerts. Cars. Nights spent lounging in the back room of a bookshop in Soho.

The empty walls of his flat echo with the silence. He can’t think from the ache of it. The void inside screams, raw and full of pain. He can still smell the fire, smoke wafting through the apartment, carrying the scent of charred demon. He hadn’t ever meant to Fall.

“I only ever asked questions,” he says, not entirely sure if he’s talking to himself, or to Her. “That’s all it took to be a demon in the old days.” He still doesn’t understand. How was asking questions enough to damn him, when he’s seen angels doing so much worse and not even losing a feather? How could a God that claimed to love all of Her children do this? How could She destroy everything She had built? How could She sit back and watch Her first children kill each other over… over ideological differences?

“Great Plan?” he calls out, praying to Her for real now, though he doubts She will hear him. “God? You listening?” There was a time he never would have dreamed about talking to his Mother like this, demanding her attention. He doesn’t care now. He’d only ever done what She had asked of him. She is the one that failed him.

“Show me a Great Plan.” He hadn’t wanted to believe it, that this was really what She wanted. Not when he was in Heaven as Her Healer, reading Her words for the first time. Not in Eden, a newly-made demon contemplating the meaning of those words for the humans before him. Not in the 6,023 years since, as he tried to find his place in this world. And not now, just hours from the end of everything.

“Okay. I know. You’re testing them. You said you were going to be testing them.” She’s not listening, but he’s going to give Her his opinion anyway. She owes him that much. “You shouldn’t test them to destruction. Not to the end of the world.”

And suddenly he’s angry. So very angry. What right has She to say she’s given them free will, and then plan it all out like this? How can She say She loves them, and then turn a blind eye to all the pain and misery in the world? What’s the point of any of this? He growls and shoves himself back from his chair. He can’t think here. He’d tried to make his flat as unlike Hell as possible, but in a way, it now mirrors Heaven. Cold. Impersonal. Without any of the warmth and life of the world he’s come to love. It’s not home. Not really. There’s only one place on Earth he feels safe enough to want to call it home, and he’s not welcome there anymore, if he ever really was.

In seconds he’s in his car, speeding down the street. Usually driving calms him, but today it only
serves as a reminder of the last time he was in the Bentley. Of Aziraphale at his side. He snarls at the pain the memory brings. There will be no more trips with the angel in this car. No more chances to watch Aziraphale panic at the speed he’s going, voicing the same complaints as always but never actually leaving. It’s too quiet without him there, but he can’t turn on the radio. Not with the chance Hell will try to contact him through it. Crowley curses himself and heads for the park. Maybe a walk will help.

He doesn’t even get out of the car when he reaches St. James. He looks at the beautiful greenness and all he can see is Aziraphale. Feeding the ducks together. Sitting on their bench. Walking along the familiar paths, almost (but not quite) close enough to touch. The void screams inside, and he nearly causes a massive accident as he speeds away.

Not one of his usual haunts can satisfy him. He’s taken the angel to them all, at one point or another. Going to them now, alone, when he knows he’ll never be there with Aziraphale again… it opens up new wounds inside him, new pain he hastily shoves behind yet another set of walls in his mind.

Eventually, Crowley settles on an old movie theater. It had been abandoned years ago, but it’s a simple miracle to clean up the inside and start the projector going. He slides into a seat in the empty theater and snaps his fingers, letting a series of cartoons play across the screen. He watches it, and he thinks. He can leave the Earth, of course. Nobody would blame him for that, for not sticking around to see it all end. Well. Aziraphale might blame him, but the angel has made it clear where he stands. And yet… and yet he would blame himself. He’s spent so long living on this planet, loving this planet. Cowardice is common in many demons, but it’s never been one of Crowley’s flaws. He just can’t make himself give into it now. The only point had been to keep Aziraphale safe. And if Aziraphale won’t go, then he has no reason.

So he’s not leaving. But if he’s not leaving, what can he do? He doesn’t know where the Antichrist is. Won’t know where the Antichrist is, until it starts. And then it’ll be too late. His thoughts flow to Warlock, the boy he raised. He’ll be at Megiddo by now. Soon, they’ll know he’s not the right boy. And he knows they might attack Warlock, but Crowley put wards in place around his young charge years ago. Strong wards, that should protect him from a demon’s wrath. And he doesn’t really think they’ll try to kill the boy. As a human, they won’t consider him worth the time it would take - not when they’re on a schedule. And they are on a schedule. The armies of Hell need to be ready for the End, because anything less than complete readiness means destruction at the hands of Heaven.

Cartoon rabbits dance across the screen as he thinks. Outside, it’s morning now. Saturday. The day the world is going to end. And he’s sitting in here, watching stop-motion rabbits.

One of the rabbits rips off its own head, and Hastur appears. And Crowley barely even pays attention to their conversation, because this is it. Hell knows. Hell knows, and they’re coming for
Fight and Flight war within him. If he fights, if he kills Hastur when he comes to collect him, it’ll only put off the inevitable for so long. Hell knows now. Or at least suspects. They know the Antichrist is not Warlock. They know that Abalam and Bebal were coming to him, and that they have not returned. They know of the hundreds of demons that have been killed over the years, all within his general proximity. They have all of the pieces. It’ll only take someone smart, like Beelzebub, to put it all together.

If he flies, if he leaves Earth, they’ll be distracted by the war. At least, until it’s over. But if Hell knows about him, then what does Heaven know? Does Heaven know about Aziraphale? About how he’s been working with Crowley to prevent Armageddon? He remembers Gabriel’s cold eyes. If they know about Aziraphale, they won’t just make a demon of him for this. They’ll destroy him.

Without conscious thought, he finds himself driving down a familiar Soho street. And there’s his -the- angel, walking towards his bookshop, not even watching around himself for any danger. But then, he’s never had to. Crowley has always been there to keep him safe, whether he knew about it or not. Crowley’s spell wards pulse against his chest, but there’s nothing immediate. Hell is still gathering itself. He has some time before they arrive. He gets out of the car, already calling for Aziraphale.

“Angel!” He rounds the car, and sees the surprise and recognition on the angel’s face. It’s not pleasure, but at least it’s not disgust. Not hatred. He can work with this. “I’m sorry,” he says, because he doesn’t know what he did that caused the angel to decide to break from him now, but there’s a chance an apology will help. “Whatever I said, I didn’t mean it.” *I never meant any of it. Never wanted any of this.* Aziraphale watches him, saying nothing, but he’s not turning way. He’s not leaving.

“Work with me,” Crowley begs. They won’t get another chance at this. “I’m apologizing here.” The angel’s expression doesn’t change. *Please. I can’t be not what I am but I can try. I’ll try to be whatever you want, if you’ll just come with me, let me keep you safe.* “Yes? Good? Get in the car.” He has to. The only other option ends in death.

“What? No!” Aziraphale says, and part of him wonders if he even expected any other result. The other, larger part of him forges on, desperate to save Aziraphale, even if he can’t save anyone else.

“The forces of Hell have figured out it was my fault,” he tells him, fear coursing through his body like electricity. “But we can run away together! Alpha Centauri!” He doesn’t know if the angel even remembers building the star system together, if invoking the name of it will help or hurt his argument. “Lots of spare planets up there. Nobody’d even notice us.”
Aziraphale stares at him like… like he’s just spoken gibberish. There’s disappointment in his eyes, too, like he’d expected better from Crowley. And that hurts. It sets off all of the other hurts, echoes in the silence. Unforgivable. It’s not enough. He’s not enough. And there was no real reason he ever should have thought that he could be.

“Crowley,” the angel says, and even his name in that familiar voice can’t soothe the screaming silence anymore. “You’re being ridiculous. Look. I-I’m quite sure, if I can just - just reach the right people, then I can get all of this sorted out.” He’s stammering, nervous, as scared in his own way as the demon. But he’s falling back to Heaven. To that mythological God that cares what happens to Her creations. And Crowley loves him for that certainty, that unwavering faith. But he’s wrong here. Heaven wants this war, just as much as Hell. And it amazes Crowley that he can’t see that.

His frustration, his fear, his hurt, they all bleed into his voice as he steps closer, begging the angel to understand. “There aren’t any right people,” he says. There never were. “There’s just God. Moving in mysterious ways, and not talking to any of us!” He’s so angry at Her in this moment. He remembers how much it had hurt when She’d stopped responding to them. How Uriel had cried from the loss. How Gabriel had refused to believe, for so very long, that She was really gone. How Sandalphon had raged, and Michael had gone quiet, withdrawn into herself. They hadn’t understood then, none of them. And he still doesn’t understand now. He never will.

“Well, yes,” Aziraphale tells him. “And that is why I’m going to have a word with the Almighty. And then the Almighty will fix it.”

She’s gone! Crowley wants to scream. She’s not listening! She won’t hear you! But what comes out is “That won’t happen! You’re so clever. How can somebody as clever as you be so stupid?” How can someone who lives for knowledge not realize what’s happened? She created them all. She made Her plan. And then, She left. It’s the archangels that are running the show now. And they’ve become so cold, so close-minded, that they can’t see that Her plan is wrong.

Hurt crosses Aziraphale’s face, followed by resolve. He looks Crowley in the eyes, that familiar sea-blue gaze firm, and sad, and still so kind.

“I forgive you,” he says. And it’s the very worst thing he could have done, like shards of glass cutting through Crowley’s soul, because he can’t. Crowley is unforgivable. It’s in his very nature. And the reminder of it, oh, it reminds him of everything he’s lost, and everything he can never have. He can’t do this. He can’t keep hoping, keep trying. He’s out of time. Out of options. And he can’t stay here and watch what happens when Aziraphale realizes, too late, that Heaven. Doesn’t. Care.
“I’m going home, angel,” he says, fear and pain and anger writhing inside him like a tempest, taking his words and making them as cruel as he’s ever been. “I’m getting my stuff and I’m leaving. And when I’m off in the stars, I won’t even think about you!” It’s a lie. One of the very few he’s ever told the angel. But oh, how he wishes it could be true. In this moment all he wants is to forget. Forget the angel, and Earth, and Heaven and Hell. Still, he knows, he never will. This pain, just like all the rest, will remain with him forever.

When he gets back to his flat, he senses it immediately. Something has changed. Frantically he checks his wards - has Hell already arrived? But no, they’re pulsing with danger, and that danger is getting steadily closer, but it isn’t with him yet. It isn’t inside his flat. The spells around his door have not been broken. No one has entered that he meant to keep out. Still, something is different here. He paces through the large open spaces, all of his senses wide open, trying to spot the change.

He finds it in his office. It’s the same as when he left it, mostly. Empty, save for the desk and the golden throne. Echoing with the sound of his footsteps. The only difference is lying innocently on the stone table, a square of paper bound in brightly-colored leather. A book. It could almost be new, the cover unworn, the spine unbroken, gold leaf on the pages still shining brightly where it catches in the mid-morning sun. The only hint that it’s ever even been opened is in the upper left-hand corner of the cover, where the leather has crumpled in where someone dropped it. Not someone. Him. Because, while there is no title on the cover, no author listed on the spine, Crowley recognizes the book. The Great Plan.

_Show me a Great Plan_, he had said, not believing she was listening. And now, here, in his home, is the only written copy. His fingers brush the leather, and he pauses. Does he really want to see the words inside? He flips it open, careless of the way it cracks the spine. He flips through it, running a finger along lines he’s read hundreds of times, each one just as painful as the last. Her Great Plan, laid out for him like a road map straight to Armageddon. And there, halfway through, he finds a page he had ripped out himself. Balled up and thrown at Her throne in anger. It’s been restored to the slim volume, as if he’d never even touched it.

**Concerning My Archangel Raphael**

His page. His fate. **His questions shall lead him to descend unto the fires of the Fallen.** That was true. He’d asked so many questions, separated himself from Her so much so that Lucifer had been able to work his way in and tear him the rest of the way out.

**He shall give freely that Knowledge which has been forbidden.** True again. He had tempted Eve. Not because he was supposed to, but because he couldn’t stand to see her forbidden the answers to her questions in the way that he had been. It doesn’t matter the reason, though.
Ultimately, he’d done what Her Plan had said. He’d gotten the humans thrown from the Garden. But he’d also given them the power to choose.

_He shall face his kin in combat and lose all that he is_. That had happened before Eden. But it had happened. His part in the plan, almost finished. Just one last line meant for him.

_And he shall Fall for the final time in beloved hands_. What was that even supposed to mean? Perhaps, he thinks, it means that moment, at the end of the fight. When Michael, his beloved older sister, whose hands had held his and showed him how to make the stars, had picked him up off the battlefield? When those strong, careful hands had thrown him over the edge? He supposes that must be it. Because the thought that it could mean _anything_ else was terrifying. How much further could a demon Fall? How much lower can you sink than rock bottom?

He flips the page, and comes face to face with an illustration. One that he does not remember being there before. It’s of a demon in dark glasses, six black wings spread wide. He - and it can’t be anyone but Crowley, not with three pairs of feathered wings - stands in front of a small white-washed cottage. It’s windows glow with warm light, and the open door lets it spill out onto a cobblestone path. There’s a garden, lush plant life growing all around the demon. Under his feet, there’s a carpet of Forget-me-nots. It would be a beautiful, serene picture, were it not for the four figures facing the demon, a wicked blade in each of their hands. The demon is pointing his own sword at the figures - angels, their backs to the viewer, where it’s all too easy to see they have the wings of an archangel.

Crowley stares at it. He’s certain it wasn’t there, the last time he held this book. He would have remembered it. The art is exquisite, reminding him of sketches Leonardo had shared with him. But Da Vinci had never seen Crowley’s wings. He didn’t know what his siblings looked like. There was no way he could have created their likenesses in such perfect detail. He can tell who each of the angelic figures is meant to be. Michael, sword pointed at the ground and a hand out to grip Sandalphon’s shoulder. Sandalphon, his own blade thrust towards the demon, his coat billowing out behind him. Gabriel, sword held above his head, poised for a deadly sweeping cut. Uriel, just to the side, lunging at the demon.

What does it mean? And why is this book here, now? Why this illustration? He doesn’t know. And a warning flash from the spell-key around his neck tells him that he doesn’t have time to find out. So he goes to the safe, and removes the tartan thermos. Then, in its place, he leaves the book. If he lives through the next twenty-four hours, he’ll have time enough to try to understand it then.

He only just gets the holy water into the bucket, when the crystal feather burns. From the hallway, he hears Hastur and Ligur calling his name. They kick at the door, pressing against Crowley’s warding spells with all the power of a Duke of Hell. The wards hold. They should, of course.
Crowley was an archangel once, and even now he has more power in his little finger than most demons do in their whole bodies. The small fire of Ligur’s power can’t hold a candle to his own roaring flame. But. So much of his power is going into his wards. Has been going into them for over 150 years. He can’t keep them all up and resist the combined forces of Hastur and Ligur attacking his door. He has to let something go. And he could release the warning spells around the angel, the ones that can lead him to Aziraphale if the angel is in danger. But even now, when Aziraphale has rejected him so thoroughly, he can’t quite bring himself to let go. So he releases the power on the door, hearing it explode inward as his unwanted guests push their way into his flat.

Carefully, knowing that even the smallest drop of it could kill him if it lands in the right place, Crowley places the bucket above the door. It’s only then that he remembers his sword, hung uselessly above his workbench in his garden room. He doesn’t have time to get it now, and if he uses a miracle to take it his visitors will know. Cursing himself for a fool, he sits down in the hard, golden throne and calls for the dukes.

The bucket falls on Ligur. Crowley watches, nerves singing. The spell-key pulses insistently with warning. DangerDangerDanger. DangerDangerDanger. The crystal feather burns against his skin. Ligur screams, and his life-pattern dissolves. Hastur keeps screaming, staring in horror at the remains of his companion. He glances at Crowley, then back at the puddle on the floor, stumbling over his words in his horror.

“That’s- that’s Holy Water. I can’t believe even a demon would - would - would- Holy Water. That’s - that’s- but he hadn’t done nothing to you!”

Crowley ignores the guilt that settles inside him. He’s killed more for less, he knows. It was easier, if he could tell himself he was protecting the angel. Killing simply to save his own skin… it’s necessary. He doesn’t want to die. But it feels worse somehow, like the stain on his soul is darker than the times he killed for the sake of someone else.

“You. You don’t frighten me,” the duke tells him, but the fear is clear on his face.

“Do you know what this is?” Crowley asks, thinking about Bebal and Abalam, killed in this same flat only hours ago. It’s almost funny, the contrast between them and Hastur. They’d been ruthless and fearless, right up until the end. Hastur is practically radiating fright. It stands to reason that those of the same rank might not share the same demeanor, but that this is the duke Hell sends to kill him? He must have been doing something right, all these years, if they think someone like Hastur or Ligur could succeed against him.
Still, the wards pulse against his chest. *DangerDangerDanger DangerDangerDanger.*

He stands, aiming the mister at Hastur. He’s not sure the bluff will work, but it will buy him time to consider other options. “It’s a plant mister,” he says, watching the duke track the nozzle with his eyes. “Cheapest and most efficient on the market today. It can squirt a fine spray of water in the air. It’s filled with Holy Water. It can turn you—” he looks pointedly at Hastur. “Into that.” He glances as the still steaming sludge on the floor.

Hastur follows his gaze, then tries on a sneer. “You’re bluffing.”

“Maybe I am,” Crowley admits. “Maybe I’m not.” If it weren’t so very serious, he’d be reminded of his days as a spy. This whole thing feels very James Bond. “Ask yourself: Do you feel lucky?”

Hastur looks at the bottle, and Crowley can see the moment he decides it’s a bluff.

“Yes,” he says. “Do you?” and the plant mister explodes in Crowley’s hands.

“Time to go, Crowley,” Hastur says, pointing at him and starting to work a demonic miracle that will drag them both back down to Hell. Crowley gathers his own power to combat it, pulling from a deeper source than he has in thousands of years. His wards pulse around him. *DangerDangerDanger DangerDangerDanger.*

The phone rings, completely unexpectedly. He had bought the machine to play with, because human inventions fascinate him. He’s only ever given the phone number to one person.

Adrenaline floods through Crowley. He can’t let Aziraphale speak into the recording. Can’t let Hastur hear the voice on the other end of the phone. Six thousand years of protective instincts kick in, and he lunches for the handset.

*DangerDangerDanger DangerDangerDanger*

“Don’t move,” he orders Hastur. “There’s something very important you need to know before you disgrace yourself.”
He hears Aziraphale’s voice coming from the old-fashioned answering machine. “I know where the Antichrist is.”

Crowley rips the phone from its cradle, pulling it to his ear. Talk to me, he wants to say. Tell me how we can save the world. He can’t. He has to get rid of Hastur first. But the very fact that Aziraphale called, it feeds that fragile hope within him, and he’s never been strong enough to hold it back.

“Yeah, not a good time,” he says. He’ll have to apologize about this later. But now he’s allowed to believe that there will be a later. “I’ve got an old friend here.” He hopes Aziraphale won’t read into that, or worse, disregard it and try to come in person. He can’t have him coming here, not until Hastur is gone.

DangerDangerDanger DangerDangerDanger. The spell wards pulse around him. Mortal danger. Like he didn’t already know.

He launches into his most ambitious bluff yet. “Well,” he says, letting Hastur feel the strength of his power. The duke will know what that strength means. As a Fallen archangel, Crowley has the same amount of power as a Prince of Hell. More, though only Satan holds a higher position. He injects false cheer into his voice. “You definitely passed the test. You’re ready to start playing with the big boys.”

“What? You’re mad,” Hastur says, even as his eyes go wide as he senses Crowley’s strength.

“The Lords of Hell had to make sure you were trustworthy, before we gave you command of the Legions of the Damned in the war ahead,” he tells the duke, and watches as disbelief and a growing pride cross Hastur’s face. “And, Hastur,” he jumps onto his throne for effect, “Duke of Hell. You’ve come through with flying colors.”

“Me?” the duke asks, and Crowley almost feels guilty for how happy he looks. DangerDangerDanger DangerDangerDanger

“Now, I- I wouldn’t expect you to believe me, Duke Hastur,” Crowley takes his inspiration from Aziraphale’s phone call, and pulls out his mobile. “But why don’t we talk to the Dark Council? Let’s see if they can convince you.”
Hastur looks surprised. “You’re calling the Dark Council?” Nobody calls the Dark Council. If the Lords of Hell want you, they call you.

“Yes I am.” Crowley gathers his power. “And they say-” he pauses, then takes a firm grip on reality and bends it to his command. “So long, sucker!” With a hiss, he dissolves into a thousand tiny pixels and sends himself into the phone line.

The spell-wards scream at him. Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger Danger. He ignores it. Hastur is following him, but this will work. Despite Hastur’s threats, Crowley is laughing. Aziraphale called him. Aziraphale called him. Aziraphale called him. It’s not all as lost as he thought. And if he heard correctly, his angel found out where the Antichrist is. The hope is expanding within him, filling his chest and stitching the shattered bits of his heart back together.

He tumbles out of the phone line, still laughing. He shuts off the answering machine. He can’t call Aziraphale, now that Hastur is trapped inside his phone line, but he can -

DANGER! DANGER! DANGER! DANGER! DANGER! DANGER!
DANGER! DANGER! DANGER!

The crystal feather, the spell-key around his neck, grows hot enough to sear his skin. He yanks it off, just in time for the silver chain to melt around his fingers. The crystal feather vibrates, and then it shatters into a shower of glittering crystal shards.

“No.” Crowley stares at them in disbelief. “Oh no. No no no no no.”

The backlash from the spell hits him a moment later, a jumble of sensations from the last of his wards, trying valiantly to tell him from where the danger came. He stumbles back from the force of it, bruising his hip on the table. He barely notices the pain. All he can get from the wards is a sense of Aziraphale, and warning of danger from Heaven. His blood turns to ice in his veins.

“No. Angel, oh, Go- Sa- Somebody. No.”

He’s never gotten down the stairs and into his car so fast. Every little delay, even the tiniest bit of traffic, makes him roar in frustration. He can’t drive fast enough, but as he does, he prays. Please let me be wrong. Please let him be alive. I promise, whatever you want from me, you can have it. Just let him be alright.
The bookshop is on fire. He can see it as he pulls up. Smoke. Sirens. People shouting. Someone shouting at him. He says something back, but he’d be lying if he said he even knew what language he spoke in. All his attention is on the closed doors. The flames licking up the walls and blowing out the windows. The terrifying lack of angelic presence.

He snaps, and the doors open for him. Inside, it’s an inferno. Bits of charred paper float in the air, Aziraphale’s beloved collection going up in flames around him like kindling. He expects to find the angel here, rushing around, trying to save his books. But the shop is empty. There is nothing alive inside. He throws his senses out, filling the bookshop with his power, searching, desperate, for something he already knows he won’t find. He’s screaming, calling out Aziraphale’s name, but his body is on auto-pilot. His mind is reaching, flowing through all the patterns of the world, searching for the one, beloved shape that holds his angel’s life force. He finds nothing. Nothing at all.

“I can’t find you!” The words are torn from him, full of desperation and fear. Anger. Agony. The silence echoes with it. “Aziraphale! For Go- For Sa- For Somebody’s sake! Where are you?!” The void reverberates with his name. Aziraphale. Aziraphale. Aziraphale.

He can’t sense him. He can always sense him. But now- now there’s not even an echo. He can sense a source of holy power between the burning shelves. Something far older, and far stronger, than his gentle angel. A power older, even, than Crowley himself. A gateway to Heaven. Activated. A path between the heart of Her domain and Earth. And there, at the edge of all that power, he can sense the place a life-pattern came apart.

A jet of water hits him, and he barely feels it. Hardly even notices he’s on the ground. The flames must be roaring around him, timber creaking, the building itself groaning as it’s about to give way. He can’t hear any of it. All he knows is silence. Vast, empty silence, screaming from the very depths of his soul.

Around him, the fire eats away at the couch he’s spent so many evenings on. The desk, where he’s spent hours watching Aziraphale work. The ancient gramophone that the angel would sometimes use to play music for them both. Everything. Everything that Crowley thinks of as safety, as home. It’s gone. Aziraphale is gone. Not gone. Dead. And so, too, the hope inside him dies. There’s nothing, nothing for him to hold to now. He failed. When the angel needed him most, he was somewhere else, dealing with his own problems. He should have been here. It doesn’t matter that Aziraphale had rejected him. It doesn’t matter that he was fighting for his life. It doesn’t even matter that whatever happened, it happened too quickly for him to be able to react, even if he had been here. What does matter is that he failed. And now, he’s alone. So very, very alone, and
scared. Flames lick at him, testing, the inferno reaching out to see if he can burn. And the world is about to end.

He’s only felt like this, this hopeless and afraid, once before. On the day he lost everything.

[*] He’s running. He can’t help it. Something has changed. He can feel it in the air. The Plan is in motion, and he knows what happens next. He knows what he did. He read the damn book. He asked Why. Hellfire, he went into Her throne room and demanded answers. It’s all been written, every word of it, in a small leather-bound book handed to him by a brother he had trusted above even Her. He is going to Fall. And then, he is going to be destroyed. Raphael has no idea how long he has left as himself, maybe minutes, maybe hours. It’s not long, now. And that knowledge terrifies him.

He should be running to them. To his siblings. He should go to them now, tell them goodbye, that he loves them, and beg their forgiveness before they kill him. He isn’t. There’s only one place he wants to be now, only one being he wants to see. He’s in the Garden with a thought, stumbling along green pathways, searching for his principality.

“Aziraphale!” He can’t sense him. His thoughts are thick with panic and his angel is nowhere in the Garden. “Aziraphale!” He’s not there. He’s gone. He can’t- Raphael refuses to think of his angel, drafted to fight in the coming war, marching onto a battle field and forced to endure horrors that have not yet been imagined. Or the other thought - the one he can’t even contemplate. He casts out with his mind, searching, seeking.

There. A presence. By the tree. As he nears, he knows it’s not Aziraphale. It’s someone both more and far less familiar. A Presence he can no longer read, but can still feel. The Morning Star.

He goes to him. He can’t not. His brother has been blocking them for so long now. To feel him like this, even if he can’t reach his mind. It should be a relief. It isn’t. His presence feels wrong. Changed. Missing something.

He finds him waiting in the shadow of the tree. Standing in exactly the same place he had been, when he’d given Raphael his copy of Her Plan. Raphael squints, trying to see through the shadow and the dark haze of corrupted power that hangs around him. Then he moves, shifts closer to the light. And the archangel sees what he has become.
Lucifer’s once shining wings are what he notices first. They’d been beautiful, the last time he’d seen them. Soft ruby red feathers that reflected the light of the sun as he flew, always well-kept and in order. No longer. The glossy feathers are gone, revealing stretched crimson skin, batlike, thin enough to reveal the delicate bones of his phalanges. Holes are torn through them, dripping blood. All three sets flap slowly, leaving a trail of ichor on the ground around him. Raphael’s hands itch to heal, and he starts to reach out. Then Lucifer turns, and something in his brother’s eyes holds him back.

Lucifer’s eyes have always been dark. Now, they are deep bottomless pits. Not so much black, as an absence of light. There’s no emotion there, nothing that Raphael can read. His skin has turned a dark blood-red, and sharp horns now jut proudly from his head like an infernal crown. Worst of all, his Grace is gone. Torn away from his essence by some unimaginable force. It makes Raphael sick to look at the leaking hole where Her love had once been. The Morning Star grins, baring sharp fangs that drip venom as he speaks.

"Such horror, little brother," he says, a new, terrible, infernal power in his voice. "Do I truly look so frightful?"

"Lucifer," Raphael can barely breathe from the horror of what he’s seeing. "What happened to you?"

His brother laughs, sharp, like nails on slate. "The time of revolution is at hand! Is it not wonderful?" He gestures to himself, making that terrible laugh again.

"No," Raphael says, reaching out with his mind, pressing against the wall Lucifer has thrown up against him. "Brother, please."

"Please?" Lucifer rumbles, amused. "You read the book, Raphael. You know what happens now. You cannot change it with ‘please’."

"Don’t do this." His voice is faint, in the face of that power. "Brother, you know what this will do to our siblings. To all her creatures." Lucifer flinches at the mention of their family, so he continues on. "Uriel wants you to come home," he says, and his brother shakes his head. "Sandalphon, he’s still too young. He doesn’t understand any of this."

"Stop," Lucifer growls.
“Gabriel misses you,” Raphael tells him. “Can’t you feel it? How much we all miss you?”

“I will drag them down with you,” his brother snarls. “You will all Fall to me.”

“And Michael,” Raphael says, watching him flinch at the sound of her name. His almost-twin, made mere minutes after his creation. “She’ll fight you. Are you telling me you’ll turn your back on her, too?”

“IT IS AS GOD HAS ORDERED!” Lucifer roars. “It is all a part of Her plan.”

Raphael shakes his head. “But… why? You always said we could change it, that you wouldn’t do what She wants.”

“Why?” his brother echoes, and any hint of recognition fades from those merciless eyes. “Why fight it, when it’s so…” He tips his head back, and spreads his arms and wings. Raphael can feel the infernal power rippling in air around him. “Glorious.” Lucifer sighs, an obscene sound in the quiet of the Garden.

“No. No, this isn’t, this-” Raphael tries to back away, running into a solid wall of power that wraps around him, holding him in place. “Brother, this isn’t you.”

“Oh, but it is,” Lucifer tells him. “This is what She has made me to be.”

“Stop!” Raphael cries out as that infernal power surges over him, burning where it touches his essence.

“Stop?” his brother asks, and laughs again. With horror, Raphael realizes that there’s no sanity in his voice. “I can’t stop. I can never stop.” He pauses, and something in his face chills Raphael to his core. “Here. Let me show you.”

The walls around Lucifer’s mind abruptly slam down, and the whole roiling mass of his thoughts flows down their bond. Distantly, Raphael can hear his siblings scream as their minds are assaulted. He stands at the heart of it, pain and fear and a terrible pleasure swirling around him, wordless thoughts slamming into his mind, driving him to his knees. It’s chaos and panic, wrapped in sulfur and flame. It fills the world, dragging him down, tearing at his physical form to remake it
in its image. He feels his wings singing at his back, feathers burning black as he struggles against his brother’s attack.

“STOP!” he shouts, both mentally and physically, and feels the onslaught halt for just a moment. It’s enough. In the quiet, he can hear his siblings crying out in pain. “LEAVE THEM ALONE!” He forces himself to his feet, hands shaking as he reaches for his staff. He forces his own power back down their bond, shoving out his siblings and throwing up walls behind them. Be safe, he thinks to them as Lucifer’s power rushes at him again. I love you all.

Lucifer draws his blade, a predatory grin on his face. “Oh, I’ll stop,” he promises. “Just as soon as you stop fighting Her Plan.” He advances, slow, careful, the approach of cat who knows the mouse is cornered. “We cannot escape Her will.”

“No!” She wouldn’t do this.” Raphael gathers his strength, holding tight to his staff as he tries to fight against the anger and pain flowing down their bond. “She can’t want this.”

“Have’t you noticed, Brother?” Lucifer asks, stepping closer. “She’s been silent for so long now. It doesn’t matter what She wants. She’s left us.”

Raphael falters. He’s thought the same, many times, since She last spoke to him. Only the Metatron has heard from Her, or so he says. His mental barriers flicker, and he hears Uriel and Gabriel scream in his mind as a fresh blast of Lucifer’s infernal power hits them.

He shoves the barriers back up, yelling in frustration. “Maybe so,” he shouts. “Maybe she’s gone. But I won’t - I won’t let you do this.” He brings his staff up between them.


“Alright, yes, I did! I read the book. I asked questions. So take me! But leave the others alone! Don’t drag them into this!”

“But why?” his brother asks. “When Hell will be so very lonely without my brothers and sisters?” The flow of the madness changes, suddenly pulling, reeling in.
“NO!” Raphael’s staff bursts into flames in his hands, and a snap brings the physical manifestation of the bond between the archangels into being before them. He raises his staff high in the air, commanding the edges to cut.

“STOP!” Lucifer commands, flames of Hellfire shooting from his outstretched fingers. Raphael brings the staff down on the thread that connects Lucifer to them all. A moment of resistance. Power meeting power. He pushes against Lucifer’s will, fighting with everything he has. The bond snaps. Hellfire surrounds him, burning down the channel from Lucifer’s bond, cauterizing it. Six voices cry out in agony, shaking the skies of Heaven. Raphael’s weapon is thrown from his hands, crashing to the dirt as tears of pain stream down his cheeks.

The fire shifts, flooding out from the broken bond and into the physical plane, pooling around Raphael’s feet. Lucifer roars and he falls to his knees again, down into the sulfur-blue flame. “YOU WILL FALL!” his brother screams, focusing all his will on Raphael. The archangel is pressed into the earth, unable to move under the weight of his power. He can feel his bones breaking from the force of it, the pain making him dizzy and ill. “IT HAS BEEN WRITTEN!”

“Brother, please,” he hates how weak he sounds, pathetic, protesting the inevitable. He’d known this moment was coming. Had known it since he’d taken that damnable book from Lucifer’s hands, right here in the garden.

“Raphael!” A horrified gasp. He looks up, fighting to see through the pain. A spot of brilliant white against the dark green backdrop of the forest. Familiar blue-green eyes wide in fright. Aziraphale. Oh no. Oh no no no.

“Oh look, we have a guest.” The press of power upon him lessens as Lucifer turns his attention to the principality, and Raphael can’t allow that. Can’t bear to hear that wonderful soft voice crying out in pain. His nerves sing with fear, lightning coursing through him, spurring him to action.

“You’re dealing with ME!” he shouts, reaching for his staff in the dirt. “Aziraphale, RUN!”

“Raphael, what-?” Aziraphale reaches for his sword, stepping forward. Lucifer laughs, low, pleased, insane.

“Did you come to watch him Fall?” the Morning Star asks. “Come closer, little one.” Raphael feels more of his power lift, flowing outward towards the principality.
“No you don’t.” He throws up a barrier of his own, stopping Lucifer from moving forward. It’s all he can do. He can’t reach his staff. He used too much power to sever their bond, his body feels weak, heavy, unresponsive. He can barely move enough to lift his head from the earth. He looks up and meets terrified sea-blue eyes.

“Leave Raphael alone!” Aziraphale is shaking. Raphael can see it in his hands, in the way the sword wavers before him. But he isn’t backing down. Isn’t running in the face of the newly crowned King of Hell. And oh, he loves him. His sweet, brave angel. But he can’t do this. He can’t be here. Raphael is going to Fall. There’s no changing that now, not when he asked so many questions. He won’t let himself be the cause of Aziraphale’s downfall too.

He forces his face to form a comforting smile, despite the pain and terror coursing through him. “Aziraphale. Go. I’ll be alright.” He gathers all of his power, every shred of it he has left, and throws it at his friend. He twists reality, and in the blink of an eye the angel is gone, miracled back to Heaven and safety. Raphael collapses, spent, not a drop of magic left within him to use in his own defense.

Lucifer laughs, nails on slate, and his power forces Raphael further down, until his body is digging into the earth. He watches with lightless eyes as Raphael writhes on the ground of Eden, body breaking and reforming, his Grace tearing away as he screams. Flames rush over him, sulfur-blue and hungry, burning at his robes, his skin, his hair. Lucifer stands over him, bat-like wings spread wide, blocking out the sun.

“Welcome to my kingdom, Brother.” Gleeful laughter accompanies his screams, mocking his pleas for help, for mercy, for forgiveness. He reaches out with clawed hands and grips Raphael by the shoulders. Almost gently, his finger part the flames that surround him, running over his essence until they find the place he’s searching for. Claws sink into him, digging into the gap that has been steadily forming between Raphael and his Grace, widening with every question. Lucifer snarls, and something inside the archangel rips. Raphael screams as Lucifer’s hands tug at his Grace, claws slicing at the last few places where it still clung to his soul. He watches in horror as flames surge over the tattered Grace, consuming it.

“Welcome to my legion, Raphael.” Lucifer laughs again, and drops him to the ground, a shaking, sobbing wreck of a being. The power holding him lifts, freeing him, but the damage has been done. “Welcome to the Beginning of the Great War!”

Lucifer takes flight, leaving Raphael to beg in the dust to a power that will no longer hear his prayers.
He sits in the inferno that was once an angel’s bookshop, and lets the flames rage around him. He is a demon, wholly and completely. A thing made of fire. A thing made of hate. Of fear. Of pain. Hellfire rages in his veins, chasing the final shreds of his hope and engulfing them, strangling them with the force of his pain. The void inside rages with it, taking in all of his anguish and doubling it, tripling it. Echoes of Aziraphale’s words to him reverberate within the roaring silence, until it’s all he can hear. *I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you.*

There will be no forgiveness now. The last bright light in his life has been snuffed out. Stolen from him by careless hands that didn’t know just what they were doing. Six thousand years. *Six thousand years.* And this is how it ends. Just like his time in Heaven, it ends in Hellfire, and pain, and loss. It ends with him here, in a space he once shared with Aziraphale. Alone, broken on the ground, begging to God for something he knows he cannot have.

“You’ve gone,” he sobs. The yellow spreads in his eyes, filling the whites until nothing remotely human remains. “Somebody killed my best friend.”

He tries to be angry. To be furious. To feel anything other than the crushing void of pain. “Bastards!” he screams, not sure if he means Heaven or Hell. “All of you!”

There’s a book on the ground before him. He picks it up, barely registering the title. It’s the only thing of Aziraphale that he has left. He clutches at it like an anchor, no, like a life-vest, keeping him afloat on an endless sea of pain. Breathtaking, unimaginable pain. He has lost Heaven. He has lost his siblings. Lucifer. Michael. Gabriel. Uriel. Sandalphon. He’s lost their bond, the family he loved. He’s lost Her. Her love. His own certainty that She was Good and Right. He’s lost his place as Her Healer, and the chance to build the stars. And now, now he’s lost Aziraphale. The world is ending, and he’s lost the only being that truly matters to him in this entire blessed universe.

He forces himself to stand up. He has one last duty to see through. These humans, the descendants of the woman who wanted to know *why,* and of the man that loved her for it, they have no one to stand for them. Not against Heaven. Not against Hell. He’s all they have. And he’s not enough. But he can’t leave them with nothing. He won’t. He doesn’t know where to go now, but that doesn’t matter. When the skies burn scarlet and the armies of Heaven and Hell descend upon the planet, then he’ll know where to be. And he will get up, and go to war. Not to join one side against the other. No, he is going to stop this, if he can. He’ll fight them all, if he has to. And if he finds out which ones took his angel from him? Well. He’s going to hunt them down. And then, he is going to make them *burn.*

Chapter End Notes
Flashback: Raphael knows he's going to Fall and looks for Aziraphale in Eden. Instead, he finds Lucifer. Lucifer starts to torture their siblings through the bond, but Raphael cuts it away so they're safe. Aziraphale arrives, and looks like he's going to try to fight Lucifer. Raphael sends him away with the last of his strength, and Lucifer is able to rip out what remains of Raphael's Grace, causing him to Fall the rest of the way to becoming a demon.

*Note - Crowley's quote in the second paragraph is from Act 2, Scene 2 of Macbeth (line 60-61). (Lady Macbeth's reply is the same act/scene, line 64-65).

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Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
2. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
3. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
4. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
5. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
6. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
7. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
8. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
9. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
10. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
11. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
12. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Oof. Ok, I'm finally done with this monster of a chapter! This is the only place where I've deliberately altered cannon, but it does rehash quite a bit of episode 6. Crowley's internal narration fascinates me, so I hope I've done a passable take on what he was thinking during these scenes.

Thank you all so much for sticking with me this long. And thank you for the lovely comments! You have no idea how much they brighten my day! I really do love hearing what you think!

Edit: adding a chapter! Sorry guys, I know I originally promised 12, and it's gotten quite a bit longer than that. I'm going to try to stick to 18 now. But it might end up at 19. Can you believe my original word count estimate was something like 50,000?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He finds himself in a bar. It doesn’t really matter which bar. It’s not one he’s been to before, and that’s really all he cares about. It’s warm, and it’s loud, and the bartender keeps the drinks coming. Everyone ignores him, which is exactly how he wants it to be. He gets drunk. Or, at least, he tries to. He’s aiming for the kind of falling-down, blackout drunk. The kind of drunk where you can’t even remember your own name, let alone what happened to you an hour before. It would be nice, he thinks, to reach that kind of incoherency. He might have to drink every drop of alcohol in the building before his infernal body gets within shouting distance of that sweet oblivion, but right now, hours before the end of the world, he’s willing to give it a go. It’s not like he’s going to get another chance, and the thought of living out the rest of… however long he’s got, remembering the flames on his face, the emptiness of the shop, the way the crystal feather shattered in his hands as Aziraphale’s life went out. It’s more than he can bear. He failed. He has failed at anything and everything that has ever meant something to him. So here he is. In a bar. Four hours until the world ends. Drunk out of his mind, yes, but not yet drunk enough to keep the grief at bay.

In contrast to the screaming void of his mind, his power is singing in his veins. So much of it, over the years, has been poured continuously into all of his wards and spells. Every ounce he could spare, wrapped up in workings meant to keep Aziraphale safe. All of it returned to him, when the wards around the angel gave way. It’s almost painful, the fire of it, racing along the pathways of his pattern and brushing against the pain of that void inside. He should use it. Rebuild his own warning spells, if nothing else. Create a working that will hunt down the patterns of the ones responsible for killing Aziraphale. Build walls of power around himself so vast even the combined forces of Heaven and Hell will be unable to bring them down. Something. Anything.

Instead, he uses just a touch of power to miracle his sword from his flat. To tuck it into the extra-dimensional pocket of the universe in which he keeps his wings. He’ll need it later, when the sky burns and the war trumpets sound. Right now, though… right now, all he needs is another bottle of
whatever it is he’s been drinking. He’s forgotten what he ordered in the first place, and all he cares about is that it’s strong, and it’s bitter, burning his throat as it goes down. It’s not good enough, really. Not strong enough to drown out his pain. But then, he supposes, there’s no alcohol in the world that would be. There’s never been anything strong enough to drown out the echoing silence of the void. Nothing except Aziraphale’s voice. And he’s never going to hear him speak again. It’s just him now. Just Crowley. Alone. With the echoes and the silence.

Something shifts in the universe around him. A high-pitched sound, like a dog whistle but even higher, on a frequency no mortal can hear. He doesn’t even think about it. It’s the end of the world, after all. The universe should be crying out. It should be screaming, protesting the horror that is about to come. He lifts the bottle to pour himself another glass, and freezes. There’s a figure there, reflected in the dark glass over his eyes. Shimmering. Transparent. But so very, achingly, familiar. The power inside tears through his mind, roaring into the silence, and all he can do is stare.

“Aziraphale?” he asks, not expecting an answer. He’s drunk. He’s drunk, and his mind is playing tricks on him. “Are you here?”

“Good question,” the shade responds, looking around as if unable to tell where his voice is coming from. “Not certain. Never done this before. Can you hear me?” It’s a ghost then. An echo of the power Aziraphale left in the world. Or perhaps simply an echo inside Crowley’s own power, trapped there when the wards broke. When the angel died.

“Of course I can hear you.” Crowley tells it, though part of him realizes this is ridiculous. He shouldn’t respond. Shouldn’t interact. It’s only going to hurt him so much more when this last remnant fades.

The ghost of Aziraphale gives him a small, sad smile. “I’m afraid I’ve rather made a mess of things.”

Crowley wants to agree. To tell him he’s an idiot. That he should have listened. Should have run away with him when they had the chance. To tell him not to be stupid, that it’s not his fault. He doesn’t. He can’t make his throat work. Can’t bear to break the silence, in case Aziraphale speaks again. Not when this is the last time he’s ever going to hear that gentle, kind, beautiful voice.

“Did you go to Alpha Centauri?” the echo asks, eyes searching sightlessly in front of him.

“Nah. Changed my mind,” Crowley tells him, the words spilling out before he can stop them. “Stuff happened.” His voice breaks, and he can barely manage to swallow back the tears. “I lost my best friend.” I forgive you echoes in the void. He half expects this figment to say it again, but he
doesn’t. He just gives him that look, the one with the big, sad eyes. The one that says I hate that you’re in pain, and I wish you would let me help. It’s a look Crowley has become familiar with, over the years. It’s almost as familiar to him as the one that says I know there’s still good in you. He hates them both, for different reasons, but right now it’s still the most beautiful thing he’s seen in a long time.

“I’m so sorry to hear it,” Aziraphale says, and Crowley wonders for a moment if he knows that Crowley is talking about him. Not that it matters. He’s just a ghost. An echo. A remnant of the angel and nothing more.

“Listen,” he continues, as if he’s realized something urgent. “Back in my bookshop—” Crowley winces, feeling the heat of the flames on his face. “There’s a book I need you to get.”

Of course. Of course even the echo of Aziraphale would ask about a book. And Crowley knows he would want to know about the bookshop. But… he doesn’t have to tell him. What has or hasn’t happened can’t possibly matter to a ghost. And yet… and yet he can’t lie to him. Not even to just the echo of his soul.

“Oh, look, your bookshop. It isn’t there anymore.” The words taste like ash in his mouth. Like the gritty, charred remains of the angel’s beloved books.

“Oh?” Hurt flashes across Aziraphale’s face.

“I’m really sorry. It burned down.” Crowley’s heart aches at the loss he can see in the angel’s eyes. Why did he tell him that? Why couldn’t he just do his best to make this echo happy? To do what he couldn’t for the real Aziraphale? He closes his eyes against the pain. In the silence, he can feel it. Something… something off. He can’t quite put his finger on it, but he feels as if he’s missing something. Something obvious.

Aziraphale is quiet for a moment, eyes staring ahead, unseeing. Crowley can see the moment he accepts the information, understands what it means. “All of it?” he asks, and Crowley nods.

For a moment, he can’t make his voice work. The echoing emptiness chokes him until he swallows it down. “Yeah. What— what was the book?” The silence is screaming at him, raw and powerful.

“The one the young lady with the bicycle left behind,” Aziraphale says sadly. “The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of—” Crowley blinks and realizes he knows that title. A surge of energy flows
through him as he reaches for the book he’s been holding in his lap all this time. Suddenly he’s sober, all of that extra power burning the alcohol away as it races through his veins.

“Agnes Nutter! Yes! I took it!” He holds it up for the angel to see, even though he can tell by the way Aziraphale’s eyes haven’t focused on him once this whole time that the angel can’t see him. “Look,” he says, excited, glad that this, at least, is something he’s done right. “Souvenir!” He couldn’t save the angel, but at least he could save this one book, if it was important enough that even his echo was asking for it.

“You have it? Oh!” Aziraphale sounds pleased, smiling, the look on his face one of relief. It’s so convincing, he almost believes this is real. “Look inside. I made notes. It’s all in there. The boy’s name, address. Everything else. I worked it all out.”

And Crowley is so proud of him. He figured it out. He found the Antichrist. And it doesn’t matter that it took until the absolute last minute for Aziraphale to try to tell him. He knows how much faith his friend had in God and the soldiers of Heaven. How much he wanted them all to do the right thing. The demon flips through his notes, looking at the map, directions, everything he needs to find the place where the end times will begin. He speaks without even thinking, an earnest promise, one he’s been making without words since before Eden even had walls. A promise that will do no good for a ghost.

“Look, wherever you are, I’ll come to you. Where are you?” He looks up, energy fading, as he realizes what he said. And there’s still… it still feels like he’s missing something.

“I, ah, I- I’m not really anywhere yet,” Aziraphale says, expression going uncertain as he tries to see through whatever it is that’s keeping him from looking at the world around them. “I’ve been discorporated.”

“Oh.” Crowley bites back the apology that rises to the tip of his tongue. He’d never meant to let Aziraphale get discorporated even once. He’s truly staring at the angel now, he knows, but he can’t shake the feeling that he’s overlooking something obvious. Something about this echo of his friend that he needs to understand.

Aziraphale doesn’t seem to notice his preoccupation, but then, he’s already realized that this ghost can’t actually see him. “You need to get to Tadfield Airbase,” he orders the demon.

Crowley frowns at the map in the book, where Tadfield is circled in pen. “Why?” he asks, already calculating the best way to get there in time. He can feel a barrier around London now, along the lines of the M25. It will keep him from just miracling himself into the base. He could try to force
it. He might even have enough power. But if he does, then will he have enough left over to take on the armies of Heaven and Hell? Not that it will matter, of course. Even at full power, one demon alone won’t be enough to stop Armageddon.

“World ending,” Aziraphale’s echo says, breaking through his thoughts. “That’s where it’s all going to happen. Quite soon, now. I’ll head there too.” Crowley tries to focus on his face, on those familiar curves and lines but his shape is hazy and indistinct, a mirage and nothing more. He frowns, looking past the echo, at the bar around them. The bartender. The patrons. Their life patterns flickering as the world marches steadily towards its end.

“I just need to find a receptive body,” the angel tells him. “Harder than you’d think.”

A dirty joke floats to the surface of Crowley’s stunned mind, the chaos inside him finding amusement in the unintended innuendo. “I’m not even going to go there,” he mutters. He can see his own pattern if he tries, the carefully worked lines fading into and behind the larger pattern of the universe, hiding him from others who might look to spot his particular pattern.

“I do need a body,” Aziraphale continues. “Pity I can’t inhabit yours.” He grins a little, and Crowley knows that if this were real, if Aziraphale really was here, he’d offer up his body without a second thought. Anything, if it would bring the angel back to him. Through the ghostly shape before him, Crowley can see people running down the street, life patterns flowing over and around the rest of the universe when they move. He makes some indistinct noises, not even sure what he’s saying, distracted by all of the life patterns around him. They itch at him. At whatever he’s somehow not seeing.

Aziraphale is smiling at him. He’d do anything for that smile to be real, and not just the echo of an expression the angel might once have had. “Angel,” he says. “Demon. We’d probably explode.”

There are so many patterns around him. So many lives. All of them, part of the larger whole.


“But we’re both going to have to get a bit of a wiggle on,” Aziraphale says, his life pattern so familiar and bright and-
“What?” His pattern. Aziraphale’s pattern. His life pattern. Ghosts don’t have life patterns. Not like this, bright and glowing gold against the rest of the universe.

“Tadfield. Airbase,” the angel says firmly, and he’s already fading out. But- his pattern is there. Lines of light and power. Strong, steady, and so very beautiful. Patterns cannot lie. Even as he fades away, Crowley can feel it there, a part of his universe.

“I heard that,” he says petulantly, a reflex while his mind races to catch up with everything that just happened. “It was the ‘wiggle on’.” He’s gone. But when Crowley sends some of his own power out into the universe, searching, flowing through the pathways of the universe, he finds him again. To this sense, to the power of an archangel, Aziraphale is as solid and real as the table beneath Crowley’s hands. As the ground beneath his feet. His pattern shines brightly, a precious, steady light. It’s real. He is real. Alive.

Crowley pushes himself back from the table, sending the last of the liquor from his body. He has to get to Tadfield. To Aziraphale. And the end of the world.

He arrives in a car that is, quite literally, on fire. His Bentley, such a wonderful car, just shy of a century old. He loves this car, just as much as Aziraphale loves his bookshop. And he knows he’ll be devastated about the damage to it later, but right now his first priority is to make sure Aziraphale is alright. That he’s there. That he’s real. So Crowley climbs from the burning car, Agnes Nutter’s book clutched in one barely shaking hand, and walks towards the odd trio standing before the gates. An army man, brandishing a gun. Shadwell, holding an insane contraption that looks like nothing so much as a tuba with a lot of extra pipes. And a red-haired woman with two life patterns. One, her own, the pattern of a mortal woman. Laid over it, lines blurring around hers, is that bright pattern he would know anywhere.

“Crowley!” Aziraphale’s familiar voice, even coming from the body of a mortal woman is comforting. Soothing. It washes over him, quieting the screams of the silent void inside.

“Hey Aziraphale,” he says. “I see you found a ride.” He tries to play this off as cool, as if he wasn’t prepared to drink himself into oblivion just hours before. “Nice dress,” he adds. “Suits you.” What the angel doesn’t know won’t hurt him. And he doesn’t need to know just how badly his loss had affected Crowley.

The angel steps toward him, and this close Crowley can feel his pattern. How it resonates with his own, power against power. “This young man,” he says, “Won’t let us in.”
“Leave it to me,” Crowley tells him, moving like always to place himself between Aziraphale and danger. He starts to speak to the man, gathering his power to cast a temptation, a demonic miracle, to make him look the other way while they enter the base. He’s interrupted by the gate rolling back on its own, allowing four small children on bicycles into the airbase.

Behind them, his car explodes.

It’s too much. On top of everything. The world ending. Hell on his trail, ready for retribution. His siblings, so eager to end everything in revenge for his own Fall. The loss of Aziraphale. The shock of his return. This whole mad roller-coaster of emotions he can’t seem to get off of. It’s far, far too much. His brain short circuits for a moment, as he stares at what remains of his car. Aziraphale is shouting at him, but he can barely hear it over the echoing silence inside. His walls tremble and crack, and it takes everything in him to hold them up. He loves his car. It represents the best of humanity. Their ingenuity, their brilliant minds coming up with new and inventive ways to do things. Their desire to go further, go faster, reach new heights just for the act of doing it. This car has been his for almost a century. In that time, it’s been more of a physical home than his flat has ever been. And now, it’s gone.

He feels Aziraphale’s miracle, sending the army human away. It’s enough to snap him out of his fog of grief. His walls hold firm. He is not in danger of losing himself to the silence just yet. He picks up a piece of the car and stands, tucking it away into the little pocket of the universe where he keeps his wings - a souvenir, something to remember it by.

“Nice work on the soldier,” he says. And Aziraphale’s response is enough to prove it’s really him, if he’d had any doubt left.

“I do hope I haven’t sent him somewhere unpleasant.”

Crowley’s not in the mood to grin, but it doesn’t stop the corners of his mouth from lifting up just a little. Only his angel would be worried about the pleasantness of wherever he sent the human that was stopping them from preventing the end of the world.

Jeeps full of soldiers pull up to the gate, and Crowley mentally shakes himself. “Oh. Okay.” He needs to focus now. He can process all of these emotions later. If there is a later. “I need to get over the…. Car thing. I’ll deal with them.” He stalks forward, eyes focused on the danger ahead. He keeps a bit of his awareness on the angel, however. Just a touch of his power connected to his life pattern. Enough for Crowley to know, without a doubt, without having to look for him, that he’s there. That he’s alive. He’s not sure he’s ever going to be able to let him out of his sight ever again. He wants to reach out, to touch, to have that very physical reassurance of his presence. He can’t, of
course. It’s not what they do. And his touch would very likely be unwelcome. Still, it’s reassuring to hear that familiar voice at his back, scolding Shadwell. Even if he does confuse ‘kick’ with ‘lick’ in ‘kick butt’.

Crowley can sense Azrael before he sees him. Of course he’d be here, at the beginning of the end. He’s one of the Four Horsemen, after all. The Angel of Death. The term, of course, is a bit of a misnomer. Azrael is neither angel nor demon, but something entirely apart. Something older than all but God Herself. He is the personification of entropy, the end of everything. In Heaven, Raphael had done his best to avoid Azrael. His presence in Raphael’s Halls of Healing could only mean one thing - that the healer had failed. He’d been his antithesis, his exact opposite, taking life instead of preserving it. And yet, when they had been forced to work together, he had found Azrael to be reasonable, sometimes even kind. He let Raphael ease the passing of the injured, erasing their pain before they breathed their last. The archangel had asked him, once, about the end of the world. About Azrael’s part in it. It comes to him now, that perhaps he should have paid more attention to his answer.

“No. You can’t come in here.” Raphael stands in the door to the Halls of Healing, wings spread wide to prevent Azrael’s entrance into his domain. “I’ve got patients in here who will be upset by your presence.”

_I know_ , Azrael says. _I am sorry, Healer, but I must._ Despite his words, he makes no move to enter without Raphael’s permission. _He just stares down at the archangel with his eyeless gaze, and waits._

Raphael glares up at him for a moment more, making his point, but he knows he has to let him in. He knows who he’s there for, and as much as it hurts to admit it, there hadn’t been anything he could do. This was always going to be the end result.

“I tried to save him,” Raphael says, and his wings droop in exhaustion. He’s used all of his power, ever last shred of it, trying to save the three lives his healers had brought him. He’s even borrowed power from those under his command, draining several of them to fill the life patterns of their patients. “I thought… I had hoped he wasn’t so far gone.”

_I know_ , Azrael repeats, voice surprisingly gentle. _He was mine even before he entered your halls._
The healer sighs, and steps aside. His healers vanish into other rooms as they walk through the long building, afraid of the specter of Death that follows at his heels. Soon enough, they reach the room where the dying angel lies. Two beds sit empty, their occupants moved as soon as the healers knew they would be unable to save this one. There's still blood on the floor, dark scarlet stains from his corporeal body, mixed with the golden ichor of a bleeding angel. Splotches of a darker color mix with the red and gold, a viscous fluid Raphael has never encountered before. It fell with the ichor from his patient, and it feels almost the same - except for the faint aura of evil within it. He doesn’t know what it is, but he doesn’t like it.

“Liriel,” he says, quiet, though he knows his patient won’t wake, even if he shouts. “I’m so sorry.” His pattern is grey and fading fast, the lines unraveling despite everything Raphael and his healers have tried. The golden lines of the archangel’s own pattern are wrapped around it, feeding it with the healer’s own life force. It’s the only thing now that’s keeping him from death. Raphael takes his hand, squeezing it gently. It’s one of the very few parts of the young angel that aren’t covered in bloodied bandages. The other two are only a little better. He doesn’t want to know what could have caused these wounds. What could be so powerful it could overwhelm three Guardians - posted to guard the armory, found when a new shift came to relieve them.

**It is time.** The angel of death comes to stand behind him, wings like the night sky filling the room.

Gently, Raphael withdraws his pattern from Liriel’s, taking back his power as the grey lines flicker and fade. “Rest now, brother,” he says in the ceremonial language of the angels, a phrase he had never thought he would have to use. He brushes a hand across Liriel’s forehead, using just a touch of power, to ease the last of his pain. “It is time to return to the fire, from which all things are made.” He blinks back tears. He has never before lost an angel as a patient. Mortal creatures, yes. Rarely, but it has happened. He’s never even seen an angel this badly wounded before.

Azrael moves to the other side of the bed, and his wings flare out around him. One boney finger touches the exposed skin of the fallen Guardian’s neck. Raphael watches as his pattern unravels, flowing up to be absorbed into Azrael’s own.

**He has gone**, Death tells him. **But you may yet save his fellows.**

“I don’t understand.” Raphael looks up at him, stepping away from the remains of the angel and ignoring the throbbing in his heart. “What happened to them?”

**It is Her Plan**, Azrael says. **I can say no more than that.**
He thinks about the book. Lucifer’s copy of the Great Plan, left behind in Her throne room just days ago. About the wounds on his three patients. About the missing weapons from the armory - the third such break in and theft since Lucifer first went missing. About Lucifer himself, and the Plan his brother claims he wants to thwart. About that first incursion into the armory, and the guard that claimed Lucifer had led the band of thieves.

“Is it true then?” he asks. “Is She really planning a war in Heaven?” Will he have to see more angels like this, wounded, fading, patterns unraveling as he tries to save them?

Azrael focuses on him, that eyeless gaze somehow seeing into his soul. I will not answer that question. You already have the information you seek.

“Then what about Armageddon?” Raphael demands, staring right back. He’s drained, exhausted, but he won’t show weakness to this ancient being. “Will you truly destroy everything She has created?”

I do as I am bid, he says. Whether now, Armageddon, or the end of the universe. There is only one fate for you all - until only God and I will remain. And then even She will cease to be, and I alone will be left. He turns away from Raphael, folding his great wings against his back.

He stops and turns when he reaches the door. You should not assume the truth is as you see it, Healer, he says. And then, in a blast of cold wind, he is gone.

Raphael retreats to his office. Liriel’s body will be taken away, to be buried by his battalion. The first angel he has lost. The first casualty, Raphael suspects, in the coming war. He sits at his desk, head in his hands, and lets himself feel the grief of loss. Of failure. The grief of a healer who could not save a patient. The grief of an archangel who could not protect one that looked to him for guidance. The grief of a younger brother who suspects his oldest sibling has done something unforgivable. Within the bond, his younger siblings flood his mind with their sympathy and love, but even that is not enough to take the edge off of his pain.

A knock on the door. Raphael looks up to see Aziraphale standing there, hesitant, blue eyes wide. The healer suddenly realizes how he must look, slumped in his chair, hair wild from running his fingers through it, deep purple bags of exhaustion under his eyes, his white robes spattered with blood and ichor from Liriel and his other two patients.

“Aziraphale?” he asks, too drained even to cast the small miracle that would clean up his robes.
The principality comes into the room, shutting the door behind him. “Michael said you might need me,” he says, frowning as he surveys the archangel. “I can see she was right.”

“I-” Raphael starts, then his voice breaks. Aziraphael’s expression softens.

“Come here, my dear,” he says, walking to stand beside the archangel and pulling him into his arms. Raphael wraps his arms around Aziraphale’s waist, burying his face against his chest. His friend holds him close, running soothing hands through his hair as he cries.

You should not assume the truth is as you see it. And it isn’t, is it? His own truth, his past, hidden behind layers and layers of walls. Aziraphale too, his true self submerged, riding along inside this woman with the purple gloves. The Antichrist - Adversary, Destroyer of Kings, Great Beast that is called Dragon, Spawn of Satan, and Lord of Darkness - standing there on the tarmac, all of eleven years old with large, innocent blue eyes and golden curls. Even the Horsemen. War, in her vibrant reds, smelling of blood. Famine, dressed in black with his sharp teeth and aura of gnawing hunger. Pollution, still new compared to the other two, with their stained chalk-white and scent of rot. They look almost human, but they are not. They’re the personification of human fears, created not by Her hands but by thousands upon thousands of human minds. He had worked with them before, and he had worked against them before. They didn’t scare him, in the way that Azrael did. He ignores them all as he climbs from the jeep, focusing on the child instead.

“That’s him,” he says, pointing. There’s no mistaking him now. The pattern of his life is far too bright, pulsing with power in a way no human pattern ever has. “The curly one.” He tries to see only the pattern, and not the boy. The child, eleven years old, just like Warlock, but capable of so much more. “Shoot him, save the world.” He reaches into his pocket of the universe, ready to pull out his sword if it comes to that.

Azrael and the boy don’t even look his way.

You’re a part of us, not them, Azrael says. No one will disobey you.

Behind him, Shadwell stares, clutching that ridiculous gun to his chest. “What?” the old sergeant asks, horrified. “But he’s just a wee bairn. You cannae-”

Aziraphale turns and snatches the weapon from the man. “Oh for Heaven’s sakes. Give me that.”
He marches forward, aiming at the boy.

_Ignore this nonsense_, Azrael says. _A word from you, and I will end their lives._

He could, Crowley knows. He could unravel all of their patterns without even a thought. If the boy orders their deaths, there won’t be anything he can do to stop it. But, until then, they are safe from Azrael. The Angel of Death has rules, just like everything else. He cannot take a life without reason.

Aziraphale’s body takes back control, pulling up on the gun, shouting. “You can’t just shoot children!”

_Raphael_, Azrael’s voice is in his head, and it takes him a moment to realize it’s not just an echo from the void. _Do you remember my words, Healer?_

“Perhaps we should wait,” Aziraphale says, looking to Crowley. And Crowley doesn’t want to be the one giving this order. Has never wanted to. But this is the fate of the world, and if they don’t do this, they’ll all be dead before the light fades from the sky.

“What?” he snaps, panic setting in. “Until he grows up? _Shoot him, Aziraphale!_”

The angel levels the gun at the boy, and for a moment all Crowley can see is Warlock, the boy he raised. Gabriel, on the day he was made, so young and eager, tripping over his own feet. Uriel smiling at him as their Mother deposits her in his arms. Sandalphon, already glaring at the world around him, clutching tightly to his hand. This is a child. They can’t kill a child. But if they don’t, if they let him live, then the world will end. They can’t fight the combined armies of Heaven and Hell alone. They won’t survive past the first attack.

The owner of Aziraphale’s body wrenches the gun upward, pointing it into the sky as Aziraphale pulls the trigger. Their one shot at ending this now goes up in flames.

“I’m sorry,” she says, too little, too late. “I couldn’t let you do it.”

Crowley wants to rage at her, but he understands the impulse. He knows why she did it. He’s not sure that he, in a similar situation, without truly understanding the stakes, wouldn’t have done the same. The family lines of seven Mesopotamian children can attest to that.
“Excuse me,” the Antichrist says, looking at Aziraphale. “Why are you two people?”

Crowley braces for attack. For the child to unleash his fury against Aziraphale. His hand curls around the hilt of his sword.

“Ah,” Aziraphale says, in typical Aziraphale fashion. “Long story. You see, I was in my bookshop, and-”

The Antichrist interrupts him. “It’s not right.” Crowley stares. This child is here to end the world, and he’s worrying about Aziraphale and the human woman sharing a body? This, he realizes, is a child raised entirely by humans. Despite his demonic origin, he’s had no Hellish or Heavenly influences in his life since the day that Crowley dropped him off at the hospital. For the first time in days, he starts to really think they might have a chance.

“You should go back to being two separate people again,” the boy says. Something shifts in the universe, and before Crowley can react, Aziraphale’s form twists, splitting, until he stands beside the human woman, dressed exactly like he was the last time Crowley had seen him. His life pattern joined to that of the body, that familiar set of lines that had come apart when his body had been evaporated by the portal to Heaven. He’s the most wonderful thing Crowley has ever seen, in the whole history of the universe. Every detail just exactly as he remembers it, from the soft white curls right down to Raphael’s ring around his little finger.

“Aziraphale,” he breathes, though no one hears him. The boy’s eyes flicker to him for just a moment, but Crowley doesn’t notice. He’s too busy re-memorizing the shape of his angel. Something that had been shattered within him mends itself as the angel glances at him, and his yellow-gold eyes meet that familiar sea-blue. He moves forward to stand at Aziraphale’s side, completing a circle with Shadwell and the woman, the Antichrist and three human children, Azrael, and the other three Horsemen. He can feel it, the weight of the universe, the fate of it all hanging on whatever happens now.

He stares at the boy now, the Antichrist, trying to read his pattern. He can’t. It’s all in flux, shifting as the boy thinks, changing as he tries to decide who and what he will be.

War looks at them all and smirks, swinging her sword in a complicated pattern. Crowley grips his, ready to pull it free, but something inside him says not yet. The other Horsemen are posturing, ready for battle, but Azrael stands back, waiting, watching. When Crowley glances at him, he sees that the Angel of Death is staring at him.
“The thing is,” the boy says to his friends, “they’re not actually real. They’re just like nightmares, really.”

And his friends stand for him. They face down monsters from human imagination, and somehow, miraculously, they come out victorious. Watching them wrestle with the flaming sword, Crowley realizes he recognizes it. He leans closer to Aziraphale, eyes on the battle, and mutters “Didn’t that used to be your sword?”

He glances at the angel, turning from the fight to watch the emotions cross his face as he realizes that Crowley is right.

“I do believe it was,” he says, and Crowley hides a grin. There’s something right, about that sword being here. Being used by children to defend the world the descendants of Eve had created. It feels almost like a plan, though none of this was ever in that small leather-bound book that’s still hidden in Crowley’s safe. They’ve gone off-script now, and anything could happen.

Famine fades away, and Azreal alone remains of the Horsemen. He stands alone before the young Antichrist and his friends, and for a moment Crowley fears he’ll kill the children where they stand.

“Death,” the boy says, “this all has to stop now.” His pattern settles into shape against his skin. He’s made his choice, and will not change it now.

Azrael’s face is as unreadable as always. It has stopped, he declares. But they will be back. We are never far away. I am Creation’s shadow. You cannot destroy me. That would destroy the world. He looks around. Good day, Gentlemen. His eyeless gaze focuses for just a moment on Crowley, and the demon hears his voice in his mind. Good luck, Healer. I will be seeing you soon. And then, with that ominous message, he is gone.

At his side, Aziraphale heaves a sigh of relief. “There,” he says, smiling. “You see, Crowley? It’s like I’ve always said-”

Crowley shakes his head. “Oh, it isn’t over.” They’ve gotten rid of the Horsemen, true. But if the Horsemen were the whole of it, Crowley could have handled it himself. “Nothing’s over.” No, now they have the gathered armies of Heaven and Hell to contend with. And if he knows his siblings, they will not give up just yet. Not when the Plan has said that their time to fight had come. “Both Heaven and Hell still want their war.”
Inside him, the silence screams. Through the tattered bond he can feel them, the intensity of their anger breaking through their own walls. The Archangels. They know what just happened. And now, one of them is coming.

He steps forward, yellow eyes focused on the children. “You,” he says. “Boy. Antichrist. What was your name again?”

The boy looks at him, and takes in his serpentine eyes without flinching. For the first time since he drove through the flaming ring of the M25, Crowley realizes he isn’t wearing his glasses. His eyes are bare for the world to see, but these children don’t even seem to notice. He supposes, after the terrifying skull-like head of Azreal, serpent’s eyes are nothing much at all.

“Adam Young,” the Antichrist answers, and isn’t that ironic. Adam. Like the first man, who loved Eve so much he followed her down the path of temptation.

“So,” Crowley says. “You and your friends got together and saved the world. Well done. Have a gold star. Won’t make any difference.” He might be slightly hysterical, anger and fear rising within him as the silence echoes with his siblings’ rage and the pain of his raw and aching bond.

“You!” he hears a shout, and turns to see a familiar figure coming towards them, a nervous young man trailing behind. “You’re the man in the car. You stole my book.”

The demon almost laughs. Of course. “Oh, Book Girl!” He looks down at the charred book in his hand. It had fallen into their hands at just the right time. Just perfectly when they needed it, for Aziraphale to find the Antichrist. Almost miraculous, really. He lifts it, gauging the weight of it. “Catch.” He tosses it, and a bit of charred paper falls from the pages, fluttering down into Aziraphale’s grasp.

Book Girl catches the book, seemingly unworried by the burnt state of it. She folds it under her arm, demanding to know what has been going on.

“Long story,” Crowley tells her. Whoever is coming will be here any minute. “No time.”

“Well, try me,” she tells him, and he knows he’s going to like her, if they survive this.

“Uh, ok,” Aziraphale says, moving to Crowley’s side. “So, uh. In the Beginning, in the Garden.
There was - well. He was a wily old serpent.” He grins at Crowley, who doesn’t grin back. They don’t have time to tell this whole story. They have maybe minutes, before the agents of Heaven and Hell arrive to get the Apocalypse back on course.

“And I was technically on Apple Tree duty,” the angel continues, settling in to apparently tell the assembled humans the whole of history. Crowley shushes him, shaking his head. The air around them is changing, starting to smell of petrichor and brimstone. The humans talk among themselves, but Crowley isn’t listening. He’s reaching out with all of his senses, trying to get an idea of what is going to happen next. He has to be ready. He reaches back into his pocket of the universe, about to draw his sword.

At the same time, lightning flashes. And Crowley is wrenched around, the remains of the bond burning inside him as the earth shakes. He blinks away spots from his vision, and sees Gabriel standing on the tarmac. Moments later, Beelzebub rises from the ground at his side. Together, they walk forward, past Crowley and Aziraphale, to stand in the middle of this strange assortment of humans that have just faced down the Horsemen and won. Crowley gives them both a mocking bow.


He meets her eyes. “That’s not a nice word.” He can feel Gabriel there, even though he isn’t looking at him. This close to one of his siblings, it’s like standing inside a roaring flame. The raw pain of the bond is vibrating inside the silence of the void.

Beelzebub sneers at him, a buzz in her voice. “All the other words I have for you are worse.” Her eyes are hard, and he can feel her anger in the air around them. “Where’s the boy?”

He glances at Adam, and the representatives of the divine and infernal armies turn to the boy. With the attention off of him, Crowley reaches into the ether once again, firmly gripping the hilt of his sword.

“That one,” Gabriel says. Adam Young. Hi.” To Crowley, he sounds like nothing so much as a door-to-door salesman, and the fake, joyless grin makes him sick to see. He approaches Adam, who watches with curiosity, but not a hint of fear. Reality is still his to command, and if Gabriel
upsets him… well. Crowley has no loyalty to Heaven. To this sibling that would have killed him. But it would destroy a vital part of him, to see his brother unmade.

“Young man,” Gabriel continues, “Armageddon must… restart. Right now.” Still so eager for the world to end. For the war to come. Crowley remembers Sandalphon’s words in the park. *It’s finally time to take our revenge on Lucifer. For taking Raphael from us.* “A temporary inconvenience cannot get in the way of the greater Good.”

Crowley wants to laugh. The greater Good. As if Good has anything to do with this. As if friendship, and love, and all of the things that Adam and Crowley are both fighting for are somehow less good than revenge, and hate, and loyalty to an absent God.

Beelzebub scowls at Adam, and Crowley wonders if she’s more pissed at him for stopping Armageddon, or inadvertently being the reason she has to work with an archangel. “As for what it stands in the way of,” she says, throwing a disgusted glance at Gabriel, “that has yet to be decided. But the battle must be decided *now* boy. That izz-” she stops, getting control over the buzz in her voice. “Your destiny. It is written. Now. *Start. The war.*”

Adam looks at them both, confusion in his eyes. “You both want to end the world just to see whose gang is best?” he asks, and Gabriel laughs.

“Obviously,” he says. “It’s the Great Plan.”

*Fuck the Great Plan,* Crowley thinks. *Look what following the Great Plan has gotten you. Has gotten all of us.* He glances at Aziraphale. Following the Great Plan has cost him far too much. They’ve already gone off-script here. Now they need to *stay* that way.

“It’s the entire reason for the creation of the Earth.”

*No,* Crowley wants to shout at him. *No, that can’t be it. Think about it, you idiot. Why would She create all of this, just to end it?*

“I’ve got this,” Beelzebub tells his brother, and smiles, moving closer to the boy. “Adam. When all this is over, you’re going to get to rule the world. Don’t you want to rule the world?”

And Adam doesn’t even seem to need to think about this. Somehow, this kid, his nephew,
understands what his priorities should be better than even an archangel. “It’s hard enough,” he says, “having to think of things for Pepper and Wensley and Brian to do all the time so they don’t get bored. I’ve got all the world I want.”

Crowley wonders what would have happened, six thousand years ago, if Lucifer had looked at their Mother and said the same thing. If he’d decided that his family was all the world he wanted, and turned away from the throne of Hell. Would he still have Fallen? Would he still have lost his siblings and Aziraphale? He turns away from that line of thought. What ifs would drive him as mad as Lucifer, if he lets them.

Gabriel’s look of confusion would be comical, if it wasn’t so sad. If Crowley didn’t know that there had once been a time when Gabriel himself was happy just to have his siblings around him. “Well you can’t just refuse to be who you are,” he says, as if that’s anything close to what Adam is doing. “Your birth, your destiny, they’re part of the Great Plan.”


“Aziraphale,” Gabriel says, and Crowley bristles at the tone of his voice, the instant dismissal of anything he has to say. “Maybe you should just keep your mouth shut.” He hates the way his siblings treat Aziraphale. He always has, but this is so much worse than the way it had been before he Fell.

This time though, for what is perhaps the very first time, Aziraphale talks over Gabriel. “One thing I’m not clear on,” he says. “Is that the Ineffable Plan?”

_Ineffable Plan?_ Crowley thinks, as Beelzebub shouts.

“The Great Plan! It is written! There shall be a world, and it shall last for 6,000 years, and end in fire and flame.”

_You should not assume the truth is as you see it._ The truth, as written in the Great Plan. Is that what Azreal meant?

“Yes, yes,” Aziraphale nods. “That sounds like the Great Plan. Just wondering, is that the Ineffable Plan as well?”
Beelzebub and Gabriel pause, confusion clear on their faces. And Crowley realizes something very important.

“Well they’re the same thing,” Gabriel says. But his voice is missing that certainty, that air of superior knowing it had held before.

“You don’t know,” Crowley murmurs. Maybe the Great Plan isn’t Her true Plan after all. The idea throws more than six thousand years of knowledge on its ear. If he didn’t Fall for Her plan, then why did he Fall? Or was his Fall still a part of Her Plan, to bring him here, at this moment, to stand beside Aziraphale and try to save the world?

“Uh, well,” he says, louder, joining Aziraphale at Adam’s back. “It’d be a pity, if you thought you were doing what the Great Plan said, but you were actually going directly against God’s Ineffable Plan.” He can see the gears turning in Gabriel’s mind, and even through the ragged shreds of the bond he can feel his brother’s confusion.

“I mean,” he continues, “I mean, everyone knows about the Great Plan, yeah? But the Ineffable Plan…” he looks around at the humans, who have been watching this all with varying degrees of confusion. “It’s, well, ineffable, isn’t it?” He looks Gabriel in the eyes. “By definition, we can’t know it.”

“But it izz… written,” Beelzebub says, but he can tell she’s thinking about it.

Gabriel’s mind is screaming against the bond now. His brother’s walls are cracking, overwhelmed by the pain this new idea brings.

“God does not play games with the universe,” he says, but it sounds like he’s trying to reassure himself.

“Where have you been?” Crowley asks him. God does not play games with the universe? What a ridiculous thought. God does nothing but play games with the universe. And in that moment, he can feel Gabriel realize what it means. If they haven’t been following Her plan, then was he really doing the Right Thing, when he led their siblings to destroy their own brother? The flare of pain would have knocked him over, if he hadn’t been bracing for it. As it is, it reverberates within his own agony, knocking holes in his hastily reconstructed walls.

“Can I just-” Gabriel says, his carefully controlled mask cracking just a bit as he turns, tugging
Beelzebub close to whisper frantically. Not that it helps. Crowley can still hear him muttering about how difficult it will be, to get ten million angels to stand down from their war footing. He grins when they both glare at he and Aziraphale, but he grips the hilt of his sword tighter. Cornered predators tend to attack, after all. And he has no illusions about what his little brother has become.

Beelzebub and Gabriel turn back to them, moving closer, and Crowley tenses. “Young man,” his brother says, glaring at Adam. “You were put on this Earth for one reason, and one reason only. To end it.” He leans down, putting his eyes on level with Adam’s, his normally impassive face turning ugly with hate and fear. “You’re a disobedient little brat. And I hope someone tells your father.”

“Oh, they will,” Beelzebub adds. “And your father will not be pleased.”

Crowley shares a glance with Aziraphale. After all of this, after losing the angel and getting him back, after staring down Azreal and his own little brother, he doesn’t know if he has the strength to deal with Lucifer too.

Gabriel and Beelzebub disappear in a pop of color. And a moment later, a burning pain rips through Crowley’s whole body, forcing him to the ground. He clutches his chest, trying in vain to stifle the sharp, stabbing, burning pain. It’s not the bond, or the silence, or even his own internal anguish. No, this agony is something else. It’s the pain every demon feels, when Lucifer rages. Satan’s infernal connection to the legions of the damned. Somewhere inside him, buried under all of the agony and rage he feels towards his brother, is the thin strand of connection that binds his essence to Hell and it’s king. That marks him as a demon. It burns now with Lucifer’s rage, a pale shadow of the scarred and cauterized bond they used to share, while the void screams in his mind.

“What’s happening?” Aziraphale asks as the demon writhes on the tarmac. “I can feel something.”

“They did it,” Crowley gasps, regaining control over his body. The pain is still sharp, still burning, but he has felt pain that was far, far worse than this. Compared to losing Aziraphale, this is nothing at all. “They told his father. And his satanic father is not happy.”

The humans yelp and stumble as the world shakes around them, crying out to know what is going on.

Aziraphale shifts just a hair closer to Crowley, and the demon takes comfort in his presence. He doesn’t think he has it in him to fight Lucifer himself. He couldn’t stand against him before, with the full strength of an archangel. He won’t be able to do anything now, bound as he is to Satan’s service.
“Well,” the angel says, eyes scanning the area around them for the danger. “You can call me an old silly, but it looks like the devil is coming. Satan himself.”

The earth shakes again, and Crowley looks up into Aziraphale’s familiar sea-blue eyes. “Right. That was that,” he says. “It was nice knowing you.”

The angel shakes his head, eyes pleading. “We can’t give up now.”

Oh angel, Crowley thinks. I’ll fight him for you. I will. But I’m not going to win. He doesn’t say it. Instead, he says “This is Satan himself. This isn’t about Armageddon.” He can feel the rage in the air around him. Frankly, he’s astounded Aziraphale isn’t reacting to the weight of it. “This is personal.” That rage, that infernal power, is growing stronger, closer, as Lucifer rises from the pit. “We are fucked.”

The ground heaves around them, and Aziraphale stumbles away, almost falling to the ground near his sword. He snatches it up, holding it in a firm grip as he turns back to Crowley. “Come up with something,” he orders, sounding for a moment like the soldier he was created to be. Then his voice breaks, and desperation seeps into his expression. “Or I’ll never talk to you again.”

Crowley braces himself. He has once last trick up his sleeve. One thing he can do. Something only a being with the power of an archangel can do. He draws his blade and stands, dragging his power up with him as he goes, catching hold of the very pattern of the universe - and stopping it in its tracks. Stopping time itself. The effort draws his wings into the physical plane, and he fights to keep two of his three sets from releasing. He’s been through enough today. He can’t have Aziraphale finding out about his past, on top of it all.

When he opens his eyes, they stand among the sands of time. Crowley, Aziraphale, and Adam. Adam. The boy who can bend reality to his will. Crowley reaches into a pocket and pulls out a pair of dark glasses, hiding away his eyes. There are too many emotions flowing through him now, too much pain. And his eyes would reveal it all.

“Adam, listen,” he says. “Your father is coming to destroy you.” He can feel it. Lucifer’s rage. His fury at being disobeyed. At losing this chance for a war against their Mother who damned them. “Probably to destroy all of us.” He tightens his grip on his sword. If this doesn’t work, if he has to fight, he’s going to do his best to make sure Aziraphale and the humans make it out. But he doesn’t like his chances.
“My Dad?” the boy asks, thinking not of Lucifer but of the man that raised him. “He wouldn’t hurt anybody.”

“Not your earthly father,” Crowley corrects him, speaking fast. Even with all the extra power he holds, it’s draining him to do this. To hold time at a standstill. He won’t be able to keep it up for long. “Satan.” His brother. “Your father who is no longer in Heaven. He is coming. And he is angry.”

“So what do you want me to do about it?” Adam wants to know. “Fight him?”

The demon shakes his head. “I don’t think fighting him would do any good.” Even the Antichrist, with power over reality at his fingertips, cannot win against Satan in a fight. “You’re going to have to come up with something else.”

“But I’m just a kid,” Adam says, and Crowley doesn’t have an answer to that. Just a kid. And how is it fair, that they’ve dragged him into this mess? How is it that they’ve gotten this all so badly wrong that the fate of everything depends on one eleven-year-old boy?

Aziraphale steps forward, unfailingly gentle and kind as always. “Yes,” he says. “But that’s not a bad thing to be, Adam. You know,” he looks the boy in the eyes, wings spread behind him, that same steady, unchanging presence Crowley has loved for millennia. “I was scared you’d be Hell incarnate,” he tells them. “I’d hoped you’d be Heaven incarnate. But you’re not either of those things. You’re much better.” He smiles. That soft, reassuring smile that says that everything is going to be alright. “You’re human incarnate.” His eyes move to Crowley’s face, and the demon is very glad of his glasses now, because at that moment the most overwhelming thing he can feel is just how much he loves this angel. And there’s no way that love isn’t showing in his eyes right now.

“Adam,” he adds, knowing, now, exactly what he needs to say. “Reality will listen to you right now. You can change things.”

“And whatever happens,” Aziraphale tells him, “for Good or for Evil, we’re beside you.” The angel takes Adam’s hand in his, holding his sword ready in the other. Crowley does the same, his own blade flickering with Hellfire, a counterpoint to the angel’s Heavenly flame.

“I’m going to start time,” he warns them. “You won’t have long to do whatever you’re going to do.” He releases his hold on the universe, feeling it shudder and start again, depositing them back on the ground of the airbase.
“Do it quickly,” he says, as the ground rumbles, and Satan starts to rise from the earth. It’s his larger, more infernal form that breaks through, all carnelian skin and dark, lightless eyes. Only one set of wings are visible, batlike and devoid of feathers, the skin ripped and torn and utterly incapable of carrying him in flight. In this light, Crowley can see the scars that cover his skin, dark and painful, given to him so long ago when Michael cast him down into the pit. This isn’t the Great Beast, for all its size. Only one head, free of chains, and fully aware of the world around him. No, this is the same form Lucifer showed him so long ago, that day in the Garden when he tore away the last of Raphael’s Grace. For a moment, Crowley is struck by the mad desire to confront him. To look him in the eyes and tell him exactly what he thinks of everything Lucifer has become.

“Where is my son?” his brother asks, looking at them all before focusing on Adam. “You? You’re my rebellious son? Come here.”

Adam steps forward, staring, defiant, up into the eyes of Satan himself. And then, he takes reality into his hands, and bends it to his will.

“You’re not my dad,” the boy declares, voice firm and certain. “Dads don’t wait until you’re eleven to say hello, and then turn up to tell you off.”

“What?” Lucifer asks, and it’s almost worth all of it to see that stunned expression on his face.

Adam keeps going. “If I’m in trouble with my dad, then it won’t be you.” The ground shakes with Satan’s wrath, but the boy stands strong. “It’s going to be the dad who was there. You’re. Not. My. Dad.”

“What did you say?” Lucifer demands, his anger sharp, hot, and suddenly tainted by uncertainty.

Aziraphale raises his sword, ready to fight. “You can do it,” he tells Adam, and Crowley agrees.

“My son. Say it again.” He holds his own sword in a one-handed grip, the nails on his free hand lengthening to claws. There’s no telling how his brother will react to being defied like this, but they’re so close now. If Adam can do this, if he can send Lucifer back, then they’ll be well and truly done with the end of the world.

Satan slams his fists into the ground, growling, his anger almost overwhelming in its intensity.
“Come here,” he demands.

Adam doesn’t move. “You’re not my dad,” he says again. “You never were.”

“NO!” Lucifer cries, but already he’s beginning to retreat, crumbling back into the ground. And Crowley almost calls out. Almost confronts him. That mad impulse to be known rising up again. But he can’t. Not with Aziraphale here. Not when to confront Lucifer would be to reveal himself to anyone who might be watching.

“Wait!” Adam commands. And the world goes still around them. Lucifer stops retreating, turning back to look at him.

“Mister Crowley has something he wants to say to you,” the boy tells him, and beckons Crowley forward.

“Adam…” Crowley starts to say, then stops. At his side, Aziraphale still has his sword raised, but he stands unmoving. Not breathing. Not even twitching a muscle. Around him, the humans are the same. Still as statues. Frozen.

“It’s alright,” Adam says to him. “They can’t hear you. Or see you. It’s safe.”

Crowley looks at him, and can’t think of anything to say.

“Say what you need to,” Adam tells him. “I won’t let him leave until you’re finished.”

The demon nods, and tries to swallow the lump in his throat. He turns to Satan. Lucifer. The Morning Star. His older brother.


Crowley finds his voice. “Or you’ll what?” he asks. “Smite me? Throw me into the pit with your great beast?”
“Oh, I’ll do worse than that to you, serpent,” his brother snarls, anger contorting his face into something even more hideous. “You’ve earned an eternal cell in Tartarus for this.”

Crowley pales, and tightens his grip on his sword. He’s heard of the things that go on in Tartarus, home to the eternal torture of doomed souls. He’ll die before allowing himself to be taken there.

“You can’t have him.”

Lucifer and Crowley both turn to look at Adam, bright blue eyes and blond curls, seeming so small compared to the titan before them. Eleven years old, but in that moment wiser and stronger than any of them.

“What?” Lucifer growls.

“You can’t have him,” Adam repeats. “You’re not my dad. But he’s my uncle. And I’m keeping him.”

“You know about that?” Crowley asks, somehow not surprised. Adam is the Antichrist after all. Reality is his to play with. There’s no reason why he shouldn’t be able to see through the walls Crowley has erected around himself.


“What do you mean, ‘uncle’?” Lucifer growls. There’s something uncertain growing in his face. Something almost, almost familiar.

Crowley looks up at him and takes a deep breath. He’d wanted this, hadn’t he? A chance to face down his brother and make him regret what he’d done? It was time to choose. Reveal himself, confront his brother, and face the consequences. Or let this chance that Adam is giving him slip away, and perhaps never get another. He doesn’t stop to think about the possible results. He just grins wickedly at his brother and sketches a wave. “Hey, Luci. Long time no chat.” Then, carefully, deliberately, he releases first one pair of wings, then the second, and then the third. All of them iridescent black now, but still strong and beautiful, ready to take him into the sky. For just a moment, he lets down his walls, and the echo of the archangel shimmers around his demonic form. “Remember me?”
“Raphael?”


“It’s Crowley now,” he says acidly. “But you knew that.”

“I don’t… I don’t understand,” Lucifer says, his infernal rage diminishing as his eyes search Crowley’s face for hints of the little brother who healed and made the stars.

“You don’t understand?” Crowley snarls, the words welling up and spilling from his mouth, finally, after six thousand years. He couldn’t stem the tide of them if he tried. “You. Don’t. Understand? What the fuck is there to understand? You dragged me down, didn’t you? Cut away my Grace and left me there on the ground like trash? Made me into this?” He gestures to his blackened wings, his serpentine eyes, the ragged hole in his essence where his Grace had once been.

“Raphael is dead,” his brother growls out the words, turning away from the uncomfortable truth. “My siblings killed him.”

Crowley laughs, bitter, angry. “They tried,” he says. “Oh, they tried. And look where it got me.” He drops all pretense of illusion. All control over his physical form. Old scars fade into view on his skin. Scars that were woven not into the pattern of his body, but into the pattern of his soul. A scar where Gabriel slid his sword across his neck. Two scars where Uriel’s blade pierced him through. The large scar on his side where Sandalphon tried to cut him in two. Claw marks along his back and sides, the legacy of Asmodeus’ attack. Hundreds of smaller scars that line his arms and body, the marks of thousands of different battles. A thin white line across his palm, where once he tried to teach a principality to heal.

“I’ve been nearly killed a thousand times since you started your war, brother.” He spits the title from his mouth like its poison. “But I’m not dead yet.”

His brother howls in rage, and an enormous crimson hand lashes out at him with obsidian claws.
Crowley jumps, six wings lifting him into the air, putting him on eye-level with Lucifer.

“And I’m not about to lie down and die now just because you can’t swallow your pride and admit you were wrong,” he hisses. “Wrong about Her. Wrong about the Great Plan. And wrong about me.” He glares at him, black wings beating the air to hold him aloft. “Maybe I did ask too many questions,” he adds bitterly. “But you didn’t have to drag me down with you.”

Recognition finally flickers in those black-hole eyes. Lucifer freezes, staring at him. “Sparkler?” he asks, using Michael’s old nickname for Raphael.

“You don’t get to call me that,” Crowley tells him. “You lost that right.”

For once, his elder brother seems at a loss for words. His jaw works soundlessly, his wide, cold eyes tracking Crowley’s movements as he slowly lets himself drift back down to the ground. The demon waits, sword at the ready to defend himself if Satan attacks.

“Why didn’t you come to me?” Lucifer demands at last, and Crowley can hear the hurt and anger in that ancient voice. He laughs again, a sound like shattered glass.

“Why should I have?” he wants to know. “What possible reason could I have had to come to you, after what you did?”

“I would have made you a king,” the Morning Star says, frowning at him, a rumble of confusion under the indignant anger in his voice. “You would have ruled at my right hand.”

Crowley glares at him, body trembling with rage. “I didn’t want to rule in Hell!” he yells. “I just wanted to know why! I just wanted answers! And barring that - barring that, I just wanted my family!” The words feel torn from him, six thousand years of pain and anguish filling the sounds and reverberating in the silence that falls between them. The void inside seems ready to open at their feet, the broken and torn part of him that once tied six minds together throbs within, still bleeding and raw after all these years - a wound that will never be healed.

“Our siblings are lost to us,” Lucifer reminds him, beating the air with his torn wings. “We are Fallen. They are not.” He bares his teeth in a snarl. “You would do well to remember that.”
“You took me from them,” Crowley shouts. “I trusted you, and you took me from them.” He looks up at Lucifer’s blood-red face, twisted from millennia of anger and rage, and wonders how this infernal creature could ever have been his beloved older brother.

Raphael is painfully young. He will grow fast in the coming days, as God begins to expand Her Garden. It won’t be too very long before his hands are full of rambunctious siblings, of starstuff, of the patterns of the universe. He will come into himself, the compassionate healer and mischievous starsmith that laughs for the first time in all of creation. He will learn to heal, and to question, and to love. But now he young. Not even two days out of the nursery. His flight feathers haven’t even come in yet, still covered in protective sheaths, delicate and new. His wings hang behind him, overlarge and awkward, too many extra appendages for his small body to maneuver around. The tips of his lower set drag along the ground as he walks, but he isn’t walking now. He’s curled around himself on the green carpet of Eden, small hands cradling a sparrow against his chest.

Lucifer finds him on the ground, weeping, shaking fingers smoothing the tiny reddish-brown feathers.

“Raphael?” Gentle hands settle on his shoulders, his body a solid warmth at his back. “What’s wrong, little one?”

When he doesn’t respond, his brother’s hands grip his shoulders tighter, and concern creeps into his voice. “Sparkler?”

“It hurts,” Raphael sobs, showing his brother the sparrow’s broken wing. The sparrow’s pain is overwhelming, so strong it feels like his own.

Lucifer reaches over his shoulder, touching a fingertip to the feathers. “What happened?”

“I found her,” the younger archangel says through his tears. “She says she flew into a tree.”

“Why didn’t you call for Michael or I?” Lucifer asks, shifting to sit beside Raphael. He slides his hands under Raphael’s own, supporting them as he holds up the bird. His presence is comforting, warm and soothing. His strong older brother, Her first angel, who always knows what to do. With Lucifer at his side, Raphael knows everything will be alright.
He sniffs, wincing as he feels a flare of pain from the bird, and mumbles his answer.

“What was that?” Lucifer demands.

“I’m the healer,” Raphael says, a little louder. “I wanted to heal her myself.”

His brother sighs. “And do you know how to heal, Sparkler?”

The younger archangel keeps his eyes on the bird. “I tried,” he whispers. “I... I don’t know how yet.”

“Then I think it’s time to learn.” Lucifer leans against him, wrapping him in the soft ruby feathers of his large wings. His consciousness brushes against Raphael’s through the bond, and he lets him in. They mingle together in the shared space of their mind, the red-and-black of Lucifer and the red-and-gold of Raphael coiling together into red-and-black-and-gold. The Morning Star pulses with comfort and calm, wrapping Raphael’s mind in well-being just as his wings wrap his body. The younger archangel leans into it, letting his older brother soothe his pain away.

See the pattern? Lucifer asks, and Raphael does. Lines of light, patterns shifting across patterns. Everything is connected, his brother’s voice echoes inside their mind. The earth to the plants. The plants to the animals. The animals to us. You see? Lucifer moves his hand, and the patterns bend around it. Raphael reaches out and plucks a string, sending a shiver through the other strings of the universe.

Do you see how they come together? Lucifer takes his fingers and guides them to a point where his own pattern merges with the larger collection of lines that make up the universe. Everywhere he looks, he sees patterns joining, shapes of power and life that come together to form a stronger whole.

I see, Raphael tells him. Among the multitude of patterns, Raphael can see one that seems weaker than the rest. Duller. The lines a sickly greyish-brown instead of vibrant gold. Parts of the pattern have come out of alignment, and he can see several places where the lines have broken apart entirely, cutting off the flow of life to the lines beyond. It’s this pattern that’s emanating the pain he could sense, that had drawn him to the Garden. The sharp ache of a broken bone, unlike anything he’d ever felt before. He hadn’t known pain, until he had felt the sparrow’s. Now that he’s noticed it again, it’s so strong it becomes all he can feel, distracting him from the lines of light that Lucifer tries to show him.
Calm down, his brother says, and Raphael realizes he’s crying again.

It hurts, he explains, taking hold of the broken pattern. It hurts too much. I don’t… it hurts. It’s all he can say. He doesn’t know how to explain it better. To tell his brother that the pain is overwhelming, swamping him, filling his mind.

Shhhh, Lucifer whispers to him. It’s alright. Push it back. You must keep the pain at a distance now, little one. He moves within their bond, reaching, until a wall of willpower moves into place between them and the sparrow’s pain. At once, the hurt is less immediate, less demanding. Raphael can think through it now.

Better? His brother asks him. Raphael nods and sends a pulse of gratitude through their bond. Good. Now, I want you to reach out and put your power into the pattern. Chase out the dead parts until the whole thing is full of light. Lucifer takes the combined red-and-black-and-gold of their power and feeds it into the pattern of the sparrow. Dull grey-brown starts to glow a soft blue, and in the physical world that same sky-blue coats their fingertips as Lucifer guides Raphael’s hand to cover the broken wing.

The larger part of the pattern fills with the blue fire, the flow coming easily from within their combined core, until it hits the point where the lines have broken apart. Raphael gasps as a shock rolls back up the flow of power.

Pull the broken pieces close, Lucifer orders. Bring them together and force the power through. Fix the pattern.

Raphael tries, but his power catches on the break, refusing to go through. He reaches out, realigning the wing in the physical plane, but even that doesn’t help bring the pattern together.

You have to force it, Lucifer tells him. It won’t heal if you don’t force it.

No, Raphael thinks. That’s not right. He tries anyway. He pulls at the broken parts of the pattern, trying to force more of that blue power down into it. It sticks at the break, pressure building, and the bird cries out in his hands.

It won’t go, the healer says, pulling back on the power.
It must, Lucifer tells him, and tugs on the pattern, **shoving** more power through it. The bird shrieks in pain, and agony rips through Raphael’s wings.

**NO,** Raphael shouts, and takes their power back. Not like that.

Lucifer waits, quiet, as the younger archangel thinks. Then Raphael reaches out again, and starts to feed their power into the pattern from either end, until the whole thing is aglow. He continues to feed power into it, watching, coaxing it, until threads of light start to reach between the broken lines. Slowly, gaining speed, they start to knit together. Lucifer steps in, guiding the power, keeping it together within the pattern.

Watch your power, he advises, though there’s a smile in his voice. When you do this alone, you risk changing the pattern. He lifts their hands from the bird, revealing a wing that’s straightened, the bone whole once again. If you change the pattern, you change the life. Together, they raise the bird into the air. The tiny creature sits up and flaps its wings. Chirps. And then flies away.

**His brother pulls back from their bond,** untangling their essences until they’re wholly in the physical realm once again, sitting on the floor of Eden, wrapped in Lucifer’s wings.

“There,” he says, smiling widely at his little brother. “You did well.”

“I didn’t do most of it,” Raphael complains.

“You will,” Lucifer reassures him. “Soon, I’m sure. Just watch when you do. You might create something entirely different by accident.”

“I’ll be careful,” he promises. He’ll try, though the first time he heals a pattern on his own, an entirely new creature will be created. It will take long hours of work before he reaches the point where he can heal with barely a thought to direct the shape of the pattern.

**His brother nods,** and ruffles his copper hair. “I know you will, little one.”

Raphael sighs and leans against him, worn out from the very first major use of his power. Lucifer wraps his wings tighter about them, keeping him warm in the crisp, clear air of the new Earth.
After a time, Raphael turns to him, a question on his tongue. “Brother?” he asks. “What happens if I can’t heal something?”

“Hmm?” Lucifer frowns, eyes on the blue expanse of sky above them. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s just...” he feels silly, but forges ahead with his question. “I overheard Michael and Mother talking. She said She has plans for all of us. But what if I don’t fit into Her plan like she wants?”

“You will,” his brother says with certainty. “You are who She made you to be,”

“But what if I can’t?” Raphael demands. “What if I’m no good at healing? Or what if She wants me to do something I can’t do? What then?”

Lucifer turns to face him, pressing their foreheads together and holding his face with both hands. The gesture is comforting, calming, but it doesn’t ease the worry gnawing at Raphael’s heart.

“Listen to me, Raphael,” The Morning Star says, quiet, intense. “And listen well. You have a part in Her plan. And while we may not know what it is, I know you will do it wonderfully. And if you do not, that is because She has planned it so.”

“But-” Raphael grips his arm, letting him feel the fear in him, the worry that he might not be good enough. “What if you’re wrong. What if I-”

“Raphael,” Lucifer interrupts, holding a finger to Raphael’s lips to quiet him. “Listen to me now, little brother. I am here to protect our family. To protect you. Whatever happens, whatever you do or do not do, I will be here, and I will love you. And I promise you this - I won’t ever let anything bad happen to you. I swear it on every feather of my wings.” He presses a kiss to his forehead, a gesture of love and comfort.

“You promised me,” Crowley says now, pain bleeding into his voice. “You promised that nothing bad would ever happen to me. And then you Fell, and you dragged me down with you.”
His brother reaches out, like he wants to grab hold of Crowley, but he stops halfway, leaving his hand hanging in the air between them. “I did this for us,” he says. “I broke Her power over us.”

“And look how that worked out,” Crowley mocks him. “Here we are, six thousand years later, and the only one who realized this plan wasn’t the Ineffable Plan is a principality that none of you lot even cared about before the Fall.” He gives his shattered-glass laugh, and shakes his head. “And we’ve all been walking right into Her Plan, all this time.”

“Her plan is flawed. Unjust. I would cast it off and form a new Plan. A new Earth, where everything bends to my will, not Hers.” Lucifer places both hands flat on the ground and stares at Crowley. “I would free you from Her will.”

“Just to force me to yours?” Crowley scoffs. “No thanks. I’ve got free will of my own, no thanks to you. I won’t be a pawn in your insane attempt at a corporate takeover.”

His brother growls, low and deep in his throat. “You would rather be Her pawn, then?”

Crowley shakes his head. “You don’t get it. I’m not anybody’s pawn. Not Hers. Not yours. Not our divine siblings’.” He sighs, and meets his older brother’s eyes, suddenly feeling exhausted. “What do you want, Lucifer? Was power really this important to you, that you gave up everything you were?”

“She is not a just ruler. She does not deserve her power,” Lucifer tells him.

He blinks up at him, incredulous. “And you do?”

His brother leans down, bringing his face close to Crowley’s. This close the demon can see the madness in Lucifer’s eyes. That feral, all-consuming hunger and rage. “I will build a world where you will not Fall for asking questions. Where eternal damnation is not the first and only punishment for breaking Her rules.”

“Is that why you did all of this?” Crowley demands, horrified. “Is all of this some delusional attempt at taking back our place in Heaven?” Lucifer had the Plan, he realizes. He would have known, almost from the beginning, that they both were doomed to Fall. And he hadn’t had Aziraphale to point out the difference between Great and Ineffable. Was his rebellion - the war, the Fall, all of it - just Lucifer’s own, twisted attempt at keeping the things he loved, no matter the cost?
“I DIDN’T WANT TO LOSE YOU!” Lucifer shouts. Then, softer, “I didn’t want to lose any of you.”

“WELL TOO BAD!” Crowley shouts back. “THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT YOU DID!”

He looks up now into Lucifer’s eyes, and he does not see the half-mad King of Hell. He can see past those bottomless pits now, and just beneath them are the laughing onyx eyes that sparkled with starlight when he kissed his little brother on the forehead and held him when he cried. Those wicked crimson claws were once the hands that cupped Raphael’s, and moved his fingers through the patterns of the world. That face, twisted in anger, once wore a smile bright as the stars. That harsh, ruined voice, raised in wrath and breaking on rage, had once sung hymns of joy - a bright sound twined together with his siblings’ and echoing with love. Those bare wings, batlike and torn, full of holes where once he had shining ruby feathers, they had once lifted him into the air, chasing his laughing siblings through the sky.

He looks up at Lucifer, and sees what could have been. He sees sickly jaundiced yellow eyes glowing with infernal power. He sees black-tipped fingers lengthened into wicked claws, fangs extended and dripping venom. He sees pale skin turned paler, turned ghost-grey and devoid of warmth. Wings of oily charcoal, battered and missing feathers, no longer able to carry him in flight. Voice torn and broken, declaring his pain to the world. This is what he could have become, had things been different. If he hadn’t had something to hold on to. Something to fight for. Lucifer had held to thoughts of dragging his family down with him, of overthrowing their Mother so he would not have to be alone in his damnation. Crowley had known even before he Fell that there was no chance of keeping them. He was dead to them as a demon, and he would never dream of causing them the pain of Falling. Where Lucifer clings still to that dark and dying hope that his family will Fall to join him, Crowley rejects it out of hand. He has never needed that twisted kind of hope.

He looks at his brother, and sees a being that was once an angel. A being that had only one thing to hold on to. One bright light. And when he lost that light, when he knew he was going to lose the family he loved, it broke him. He wasn’t fighting for the humans. He wasn’t fighting for Earth. He wasn’t even truly fighting for a throne or a kingdom or a universe. He wasn’t fighting for Heaven, or even for Hell. He was fighting for his siblings. Not for their own sakes, for their lives, but simply to keep them at his side. A selfish desire to retain them, at any cost. Even the cost of their own peace and happiness. Such a selfish desire. As a reason to fight, it hadn’t been enough. And now, when he has a kingdom and legions and more power than anyone but God Herself, he really has nothing at all. So now he fights for rage. And pain. And to get back at the Mother that abandoned him.

Crowley looks at himself, and knows that he fights for so much more. He fights for life. For freedom. For choice. For questions. For answers. For the woman who asked questions, and all those descended from her. For this wild, wonderful, terrible world where four children can stand
against the worst nightmares out of human imagination and come out victorious. For the possibilities and the chaos of self-determination. And, yes, for the family he lost. For the chance that maybe, just maybe, they won’t have to suffer any more losses at the command of a God who plays chess with Her children as pieces. But he also fights for love. For Aziraphale. For the Angel of the Eastern Gate, who gave away his sword and liked to take walks in the Garden with Her Healer. For his life, and a chance for his happiness. And also he fights for himself. For everything he lost. And for everything he has or may yet gain.

He stands there on the tarmac, and he looks his elder brother in the eyes. This hell-thing, that even now can think only of his own wants and his own loss. And then, he does the worst thing he can think of. He meets that black-hole gaze with his own blazing yellow-gold. He opens his mouth. And he says three simple words. Just three words, but they mean so much more than the sum of the sound.

“I forgive you.”

“What?” Lucifer asks, and though their bond is gone, just another badly-healed scar, Crowley can feel the pain that lances through him.

“I forgive you,” he repeats. And he means it. He doesn’t have to keep all of this anger inside. Doesn’t have to hold on to his rage and his pain until it takes his soul and turns him into something dark and twisted like his brother. He can choose to let it go. It makes him feel so much lighter. So much freer.

Out from under the weight of it, he can feel the place where Lucifer bound him to his service. That thin connection all demons have to their Lord and Master. A poor replacement for Her Grace. He grips it in one hand, pulling it into the physical realm, and carefully brings his sword down to rest atop the base of it.

“No,” his brother says, eyes widening with fear. Crowley meets that gaze, and knows that he remembers the last time they stood like this, a bond between them and a weapon in Raphael’s hands.

“I forgive you,” he says a third time. “But I won’t be your pawn.” He has to be more careful this time. He doesn’t want to sever Lucifer’s connection to all of his demons. He’s just going to cut himself free.

“Raphael,” Lucifer shouts, reaching out, but not fast enough.
“Go back to Hell, brother. I’m not your creature any longer.” Swiftly, sharply, he brings his blade down. It meets little resistance. The threads connecting them snap, and it takes just a touch of his own Hellfire to seal the wound. Just another scar on his essence.

“I never was.”

“NOOOO!” Lucifer howls, his infernal form crumbling around them, fading back into smoke. Crowley glances at Adam and nods. The boy releases his hold on his former father, and, without anything to hold him there, Lucifer is sucked back down into the pit.

Then Crowley turns to Adam, and for a moment it’s just the two of them there. The Fallen Archangel and his nephew, the former Antichrist. The demon takes two faltering steps, and kneels down to look the boy in the eyes. He doesn’t have words for what Adam just gave him. For the chance to cut himself free of millennia of hurt and anger. To free himself from Lucifer, and everything his brother has done. He reaches out, resting a hand on the boy’s shoulder, and knows that he’s understood.

“Thanks, kid,” he says. It’s not enough. But it’s all he can manage.

“That was wicked,” the boy tells him, grinning. And then, completely unexpectedly, he throws himself into Crowley’s arms for a hug. Startled, the demon freezes for a moment. And then he wraps his arms around his nephew, and holds him tight.

“We did it,” Crowley tells him, hardly able to believe it himself. “He’s gone.” It hurts, deep inside, where he still misses his older brother. The void echoes around him. And yet, he does not regret his actions. Sometimes, he knows, a bone must be re-broken in order to be healed.

“Yeah,” the boy agrees, and the demon realizes that he’s shaking. They both are.

“Hey,” he says softly, rubbing a soothing hand up and down Adam’s back. “It’s alright. It’s over.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam sobs into his shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I should have known better. Shouldn’t have even started it.”
The demon feels a flash of anger, rage on behalf of this child, who never should have been put in the position of deciding the fate of the world. He’s just a kid. He had no stake in this fight, until they made him the crux upon which it all hung. If things had been different, if he’d been left alone, allowed to just *be a kid*… well. That was never in the Plan. And so the forces of Heaven and Hell had swept him up and forced him into their six-thousand-year grudge match.

“You shouldn’t have been put in that position to begin with,” he growls. “They *never* should have done that to you.”

“But I did it,” his nephew sobs. “I was going to end it all. I- I made Pepper and Brian and Wensley freeze. I took away their mouths and made them follow me. I was going to kill *everyone*.”

Crowley pulls back, not releasing him, just moving until he can look Adam in the eyes.

“*Listen to me*,” he says, lowering his glasses to the boy can see it in his eyes that he means every word he’s about to say. “That’s not your fault. That’s just… *them*. The Plan. The Great Plan, not the Ineffable one. That was what *they*, Heaven *and* Hell, wanted you to do. What matters,” he stops as Adam tries to look away. “No, listen, look at me, Adam.” He waits until the boy meets his eyes again. “What matters is that you *didn’t*. You were overwhelmed with power. With the impulse planted in you to start their war. That was *them*, not you. You stopped. You chose your friends. Your family. Your world. You *chose*, Adam. You could have done what was easy, let yourself become the creature they wanted you to be, started the war, destroyed the world. But you didn’t.

“You’re not the Antichrist, Destroyer of Kings, Hell incarnate. But you’re not an angel either. Not Heaven incarnate. Like Aziraphale said, you’re *human*. And when you had the option to become something else, you *chose* to be what you are. And that- Adam, that’s *amazing*. That’s something some people never do. I’m not saying your friends won’t be upset with you for what you did at first. But what you did here today, I don’t think anyone else could have done it.”

“You did, though,” Adam points out. “You chose to try and stop all of this *years* ago.”

“I did,” Crowley agrees. “But only because I had help. Without Aziraphale, I probably would have given in and let myself become a proper demon centuries ago.”

Adam just looks at him, unimpressed, the sorrow fading from his eyes. The demon laughs, and the sound is a little less like shattered glass. A little closer to his old, bright joy. “Alright,” he admits. “I might not have gone that far. But I only made it here because I have things I care about. People I love. And I’m selfish, just like Lucifer. I don’t want to give that up.” It’s not quite the same, he knows. Lucifer’s love was possessive, consuming, caring nothing for how the object of that desire
felt. Crowley just wants those he loves to be happy, even if that happiness doesn’t include him.

“Then I’m selfish too,” Adam tells him. “I want the world to stay the way it is so I can keep what I love too.”

Crowley grins at him. “Then we’ll be selfish together. Sound good, kid?”

Adam grins back. “I guess I’m gonna get in trouble with my dad for this, huh?”

The demon shrugs, and stands, tucking his wings and his scars away from sight once again. “Eh. Everybody gets in trouble with their dads now and then. Just know your uncle is proud of you. You’re a good kid, Adam Young.”

“Thanks Uncle Sparkler,” he says impishly, and Crowley rolls his eyes.

“Call me that again and I’ll hang you upside down from the village well, Hellspawn.”

Adam just laughs. Around them, their companions come back to life. At Crowley’s side, Aziraphale breathes in, and frowns.

“Crowley?” he asks, and the demon shifts just a bit closer, taking comfort in the angel’s warmth.

“It’s alright, angel,” he says. “It’s over. The world is safe.”

Later, when the children have been returned to their parents and the older humans have been set on their way back home, Crowley sits beside Aziraphale on a bench outside a church. There’s a careful distance between them still, just like it has been for the past six thousand years. And Crowley… he’s okay with that. He can’t ask for more. Not even after everything that just happened. Not when he knows what he is, and what he was. Not when he knows that the demon-that-is will always be Aziraphale’s second choice, when he can’t have the archangel-that-was. And that, only if he can even consider feeling something like love for something like Crowley. The knowledge doesn’t hurt so much, tonight. Because, against all odds, they’re alive. And they’re
together. Maybe not in the way he wants. And maybe even not for much longer, with Heaven and Hell both looking for someone to blame. But right now, tonight, they’re *here.*

He’s so tired. Exhaustion has settled into every line of his body. Emotional, physical, *spiritual* exhaustion. He’s been wrung up and squeezed out, used up until even feeling is too much work. If the angel wasn’t here, he’d probably already have fallen asleep right here on the park bench. He doesn’t even have enough power in him to miracle them back to London. It’s all he can do to summon a bus.

“It all worked out for the best, though,” Aziraphale says into the silence.

“Hmm?” Crowley watches him from behind dark glasses, unable to take his eyes off of him, afraid that, should he look away, the angel won’t be there when he looks again.

“Just imagine how awful it might have been, if we’d been at all competent.”

“Ah,” Crowley agrees. “Point taken.” If they, either of them, had been the creature they were meant to, the world would probably be nothing so much as burning sludge right now. He sighs, and looks down, expecting to see the angel’s fingers fidgeting with his ring. Instead, he’s holding a small scrap of paper.

“What’s that?” he asks, though he doesn’t really have enough energy to be truly curious. He barely has enough to lift the bottle of wine he’s holding to his lips.

Aziraphale passes it to him. “It fell out of Agnes Nutter’s book.”

*When all is said and all is done, ye must choose your faces wisely, for soon enough you will be playing with fire,* he reads. Of course. He may have severed his connection to Satan, but Hell will still be coming for him. They’ll want to make an example of him now. Show them all what happens, when a demon defies Lucifer’s will. He’s not naive enough to think his brother will step in, now that he knows who Crowley once was. No, he probably won’t even notice until it’s far too late. He’ll be too wrapped up in his own pain and rage, licking his wounds and ignoring all that goes on around him.

“For soon enough you will be playing with fire,” he quotes. “So this is the final one of Agnes’ prophecies?”
Aziraphale is watching him, waiting for his reaction. “As far as I know,” he says.

“Hmm.” He tucks the knowledge away to deal with as soon as he’s had some rest. He’s not sure he could even solve a simple math problem right now, let alone decipher a prophecy. “And Adam?” he asks, though he already knows the answer. “Human again?” He wants to see what Aziraphale says. How much the angel can sense. Can he tell that Adam kept his connection to Crowley? That, whatever else, it still makes him at least part inhuman?

Aziraphale nods. “As far as I can tell, yes.” He’s smiling, and accepts the wine bottle Crowley passes him, gently brushing their fingers together as he takes it from his hand.

As the angel drinks, Crowley can’t help but voice the question that’s been nagging at him since they first realized that the Great and Ineffable Plans were two different things.

“Angel? What if the Almighty planned it like this all along? From the very beginning?” Was I still meant to Fall? Did She always mean to bring me to this point? To bring us to this point?

Aziraphale considers it. “Could have,” he admits. “I wouldn’t put it past Her.”

The demon thinks about that, as Aziraphale returns the items of the Horsemen to the delivery man. What does it mean for him, for them, if this was how it was always meant to go? Is he still bound to some great Plan? Will he, one day, find himself outside of a cottage like that one drawn in the book he’s put in his safe? Sword drawn, wings flared, ready to face down his siblings in battle? Or is that just another red herring? Something She put in his path for… whatever reason She does any of this?

“Do you believe in life after death?” the postman asks. And Crowley wonders if that’s what he has. Does Falling count as death? And Death… Azreal had said he’d be seeing him soon.

The postman leaves, and the bus arrives to take them back to London.

“There it is,” the angel comments. “It says Oxford on the front.”

Crowley takes a sip of wine. The Oxford bus was closest, and he didn’t have the power to draw anything else to them. “Yeah,” he says. “But he’ll drive to London anyway. He just won’t know why.”
“I suppose I should get him to drop me off at the bookshop,” Aziraphale says. And oh. It feels so long ago now. Centuries. Not just this morning, that the bookshop burned down and he had believed Aziraphale was dead.

“It burned down, remember,” he says gently, and watches as realization and pain cross his angel’s face.

“You can stay at my place. If you like.” But we can run away together! Alpha Centauri! He waits to be rejected again, noting the surprise in Aziraphale’s eyes as he stares at him. Please? He wants to say. And he almost thinks the angel is going to accept. But then he looks away, walls going up between them as old instinct takes over.

“I don’t think my side would like that.”

Sides. There have always been sides between them. First, it was the distance between an Archangel and a Principality. A small distance, easily ignored. And then it was yawning gulf between Demon and Angel. Insurmountable. And yet, somehow, they managed to reach the point where they could sit here, together, after having worked side-by-side to prevent the end of the world.

Fuck ‘sides’, he thinks. He’s had enough of letting someone else’s definition of what they should be stand between them.

“You don’t have a side anymore,” he says gently, afraid of frightening the angel. “Neither of us do.” He cut himself free of Hell today. And while he’d give anything to let Aziraphale keep that certainty of Heaven, he’s come too far now to be bound by their rules and live. They can’t make him Fall, not if this really was Her Ineffable Plan. But if he goes back, they will destroy him.

Crowley waits until Aziraphale is looking at him, giving him his full attention. He wishes he could wipe the pain from his eyes, but he’ll settle for knowing that, whatever happens, he’s not going to let either side lay a finger on his angel. “We’re on our own side,” he says. “Like Agnes said, we’re going to have to choose our faces wisely.”

“Do you-” Aziraphale’s voice shakes, but his gaze is firm as he watches Crowley’s face. “Do you think they’ll come for us, then?”

He looks at him over his glasses, yellow eyes glowing in the darkness of the night. “Angel,” he
says, touching a hand to the hilt of his own sword, a comforting weight against his leg. “When they come, we’ll be ready.” He pauses, then adds “I won’t let them take you. Not again.”

He stands, shoving his glasses back into place as the bus arrives, and tries not to shake apart at how much of himself he just revealed. Aziraphale reaches out, touching his arm with gentle fingers.

“Then we’ll need to come up with a plan of our own,” he tells Crowley, and follows him onto the bus.

Chapter End Notes

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Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
2. Chapter 13 - healing the sparrow
3. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
4. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
5. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
6. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
7. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
8. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
9. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
10. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
11. Chapter 13 - Azreal and the first victim in the war
12. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
13. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
14. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Aziraphale agrees to come with Crowley back to his flat. The demon tries not to think too much about that, on the long bus ride into London. Tries not to read anything into the way the angel sits next to him, instead of in front. How he leans against Crowley’s shoulder, just a bit, just enough for the demon to feel the press of a warm body against his. He’s so tired. Exhausted from the events of the past week. He can’t help it, when the rumble of the engine and the warmth at his side lulls him into sleep. It feels like only moments later, when Aziraphale shakes him awake.

“Wake up, Crowley. We’re here.”

He grumbles, stretching, and leads them down onto the midnight-quiet streets of Mayfair. The angel stays with him, standing closer than he ever has before. Crowley watches him out of the corner of his eyes as he leads the way inside, but can see no discernible reason for the change. Perhaps, he thinks, it’s just that Aziraphale is as rattled by everything as the demon, and needs the reassurance that they’re both still here. Still alive.

He stops at the door to his flat, glancing at the angel. “It’s a bit of a mess,” he warns, realizing he never did clean up after that last fight. There’s probably still demon sludge on his floor.

Aziraphale shrugs, waiting patiently beside him. “Well my dear,” he says, “you’ve seen my shop. I can hardly fault you for a ‘bit of a mess’.”

“Alright then,” Crowley grins, and bows him into the apartment. “Welcome to my humble abode.” The angel rolls his eyes and gives an exasperated huff, but he doesn’t hesitate like Crowley expects. Doesn’t hedge, or suggest he find other accommodations. It leaves the demon feeling a bit uncertain, like an actor in a long-running play that’s suddenly been told at intermission that he gets to improv the second act.

He follows Aziraphale inside, noting with relief that at least he remembered to clean up the furniture that had been disturbed by Bebal and Abalam’s attack. The angel is looking around, frowning, at the large grey, empty space.
“It’s so…” he starts, trailing off as he stares at the statue at the end of the hall. The lectern from the church, that night in 1941.

“Modern?” Crowley suggests, hiding a smile. This was more what he’d expected, whenever he had allowed himself to imagine bringing the angel up here. He’d always known he’d hate it. “Stylish? *Posh*?”

“Empty,” Aziraphale says. He turns to Crowley, blue eyes wide and sad. Then he looks horrified at himself. “Oh, I’m so sorry, of course it’s lovely, my dear. I didn’t mean -”

The demon laughs at him. “Angel, it’s alright. I know what it looks like. It’s just a place. Somewhere to sleep. It’s not *home.*” Home had been the Bentley. The bookshop, too, though he’d never admit it out loud. Both were gone now, and all he was left with was this. This large, empty space, still and echoing of violence and pain.

“Oh, but Crowley, it-” the angel freezes, half turned towards Crowley, fear flashing in his eyes. The demon immediately reaches out with his senses, looking for danger, and finding nothing at all.

“Wait right there,” Aziraphale orders, tone leaving no question that he would be obeyed. He glances quickly at Crowley, and then walks away, deeper into the apartment. Crowley follows, drawing his sword and holding it at the ready. He can’t sense whatever this is, but he’s not about to let it catch them unarmed.

The angel pauses, frowning, at the door to his private workroom - the one that contains his bed and his special, secret garden. He lifts a hand to the handle, then stops and turns away. Instead, he leads the way directly to Crowley’s main office, where he stands still in the doorway.

“Stay back,” he orders. “I don’t-”

“Get behind me angel,” the demon says, reaching out to pull Aziraphale back from whatever it is, but the angel stands firm.

“I said *stay*,” he says, still standing in the door. “There’s something holy here.”
Crowley realizes what it is almost instantly. “Ah. That’s, uh.” He can see the sludge on the floor if he looks around the angel. The melted remains of a demon. “Watch your step.” Aziraphale had been about to stand in it.

“What?” the angel looks down, and steps back, almost colliding with Crowley. “What is that?”

“That’s Ligur,” he tells him. “Or at least what’s left of him.”

“What’s- oh.” Aziraphale stands still, staring. “Holy water.” The tense air about him evaporates as he relaxes. “Yes, I can feel it now. I had thought - well. I suppose I thought someone,” he points upward. “Had decided to pay us a visit.”

“Nah.” Crowley lowers his sword. He knows his siblings, and he knows Hell. They need time to regroup, and to argue about what is to be done. There’s paperwork, too. They’ll have to file the proper forms, and get the right signatures, even for this. They have at least twenty-four hours before anyone comes looking. “I reckon we’ve got a day or two at least before anything happens.” He starts to push past the angel. “Look, let me just-”

“No.” A strong grip catches his shoulder, and Aziraphale shoves him back, further down the hall. “You’re not going in there until I’ve cleaned it up. I’m not risking you around something as dangerous as Holy Water.”

“Angel,” Crowley protests, but Aziraphale shakes his head, steel in his gaze.

“You’ve taken far too many risks with yourself already today. Stay. There.”

“Careful, Aziraphale,” Crowley says, watching him enter the room and conjure a mop and bucket. “I might start to think you care.” He’s only half joking.

The angel gives him a hard look. “Of course I care, my dear. Now please, it would make me feel a great deal better if you were somewhere else until this is gone. I don’t want to risk accidentally splashing you with any of it.”

‘Of course I care’, Crowley thinks, nodding absently. That’s new. He’s too tired to argue it though. The void echoes with other words. I don’t even like you. We are not friends. It’s over. I forgive you. He doesn’t even have the energy to force them back behind his walls tonight. Instead, he carries
his sword back to his workroom and hangs it carefully in its place on the wall, afraid that if he
opens that pocket of reality he keeps it in, he won’t be able to restrain his wings from breaking free.
Keeping them hidden away is a simple spell, one he had learned long before She even made the
humans. It takes just a drop of power to start. Right now though, he doesn’t even have a drop, he’s
that tired.

The nap on the bus did him some good though. He has enough energy to stay standing for now,
though he glances at the bed with longing. Not yet, he tells himself, deliberately putting his back to
the soft black sheets. If he sleeps now, he doesn’t know how long it will be before he wakes up -
and he doesn’t have time for a decade-long nap. They have to make a plan. There’s only a day
before they need to be ready, and he has no idea what Agnes’ prophecy means. He can sleep later.
Once he knows Aziraphale is safe.

They’ll have to have some hard conversations, he knows. Sides, for one thing. What it means to be
on their own side. He can’t forget that Aziraphale never really agreed to this. He hasn’t yet said if
he even wants to be on a side with Crowley. He might not. He might want to go his own way, after
all of this. Just two supernatural entities, on their own in the wide, wide world. And then Crowley
will be alone again. He can feel the silence eating away at him tonight, raw and painful. He can
almost feel his siblings on the other side of the tattered bond, just a touch more real than the
echoes in the void. There’s a phantom ache too, in the center of his chest. The place where he cut
away his connection to Hell. His last connection to the older brother he loved.

He thinks about his family now. About everything he’s lost. He’s already lost Aziraphale three
times this week. The bandstand, where the angel had denied even their friendship. The street, after
Bebal and Abalam’s attack, where he refused to run away with him. And the bookshop. The fire,
where he had failed so spectacularly to keep the angel alive. He doesn’t know if has the strength to
live through a fourth time.

Staring at the sword on the wall, Crowley wonders how his siblings are doing. Seeing Gabriel,
seeing him and being seen but not recognized, it had opened up some of those old wounds inside
him. His brother’s face, just before he vanished… it had been a mask that was riddled with cracks.
Bits of that emotionless, cold facade had already been flaking away, revealing the horror and pain
beneath. It had been the face of someone who has had their entire world pulled out from under
them in an instant. Crowley recognized the expression. He had seen it once before.

All he can hear is their breathing. Harsh. Labored. Steel clashing against wood, throwing sparks
when his miraculously reinforced staff holds strong. He jumps back, away from her next swing,
eyes darting around them as he searches for an opening. Michael is faster and stronger, Her
Warrior, the greatest soldier of Heaven. But Raphael has something she does not. The patterns of
the universe. It’s his own special gift, the ability to see them without effort or distraction. After that
day in the Garden, when Lucifer taught him how to heal, he’s never truly been able to stop seeing them. It’s the first thing he notices, when he looks at something living. The lines that reveal their life, their strengths, their weaknesses, whether they are ill or healthy. Right now hers is flickering with exhaustion, grey around the edges, just like his.

She swings and he reaches out with a wing, batting her sword away. “Sloppy,” he tells her. “You can do better.”

“Bastard,” she growls, and lunges. Raphael darts in, raising his staff. They clash together, body to body, and he strains against her superior strength. His staff is the only thing keeping her blade away from his face. He ignores the flare of pain in his chest, gritting his teeth and holding his ground. Michael brings the full force of her strength down against him, and his staff is forced back, almost to his nose.

When his arms are about to give out he flares his wings, flapping them hard and letting the thrust carry him back just in time for her sword to crash to the ground. He darts to the side, evading another wild swing, tucking his wings tight against his back.

“Stay still, damn you,” his sister curses, tracking his movements with ice blue eyes.

Raphael laughs, circling, and doesn’t reply. Gold light reflects from his staff as he moves, twirling the weapon lazily as he waits for her to attack.

Michael jumps, powerful wings sending her into the air. He has just enough warning to duck, rolling away from her dive and back up on his feet. She lunges forward again, wincing as she puts her weight on her left leg.

Immediately he stops his attack, dropping his staff and moving forward to catch her as she stumbles, steady hands taking the sword from her fingers and casting it away in favor of holding on to her elbows and supporting her weight, guiding her over to a seat.

“Stupid,” he tells her, after he’s eased her down onto the bench. “You knew you were overdoing it. Why didn’t you say anything?”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Don’t pretend you aren’t doing exactly the same thing, dear brother.” Concern lines her face as she glances at his chest, the bandage there a slight bulge in the fabric of his robes.
“At least I’m not stupid enough to try and land on a leg that was broken in three places last night,” Raphael retorts, kneeling at her feet. “Here now, let me look.”

Michael twitches her leg out of his grip. “No. You’re still drained from yesterday. I’ll be fine if I just sit for a minute.”

Raphael sighs and reaches out again, gripping the lines of her pattern. She’s right, he is drained, but he has enough for this. He feeds his own energy into her, chasing the greyness from her lines. When he pulls back she has more color to her face, and her leg is that much closer to being fully healed. He nods, satisfied. Michael reaches out, and smacks him on the ear.

“What was that for?” the healer demands, rubbing the injured appendage. His sister glares at him.

“You need to recover your own strength. I could have waited for one of your healers to come to me.”

“You could have,” he admits. “But I was here. Some Healer I am, if I can’t even heal my own sister.”

Michael’s hand twitches like she wants to hit him again and he ducks, bringing a hand up to block the blow. She catches it, holding on when he tries to pull away. “You half-killed yourself last night, keeping not just me, but two Guardians alive. Your own healers said we almost lost you when you wouldn’t stop to let them heal you.”

“Ah. Then let me guess,” Raphael says, an ironic twist to his smile. “That’s why you decided to drag me out here to the training ground, and sent everyone else away. You just wanted to wear me out some more so you could yell at me and I wouldn’t fight back.” He had thought it was odd when she was so insistent on practicing, knowing he wouldn’t allow her to go alone after an incomplete healing.

She rolls her eyes again. “So dramatic. Just like your brother.” They both wince. He knows which brother she meant. “Sorry,” she says after a moment. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

He nods. He knows she didn’t. It hit a little too close to home anyway.
“I did want to talk to you, though,” Michael admits, and he grins.

“I see. So. You’re going to order me not to risk myself like that again, aren’t you?” If their roles were reversed, he’d be doing the same. Still, he couldn’t have done any different. They’d been guarding the relic room, the place where they stored all of Her holy artifacts, just waiting for another attack. There had been word that the strange group of renegade angels had some interest in one of the artifacts. It had only been a matter of waiting, and being there at the right time, to stop them. Or so they had thought.

They hadn’t been prepared for the ferocity of the attack. Four of their team had been killed in the first few minutes. Five more had died before Michael had fallen, her leg twisted at an odd angle and a sword in her gut. Raphael didn’t remember much of the fight after that. He’d been too busy defending her, pouring his energy into her pattern, to really take note of what he did. Two Guardians had fallen beside him, and he’d automatically latched on to their life patterns as well, keeping them all alive, healing the worst of the damage. He hadn’t even noticed when he’d been stabbed. It wasn’t until Gabriel and Uriel had taken over, pulling him away from their older sister and shoving their power into his pattern, keeping him alive, that he’d even realized he was wounded. In the end, it had drained two of his healers, just to heal him to this point. Michael had fared a little better, having had the bulk of his healing energy. The two Guardians were still in the halls of healing, being kept alive by junior healers until the rest were recovered enough to care for them. He makes a mental note to train more. They’re going to need all the help they can get.

“No,” she tells him. “Though that is a very good point. You need to take better care of yourself.”

He nods in agreement. He can’t tell her that it doesn’t matter. That he’ll be Fallen soon enough, whether he risks his life or not. Instead, he just shrugs. “I will when you do.”

Michael’s face twitches, and he knows she’s hiding a grin. “I actually wanted to talk to you about something else,” she says.

Raphael sighs and stands, moving to sit on the bench at her side. “Fine. Change the subject. I’ll just remind you later that you won’t do anyone any good if you re-break that leg before my healers have a chance to fix it.”

“Can you be serious for a moment?” she demands, frowning at him.

He nods, running a finger across his lips and miming a lock. His sister rolls her eyes, but seems
mollified. He waits expectantly, and notices with confusion that she seems nervous, shifting in her seat.

“What is it?” he asks, suddenly concerned. “Michael?”

“Sparkler…” she sighs. “Raphael…”

“Ok, now you’re worrying me.” Raphael leans forward, putting a hand on her arm. She never uses his name. Not unless it’s truly serious.

“I had hoped to wear you out first,” she admits quietly. “I don’t want you to go all flighty and run away when I say what I have to.”

He tries to think about what he could have done that brought this on. Nothing comes to mind. At least, nothing that’s new since the last time they talked like this. Well. He had enchanted the Metatron’s hair to turn a different, vibrant color whenever he claimed he spoke for God. But really, he had deserved it, lording it all over them that he could still speak to their Mother, while they, Her first children, could not. Turning his hair colors had been for everyone’s good. If he hadn’t, Gabriel and Sandalphon might have done something truly drastic.

“And… why would I be tempted to run away?” he asks, fear settling like a weight in his stomach. Does she know? He wonders. Did she see?

Michael gives him a hard look. “I know how touchy you get when you don’t want to hear something.”

“And what don’t I want to hear?” he asks, feeling the tension running through his body. What, he wonders, is so bad she needed to speak to him in private like this?

“It’s about Aziraphale.”

He goes still. “What?”

“You’ve been… spending quite a bit of time with him lately,” she says carefully.
“So? I spend time with a lot of people.” He glares at her. “And I was under the impression you approved of him.” He’d come to rely on her approval, unspoken as it was, against the very blatant disapproval of their younger siblings.

“I do,” she tells him quietly. “But people are starting to talk. Everyone knows how busy we are, and to see you spending so much time with one principality… they’re starting to wonder why. Why just this one principality, and not the rest? Why spend so much of your free time with him, and not with your own siblings?”

“They?” he asks, voice hard. “Or you?” She looks away, ice blue eyes dropping to his hand, where it still rests on her arm.

“Michael.” He can feel his wings starting to flare out, feathers puffing up with anger. “What are you really trying to say?”

“You must know how it looks,” she says, raising her head to meet his gaze. “An archangel taking interest in one of the lower choirs.”

“Lucifer never cared about that,” he retorts. “He could talk to anyone, and you never said anything like that to him.”

Michael shakes her head. “Lucifer was different. He didn’t have the shadow of war hanging over him. Unlike us.”

It doesn’t escape his notice that they’re both speaking of their older brother in the past tense. They haven’t talked about what happened. About their suspicions behind last night’s attack. But he knows she shares his fears for their sibling.

“Then isn’t that all the more reason to band together? To be out there, with the other angels, instead of walling ourselves off? If- if angels are Falling, don’t we need to be more involved with the lower choirs?” Raphael demands. He hates this. Hates how they all question his relationship with Aziraphale. They can’t seem to understand that he cares about the principality, not for any specific reason but just because of who he is. They don’t see that he’s not trying to replace them. That he doesn’t care for any of them any less. All they see is a threat, and treat Aziraphale accordingly.
“Is that why you spend all your free time in Eden, then?” she wants to know. “To be involved with the Garden and the gardeners?”

“I- you know why. You said you approved.” He sounds petulant, and he knows it. But damn it all, she had told him she liked Aziraphale. Hellfire, she’d even sent the principality to him when she knew he needed a friend. Someone outside of their little family, to comfort him in a way that they could not.

“I did,” Michael tells him. “I do. But I’m worried. You haven’t been yourself lately, and I think it might be because of him. Raphael, I know how you feel about him. And you have been gone more often than not these past few months.”

He resists the urge to stand and pace, resettling his wings against his back as he thinks. “That’s- he- I- ngk.” He’s been avoiding his siblings. He knows he has. But how can he face them, when he knows what’s coming? What they’re going to have to do? He tried. He really, truly tried to be good. To not ask questions. To not question Her. But he knows the damage is already done. The evidence is clear enough now. He saw it with his own eyes last night. He is Falling, and there’s nothing he can do to stop it.

“I know,” she repeats. “And if things were normal, I wouldn’t say anything. You know that. But we need you now. Here. With us.”

“And he doesn’t, so I’m just supposed to stay home like a good little healer and forget I have friends, is that it?” Raphael snaps, eyes blazing a deep, angry gold. What right did she have, to demand that? To make him leave the one, solitary comfort he has in all of this?

“I don’t mean that.” She’s watching him now, with those ice-blue eyes of hers. Like steel, he’d once thought. Hard and cold. She keeps her emotions locked away tightly, showing the world a stern, unmoving face. It’s only in the deepest depths of that icy blue that he can read her thoughts and feelings. It’s so different from the warm, sea-blue-green of Aziraphale, his face an open book for all to read. And, God, he loves them both. So, so much. How could he ever choose between them?

“Then be clear,” he tells her, the fire of his own anger flickering in his words. “What do you mean?”

“I mean we are at war. And you are going to have to commit to your side, brother. I cannot have you distracted when Lucifer attacks.”
Her words send chills down his spine. War. He’d known it was coming. Had known for months that it would come to this. And the attack last night... it had not been a simple raiding party. It hadn’t been just a small band of disgruntled angels. There’d been more to it than that. There always had been.

“Aziraphale is one of the most loyal of Her angels,” he points out, dragging his mind back to the topic at hand. He needs her to know that. To understand. Because when he Falls, they’re going to want someone to blame. And he needs to be sure it isn’t Aziraphale. “He won’t Fall.”

“I’m not worried about him. I just don’t want you thinking about him when you should be thinking about your duties.” She reaches for him through their bond, a cool blue-silver vein of her most private emotions. Everything she keeps locked up, the secret heart of her, there for him to see. How much she loves him. How she grieves for the loss of Lucifer. How afraid she is of losing anyone else.

“I don’t want you getting distracted in battle,” she adds. In her mind, he sees it - the worst of her fears. Gabriel, overconfident, taking on an enemy he cannot defeat. Uriel, overpowered by Lucifer himself, falling on their elder brother’s blade. Sandalphon, wild with rage, alone against a legion of Fallen angels. Raphael himself on the battle field, turning from an enemy as Aziraphale cries out in pain. That enemy running him through, destroying him. Watching him die before any of his healers can reach him. “We can’t afford any mistakes.”

He pulls back, pain rushing though him. He shall face his kin in battle, the Plan had said. His kin. His sister. His death is her worst fear, and he cannot stop it from happening.

Michael watches his face, and he can see the fear still in her eyes. “I want you to promise you’ll stay with us,” she says. “Don’t go down to the Garden any more. At least, not until the war is over.”

“Any one of us could die,” he snaps, anger bubbling up in him again. It’s always so quick at hand now, far more than it ever had been before. Another symptom, he thinks, of his imminent Fall. And now he does stand, pacing, wings rising around him in agitation. “He could die. And you would have me leave him because you’re afraid?”

“I would have you keep yourself alive,” Michael snaps back. “We need you here, with us. Our siblings need you here. They need to know that after Lucifer... that you won’t vanish like he did.”
“I can’t promise that,” he tells her, losing his grip on his own fear and pain. Her eyes widen as the full force of his emotions hit her, swamping their bond.

“Raphael,” she gasps, reaching for him instinctively. “What-?” Her mind catches on a memory. Red blood and golden ichor staining the bandages he changes with shaking hands, the fluids tainted by the sticky black ichor of a Fallen angel. She recoils from the memory, flinching back against the bench. He jerks away, walls going up around his mind. But it’s too late now. She’s seen.

“Stay right there,” Michael commands him, standing and grabbing him by the shoulders. Her own wings flare wide around him, blocking his retreat. A hand reaches up, tugging on his robes until his left side is bare, the cool air of Heaven raising goosebumps on his pale skin. The bandages around his chest need changing, the red of his corporation seeping through the soft white gauze. Carefully, she pulls the pads of fabric away, revealing the half-healed wound that remains. It had opened again during their exercise, weeping blood and golden ichor. But mixed in with the gold is something darker. A thicker, viscous fluid. Black, tar-like, and tainted with evil. The ichor of a Fallen angel.

“You always told me not to ask questions,” he says softly, gently removing her hands and replacing the bandages. A touch of power and they’re clean again, though they won’t stay that way for long. “You were right.”

She’s staring at him, eyes wide in horror, pain and fear rolling off of her in waves. He can see her certainty shattering, the knowledge shaking her view of the world down to its core.

“Raphael…”

“I’m sorry,” he says, swallowing a sob. “I don’t think there’s any stopping it now. I- I’ve tried.”

“No.” There’s steel in her words then, cold and hard and certain. “No. I will not allow it.”

Raphael shakes his head. “I don’t think we have a choice. This was always a part of Her plan.”

Michael gives him a sharp look. “What do you mean by that?”

“I…” The book is gone. Left in Her throne room, weeks ago. His sister won’t be able to find it, to
see that forbidden knowledge for herself. She’s safe from that, at least, if he tells her about it now. “Lucifer gave me a copy of the Great Plan.”

She’s pressing against his walls now, the silver-blue of her thoughts laced with confusion, anger, and pain. He lets her in, an image of that day in the Garden forming in his mind. He found me in Eden, he says through their bond. And he told me I was going to Fall. In the memory, Lucifer’s lips form the words. She’s going to sacrifice you, Raphael. She’s going to make you Fall.

No. Her horror floods through him, and he throws up a wall between them and their siblings. He doesn’t know how long he has, but he doesn’t want his last days with them tainted by this.

Lucifer must have been lying, she says. This can’t be Her plan.

I’m sorry, he tells her, filling their bond with his own pain and regret. He shows her the pages of the book. Her whole plan, laid out in his mind. Not enough for Michael to see, to know, what has been forbidden for them to know. But enough that she can sense Her power within the words. He shows her his page. His questions shall lead him to descend unto the fires of the Fallen.

She can’t do this to you. In the bond like this, he can feel the divine wrath growing in her, directed at their Mother. She can’t make you Fall just for that. Her anger is rising, like magma about to break forth from a volcano.

MICHAEL! He shouts, and she stops, astonished. He has never yelled at her in that tone before, with fear running cold and glacier-white through his thoughts.

Stop, he says. It’s done. I am going to Fall. Saying it out loud like that solidifies it. Makes it real, in a way it hadn’t been before. It tears at something inside of him, cracks running through the core of his being. Don’t- don’t fight it. Don’t risk yourself. His fear flows around her rage, cooling it, bringing her back to herself.

You can’t, she says, gripping his arms hard enough to bruise. You can’t Fall.

I don’t want to, he replies simply. I never wanted to. He lets her feel his pain, his fear, and his regret. All of his questions. The weight of all the answers he never got. The agony of betrayal. The cold, sick knowledge of everything he’s going to lose. Aziraphale’s eyes flash in his mind, and he feels the sharp sting of loss.
Lucifer lies, his sister tells him. He could be lying about this. We can find a way to stop it. She’s grasping at straws, he knows. Clinging to the hope that this isn’t what their God has ordained. He lets her hope, though he knows better. Yes, Lucifer lies. But he did not lie about this.

You’ll stop asking questions, she orders.

I will, he agrees. He already has, for the most part. He won’t ask questions where others could hear, not when he knows the consequences for them. But just because he doesn’t ask them out loud, it doesn’t stop him from having them.

No more mischief, she adds. No turning people’s hair colors. No pranks. Nothing even slightly questionable.

Raphael nods. Okay. He doesn’t think that it’s that’s causing him to Fall, but if it eases her fears, he’ll do it.

You’ll do your duties to the very best of your ability. No slacking. No distractions.

None, he agrees.

And Aziraphale- she starts, and a violent flare of emotion cuts her off. His fear and loss rising to the forefront of their bond.

He is something to hold on to, Michael tells him. I will not ask you to stop seeing him, so long as it does not distract you from your duties.

The healer sighs in relief. He had been afraid she would demand it, and he would have had no choice but to obey.

I will, she continues, ask that you spend more time at home. I was not wrong when I said you are barely ever here. And we miss you. He can feel her fear, her loss. How she wants to keep him by her side, to have every moment with him she can. But she has duties. He has duties. And their siblings have duties. They cannot be together often now, except through their bond.
Don’t tell the others, Raphael begs. I don’t- I don’t want them to worry. They’re in enough danger now, they shouldn’t be distracted by this.

He feels her agreement in the bond. They won’t hear of it from me, his sister promises.

Thank you. He sighs, sagging down to rest his head against her shoulder. She pulls him close, folding her wings around him like she used to do when he was very small.

“You will not Fall,” she tells him, resting her head against his. “I will not allow it.”

He wants to let himself believe it, there wrapped within her wings. This has always been where he is safest, where his strong older sister will protect him from all harm. But in his heart, he knows the truth. They may try to stop this. They may even hold it off for a time. But in the end, he will Fall. It is Her Great Plan.

“I love you,” he says, for lack of anything better to say. “I love all of you. Even Sandalphon.”

Michael breathes a laugh next to his ear. “I know, Sparkler,” she tells him. “And we love you.”

It has been a very, very long time, since he felt worthy of that love. Since he felt worthy of anyone’s love. He is a demon. A thing of Hell. And creatures of Hell cannot be loved. It is in their very nature to be unlovable. But… he cut himself free today. He doesn’t belong to Hell anymore. And Aziraphale is here, in his flat. Dare he allow himself to hope…?

No. He ruthlessly shoves that slippery flame of hope away. Aziraphale might have chosen to stand with him, in the end, but that means nothing for his feelings towards Crowley himself. I don’t even like you. He remembers that night. The determination in Aziraphale’s eyes when he said it. There’s no ‘our side’. No. There might be friendship there. Might be. But he isn’t an archangel. He isn’t Raphael. Not anymore. He cannot be something that Aziraphale can love.

He hears the angel’s steps in the hall, and then a sink turns on in the bathroom, followed by the unmistakable sound of water being poured into a plastic bucket. From the sound of it, the angel has
decided to clean his office the hard way. He’s likely as drained as Crowley now, after being
discorporated so suddenly - and then just as suddenly returned to his body. Crowley could kiss
Adam for that. He makes a mental note to make sure he gets the kid something epic for his
birthday, even if it’ll be a week or so late.

Yawning, he drifts over to a table full of flowers. His second-best squirt bottle is sitting right where
he left it, still full of the specially filtered water he uses on the more finicky plants. He scowls at a
pot of miniature roses, and starts checking them over for spots. It would be just his luck that the
sheer amount of violence in the flat over the past two days had caused them to wilt. He considers
the fate of his best squirt bottle, exploded in his hands when Hastur called his bluff. He’ll have to
get another one now, assuming they survive whatever Heaven and Hell decide to do to them.

“Don’t even think about getting lazy,” he cautions the roses. “I don’t keep you here just so you can
repay me by up and dying every time there’s a little spot of trouble. One of these days, I will use
that wood chipper on one of you.” He levels a glare at a small box of blue roses. These, in
particular, took quite a bit of work. Human scientists still haven’t managed it, but as a demon
Crowley has means at his disposal that they do not. He spent a good part of the sixteenth century
breeding these beauties, and he is justifiably proud of them. One of these days, he plans to plant a
few seeds out there in the wild, just to see what the humans will do when they find them. Until
then, though, there are only two bushes in all of existence. He was drunk when he named them, late
one night after an evening spent at Aziraphale’s side. Angel’s Grace, he called them, thinking of
bright sea-blue eyes and gentle smiles. It has never escaped his notice that, in the language of
flowers, blue roses mean unattainable desire.

He moves on from the roses, giving a gentle misting of water to his orchids before taking a look at
the patch of forget-me-nots. More of them are sprouting in the box, so many that he’ll soon have to
re-pot them all. Another box by the window, perhaps. Or maybe even out in the rest of the flat,
now that he doesn’t have to worry about Hastur or Ligur dropping by unannounced. Crowley
busies himself checking over the tiny plants, muttering threats he does not mean while careful
hands lift each petal to check for spots. Tending to them calms him, easing the fear and anguish of
the day. He buries his fingers in the soil, and lets the calm of the earth and he steadiness of green
and growing things seep into his bones.

“Crowley?” Aziraphale’s voice breaks into his concentration, drawing him back to reality.

“In here, angel,” he calls, forgetting, for a moment, that Aziraphale has never seen this secret part
of him.

He remembers a moment later, as he hears the angel’s footsteps growing nearer. He’s too tired to
work up a full panic. Instead, he settles for gripping his squirt bottle tightly and hoping the angel
won’t notice the particular significance of some of his flowers.
“Oh!”

Crowley turns at the soft sound, to see Aziraphale standing in his doorway, staring about in wonder. “Oh my,” he says, wide eyes falling on a pot of anemone and aster, then moving across a bed of tulips to the box of gardenia Crowley keeps forgetting to re-pot.

Funny, Crowley thinks, watching Aziraphale examine his plants. How it comes back to this. To him, and me, and a garden.

Aziraphale looks up at Crowley and smiles. “Oh, Crowley, your garden is quite spectacular.”

“It is, isn’t it?” He can’t help the pride in his voice at the praise. “Though,” he adds, with a meaningful look at a pair of orchids, “they had better not get any ideas from all this praise you’re giving them, angel.” A sickly spider plant, just moved back here from the front room days ago, shakes in its pot. “That means you too,” he adds, glaring at the heliotrope in the corner, which seems to shrink in on itself. “You know what you did.”

The angel gives him a look, equal parts exasperation and fondness. He’s seen that look so many times over the millennia, and he hoards it like all the others. This expression, the set of Aziraphale’s jaw, the angle of his eyebrow, the twitch of his lips. This is the expression he loves best. As Raphael, he’d seen it often on their walks through the Garden. Sometimes he had made a game of it - what would he have to do, to get Aziraphale to look at him like that? Pranks on his siblings usually did the trick. Rude comments about people he didn’t like. Questions that didn’t edge too close to questioning Her. After he Fell, it had taken thousands of years before he’d seen that look again. And even now, it’s so rare he gets to truly experience it. Usually, the angel hides it away, buries it under disapproval or discomfort or any number of other things. This time though, it’s Crowley who first looks away.

“My dear,” Aziraphale says, and his voice holds the same tone as his expression. “You really should be nice to them.”

Crowley scoffs, turning to spray a fine mist of water over his plants. If he looks too long at the angel like this, he’ll give himself away - even with the glasses to cover his eyes. The lines between them have shifted somehow, and he doesn’t quite know where to step. This past week has been… eventful, to say the least, and right now he just wants to keep what little he’s been able to cling to.

“Is that… Forget-Me-Not?” Aziraphale asks, and Crowley jumps. Somehow the angel managed to
get around the tables and come up behind him without the demon even noticing.

“Ngk.” He glares at the angel, not that he can tell, since his eyes are hidden behind dark glass. “Myosotis,” he says, once he recovers. “’S poisonous. Causes… liver cancer.”

“Hmm.” Aziraphale leans over his shoulder to get a better look at the planter, seemingly not at all effected by how close they’re standing. “I do believe humans say almost everything causes cancer. I know for a fact these are perfectly safe. Though the Chinese variety can be mildly toxic to grazing animals.”

“Oh?” Crowley lifts an eyebrow at him, unnerved by just how close his face is to his. If he looks down just a bit, he can see how close their lips are to touching. It’s too much. He takes a careful step away. “Are you an expert on poison, then? Aziraphale, you’ve been holding out on me!” he teases, hiding his discomfort under a cheeky grin.

Aziraphale, as predicted, humphs and pouts, giving him that exasperated look once again. “Of course not, dear. I happen to know about these flowers because I created them.”

Crowley reminds himself to be surprised. “You did? I thought you were a principality, not one of the gardeners,” he says, looking between the angel and the flowers, as if shocked to find a link between them. The scar on his palm pulses, and he double-checks his walls, just to be certain no hints of his old self are showing through.

“I did,” Aziraphale confirms, smiling softly at the memory. “It was… just after the humans have been created. The poor young woman had fallen and skinned her knee, so I brought Raphael to her. When she was well again, he offered to teach me. I had picked another flower, but, well, these things tend to go wrong your first time.”

Crowley shrugs, trying to look disinterested, and turns his squirt bottle on a pot of bright yellow yarrow. “I suppose. Guess if it’s something you made, it can’t be that bad for people.”

The angel hums in pleasure, bending closer, almost burying his nose in the tiny purple blossoms. “You know,” he says, “the humans have a story about the naming of these flowers. Why they’re called forget-me-not.”

“Mm.” Crowley grunts in response. He knows the story. He’s always rather hated it, if he’s being honest.
“I used to think it was such a beautiful tale,” he continues, not noticing his companion’s disinterest. “A young maiden, they, say, was walking along the banks of a river with her lover, a brave and chivalrous knight. She saw these flowers on the far bank, and told her love how beautiful she thought they were. Of course, he, being a gallant knight, immediately jumped into the water to pick some for her. Unfortunately, the current was far stronger than he expected, and with his heavy armor on he could not swim. As he was swept away, he tossed a bouquet of flowers to the maiden, imploring her never to forget him. She wore those flowers in her hair, and remembered him until the day she died - never taking another lover for as long as she lived."

He sighs, turning back to Crowley. “I used to think the story was wonderful and tragic. How faithful the maiden must have been, how much she must have loved him, to remain true to her knight even after he was no longer at her side.”

The demon laughs, sharp and bitter. “Sure. Because I’m certain that’s what her lover would have wanted, if he really did love her. For her to remain alone and miserable the rest of her life.” He shakes his head, an ironic smile twisting his lips.

“You’re right,” Aziraphale says, to his surprise. When Crowley looks at him, eyes wide, the angel nods gravely. “It was foolish of her, to mourn him for so long.” He looks down at his hands then, turning the gold ring around and around on his little finger. “It took me far too long to realize, but I know now. Just because you’ve loved one person and lost them, it doesn’t mean you can’t move on and love someone else. Or that, in loving another, you’re forgetting or betraying the one who came first.”

Silence falls between them, heave and full of exhaustion and longing. The void, strangely, remains quiet, free of the echoes that normally plague him in moments like this. The lack of it is somehow so much worse.

“Yeah, well,” Crowley says after a minute, “that’s all well and good. But you’ve got stay alive long enough to find that other person.” He’s running away from the conversation, he knows, but it feels like the ground is shifting under his feet far too fast. He can’t catch his balance. Doesn’t quite know where they’re going to land, when it stops. His eyes fall on the sword, hanging on its rack on the wall where he’d just left it. Is that a speck of dirt, there by the hilt? He’d better clean it, before it causes any damage to the blade. “We’d better come up with a plan, and quick, if we want to live to see next week.”

He has to be imagining the disappointment on Aziraphale’s face when the angel nods.

“You’re right, of course. We really should work out this prophecy.” He takes the bit of paper from
his pocket and turns it over, examining it for any clues they haven’t already found.

“We could always try to fight our way out,” Crowley offers, pulling down the blade and producing a cleaning cloth from a drawer. “I don’t really think it’ll work, but it’s worth a shot.” It wasn’t dirt or dust he’d seen, but he sets to work polishing the obsidian anyway, just for something to do with his hands.

Aziraphale watches him, eyes on the sword. “Crowley,” he asks carefully, “I didn’t have time to ask earlier. Where did that sword come from?”

“Hmm?” The demon looks from the angel, to the sword in his hands, and shrugs. “It’s mine. I brought it out just in case, you know, if Lucifer decided to attack.”

“Yours?” he sounds surprised. Crowley shrugs again, secretly glad to be back on safer territory. He might get yelled at for fighting, for using the sword, but it’s better than that awful silence hanging between them, with Aziraphale looking at him so expectantly.

“Mine,” he agrees. “Hell-blade. It’s useful against all sorts of things, if you know how to use it.” When the angel just looks at him, he puts down the cleaning cloth and holds the blade out for him to examine. “It’s not a flaming sword or anything, but it’s served its purpose.”

“And… what purpose is that?” Aziraphale asks him, gingerly taking it from his hands. He frowns at the scratched obsidian, running delicate fingers over scores in the volcanic glass.

Crowley shrugs and tries not to look at the expression on the angel’s face. “What does anyone use a sword for, angel?”

“Many things, I expect,” Aziraphale says, giving him a shaky grin. “I once saw King Arthur use Excalibur to chop down a tree, you know.”

Crowley’s jaw drops in astonishment. “No.”

“Yes. It was during that ridiculous quest for the Holy Grail. We were caught on the road in a snowstorm, and needed the wood to keep warm.”
“You’re joking.” He can’t quite believe Arthur Pendragon would use his own bloody magic sword like an ax.

“Not at all. The man was quite the pragmatist. The sword was magic, he said, but that didn’t mean it shouldn’t be used when it was needed.”

Crowley laughs. “I can just imagine Lancelot’s face. King Arthur, using the Sword of the True King to chop firewood.”

“He was quite put out,” Aziraphale agrees, smiling. Then his eyes focus on Crowley, and the expression falls from his face. “But we were talking about your sword, my dear.”

“Right.” He hunches his shoulders, and wishes he had developed a nervous habit like the angel. It might make things so much easier, if his hands weren’t hanging useless at his sides like slabs of meat.

The angel turns the blade over in his hands, and gives it a few practice swings. His stance is perfect, his grip sure, and Crowley remembers how he trained to be a warrior. How, if he had wanted, he could have joined the armies of Heaven at any time and had a legion of angels placed under his command. It says something about him, he thinks, that he didn’t. That he preferred to work alone, on Earth, guiding and caring instead of fighting and killing. Crowley wonders what it says about him, that he's spent so much of his own time on this planet with a weapon in his hand.

“Where did you get it?” Aziraphale asks, testing the balance of it now. “I can’t imagine Hell keeps these things just lying around.”

“Made it.” Crowley feels a swell of pride when he looks at him in astonishment.

“You- you made it?” the angel asks. “How?”

Crowley shrugs. “There’s a volcano down there. A big one. Doesn’t take much power to heat the lava enough to forge the obsidian in. I used to be a starsmith, remember? It’s not much different, forging a weapon instead of a star.”

“But…” Aziraphale traces a finger along the sigils on the blade. “When did you… no. Why did you do such a thing?”
He considers his reply. The truth, that he couldn’t bear to let Aziraphale face Asmodeus in battle, would reveal far, far too much of himself. The rest of it, that he’s spent the past six thousand years making sure Aziraphale never has to fight, never faces that kind of danger... that would be getting far too near the heart of it all for his liking. And the angel would want to know why. Why would a demon do that for an angel he barely knew? Even when he had volunteered to heal Tobit, they could hardly have called themselves friends. How could he explain that he’d wanted to protect him, when his reasons have always been rooted in that very first meeting, when he’d given a young principality the answer he’d been searching so desperately for - an excuse to care about the beings in his charge.

The angel is still watching him expectantly, and Crowley knows he’s let the silence drag on too long. Stupid demon. Should have come up with an answer quicker. Now he knows something’s up.

“It... ah. It seemed like a thing to do,” he says.

“There’s powerful protection magic on this sword,” Aziraphale says carefully. “It must have taken an awful lot of power to create. You... you weren’t in any kind of trouble, were you, Crowley?”

An incredulous laugh is pulled from him before he can stop it, raw and rough, full of shards of glass. “Trouble? Angel, I am trouble. Demon, remember?”

That earns him a frustrated glare. “I meant, were you in danger?” He meets Crowley’s eyes, and does not back down.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” he tells him honestly. “Mostly just some minor demons looking to cause trouble.”

Aziraphale’s expression shifts, going unreadable, and he turns his eyes to the sword and the many, many scratches and nicks in the obsidian. “This blade is very old,” he says softly. “And very well used. How many times...” He raises his head once more and meets the demon’s stare. “How many times have you had to fight for your life, and not told me?”

Under that steady gaze, he cannot think of a lie that will be believed. He looks away, a glance falling on those small purple flowers they created together in Eden so long ago. “Wasn’t my life I was fighting for,” he mutters.
“But then…” he watches from the corners of his eyes as confusion slowly turns to understanding on the angel’s face. “Oh! But- no, that can’t be right. I…”

“Yeah.” Crowley nods, carefully keeping his gaze on the flowers.

“You’ve been protecting me?” Aziraphale asks. “For all this time?”

He shrugs. “Course I did. It wasn’t like you had a weapon.”

“But… why? I don’t understand.” The angel’s eyes flicker between Crowley and the sword.

The demon takes the blade from his hands, carefully placing it back on the rack. “Heaven wouldn’t. So I did.” He can’t keep his emotions from bleeding into his voice. Anger. Pain. Love.

Aziraphale makes a noise of frustration behind him. “But… why?”

Crowley turns, and can only meet his gaze for a moment before his eyes drop once again to the flowers at his back. “We’re, mm. We’re… friends,” he says, though that isn’t all of it. “I wasn’t going to let Hell attack you if I had anything to say about it.”

Something like realization settles into the angel’s face. Like finding the last piece of a puzzle and all the rest falling into place.

“But my dear,” Aziraphale reaches out and rests his hand on Crowley’s upper arm. “If you were protecting me, all these years, then who protected you?”

He shakes his head, tightly controlling his expression so it gives nothing away. “Shouldn’t we be making a plan right now, angel?” he demands. “I thought that was the whole reason you were here. To plan for when Heaven comes for you.”

The angel frowns at him. “That’s not the only reason I’m here, and you know it,” he snaps. “Now answer the question.”
He tries for a grin, but only manages a sort of grimace. “I’m not the one that needed protection, angel.”

Aziraphale grips his arm tighter. His eyes fill, and the sharpness from a moment before fades away. “I’m not so sure,” he says gently, and his other hand reaches out, fingers barely brushing Crowley’s jaw. And Crowley wants, so desperately, to lean into that touch. To let him caress his cheek, run his fingers through his hair. But even now, that sort of gesture isn’t for him. And he knows that however much he wants, it never will be. He turns his face away.

“Oh my dear.” The words are soft, and so, so full of emotion. “I have been cruel to you, haven’t I?”

In his hands, Crowley feels like a demon made of glass, a hair’s breadth away from shattering. Something lovingly crafted by a master craftsman, but it came out flawed. A glass angel thrown on the ground, smashed for its imperfections, before being picked up and carefully put back together again, missing a few pieces and held together with string. The lightest gust of wind could send him tumbling into shards once again. He closes his eyes and waits for the hammer to fall.

“I believe,” the angel says gently, carefully, like he can sense how close Crowley is to coming apart. “That I owe you far more than a few apologies.”


“No.” The firmness in Aziraphale’s voice shocks him into opening his eyes. “You never deserved that. Any of it. I- I acted out of fear. Cowardice. I denied you, again and again, when you never-you have never given me cause to doubt your friendship. I said… terrible things to you. Things I didn’t mean. But I said them. And I was wrong.”

Crowley blinks, stunned. “You… what?”

The angel sighs and steps away, hands coming together in front of him to fidget with his ring. The place where his hand had been feels cold, like it had suddenly been coated in ice. “I- I know what they do, to angels they think are in danger of - of Falling. And I was scared. I didn’t want…” he stops. Swallows. “They killed Raphael for Falling. I was scared that if they knew how I - if they knew of our friendship, they would kill you too.”

“You loved him,” Crowley says, that ancient ache filling the words. You loved him, but you’ll
Aziraphale nods, smiling as he remembers the archangel. “I did. He was… he was kind. Funny. He never treated me like I was lesser just because I wasn’t an archangel. And he loved everyone, so fiercely sometimes it was frightening. He was- he was very much like you, in some ways.”

“Angel…” he doesn’t know what to say to that. Anything he could say might give him away, and he can’t have that. Not now. It wouldn’t be fair. He’s not the archangel Aziraphale loves. He’s a demon, with layers of anger and bitterness and pain on his soul. And the thing is, he knows Aziraphale would try to love him anyway, if he knew. But he’d always be looking at him, trying to find the archangel under the demon. And Crowley isn’t… he isn’t good, at his core. He isn’t innocent, or joyful, or any of those things he used to be. He’s just Crowley. And that will never be enough. Not compared to what he was. The void is awake again in force, echoing with his pain. I don’t even like you. Demon. Unforgivable. Aziraphale will never see you as anything other than what you are.

“I loved him,” Aziraphale says. “But I do believe I told you earlier, just because I was in love once, and lost that love, it does not mean that I cannot love again.”

The demon shakes his head, taking a step back, almost into the hall. He can’t mean that like it sounds, he tells himself. He can’t. Too fast, another part of him screams. This is going too fast.

There’s a moment then, before Aziraphale speaks, where anything could happen. Where he could change the subject, back away like he always does. Crowley wouldn’t blame him in the least, if he did. But then something in his expression changes, determination replacing his habitual indecision. “Crowley.” He reaches out again, taking his hands, and suddenly the demon has never been so afraid. “You must know that I-”

“Stop,” Crowley pleads, the sound catching in his throat like a sob. “Please.”

Aziraphale looks at him in astonishment. “My dear, I’m trying to tell you that I love-”

He can’t let him finish that sentence. “You shouldn’t say things you don’t mean, angel,” he says, shoving down the hope that tries to rise in his chest. But, slippery thing that it is, it keeps slithering out of his grip. He can’t love me. Not as I am.
The angel glares at him. “I’m not lying, Crowley. You know that.”

He looks away. “You can’t be telling the truth.” There’s no way Aziraphale could even be contemplating putting the words ‘Crowley’ and ‘love’ in the same sentence, unless there’s a ‘don’t’ before them. He’s not allowed to hope for anything different.

“Why?” Aziraphale demands, and Crowley closes his eyes.

_I’m not your archangel. I’m a demon. I can’t ever be something that good and pure ever again._

“I might have been something you could love, once,” he says. “But I know what I am, angel. I know what you see when you look at me.”

“And what is that?” Aziraphale asks, moving closer, and despite himself Crowley can’t help but lean in to his warmth. “What do I see, when I look at you?”

“A demon,” Crowley says bitterly. “Unforgivable. Damned.” He swallows, and the words on his tongue taste of sulfur and ash. “Evil.” _You are that which can never be forgiven._

Aziraphale shakes his head, a small, sad smile appearing on his face. “I acted my part too well, I’m afraid my dear. I was trying to protect us both from what Heaven would do if they found out the truth, but in doing so I have hurt you badly.” He takes Crowley’s other hand as the demon raises his head to look at him, forcing down the hope that tries to rise through the pain.

“I don’t know if you can forgive me, for the things I said that made you feel less than what you are,” the angel says, squeezing his hands. His voice is sure, no longer stumbling over his words as he tries to find the right thing to say. “I don’t know that I would be able to, myself. But you should know that Evil is the last think I see, when I look at you.”

Crowley turns his face away, unable to bear the honesty in Aziraphale’s gaze. But the angel lets go, reaching out instead to hold his face gently in both hands. “My dear, you are the most brilliant, charming, and, yes, kind being I know. I have never met anyone with more strength. You have endured unimaginable pain, but you never let it turn you into something cold and bitter, even though I’m sure there are times when it would have been easier to do so. Yes, you can be harsh, but I’ve seen you be gentle too, when you think no one is watching. You’ve been the one constant in my life since the day we met in Eden, and I know I could never have made it this far without you.”
You have saved my life more times than I can count - and I’m certain there are more that I’m not aware of. You are so much more than anyone has ever you given you credit for, and I-"

“Don’t.” The word is pulled from his throat, a harsh whisper. Behind his glasses, his eyes are wild, terrified. He grips Aziraphale’s hands, pulling them away from his face, but then he cannot make himself let go. Don’t give me this. Don’t tell me that you love me. It will destroy me when you take it away.

“Don’t what? Don’t tell you everything I should have said from the very beginning? Don’t let you know that you are strong, and beautiful, and the most amazing being in the whole world? Don’t tell you that I-”

Crowley wrenches himself away, stumbling down the hall, away from the angel’s warmth. “Don’t sssay it!” he hisses. He can’t hear those words. He can’t.

“My dear-”

“No,” he shouts. It’s suddenly far, far too much. After everything they’ve just been through, he can’t stand here and listen to this. Not when he knows, he knows that he’ll always be second best, Aziraphale’s second choice, his consolation prize. The broken thing that will never measure up to the ghost of Raphael in Aziraphale’s eyes. “Just- just don’t, okay?”

The angel’s eyes fill again, and threaten to spill over, but still he reaches out. “Crowley, please. I need you to know how very much you mean to me. And I think, despite your protests, you need to hear it too.”

Crowley’s face contorts into a snarl. “How can you stand there and just say things like that?” he demands. “How can-” he chokes down a sob, and he’s so, so glad for the glasses he’s still wearing in the darkened flat. “How can you say it like you mean it?” He can’t mean it. Not after everything he said.

Aziraphale’s face crumples before he forces a smile. “Because, my dear, I do.”

“You don’t,” Crowley growls. “Not really.”

“Yes, really.” Aziraphale snaps, taking three determined steps towards the demon, until Crowley
he says softly, then. “Have I made it so hard for you to believe I might care about you?”

The demon turns away, supporting his suddenly weak legs with a hand against the wall. He can’t look at that expression. It gives him too much hope. Deliberately, he keeps himself from reaching out, from sensing the emotions in the room. “I’m not—” he breathes in deeply, letting the feeling of air in his lungs steady his frantic heart. “I can’t be what you need me to be.”

He can feel the angel come up behind him, but he’s still not ready for the gentle hand that touches his shoulder.

“And what do I need, my dear?” Aziraphale asks him. “What could I possibly need, that you have not given me?”

Crowley can’t bring himself to pull away from the angel’s warm grasp, leaning into the touch like it’s all that’s keeping him standing. But he can’t turn to look at him either. He holds himself rigid, and tries not to shake apart.

“Did you hear me, Crowley?” That kind, wonderful voice sounds beside his ear, and he’s drowning. The silence is eating him alive. He wants to believe this. Go- Sa- Somebody, he wants to believe this is real.

“I’m not—” he starts, but finds he can’t continue past the lump in his throat. There’s so many things he’s not. Not holy. Not an angel. Not Good, not kind, not patient. Not an archangel. Not Raphael.

Aziraphale sighs, so close he can feel the air on his face. “But you are, you know. You are everything I have ever needed.”

That gives him enough impetus to pull away, stumbling into the pedestal that holds that statue he pulled from the rubble of a church in 1941. It rocks dangerously, and he clutches at it, not sure if he’s steadying it, or using it to steady himself.

“Will you stop saying that?” he demands. No. Don’t stop. Make me believe it. “Lying is beneath you, Aziraphale.”

The angel makes a sharp, pained noise, and Crowley almost turns to look at him. “It’s not- it’s not
lying Crowley. I promise you, it’s not.” He takes a step forward and Crowley’s knuckles go white as he grips the statue, holding on to its wings like a lifeline.

All he can hear is his own ragged breathing. The statue is rough and cold beneath his hands, and he stares at the pale grey stone and the ashen tan of his flesh.

Soft, pale fingers cover his own, and he looks up to see Aziraphale across the pedestal, entirely too close. Please, he thinks. Please I want to believe you.

“You don’t need to believe me now,” the angel says. “But I’m not afraid anymore. And I’m so, so sorry that it took me so long to get here. But I need you to know that you are worthy, and wonderful, and very much loved. And I will say it as many times as it takes until you believe me. I will continue to say it until the day the universe dies, and even then a thousand times more for each time I failed you, my dear.”

The silence rages at him, the raw and aching parts of him crying out at his words. Behind his glasses, Crowley closes his eyes.

“You didn’t-” his not-so-decorative heart squeezes tight within his chest, stopping the words before he can speak.

“Fail you?” Aziraphale asks, bringing up his other hand to cradle Crowley’s palm in both of his. “I do believe I did. Inexcusably and repeated so. Each and every time I failed to protect you.”

“Didn’t need protecting,” Crowley protests, torn between the need to pull away, to run, to fly away, and his deep, deep desire to stay, to feel those warm hands around his, to let the angel’s voice in to soothe the screaming pain inside. He glances at the sword on the wall, framed in the doorway to his workroom, lit by its own ghostly glow.

“No,” the angel muses, following his gaze. “No, I think, in that way. But there are more dangers to this world than the physical. Things I could have saved you from, had I been less of a coward.”

“You’re not-” the protest springs to his lips immediately, but Aziraphale lifts a finger, silencing him before he can finish his thought.
“I am, though,” he says. “I let my fear hold me back. I hid behind a mask of righteousness and holiness. Turned away, when I should have been there for you. And I don’t- I don’t know how to fix what I’ve done, if… if I can ever make it up to you. But I want to try, if you’ll let me.”

He wants to believe this. Wants it so badly it hurts. Aziraphale will never see you for anything more than exactly what you are. Unforgivable. He remembers the bandstand. His heart crumbling to dust in his chest. We are not friends. I don’t even like you.

“You don’t even like me.” He says it so quietly the angel almost can’t hear it. And even if you did, I’d always be second-best. I’m not your archangel.

Aziraphale takes a breath that shakes, hands clutching at Crowley like he’s the only real thing in the world. “My dear, when I said that, I lied. And I- I could try to explain it to you, tell you why I said what I did, but that doesn’t change the fact that I did it. Nor does it change the fact that it was a lie. I like you. I love you. More than you know.” He sighs when Crowley still won’t look at him, and relaxes his grip on the demon’s hand, letting it fall away to hang limply at his side. “And I will regret what I said that day for the rest of my life. It was inexcusable. And cruel. And so much less than you deserve.”

Crowley stands there, shaking, trying not to shake apart with all of the emotions running through him. He means it. But if he had another choice, if he still had Raphael, would he mean it then? “I can’t do this, angel,” he says, hating the way the pain seeps into his voice, illuminating the cracks in his soul. “I… I can’t.”

“Can’t what?” Aziraphale asks, still standing so close, a steady, solid presence. “My dear,” he prompts, when Crowley doesn’t respond. “You can’t what?”

He closes his eyes. “I can’t… this. With you. Angel, I can’t.” I can’t let you do this, not when I know what I am. And what I am not.

“I see.” The angel draws a shaky breath, and he takes a step backward, away from the demon. And it’s… his heart is shattering all over again, the silence screaming so loudly Aziraphale must be able to hear it. “I understand. I’m sorry, my- Crowley. I… I won’t bring it up again.”

He’s leaving you, that traitorous voice inside tells him. You’re finally pushing him away.

“I can’t be second-best,” he spits out, the words all in a jumble, before he can stop himself. He has to
say it, before the angel leaves. Needs him to know why, even though he knows it’s the worst idea he’s ever had.

“What?” Aziraphale asks, one carefully controlled syllable.

“I won’t be second best,” Crowley says, slower, watching their shadows on the wall. “Whatever I feel, whatever I- I want, I won’t survive being your consolation prize. So I can’t. Can’t hear you say - all of that. Not when I know that, given the choice, there’s someone else you’d rather.” He stops abruptly, because the angel is suddenly standing right in front of him, crowding into his space in a way that Aziraphale has never done before. He stands so close the demon can’t help but to look at him. His expression is so open, honest, full of love and pain and no small amount of frustration as he stares up at Crowley.

“Second best to whom?” he demands. “Who on God’s green earth do you think could possibly compare to- to you, the kind, wonderful, beautiful person who has stood by my side for the past six thousand years? Who else has saved me - risked his life to save me, time and again, and never asked for a damned thing? Who else loves this planet and all its creatures as much as I do? Who else can absolutely infuriate me and make me laugh in the same sentence? Who else would I drink with, or see plays with, or- or trade jobs with? No, Crowley, if you’re telling me no, then tell me no because you don’t feel the same. Tell me I’ve waited too long, hurt you too much, and I’ll accept it. Tell me you don’t love me, and I’ll back away. But don’t you, for one second, think I can stand here and feel your heart breaking, and accept that you would rather feel that pain than be with me because you think I’ll find someone else. There isn’t anyone else. There never has been. And there never will be.”

He’s so close now, they’re almost chest-to-chest, sea-blue eyes staring up at Crowley with an intensity he rarely sees in the angel.

“And Raphael?” he asks, almost hissing the name. “What about him? I’m not an archangel, Aziraphale. I can’t be that for you.”

“Ah.” Aziraphale’s expression clears, and he takes a step back. But before Crowley can register the lack of warmth against him, he brings up a hand to rest against Crowley’s jaw. The demon freezes, wanting to lean into that warmth, that soft, gentle touch. He doesn’t though. If he does, if he lets himself experience what it’s like to have this, it will only destroy him completely when Aziraphale leaves him.

“My dear,” the angel says carefully, as if afraid his words will break him. “I think… I think I have rather a lot to say that you need to hear. Would you mind terribly if we relocated to the sofa? We’re both exhausted, and this will all be so much easier if we can talk without fear that one of us is going to fall over.”
Crowley has never been able to deny him anything, and he can’t quite find it in himself to start now. He nods, and allows himself to be led by the hand to a couch that is significantly more plush and comfortable than the one that had been there when he opened the door.

Aziraphale settles down against the arm, and tugs him down to sit next to him. Crowley collapses on the other side of the couch, as far from the angel as their joined hands will permit. He knows he should let go, but he just can’t bring himself to. He said he loves me, he thinks. He won’t mind if I hold on to his hand. Just for a few minutes.

Aziraphale smiles at him, soft, sad, but also full of all of those emotions he’s trying so hard not to understand. “You’re safe here, my dear,” he says. “I promise you this much. You are safe, and you are loved. I will not fail you again, I swear it.”

Crowley closes his eyes. He hasn’t been safe in six thousand years. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, angel.” His voice is rough. Watery. Almost too soft to hear. He has too many failed promises in his past. Too many times, he’s been told he was safe. Been told he was loved. He hides too many scars from when those promises were broken.

The angel squeezes his hand. “Crowley. You told me once that you can still feel love. What do you feel now?”

“I-” he’s been deliberately avoiding examining the emotion in the room, too afraid of what he’ll see. He hadn’t wanted to know with absolute certainty that the angel was lying. Hadn’t known if he could take it, if he found out he was telling the truth.


He shakes his head. He’s not ready. Not yet.

“I’ll tell you what I feel,” the angel says. “I can feel how tired you are. It’s been a long week, and you stopped time today. You’re exhausted. But you don’t want to sleep until you know we’re both safe.” He wraps his hands tightly around Crowley’s. “I can feel your fear. You’re trying to hide it, but it’s there. You’re afraid…” he pauses, reaching, and Crowley tries to draw his emotions back, lock them behind his walls. But his mind is too full of pain, even with all that he released today. The void is expanding within him, filling him, until there’s no room to hide his fear, or his love.
Aziraphale’s eyes go wide, and he makes a pained little sound. “You’re afraid of me.”

“Not of you,” he rushes to reassure him, to ease the pain he can feel, without even trying. “Not of you, angel. Never of you.”


“Not without reason,” he says bitterly, remembering the bandstand.

Aziraphale nods solemnly. “No. Not without reason. But I promise, on every shred of divinity I have, I won’t leave you again.” Then he pauses, brow furrowing. “Why… why does it hurt you, when I say that?”

“Because,” Crowley tells him quietly. “I know what it’ll feel like when you break that promise. When you leave.”

“Never,” he promises. “Never, never.”

“Sure,” Crowley agrees, though he knows better. Aziraphale opens his mouth to argue, but the demon shakes his head. “Go on, angel. Tell me what else I’m feeling.”

“I-” he almost argues, but seems to think better of it. “Okay.” His thumb rubs slow circles into the back of Crowley’s hand. “You… you’re trying to hide it. There are walls in you that I can’t see past. But I can feel your pain.” His free hand rises, almost as if he wants to touch the demon’s face, before dropping back down to rest on his knee. “I can feel… love. You’ve buried it, but it’s there, with the pain. It’s… earlier, I felt your heart breaking. And now, I can feel the pieces. You’re trying to keep them apart. And I know- I know I can’t feel everything. You’ve locked away so much. But I’m a being of Love, and even faint and hidden, I know what love feels like.”

“I’m a demon. I don’t love.” The argument is weak and he knows it. It’s reflexive, more than anything.

Crowley stares at him then, eyes wide and shocked. “Did you- Angel, did you just curse?”

He smiles, gentle, kind, and so full of love. “I can curse,” he tells him. “When the situation calls for it.”

“And this calls for it?” he wants to know.

Aziraphale just watches his face. “I do believe it does.”

Crowley can’t help it. He laughs. It comes out harsh and broken, full of glass shards, and he leans his head back against the couch.

“Angel,” he says helplessly. “I love you.”

Aziraphale gasps, and Crowley’s hand flies up to cover his traitorous mouth. Shit. Shit shit shit. “I didn’t mean it,” he says a moment later. “I didn’t-”

“You did,” Aziraphale says. “It’s okay. You can say it now. Crowley, look at me.”

He turns his head, but keeps his eyes closed behind the dark glasses.

“Will you take those blasted things off?” the angel demands. “This would be so much easier if I could see your eyes.”

That he will not do. His eyes will give him away, every time. Worse, they’ll remind Aziraphale of everything he is, and everything he is not.

“He will not do. His eyes will give him away, every time. Worse, they’ll remind Aziraphale of everything he is, and everything he is not.

“Please?” Aziraphale asks, and he hates that he’s made the angel plead. But he still won’t take off his glasses. He’s already revealed far too much of himself this night.

When he makes no move, Aziraphale sighs. “Alright then,” he says, squeezing his hand gently. “I told you what you’re feeling. Now you tell me how I feel.”
Crowley takes a deep breath. Slowly, afraid of what he might find, he reaches out with a different set of senses. Instantly he can feel all of the emotions in the room. All of his own pain and turmoil. The fear coming from his terrified plants. And… Aziraphale.

The angel is making no effort to hide his emotions. He’s wide open, broadcasting everything he feels. Crowley can sense his exhaustion, the pain and fear from the past week fading away. His bitter disappointment in Heaven, in the archangels, for not living up to everything he believed they should be. Stronger than that is his frustration, his desire for Crowley to believe him, tempered by understanding of all the reasons why the demon won’t. There’s pain there, too, and sorrow. Genuine, deep regret of the actions he had taken. Uncertainty, the fear that he won’t be enough. That he went too far, hurt Crowley too much. And … there is love. Specific, romantic love. That feeling that Crowley has almost, almost sensed before, slipping back behind the angel’s own walls whenever he got too close. But those walls are gone now. And here, in this dark, lonely flat, he’s bearing all of himself for the demon to see.

It’s… he had once explained a demon’s ability to sense love as listening to an orchestra from which the base is missing. Love, in all its forms, except the one that gave life to them all. An absence he’s always aware of. But here, now, it’s a solo. A violin played by a virtuoso, filling the room, rendering all the other instruments irrelevant. A concert played by one, for an audience of one. Specific, both in nature and intent. It’s wide and deep and bright as moonlight. It’s gentle and strong and old. It’s - too much.

Crowley jerks his hand away from Aziraphale, clapping his hands over his ears and drawing his feet up onto the couch, folding in on himself. He shuts off his senses, locking them down to the here and now. To the feel of his hair under his fingers, the pain as he tugs on it until it hurts. The breath, harsh and ragged in his chest. The thump-thump-thump of his far too present heart.

“Crowley!” Aziraphale scrambles off the couch to kneel in front of him, reaching out to cover his hands with his own. “Crowley, what’s wrong? What is it?”


The flood of emotions in the room collapses, pulling away as Aziraphale re-establishes his own walls. “My dear, I’m so sorry,” he says. “I didn’t think -”

Crowley gasps at the loss of it, looking up, and suddenly the dark glass between them is too obstructive. Blocking his view of those beautiful blue eyes. His fingers rip the shades from his face, throwing them on the floor and exposing his wide golden eyes.
“Oh.” Aziraphale’s hands frame his face, gentle fingers rubbing away the tears that spill from his eyes. “Oh my dear.”

“How can-” his voice breaks, and he tries again. “How can you feel all of that? For me?” He doesn’t understand. He’s Fallen. He’s a demon. He shouldn’t be loved. Can’t be. Not by Aziraphale. Not after Aziraphale had Raphael. He can’t compare to an archangel.

“I don’t know,” the angel admits. “But I do. I have done, for a very long time now.”

“You don’t know.” Of course. He turns his face away.

“I don’t,” Aziraphale repeats, still kneeling at his feet. “I’m not… I’m a principality. I wasn’t built for specific love. I shouldn’t have been able to love even once, let alone twice. I don’t know how I can love like this. But I do know why it’s you.”

“Why?” he demands. He needs to know. Suddenly, despite everything that they’ve just been through, despite the threat of Heaven and Hell hanging over them, this, right here, is the most important thing he has ever needed to know.

“I-” the angel hesitates. “I’ve been making a terrible mess of this so far. I think it would be better for me to show you, if you’ll allow it.”

Crowley looks at him, and Aziraphale meets his eyes, not flinching away from his serpentine gaze. He knows what the angel wants. To share their thoughts mind-to-mind. There, it would be almost impossible to lie. Crowley would know that whatever the angel said, it was the truth. But there is also the risk that Aziraphale would see his own thoughts. His own memories. He might reveal more than he intends.

He could say no. He knows, meeting those steady sea-blue eyes, he could refuse. And Aziraphale would do his best to explain in words. But he also knows how difficult that would be. And he would always have that doubt in his mind. Would always wonder just how much of it all the angel really means.

Wordlessly, he nods.
Aziraphale reaches out, the lightest touch of essence against essence. Crowley almost pulls back, afraid. But Aziraphale is pulsing with a comforting stream of love, specific love, and the assurance that no matter what he sees, that love won’t go away. He opens up, and feels the warmth of him flow in.

The angel’s essence has changed, since that time in the Garden. He’s still so warm and comforting, that steady rock he remembers. But though the rock has grown large over the years, time and experience building him up from a boulder into a mountain, there’s an ocean of doubt that surrounds him. The waves of that ocean chip away at the rock, undermining its foundation. His fears, his worries, every time he’s felt not quite good enough, every time he’s been afraid of failing Her, it wears away a little more at the heart of him. Around them, the waves swirl, and Crowley is a tempest. He knows he is. A hurricane, destroying everything within its path. He expects the waves to grow at his approach, to froth and rage as their essences start to mingle. They don’t. Instead, they seem to calm as he draws nearer, settling down, until the rock of his angel sits in the eye of his storm surrounded by seas as flat and clear as glass.

Crowley. The thought is imbued with shock and pain, and an image presents itself to his mind. His tempest, winds raging, lightning dancing in a chaotic pattern across the clouds, lashing out to strike a core of light within the eye. The light shudders and shakes, curling in on itself as the hurricane feeds on the storm winds seeping from cracks within the light.

Let’s go somewhere more comfortable, Crowley suggests, needing to get away from this place where their essences combine. Needing to be elsewhere before Aziraphale looks too deep at the core of what he is. He thinks it, and suddenly they’re standing in his mind. A vast grey blankness that extends forever on three sides. Behind them stands the labyrinthine structure he’s built over the years to house and hide his pain.

My dear, what? He can see a projection of Aziraphale standing at his side. He’s looking behind them, staring at the massive walls of Crowley’s mind.

You learn some tricks, keeping Hell out of your head, he says with forced cheer. It’s true, though not the whole truth. He’d learned to build walls before he ever had to defend himself in Hell, trying to keep five over-inquisitive siblings from his thoughts. This had just been the natural extension of that. Locking his pain away, not only from Hell but to keep it from destroying him from the inside out.

Aziraphale reaches out with a tendril of white-blue thought, and, before he can react, touches the first of his many, many walls. It crumbles at the point of contact. Pain rushes out, washing over them, swamping the angel with its strength. It’s like a black hole swallowing a star, dragging his light deeper and deeper into the void. In a panic, Crowley slams the wall back up, shoving Aziraphale from his mind.
Back on the couch they stare at each other, the only sound from Crowley’s harsh, panting breaths.

“Don’t- don’t do that,” he says when he can speak again.

Aziraphale stares at him, worry clear on his face. “Crowley…”

“But what you expected, huh?” he says, with a short, humorless laugh. “Bet you’re rethinking that love confession now.”

“Never,” the angel says, so vehemently that this time Crowley can’t help but believe him. “I just… you carry so much pain, my dear.”

“Demon,” Crowley reminds him. “Comes with the territory.”

His hands are shaking, the demon notes. He’s playing with his ring again, fingers turning the gold band around and around on his little finger.

“What?”

“I rather want to find everyone who caused you pain and commit acts of violence upon them,” he says, as tears spill from his eyes and roll down his cheeks. “And I can’t help but realize that quite a bit of what I just felt is my own fault.”

Crowley pulls him back up to sit beside him. “It’s not just you,” he tells him. “I lost... Everything. When I Fell. Six thousand years doesn’t take that away.” His tone is bleak. “That’s always going to be there. You should probably know that, before we get too far.”

Aziraphale wipes his eyes on his sleeve. “No,” he says firmly. “That doesn’t matter. I love you. Nothing is going to change that.”

Crowley looks away. He can say that now. But he wonders if he’ll get the same response, once the angel sees the full extent of his pain.
“Please,” Aziraphale says. “Can we try again?” He holds out his hand, palm up, for the demon to take.

He hesitates, staring at it. “But-”

“Crowley.” The angel puts his other hand on Crowley’s knee, and looks at him with watery but determined eyes. “I love you. That means all of you. The good and the bad. And I- you’ve been so patient with me, all these years. Showing me, over and over again, without hope of reciprocation, that you care. Will you give me a chance, now, to show you just how much your love is returned?”

Crowley takes a deep breath, and nods. Slowly, without looking away from those beautiful sea-blue eyes, he reaches out, and takes the angel’s offered hand in his.

Chapter End Notes

I'm only slightly sorry for the cliffhanger. Next chapter we’ll get to see a bit of Aziraphale's point of view!

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Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
2. Chapter 13 - healing the sparrow
3. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
4. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
5. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
6. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
7. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
8. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
9. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
10. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
11. Chapter 13 - Azreal and the first victim in the war
12. Chapter 14 - Talking with Michael
13. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
14. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
15. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Memories - Part 1

Chapter Notes

Apologies for this one being a week late - my cat had an emergency last weekend and I wasn't able to finish the chapter. (He's doing better now, thankfully!) Also, what I had planned to show here ended up hitting 40k words, so I have split the chapter in two - this part contains Aziraphale's memories of Raphael and Heaven, while the next chapter (which I hope to have up on the 15th, since I'm driving down to my parent's place for the holiday this week and don't know how much writing time I'll get there), has his memories of Crowley.

Thank you all so much for sticking with me so far! I love hearing what you think of this story, every comment and kudo brightens my day so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s loud in the Halls of Learning. Louder than normal. For once, every single angel in his generation is here, and they all seem to be talking at the same time. It’s far too loud for Aziraphale’s taste. For the past few weeks he’s been in Eden, learning more of the specifics of his position as a principality. After the quiet of the Garden, this cacophony is… unnerving, to say the least.

“What’s going on?” he asks an angel standing next to him. They shrug, staring at the sea of wings and bodies moving around the room.

“Dunno. Visit from somebody high-ranking, I think. They want to look over our ranks before they officially give us our duties or something.”

“I heard they’re sending the Archangels,” someone else says, something almost hungry in her voice. “It’s a chance for us to impress them. Show them how much we’ve learned.”

“Oh. Oh dear, there won’t be a test or anything, will there?” He chews on his lower lip, suddenly worried. He’s still not entirely clear on just what a Principality is supposed to do, and he has no idea what they would even test him on at this point, but…

“Don’t be ridiculous,” another voice says, and he looks up to see one of the oldest of their generation looking at him with a hint of disdain. “As if they need a test. I hear they can see the flaws in you just by looking.”
Aziraphale clasps his hands in front of him, worry a sinking pit in his stomach. What if they are sending the archangels? What if they take one look at him and decide he isn’t good enough? He stays silent as his companions start to chatter, speculating on the nature of the day’s activities. His thoughts spiral with worries. He should, he thinks, know by now what the most important part of his job is. He doesn’t. He knows all of his primary duties left right and backwards. He’s the best in his class with a flaming sword. He can recite all of Her commandments by memory, in addition to the entire angelic handbook. But he still feels like he’s missing the most important part.

The appearance of another angel distracts him from his thoughts. He stands in the doorway by the front of the room, lit from behind by the cold white light of Heaven. On this angel, though, that light dances. When he moves it throws sparks from thousands of drops of gold, like stars that glitter along his exposed limbs and face. The gold is in his hair too, bits of it shining in constellations against the startling scarlet tresses. Brilliant amber-gold eyes scan the assembled young angels with open curiosity, and Aziraphale is certain he’s never seen anything more beautiful in his life. But what really catches his gaze are his wings. While every angel he’s met so far has had pure white wings, this new angel has wings that drip with gold, like someone upended a bottle of ink over his back and let it flow down his feathers.

The newcomer moves, folding those shining wings against his back, and reaches out to touch the head teacher on their shoulder. They startle, turning, and then bow deeply to the newcomer. The bright angel grins, the kind of smile that takes over his whole face and lights it up like the warming light of Her love. He pulls the teacher from their bow, leaning in to speak quietly in their ear. The teacher leans back, looking at the newcomer with wide eyes, before nodding. The bright angel claps them on the shoulder, and moves to stand at the side of the room.

“Alright! Listen up, everyone!” the head teacher shouts over the noise, using a minor miracle to amplify their voice. “Tomorrow we’re sending you off to your duties. Not—” they add, as an excited rumbling starts in the crowd. “That it gets you out of lessons. You’ll still study with us until we’re confident in your abilities.” Groans and grumbling fill the room.

“Quiet!” another teacher shouts, glaring at them all until silence falls. Then he nods, pleased, and turns back to the first of the teachers.

“Now,” they say, “you may have all noticed we have some distinguished guests here today.” He gestures to a group of older angels, lined up along the back wall of the room. “We’ve brought together some senior angels from all the choirs. They’re here to give you some last advice before you get started. They’ll be here for the rest of the day. Please take some time to speak with them, and prepare yourselves to begin your official assignments tomorrow.”

The older angels move out into the crowd, and the cacophony of sound returns. Aziraphale forcibly puts thoughts of the bright angel out of his mind. This is his chance, finally, to get someone to tell him the most important part of his job. He’s asked so many of the teachers, and they all have given
him different answers. Still, none of them really seem to ring true with everything he’s been taught. Guiding God’s creations, yes. Keeping them to Her Great Plan, that makes sense. Preventing them from falling to Evil, well, he’s not quite sure what Evil is, but he suspects it’s bad if he’s meant to keep Her creatures from it. But still, all of that is his job, but it doesn’t tell him what the most important piece of it is. And the answers he has been given never seem… complete, somehow. Here, now, he has a chance to ask these other high-ranking angels. Perhaps one of them will have an answer for him.

They don’t. He spends hours getting advice from many older, more experienced principalities, and none of them tell him anything new. Guide Her creations. Follow Her Plan. Guide them how? he wants to ask. What is Her plan for them? No one seems to be able to tell him. He’s beginning to get frustrated. How can he do his job, if he doesn’t fully understand it?

Something touches his elbow and he turns, coming face to face with a pair of bright honey-amber eyes.

“What’s the most important part of being a principality?” the bright angel asks him, watching with open curiosity on his face.

Aziraphale frowns, shaking his head. “I don’t know!” he says, aware but unable to help the fact that a hint of a whine has crept into his voice. “That’s why I’m asking!”

“Didn’t your teachers tell you?” the bright angel’s eyes drift over him, and Aziraphale fights the urge to fidget under the intensity of that warm gaze.

He nods, clasping his hands before him and ordering his newly-issued body not to blush. “They told me that we’re meant to guide Her creations. That we must keep them on track for the Great Plan.”

The other angel wrinkles his nose in distaste, mouth pulling downward in a frown. “They’re wrong,” he says firmly, like it’s a fact. Like he isn’t telling Aziraphale that all of his teachers and the older principalities have gotten this one, central fact about their own existence wrong.

Finally, Aziraphale thinks. “What is it then?” he asks, hoping that this time he’ll finally get an answer that feels right. “The most important part of being a principality?”

His companion leans in, like he’s about to tell a secret. “You care,” he says simply. “You care
about the people you’re sent to guide. *That’s* the most important part of being a principality.”

Aziraphale thinks about that for a moment, turning the words over in his mind. They feel… right. This is the answer he’s been searching for. “Yes,” he says, relieved to finally, *finally* have an answer. “Yes, I think you’re quite right. I won’t get anywhere with them, if I don’t care about them.” He smiles, and meets those wonderful honey-amber eyes. “Thank you, this makes me feel a great deal better.”

The stranger smiles too, an expression that infuses his whole body with light. “Happy to help. That’s *my* job after all. You lot get to do the guiding of Her creatures. We do the guiding for you.”

*We?* Aziraphale wonders. *Who is he?* “And the caring?” he asks, before he can get control over his mouth.

The bright angel, impossibly, smiles *brighter*, and he utters a bright, clear sound of joy, unlike anything Aziraphale has ever heard before. Dimly, he’s aware of other angels turning to look at them, but he can’t look away from the beautiful angel in front of him.

“And the caring,” he says, and makes that sound again. Aziraphale doesn’t think he’s ever heard anything more wonderful.

“Brother.” Another angel appears at his companion’s side, someone the principality has never seen before. This angel, too, has color in his wings - a deep purple brindled pattern that matches the violet of his eyes. “Lucifer is looking for you.”

The bright angel frowns, rolling his eyes and crossing his arms over his chest. “I told him I’d be here today.” He sighs. “What does our dear brother want?”

“He wouldn’t say.” The newcomer pouts. “He just said to get you, and to hurry.”


“Oh, that’s- don’t let me keep you,” Aziraphale tells him, suddenly realizing that whoever this angel is, he must be someone dreadfully important, if Lucifer himself is looking for him.
That earns him another smile. “Trust me, I’d much rather stay here with you. Lucifer’s probably just going to pawn off his paperwork on me while he gets to go out and do something exciting.” He shakes his head sadly. “And there I’ll be, stuck in my office, buried under piles of paperwork.”

“I’m sure it won’t be that bad,” Aziraphale says.

The bright angel makes that joyful sound again. Laughter, Aziraphale suddenly knows, in the way of angels when God has chosen the name for something. “Well, maybe you’re right,” he says. “Look, Aziraphale-”

“You know my name?” he asks, surprised.

“I know everyone’s name,” his companion says, as if that was not at all surprising. “Look, if you have any other questions this lot can’t answer, you can find me in the Halls of Healing. If I’m not there, someone will know where to find me.”

“Oh, but-” Aziraphale starts, but doesn’t get a continue. The bright angel gives him another shining smile, and then in a flash of golden feathers, he’s gone.

“You didn’t tell me your name,” he says, staring at the space he had just occupied.

“That was an archangel,” someone says, awed. “That was Her Healer, Raphael.”

Aziraphale does not go to the Halls of Healing, as much as he wants to. His thoughts stray to the archangel far too often for his own liking, lingering on the warm honey-amber of his eyes, and the way his smile seemed to light up his whole face. Thousands of years later, he will compare those eyes to the color of a sweet summer mead, but for now all he knows is that they are impossibly bright and beautiful. But they belong to an archangel. And Aziraphale is just a principality. He has no claim on an archangel’s time, no matter how honestly the offer was meant. And, truthfully, he has no more pressing questions that the teachers cannot answer. It would not be proper for him to seek Raphael out just because he desperately wants to see that smile again. So he stays in Eden, and does his best to complete his assigned duties within the Garden.
He’s almost convinced himself that he’ll never see Raphael again, when he turns up to one of his lessons - fewer, now that he has actual duties - to see that bright scarlet and gold archangel lounging at the front of the classroom, feet on the teacher’s desk. He grins when he sees Aziraphale, sitting up and leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

“Aziraphale!” Raphael says. “Good to see you again!”

A rumble of surprise goes through the class, and Aziraphale blushes and stammers, unused to such attention. “I, ah, good- good morning Raphael. Ah, that is, oh-” he shuts his mouth and wishes he wasn’t so easily flustered by the sight of the archangel.

Raphael, for his part, simply gives him one of those slow, pleased smiles. “Yes, well,” he says. “I’m here today to teach you lot about star-making, and how we design the universe. The teachers think it’ll give you a better idea of how important your jobs are, and I agree. The universe is a big place, and those you will be sent to guide each have an important part in it.” He turns his eyes on the rest of the class. “And let me say this, before we get started - I know some of the teachers who do not appreciate questions. I am not one of them. In fact, I will be very disappointed if you lot don’t speak up when you want to know something. Got it?”

The assembled young principalities nod, and Aziraphale takes his seat. They’re all fully grown now, with all the power of their station. They have just a few lessons left before they, in turn, will become the teachers for a new generation of angels. Still, there are many things they do not know, as Raphael’s lesson quickly reminds him. He’d always assumed starsmiths just… called the stars into being, in the same way he could call the flames to his holy sword. They just thought about it, and it became reality. Instead, Raphael stood in front of them and spoke of weaving the heart of a star, of calling threads out of the Forge of Creation and twining them together until they ignite. And then pulling more of pure Creation and weaving it to a pattern of God’s design. It was fascinating, but even if it hadn’t been, he thinks he could listen to him speak forever.

The archangel disappears after the lesson, dismissing them and vanishing through the doors before Aziraphale can even rise from his chair. He’s not disappointed, he tells himself. He’s not. He’d only hoped, after that greeting, that perhaps they could exchange a few words without him stumbling all over himself. That the archangel might stay, just for a moment. Might want to know why Aziraphale never came to look for him. But, of course, it was a presumptuous thought, he tells himself. An archangel has no reason to seek out a principality. He keeps telling himself that as he leaves the Halls of Learning, right up until a warm presence appears at his side in a flash of red and gold.

“So,” a cheerful voice says, and he looks up to see Raphael grinning at him. “What did you think of the lesson?”
“I- ah, well, it was very good,” he tells him. “I’m still not quite sure I understand the process, but I don’t know that anything would that unless I actually learned how to do it. Otherwise, it was very informative. I never realized it took so much effort to create a star. I had always wondered how it was done, but everyone always seemed too busy, and I didn’t want to bother them to ask.” He knows he’s rambling, but can’t quite seem to get himself to stop.

Raphael laughs. He’s heard a few other people do it now, but Raphael’s laugh is still the best. So clear and bright, joyful, the kind of sound that draws a smile to his face just from hearing it. “I hear you. The starsmiths have a long way to go, until the universe is complete. It’s the same in the Halls of Healing. There’s not very many of us at the moment, and it seems like every other second we’ve got some idiot angel bruising himself and running to us for help. Not to mention those absolute morons in Michael’s legions that seem to think it’s not a training session if someone doesn’t walk away with a broken limb.” He rolls his eyes. “Let me tell you, the amount of times I’ve had to threaten to stop healing them just to get them not to injure each other on purpose would astonish you.”

“And Michael allows that sort of behavior?” Aziraphale asks, before realizing that he’s questioning an archangel. Raphael shrugs.

“Eh. She doesn’t approve, but she won’t stop it. Says she has to pick her battles, and something about giving orders she’s not sure will be obeyed. It’s hard enough getting Sandalphon to stop picking fights, and he only just got his flight feathers, bless him.” His smile turns fond as he mentions the youngest of the archangels. Aziraphale had heard they were all close, more like a family than simply choir-mates, and Raphael’s expression confirms that.

“Are they all like you?” he wants to know. “The other archangels?”

That draws yet another laugh from Raphael. “Heavens, no. Can you imagine the chaos?” he chuckles at the thought, shaking his head. “Nah. We’re a mixed bag, us. Sandalphon’s still a kid, but he’s stubborn. Always quick to start a fight. Uriel, though, she’ll finish them. She’s smarter than all of us combined. Gabriel’s just a bundle of energy. Too enthusiastic for his own good. Michael’s older than me by a few months. She was the second angel ever created, and she takes that as a serious responsibility. She’s the quiet one, but you don’t want to get her mad at you. And then Lucifer, well. Lucifer always knows exactly what to do, and when to do it. He’s the best of us all.”

“They sound wonderful,” Aziraphale says, wondering if any of his fellow principalities know him well enough to describe him like that. Probably not. They don’t tend to socialize together very much, having been built for the solitary life of guiding a group of mortal creatures on their own. Even Aziraphale prefers the quiet noises of the Garden over spending time surrounded by other angels.
“Oh, sure, they’re wonderful,” Raphael agrees. “Right up until you realize that they’re in your head all the time, all five of them, commenting on everything you do.” He makes a face. “And yes, Gabriel, I do know it was you who borrowed Michael’s sword last week, so shut it or I’ll tell her.”

He falls silent, and Aziraphale realizes that the archangel’s eyes are suddenly glowing a vibrant purple. He snorts a laugh, and they fade to an icy blue for a few seconds before returning to his natural amber-gold. “Sorry about that,” he says, once his eyes are fully golden again. “Like I said. They’re in my head. Be grateful She didn’t think to include that feature in all the choirs.”

“Ah. Yes, I can see where that would be… less than ideal.” Aziraphale says, wincing at the picture painted for him. There are several thousand principalities. He can’t even imagine what it would be like, if they could all hear each other’s thoughts.

“Yup,” Raphael agrees. “Now, I’ve got a couple free hours, and I’ve been dying to see those new creatures in the Garden. Bats, I think she called them? Small furry things that see with their ears?”

Aziraphale nods. “Bats, yes. Though they do have eyes, you know. They use the sound bounced off of objects to get a better picture of the area at night. It helps them find the insects they eat.”

“Do they really?” the bright archangel leans closer, eyes lighting with interest. “Would you have some time to show me? I heard they live in large colonies. Is that true?”

He follows Aziraphale to Eden, asking questions the whole way, until the principality leads him to a large cave in which several species of bats have come to roost. There, he falls silent, watching the tiny creatures carefully, examining everything from their flight patterns to the way their feet grip the roof of the cave. When one of them lands in his hair, he looks at Aziraphale with wide, delighted eyes and carefully touches the soft fur of the little bat. A few other bats follow, landing on the archangel like a particularly comfortable tree, and Aziraphale cannot help but return the bright, happy smile Raphael gives him before turning to examine the fruit bat that clings to the shoulder of his robes, squeaking.

After that, Aziraphale had thought he wouldn’t likely see the archangel again. Raphael, however, seems to have other ideas. He comes down to Eden every few days, asking Aziraphale to show him some new plant or animal God or the gardeners created. And spending time with Raphael, it’s not… it’s not like being with the other angels. He never feels judged by Raphael. The archangel
watches him with those wide amber eyes, but his gaze is never evaluating, never seems to find him lacking in any way. At first, he had worried that perhaps Raphael was testing him, trying to see if he was really fit for guiding Her creatures on earth. But whenever he failed to answer a question, those bright eyes never shone with success or even true disappointment. He’d just shrug, and ask another question. After a while, Aziraphale was forced to accept that whatever Raphael’s reasons are for coming to him, testing him is not one of them.

Soon enough, the archangel takes to asking him to meet in the Halls of Healing whenever his duties as a principality bring him up to Heaven. There, Raphael brings him into his workroom, sometimes to show him something he’d created, sometimes just to enjoy the light of Heaven streaming in through the windows and talk about Aziraphale’s lessons, or their respective duties, or his siblings, or even sometimes nothing at all. Sometimes they sit together in silence, each working on their own tasks.

Aziraphale becomes used to the occasional flare of color in Raphael’s eyes, how his expression can go distant in the middle of any conversation, eyes lowing purple, or blue, or brown, or on occasion, black. It was more disconcerting to be speaking with one of the other archangels and see their eyes change to Raphael’s familiar amber-gold. He sees them far more frequently than he ever had before, now that Raphael is known to spend time with him. If they cannot find their brother, sometimes they come to Eden looking for him. Usually the younger three ask curt questions and disappear as soon as they get the information they need, but Michael and Lucifer both take time to speak with him outside of asking after Raphael.

Lucifer frightens him, in a way he can’t quite describe. There’s no reason to be scared of the Morning Star, but to Aziraphale those cold black eyes of his seem cruel and uncaring, even as his words are warm and friendly. He hates it the most when he speaks with Raphael mind-to-mind, when he sees that beautiful, expressive face looking back at him with the eyes of a black hole.

Michael is intimidating as well, but she doesn’t frighten him in the way that Lucifer does. She’s cold and distant, but he can see that she cares about her brother from the look in her eyes when she speaks his name. It’s Michael that corners him in the Garden one morning as he’s tending to a small family of squirrels.

“What are your intentions with my brother?” she demands, without offering a greeting.

“Oh, hello Michael.” He gives her his best smile. “I, ah, I’m not sure what you mean by that. I know he likes to spend time here, but I don’t have any intentions about him.”

The archangel sniffs. “Hmm.” Ice-blue eyes rake across him, examining him, and he nervously clasps his hands together and tries to stand up straight.
“You don’t wish, perhaps, to be promoted to a higher choir through association with an
archangel?” she asks, eyes unreadable.

“What?!” Aziraphale asks, shocked. “Promo- I- I- No!” He hasn’t even considered the possibility.
Or the possibility that others would look at him spending time with Raphael and assume that’s
what it was. “No, heavens, I’d never. I like being a principality. I don’t want anything else.
Goodness, I’d never get to see Eden if I was promoted up.”

“Mm.” Michael’s frown deepens. “Then what do you want from him? What drives you to seek him
out?”

“I- what do I want from him? That’s not- we’re- I’m not-” He stops himself, and takes a breath. “I
don’t want anything from Raphael. I just… I like spending time with him.” He frowns, considering
her question. “Or, well, I suppose that’s not entirely true. I want him to be happy. That’s all. And
he seems to be happy, when he’s here in the Garden.”

“Happy,” she repeats, the word coming out flat. “That’s all? You don’t want, ah, special favors? To
be given deference as the favored of Raphael?”

“Oh, I’m hardly someone anyone would be giving deference to,” he tells her, forcing down
irritation at the suggestion. “As for special favors, I can’t imagine anything I would want. As I
said, I like what I am. I like what I do, and how I do it. If I want anything, it’s to be left alone to do
my work.” He blushes then, realizing what he just said, but she doesn’t seem offended by his tone.
On the contrary, she’s nodding, a small, tight smile on her lips.

“Good. He had said you would tell me that, but I’m glad to see he was not mistaken.” She looks
him over again, her eyes less critical this time. “Sandalphon and Gabriel will be happy to hear it as
well. They were worried you were going to take advantage of Raphael’s trusting nature.”

“I’d never,” he says vehemently, and she holds up a hand to forestall any further argument from
him.

“Peace, caretaker. If I thought otherwise, you would be in a very different situation right now.” The
ice in her eyes is thawing, and he almost thinks he sees approval in them now. “You must
understand,” she says, “Raphael is very important to us. I had to be sure.”
“Oh.” Aziraphale blinks, relaxing. “Ah. I- yes. I understand.” He thinks of those bright amber-gold eyes, and that warm sun-bright smile. “He is… important to me, as well.”

Michael nods, watching him thoughtfully. “In that case, perhaps I could ask something of you?”

“Anything,” he says, and means it. She is his superior. He is duty-bound to obey any and all requests she might have of him. But, more than that, she’s Raphael’s sister, and he would do almost anything for her if he thought it would please Raphael.

“Watch out for him?” she asks, and he stares at her, shocked.

“Watch out… for Raphael?” he asks her, unable to think of a single situation in which he might need to protect the archangel.

Michael nods gravely. “I know he doesn’t seem it, but there are times when he needs support. And he won’t come to us, not when he believes his purpose is to take care of us all. He won’t show weakness unless pushed to it. He needs someone outside of his siblings to be there for him. Someone he doesn’t have to feel responsible for. Do you think you can do that?”

“I… yes. Yes, of course,” he tells her. “I would be honored to.” He’s not sure he believes her, about Raphael needing someone to support him. But if he does, then Aziraphale will be there for him, without question.

“Thank you.” Her smile softens into the first truly warm expression he’s ever seen from the warrior. “I- ah.” She stops, and Aziraphale watches as her eyes darken to a familiar honey-amber. Moments later, lightning flashes and Raphael is standing between them in the clearing.

“Michael,” he snaps, wings flared in anger, obstructing Aziraphale’s view of them both. “I thought I’d told you to drop this.”

Michael sighs. “Relax, brother,” she says quietly. “I had to be sure. Now I am. You will hear no more of this from me.”

“I had better not,” Raphael growls, then turns to Aziraphale. “She didn’t scare you, or threaten you, did she?”
He shakes his head. “No, nothing of the sort.” He’d been worried, yes, but never scared. “I’m alright, my dear.”

“Oh. Good.” His wings fold down against his back, and Aziraphale can see Michael over his shoulder. She gives him a meaningful look, tilting her head at the healer, and then disappears in a flash of color. Raphael glances after her, scowling. “Listen,” he tells Aziraphale. “If any of them try anything like that again, if any of them bother you, you call me right away, you hear me?”

“She wasn’t bothering me, Raphael. Honestly, she wasn’t,” he says. “She was just worried for you. I understand.”

“Well, understanding or not, you shouldn’t let them push you around. If they do it again, I swear I’ll make sure they regret it.” There’s a fierce protectiveness to him that Aziraphale hasn’t seen before. It warms him, even as he tries to convince his friend that Michael had done nothing wrong. It’s nice, knowing without any question that Raphael cares about him, but sometimes it feels rather like being loved by the sun - so warm and bright, but too much of it and he begins to burn.

“I can take care of myself,” he insists, scowling at his friend. “I’m not incapable. And she did have good reason.”

“Good reason my ass,” Raphael huffs, but seems placated. “Fine. At least she’s gone now. And I’ll have the chance to destroy her on the practice field tonight anyway. We’re giving Sandalphon and Uriel lessons in flight combat.” He grins, clearly in a mercurial mood today. “That’ll show her to interfere with my relationships.”

“Oh, but really, she was just trying to look after you,” Aziraphale tells him. “I don’t think she meant any harm.”

Raphael rolls his eyes. “Well, she doesn’t get a pass just because she ‘didn’t mean any harm’. The last thing I want is Gabriel or Sandalphon thinking they can try things like that. Uriel, at least knows better.”

“But-” Aziraphale starts, but Raphael shakes his head and sighs.

“No, I know. Come on, I hear there’s a new kind of fish they released in the stream yesterday. How much do you want to bet I can catch it with my bare hands?” The archangel grins at him until
Aziraphale rolls his eyes, exasperated and fond, and takes him by the arm.

“I think you should leave the poor fish alone, my dear,” he says, but leads him deeper into Eden anyway.

After that, Raphael seems to make a point of it to spend more time with Aziraphale. Not just in Eden or his workroom, either. Sometimes they spend time in different parts of Heaven - out of the way courtyards, large gathering halls, once even in the archangel’s private quarters. Their favorite place, though, is a large open park outside the Halls of Healing, with comfortable benches and a wide view of the fields between the administrative buildings of Heaven and the Gates. It’s a beautiful place, with intricate fountains and white marble pathways. Tucked away in a corner by a small pond, they sit on a bench talking about anything that comes to mind.

Today, the air feels… charged. Aziraphale can’t put his finger on it, as he watches the angels around them, but there’s a tenseness to the park that is not normally there. Even Raphael seems to notice it, his amber-gold eyes scanning the area slowly, carefully, even as he carries on his normal good-natured banter.

“And I said, ‘if you’re so sure, go ahead and build it then.’ And you know what? He did!” he laughs, shaking his head at the antics of his brothers.

“What happened then?” Aziraphale asks, intrigued. The stories where Gabriel ignores Raphael’s advice never seem to end well for the younger archangel.

Raphael smirks. “It collapsed! Big flaming star, and it collapsed all the way down into a black hole! Right there, in the middle of the workshop!” He starts to laugh again, then abruptly stops, frowning.

“Raphael?” Aziraphale asks, concerned.

The archangel raises a hand, stalling any further comments. “Wait.” His gaze goes to a small group of angels several feet away, well out of earshot. The tension in the air spikes, and Raphael stands. Moments later, one of the angels he was watching stands as well, shouting angrily at their companions. Even as other angels turn to look, Raphael is striding over to the group. He puts a hand on the shoulder of the shouting angel, and says something quietly. They shake their head,
looking down, and Raphael smiles. He says something - a joke, by the way the others laugh - and ruffles the hair of one of the younger members of the group. After a short conversation, the one that had been shouting resumes their seat and Raphael waves to them, returning to the bench with Aziraphale. As he approaches, the principality realizes that the air in the park has returned to normal.

“Where was I?” the archangel says, as if he hadn’t just gone and stopped a fight before it happened. “Right. Gabriel’s black hole. Well, -”

“What was that?” Aziraphale interrupts, unable to hold in his curiosity.

“What was what?” Raphael asks, turning those beautiful golden eyes on his face.

“That!” Aziraphale gestures to the now-laughing group of angels Raphael had spoken to. “You knew before they started shouting that something was going to happen.”

The archangel shrugs. “Eh. I just read the emotions in the room. Don’t tell me you didn’t feel it. Haniel was practically radiating anger earlier.”

“I could feel something,” he replies, glancing at the angel. “But I didn’t know who it was coming from.”

Raphael frowns at him, eyebrows drawing together in confusion. “Don’t tell me they haven’t taught you how to read emotions yet. They can’t have just been letting you lot feel everything without knowing what it’s coming from.”

“Oh…” he shakes his head. “No, no I don’t think they have.”

Raphael pauses, expression turning thunderous, and Aziraphale watches as his eyes fade to a light blue for several minutes, and then to a warm, deep brown. Then his normal gold returns, and he nods firmly. “Uriel will take care of it. They’re going to teach everyone who hasn’t learned yet. Tomorrow, if we have anything to say about it. Bloody teachers, I knew we should have taken more of an interest in what they were doing. That’s, what… twelve generations of angels now that they have to teach? Thirteen, if they also haven’t gotten to the group above yours.” He grumbles under his breath, looking around as if he could find one of the teacher angels right then to reprimand.
“I’m sure they were planning to get to it soon,” Aziraphale tells him, reaching out to rest a hand on his knee. “They’ve been very thorough about everything else.”

“Yeah, but…” Raphael shakes his head, expression lightning. “Nah. I’ll let Uriel yell at them. That’ll teach them.” He grins.

Aziraphale shakes his head, smiling fondly, used to the archangel’s mercurial moods. “I’m sure she’ll be magnificent.”

“She will,” he says, every inch the proud older brother. “You should hear her arguing with Sandalphon. Neither of them can quite match Gabriel in volume yet, and nobody can truly surpass Luci in the art of insults, but Uriel has this quiet way about her that just makes you want to sink into the floor to get away.”

“I’m sure it’s very impressive,” the principality says, laughing. Only Raphael would look so proud of his siblings’ ability to yell at people.

“It is,” his bright companion nods. “But.” His expression smooths out, turning pensive, eyes on Aziraphale’s face. “I think I’m not going to wait for the teachers to get their act together. I’m teaching you how to read emotions. Right now.”

His eyes widen. “Oh. Alright. Ah… do I need to do anything special?”

Raphael takes his hands in his, and Aziraphale allows himself to enjoy the rough warmth of them. “Not precisely. Just… pay attention to your feelings.”

“My… feelings?” Aziraphale frowns, trying to determine his own emotions.

“No,” Raphael releases one of his hands to tap one long, elegant finger against his forehead. “Not here.” He taps over Aziraphale’s chest. “Not here either. Reach out, the same way you would to touch my essence, and feel the world around you.”

Aziraphale tries, taking a deep breath and relaxing the way he had been taught. For a moment, he almost thinks he feels something, but then it’s gone.
“How did you feel Haniel’s anger earlier?” Raphael says, speaking quietly. “Remember what that felt like?”

He reaches out again, looking for that strange, tense sensation. Feeling for that charge in the air. And suddenly… it’s overwhelming. He can feel so much. Too much. It’s like going from dry land to suddenly standing under a crushing waterfall. He gasps, drowning in it.

“Here. Be here, Aziraphale. Focus on me. Ignore everything else. What am I feeling?” Warm, rough hands on his face. Concern carried in a beloved voice.

“You…” he sifts through the flood of emotions in the room, looking for that warm concern. He finds it, a thread of gold-and-red running through a stream of feeling. “Concern,” he says, opening his eyes and looking into soft amber-gold. “Now relief.” The red-and-gold emotions have shifted, becoming lighter as he opened his eyes. “You’re… upset?” There’s a faint feeling of it, that same sort of sharp charge he had felt earlier.

Raphael nods. “At myself. I should have taken you someplace more private first. There’s too many people here.”

“Don’t be,” Aziraphale says. “I can handle it.” He can, he realizes. He was built for this. All of it, the whole flood of emotions, are slotting into place around him. It’s no longer a waterfall, but a manageable trickle he can sort through and examine as he chooses. It hits him suddenly that he doesn’t need to be taught this. He just needed to understand that he could.

“Alright,” the archangel says, relaxing. “Then… what do I feel now?” Those bright gold eyes leave his face, focusing instead on a group of young angels, children of the newest generation.

“Fondness,” he tells him, identifying the slow warmth of the emotion. “Protectiveness. Affection.”

“And now?” he looks to Haniel and their companions.


Raphael chuckles, and he feels that amusement too. “Good. How about now?” He’s looking at Gabriel now, the younger archangel is across the park, sparring with Sandalphon.
“Love.” The surge of it is overwhelming. So much love. Fondness, too. Worry. Hope. Joy and pride. Concern. And love. Warm and deep and unbreakable. And so very different from the Love he can feel all around them. The Love of the almighty moves in and around and through his senses, a deep hum against the brighter noise of angelic emotions, general and unspecific. Raphael’s love, in contrast, is the brightness of a supernova, loud as a clap of thunder or the explosion of a sun.

“And now?” Before he can truly comprehend the feeling, Raphael turns his gaze back to him.

Aziraphale blinks. “Love,” he realizes with shock. It’s not the same as that bright fire of love for his siblings. This love is quieter. Warm and comforting, like a soft blanket. It wraps around him, settling against his essence, and he realizes that it’s something he’s felt before. He’s been feeling it, for some time now.

Raphael smiles then, a different smile from his normal mischievous smirk. It’s soft, gentle, and full of that warm and quiet love. “Love,” he agrees.

“Me?” he asks. Raphael nods, and squeezes his knee.

“You,” he confirms.

He doesn’t know what to say to that. Doesn’t know what he did to deserve the love of an archangel. He’s just a principality. Nothing even remotely important. But here he is, with the undeniable proof of Raphael’s love in the air around him. He finds he can feel it even when Raphael isn’t around. It stays with him, when he returns alone to Eden, like it’s become a part of him. In a way, he supposes, it has. He wonders if this is how Raphael’s siblings feel. If they can feel his love with them, wherever they go. He hopes they can. It wouldn’t be fair of him, to have that wonderful emotion all to himself.

Things stay the same, for a long time after that. Walks in the Garden with Raphael. Hours spent in the Halls of Healing, working on separate tasks but together. Showing his bright archangel the newest additions to Eden. Learning about the universe at Raphael’s side. Laughter. Love. But then… things change. It starts slowly at first. An increase in the frequency that Raphael’s eyes will fade to blue or purple or brown. Less time spent in idleness. Fewer walks in Eden. He can feel Raphael drawing back from him. Not a lot, but some. He’s less open with Aziraphale, and sometimes, when the healer thinks he’s not looking, he seems immeasurably sad. He stops asking
so many questions, seeming content now to sit in silence. Once or twice Aziraphale catches a glimpse of a small book in his hands, but it’s always hidden away as soon as Raphael realizes he’s near. It hurts, being shut out like this. But he can still feel the archangel’s love, warm and bright and steady.

And then, he starts hearing rumors. Terrible things. Angels deserting their posts. Angels...changing. Turning into dark, twisted versions of themselves. He doesn’t want to believe it, but then he goes to a meeting of principalities to find several seats conspicuously empty. Raphael tells him not to worry. That they’re doing all they can to stop it, and things will get better soon. But Aziraphale can feel the fear in him when he speaks of it. Raphael asks him to keep watch in Eden, but doesn’t tell him what to watch for. He has even less time now, all of it claimed by other duties. Aziraphale has to seek him out if he wants to spend any time with his friend, and even then, there’s always the chance he’ll see Raphael’s eyes fade to blue, and Michael will call him away yet again.

The first time he truly begins to feel fear, though, is the evening Michael comes to him at his post on the Eastern Gate. “He needs you,” is all she says. He leaves for the Halls of Healing without a second thought.

The healers are in chaos as he enters, and he hears from some of them that Azreal has just left. That news sends a jolt of fear down his spine, and he hastens to the back rooms where Raphael keeps his workshop. He almost stops when he sees the body, attended by a squad of solemn guardian angels. They don’t seem to notice the healers moving around them, holding vigil for their fallen comrade. But Raphael is not with them, or in the other two occupied rooms at this end of the hall, so he continues on to the healer’s workroom/

The door is closed when he reaches it, but swings open at his knock. Inside, he finds Raphael seated at his desk, head in his hands. His pure white robes are stained with blood, ichor, and something else Aziraphale can’t identify. His long hair, usually so neat and carefully styled, is wild and matted, braids half undone or unraveled entirely. He turns his head as the door swings fully open, revealing dark bruise-like circles under his eyes, the honey-amber color darkened almost to bronze with fatigue.

“Aziraphale?” he asks, and even his voice sounds exhausted.

Aziraphale closes the door behind him, moving closer, and his heart breaks at the sight of tear tracks on the healer’s face. “Michael said you might need me,” he explains, wanting nothing more than to erase whatever it is that has done this to his friend. “I can see she was right.”

“I-” Raphael tries to say something, but his voice breaks, sorrow plain as daylight in his eyes.
The principality cannot help himself. “Come here, my dear,” he says, reaching out and drawing Raphael into his arms. The archangel reaches out, wrapping his own arms tightly around Aziraphale and burying his face in the soft fabric of his robes.

“Shh, it’s alright,” Aziraphale tells him, holding him close as he lets out a great heaving sob and starts to cry in earnest. “It’ll be alright.” He smooths his fingers through Raphael’s hair, using a small miracle to clean his robes of their stains. “You’re safe, my dear. Cry all you need.” His hair will take more effort than his robes, full of snarls and knots as it is. Aziraphale keeps one arm wrapped around the archangel and uses the other to card though his hair, letting miracles drip from his fingers, cleaning the scarlet tresses and leaving them soft, silky, and free of tangles. As Raphael’s tears start to fade, he gently massages his scalp, making soothing noises and projecting an air of calm and love as best he can.

He does need me, he thinks with wonder, and a small bit of terror. He’d never let the archangels see him like this. He’s not sure what to do with that information. Isn’t sure how to be what the archangel needs. For now, he settles on continuing to run his fingers through his hair, letting him cry himself out over the loss of a patient he must have worked so very hard to save.

Eventually, Raphael’s sobs quiet, and he pulls back, looking up at Aziraphale with tear-stained eyes.

“Thanks,” he says quietly, sniffing, and rubs the last of the water from his face with rough hands. “Sorry you had to see that.”

“Don’t be sorry, dear,” Aziraphale tells him firmly. “There’s nothing wrong with being upset.”

“Aziraphale-” Raphael starts, heartbreakingly uncertain, and the principality shakes his head.

“No. Don’t apologize for this. You lost a patient. Frankly, I’d be worried if you weren’t upset over it.” He presses a kiss to Raphael’s forehead. “You love everything so fiercely, my dear. That must mean you feel loss just as strongly.”

“I… yeah.” Raphael drops his head down to rest against Aziraphale’s chest. “I hate this.”

“I do too,” he tells him, fingers carefully unraveling his remaining braids. “Whatever this is. I hate seeing what it’s doing to you.”
“’M sorry,” the archangel says.

Aziraphale sighs. “It’s not your fault, my dear. I just wish you’d let me help you. I can’t do anything, if you won’t tell me what this is all about.”

When Raphael doesn’t respond, he sighs again and lets his hands drop to the archangel’s shoulders. “Alright then. Turn around, and let me see to those braids of yours.” He waits as Raphael obediently turns around in his chair, presenting Aziraphale with the back of his head. He smiles fondly at the sound the healer makes when he starts working on the braids - a small, undignified noise of pleasure that no one else would ever have believed he could make.

“Did you hear about the new plants the gardeners came up with the other day?” he asks as he works, trying to take Raphael’s mind off of what had happened.

“No, what is it?” He leans back against the chair, closing his eyes, and Aziraphale can feel him relaxing under his hands.

“It’s a vine with bright white and yellow flowers that smell and taste of honey,” he tells him. “They’re calling it Lonicera. ‘Honeysuckle’.”

Raphael laughs. It’s small and weak, but it’s a laugh.

“Next time you come to the Garden, I’ll show you some,” he adds.

“I’ll hold you to that.” The archangel sighs. “But it might be a while. There’s a lot going on up here.”

“You’ve said,” Aziraphale tells him, doing his best to hide his disappointment. “We’re hearing all kinds of rumors down there. I’m not sure how much truth I put in them, if I’m being honest.”

Raphael is silent for a long time. Long enough that Aziraphale begins to feel a sick sort of fear as the rumors he’s heard cross through his mind. Eventually, the archangel says quietly “It’s nothing you need to worry about. We’re going to take care of it.”
“Oh, but…” Aziraphale wants to press him for details, to truly know what’s going on, but he doesn’t want to upset him any more than he’s been upset tonight. “Well, I believe you of course. But you do know you can come to me if you need anything, right?”

“I… yeah. Yeah, Aziraphale. Thanks.” He reaches back and finds one of Aziraphale’s hands, squeezing it gently before letting go.

After that, he sees less of Raphael than ever. The rumors he hears start to grow larger, and more frightening. And while some are clearly impossible, there is enough truth in what he hears to truly scare him. Raphael is frustratingly evasive whenever he brings it up. Avoiding, obfuscating, and sometimes even outright refusing to answer. Sometimes it feels like he’s deliberately keeping Aziraphale in the dark, perhaps because he doesn’t want him to worry, or perhaps because he’s been ordered not to discuss it. Whatever the reason, it leaves Aziraphale feeling frustrated and worried, wishing he could do something, anything more to help his friend.

He gets word of the fight in the relic room several hours after it happened, by way of rumors carried to him by a chatty gardener. The minute he hears that Raphael may have been involved, he makes his way to the Halls of Healing.

Standing outside, the doors loom large before him, dark, and solid, and shut. Behind them he can hear the cries of the wounded, and the dying. Raphael is in there, he thinks. On any other day, that thought would bring him comfort. Raphael belongs in the Halls of Healing, after all. They are his place, as Eden is Aziraphale’s. But tonight… tonight angels have died, and the rumors swirling through the lower choirs say that Raphael and Michael are among the lost.

“Can I help you?”

He blinks. While he’d been hesitating at the doors, a healer had come up behind him and now stands impatiently, waiting for him to move out of her way. He knows her, he realizes, though he doesn’t remember her name. Raphael’s second in command.

“Um. I- that is…” He’s not sure if he’s allowed to be here now, but he can’t be anywhere else. Not if Raphael is hurt.
Something like recognition flickers in the healer’s eyes, and she frowns at him. “You’re… Aziraphale, right? Raphael’s… principality.”

“I- yes. Yes, that’s me. I heard… Well, they’re saying that Raphael is- that he’s…” he can’t make himself say the rest of the words.

The healer nods once. “Right then. Follow me. But if the archangels are still with him, you’d best wait outside. They’re touchy tonight.” She pushes past him and shoves the doors open, leading him down the long straight hallway to a series of rooms at the very back. Raphael’s private workrooms. She pauses at a doorway and looks in, then turns back to Aziraphale.

“Stay here. I’ll have someone come get you when they’re clear.”

Aziraphale grabs her arm as she starts to leave. She stops, looking first at his hand, and then at his face with a raised brow.

“Is he- will he…”

Somehow, she understands what he’s trying to ask. Her face softens. “He’s blessed stupid,” she says, with the long-suffering look of anyone who has spent significant time around Raphael at his worst. “And there’s no healing that. But he’ll be fine. Michael too.” Sorrow appears in her deep green eyes, and she glances at another closed door. “Would that I could say as much for the others.”

Aziraphale lets go of her, relief washing over him. “Thank you,” he tells her. “I… I was worried.”

She gives him a smile, and then disappears through the door, closing it behind her.

Alone, Aziraphale finds himself in a small anteroom to Raphael’s chambers. Large windows line the walls and ceiling, perfect for letting in as much light as possible during the day. Large pots and square boxes of earth line the walls, each one holding herbs and plants used for healing. How many times has he stood in this very spot, watching as Raphael tended to them, bathed in light? He always seems so content around his plants. Happy. So different from the other times Aziraphale has seen him lately when he thinks himself alone.

There had been a moment, weeks ago, that still unsettles him. He’d come in quietly to see Raphael
standing by the windows, eyes closed, face turned up towards the sun. The light had caught on the gold in his skin, throwing sparks from the glitter of it in his fire-red hair. He had sighed, as Aziraphale watched, a gentle smile lifting the corners of his lips, and for just that moment he had looked as young and carefree as the day they met. And then the smile faded, lines of care and worry returning to his face. A cloud passed in front of the sun, and the light faded from his skin, throwing his face into shadow. And Aziraphale had shivered, though Heaven was never cold, a dark feeling of foreboding settling in his core. And then the cloud was gone, sunlight chasing away the shadows. Raphael had opened his eyes and grinned at him, gesturing for him to come closer. But he still couldn’t escape the feeling in his gut that something was about to go very, very wrong.

He shakes the memory from his mind. Now is not the time to be inventing shadows. The healer had said that Raphael would be alright, and he must believe her. Still... it’s hard to stay positive when there’s nothing he can do. He fidgets with the clasps on his robes, wishing he’d brought something to do. He takes a deep breath, trying to steady himself. Raphael didn’t need him to be panicky and anxious. He needed him to be calm. Steady. Reliable.

“No!”

The shout comes from beyond the door into Raphael’s office. Aziraphale frowns, stepping closer.

“With all due respect, it’s not your call. He is my patient. And if you insist on being loud, I will ban you from the premises until he is well again.” That was the healer. The angry voice from before could have been Gabriel, or perhaps Sandalphon.

“You can’t tell me what to do, Virtue.” That was definitely Gabriel. Raphael must be unconscious, or else he would never dare to speak to a healer like that. In the Halls of Healing all are equal, never mind their choir. It makes no difference to Raphael that the healer is a Virtue and not a Seraphim, He promoted her for her skill, and not her rank. Even the lowest angel can have authority here, so long as they show Raphael they will do the work.

“She can.” That quiet voice belongs to Uriel, echoing his thoughts. “We have no rank here that matters. In this place, the healers’ word is law.”

Gabriel’s voice rises. “She can’t order us to leave. I won’t do it.”

“Do not forget,” the healer tells him, “you have another sibling in these halls. Your love of your brother is commendable, but he needs rest. I will tend to him, and call you if anything changes.”
“Come,” Uriel says. “Sandalphon says Michael is about to wake. We should be with her.”

“We should be here. I’m not leaving until he’s awake.” Aziraphale can picture Gabriel’s pout. Of Raphael’s younger siblings, he is the most attached to the bright healer. Sometimes Aziraphale thinks that Gabriel would be happiest if the world consisted of no one else but he and Raphael.

“Gabriel-” Uriel starts to argue, then falls silent. After a moment, she speaks again. “Michael has asked for us. We will go to her.”

Aziraphale hears a door open on the other side of the office, and then silence. Some time later, the healer opens the door to the antechamber.

He looks up then, expecting her to send him away as well, but she smiles and stands to the side of the door. “You can come in now,” she tells him, voice low. “Just be quiet. He’s asleep, and I want him to stay that way.”

“Asleep?” Aziraphale can’t help but show his surprise. Angels don’t sleep. They don’t need it like mortal creatures do. The closest they ever get is a meditative state used to recharge spent energy.

“He nearly died,” the healer says. “Stupid archangel. If the idiot would have just listened and let one of the others take over… but no. He had to play hero and try to keep three mortally wounded angels alive, and try to fight off attackers at the same time.” She throws a frustrated glare over her shoulder. “And he tells me Sandalphon is the reckless one.”

“But you said… he’s alright?” Behind the healer, he can see white sheets covering a motionless form, though from where he is standing the healer is blocking his view of Raphael’s face.

The healer reaches out and grasps his hand. “Come. It will do him good to be with you.”

She draws him into the office, closing the door behind him. The room has two other doors, and both are shut tight. She looks at one of them and sniffs. “You’ll be far better for him than those lunkheads.”

Aziraphale looks at her scandalized, and she laughs. He can see why Raphael likes her - they have the same sense of humor. “They’ve been in here for hours, getting in the way of everything.”
“If they’re a problem, why let them stay for so long, then?” he wants to know, watching her instead of looking at Raphael. He isn’t quite ready to face the fear of what he might see.

She sighs. “Because I am a healer. And they needed him.”

“They did?”

“They did,” she repeats. “I imagine you’ve seen it, haven’t you? He’s the heart of them.”

“Ah.” She was right. He is.

“They need to know he will be alright. So I let them stay for as long as I could. Until their presence here was doing more harm than good.”

“And you don’t think I will…?”

She shakes her head. “He needs you.”

Aziraphale wants to protest, but can’t quite find the words. He remembers darkened amber eyes, the way Raphael had looked up at him, just a few weeks ago in this very room. A noise from the bed distracts him. He looks toward his friend, and the breath catches in his throat.

Raphael is wrapped up in soft sheets, his hair spread across the pillows like a wave of fire. His skin is pale, almost bone-white, and his great golden wings are out and folded underneath him. His eyes are closed, but his face is far from peaceful. Lines of care stretch across his forehead and the corners of his eyes, while his mouth is twisted in a grimace of pain.

“Oh Raphael…” Aziraphale goes to him, hands fluttering above the covers, uncertain of what he can do.

“Nuh… mmph… ‘uci…’” Raphael turns his head, face scrunching in pain.

“Mm… A…. zira…” his hands clench tight around the sheets and he turns his head towards the sound of the angel’s voice.

“Yes, I’m here. I’m right here,” he tells him, touching his arm with hesitant fingers. “You need to rest now, my dear. Sleep.”

“’All… don’… don’ wan’…”

“Shh,” he whispers, “shh, quiet now Raphael. You’re okay now.”

His archangel twists, turning on the bed until the sheets fall away from his bandaged chest. The healer, concern in her eyes, moves to the other side of the bed, pressing down on his shoulder to keep him from thrashing and aggravating his wounds.

“Hold him still,” she orders. “He’s dreaming. He doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“Please!” The sharp cry is drawn from Raphael’s throat, a desperate sound, full of heartache and anguish.

“Shh, shh, it’s alright. Whatever it is, it’s gone, you’re safe.” Aziraphale leans across Raphael, using his own weight to hold him still. This close, he can smell the particular combination of ozone, hearth-fire, and healing herbs that always seems to cling to his friend. But now there is also the sharp tang of fear. And the metallic bite of blood.

He is nearly thrown from Raphael as the archangel twists violently, but he holds firm, pressing him down, holding him still. Raphael’s head rolls from side to side, tangles of copper hair flying, and they can see his wings straining under him as if attempting to take flight.

“Raphael, stop this,” the healer orders.

“Don’t!” the archangel’s hands reach out, stretching, seeking. Aziraphale catches them, tangling their fingers together and pressing his hands down against the bed.

Miraculously, he seems to settle, body going limp under them. “’Zira… don’ le’ me… don’ le’…”

“I won’t” Aziraphale tells him, though he doesn’t really understand what he’s asking for. “I won’t, dear one.”

A bit of the tension eases from his face. “Mm…. wan’… wan’ stay.” His words trail off into a soft mumble, and then he sighs, long and deep, and his breathing resumes an even pattern.

“I’ll stay,” Aziraphale promises him. “I’ll stay right here, for as long as you need.”

He’s still at Raphael’s side when he wakes the next morning. He’s watching, the moment the archangel’s eyelids twitch and he sighs, the first signs of awareness returning to his face. Slowly, he opens his eyes, looking up, and Aziraphale’s breath catches in his chest at the beauty of those wonderful golden eyes. Raphael blinks slowly, and then he smiles, a slow, sweet smile.

“Hey,” he says softly.

“Hello.” Aziraphale can’t help but smile back, relieved that he’s finally awake.

“I thought I felt you with me,” Raphael says, reaching out and brushing Aziraphale’s arm with gentle fingers. “I dreamed you were, at least.”

“I was here,” he tells him. “I wanted to heal you, but they told me it was too dangerous.” He’d argued with the healer over that, even offering his own power to feed hers if she could complete Raphael’s healing. But she had been insistent, and in the end, he had been forced to relent.

Raphael nods, the smile fading from his face. “They were right. The angels we fought, they had… tainted weapons. Obsidian blades, like nothing we’ve seen before. The wounds they left…” he
……touches the bandages on his chest. “It will take more than raw power to heal this.”

“Was it… do you know *why* they attacked?” Aziraphale asks him. He knows what the rumors say, but he doesn’t want to believe them.

Raphael shakes his head. “We think they wanted something in the relic room, but we’re not sure what.”

He frowns. He can tell Raphael is holding something back. More information he doesn’t want to share. “I wish you would let me help you,” he says sadly.

His bright archangel smiles at him, reaching out and taking his hand. “You help me by staying safe,” he tells him. “It helps me to know that, whatever happens, you won’t be harmed.”

“But I’ve trained as a soldier,” Aziraphale protests. “I can fight at your side.”

“I know,” Raphael says, calm despite the fear the angel can feel in him. “And it means a lot that you’re willing to help. But the best thing you can do for now is keep Eden safe.”

“I… alright.” He’s not going to push. Especially not now, when Raphael has only just started to recover from his wounds. He squeezes the archangel’s hand in his. “I just worry about you, my dear.”

“I’ll be fine,” he assures him. But somehow, Aziraphale isn’t convinced. Raphael lets his head fall back against the pillows, sighing, and his hand slips free to lie on the covers over his chest. An uncomfortable silence falls between them and Aziraphale tries to find something, anything, to say to break it. Eventually, his eyes fall on the archangel’s hands, and in particular the band of gold around the fourth finger of his left hand.

“Why do you wear that?” he asks, tapping the ring. On closer inspection, he sees a design of angel wings, curled around the finger to meet at the tips. There’s a slightly lighter tone to the gold on the wings, in the same place as Raphael’s ink-drip pattern, and a crest at the base of the wings holds the sigils of all six archangels. “I’ve never seen you without it.”

“Mm?” Raphael lifts his hand, examining the band. “We all have one. Lucifer gave them to us, each on the day we were born. To mark us, not just as archangels, but as a family.” He slips it from
his finger, and offers it to Aziraphale to examine. “The crest changes,” he says, drawing a finger across it. “Whenever one of us is born. The day I got mine, there were only three sigils.”

“Oh.” He takes it, feeling the weight of it in his hand, surprisingly heavy for something so small. “It’s beautiful.” He reverently touches the pattern on the wings, admiring how faithfully it replicates the larger pattern of Raphael’s feathers.

“It is, isn’t it?” Raphael takes it back when Aziraphale offers it, sliding it back onto his finger. “Lucifer has a great deal of talent for creation.” A sad, pensive look settles onto his face.

“Raphael?” Aziraphale asks, putting a hand on the archangel’s arm.

“I just… I wish I knew where he was,” Raphael tells him, eyes on the crest of his ring. “I miss him.”

Aziraphale covers his hand with his own. “I’m sure he’ll return soon.”

“Yeah,” Raphael nods, then meets his eyes, smiling. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Aziraphale returns the smile, relieved to see it. “Until then, though, he’d want you to take better care of yourself,” he tells his friend, looking pointedly at the bandages across Raphael’s chest. “I doubt he’d be very happy if he returned to find you wounded.”

The archangel laughs, and a little more of Aziraphale’s worry floats away at the bright sound. He’ll be okay. The alternative is… unthinkable.

Something is wrong. He can feel it in the air. In the way Eden has gone quiet, as if not even the insects dare to make a sound. The sky above is dark with clouds, in a way he has never seen before. Fire burns behind the clouds, and he can feel the call to arms in his Grace. He wants to follow it. To leave the Garden and return to Heaven. Not because he truly wants to fight, no, but because he needs to find Raphael. He remembers his words, just days ago, the last time they had really spoken. *I may have to go away for a while.* This was what he had been so afraid of then, Aziraphale is sure of it.
Power explodes, deep in the Garden. The forest _shakes_ with the force of it, and Aziraphale is running before he even realizes he means to move. He can feel it now, a vast power, tainted, violent, raging in the heart of Eden. As he nears, he can hear shouting. Screaming. The power pushes back against him, overwhelming in its strength. Every step nearer to the source is a struggle. And then he recognizes a voice inside the anguished cries.

“NO!” Raphael’s voice. He would know it anywhere. He runs forward, intent on stopping whatever it is that’s causing his friend pain, only to be brought up short by a wall of flames. They seem to expand as another voice beyond the fire _screams_, almost inarticulate with rage. Aziraphale can’t quite make out the words, swamped as they are with infernal power. The flames rise higher and higher, until suddenly they collapse in a flash of bright light, flooding inward as the very fabric of reality shudders and cries out around them.

The first thing Aziraphale sees, as the spots clear from his eyes, is a demon rising from the flames, glowing carmine skin illuminating six featherless wings, dripping blood and the thick black ichor of a Fallen angel. The creature _howls_, rage and pain and loss torn from its throat in a single, wordless cry. The flames rise around it in a wave, bright and sulfur-blue, before crashing down over a smaller figure in the demon’s shadow. A bright figure of red-and-gold, infinitely familiar.

“You WILL FALL!” the demon screams, and the flames surround the bright figure, tainting his gold with a greenish hue as he falls to his knees in the earth. The flames rise around him again, driving him further down, pressing him into the dirt.

“Brother, _please_,” the angel cries out, and Aziraphale’s horrified brain finally catches up with his eyes.

“Raphael!” he breathes, terrified, frozen in fright at the scene before him. The demon - _Lucifer_, he realizes - it can only be Lucifer with that much power and barely contained malice - turns, and he shrinks away from the mad light in those eyes like a bottomless pit.

“Oh look, we have a guest,” the first of the archangels says, a predatory smile crossing his face. Aziraphale forces himself to stand still, though his hands shake and his knees feel weak and made of rubber. He doesn’t understand what he’s seeing. He doesn’t _want_ to understand.

“You’re dealing with _ME_!” Raphael shouts, crying out in pain as he fights against Lucifer’s power, hands stretching out towards his staff on the ground six feet away. “Aziraphale, _RUN_!”

Aziraphale reaches for his own sword instinctively, stepping forward, his only thought to protect his friend. “Raphael, what-?” he can’t quite find the words he needs. Can’t make himself
understand what’s happening here.

“Did you come to watch him Fall?” Lucifer asks, focusing the full force of his infernal gaze on Aziraphale, who want to shrink under the force of it. He can’t. Raphael needs him. He stands strong, gripping his sword tightly in both hands. The Morning Star laughs, a low rumble of amusement that is somehow even more terrifying than the bottomless pits that had once been his eyes. “Come closer, little one.”

Aziraphale lifts his sword, terrified but determined.

“No you don’t,” Raphael says, voice strained as he struggles against some invisible weight pinning him to the ground. He makes a gesture, and a wall of power forms between the archangels and Aziraphale. The principality looks at him, and meets wide amber-gold eyes. There’s something desperate there, in those wonderful bright eyes. Something Aziraphale has never seen there before. Fear. Fear... and defeat. His friend wretches on the ground, pinned by sulfurous flames and a power Aziraphale cannot quite see. His white robes are stained and charred, smoldering under the pale blue fire. His hair, usually so artfully maintained, is in disarray, copper locks falling across his face, tangled with leaves and dirt from the forest floor. And his wings. His beautiful, golden wings are burning, flames slowly spreading out from his back, leaving charred black feathers where once there had been brilliant white and gold.

“Leave Raphael alone!” Aziraphale shouts, though his voice and hands both shake. He should be watching Lucifer, preparing for the attack he knows is coming, but he can’t tear his eyes away from Raphael’s desperate face.

The archangel struggles, trying to rise only to fall back to the earth, his own eyes locked on Aziraphale. Then he sighs, and for a moment the panic clears from his face, replaced by determination. He meets Aziraphale’s eyes, and, impossibly he smiles. It’s the same genuine, kind, beautiful smile that Aziraphale has loved since the very first time he saw him. It feels wrong, here where the very air is saturated with fear and rage. And then Raphael speaks, and the tremor in his voice turns Aziraphale’s blood to ice.

“Aziraphale. Go. I’ll be alright.”

He doesn’t have a chance to react. The warmth of Raphael’s power wraps around him, pushing at him, sending him away. He watches, struggling against it, as that beautiful smile collapses into pain and the fires rise up again around his bright archangel. And then he’s in Heaven, a tortured cry ringing in his ears.
“NO!” He stumbles forward, reaching out for an archangel that is now light-years away. “No.” He says it quieter this time, already scanning the room, getting his bearings.

“You! Soldier!” A sergeant with unfortunate-looking facial hair barks at him, stalking over from a table piled high with uniforms and Heavenly weapons.

“Michael!” Aziraphale calls out, ignoring the sergeant, looking around for any of the archangels. “I need Michael. Or Gabriel! Where are they?”

The sergeant glares at him with open disdain. “The archangels are already on their way to the battlefield, which is also where you should be, soldier.”

“I need to speak with them. Now,” he demands, and something in his voice makes the sergeant pause. “Raphael’s been attacked,” he says quickly. “In Eden. He sent me to get help.” Not exactly true, since Raphael hadn’t given him any instructions, but damn it all if Aziraphale was just going to leave him.

That gets him attention. “We need to send as many angels as we can to the Garden. Lucifer had him by the Tree. I don’t know how much longer he can hold out—” the sergeant isn’t listening to him anymore. He turns around, barking orders to the other angels assembled there. Runners are sent out to find the archangels. A platoon is deployed to the Garden to hold Lucifer back until the archangels can be summoned. When Aziraphale tries to go with them the sergeant holds him back, demanding he remain until Michael herself can question him.

Soon, they appear, all four of the remaining archangels, led by one of the messengers the sergeant had sent out. When she sees him, Michael heads straight for Aziraphale.

“What happened?” she demands, icy eyes flashing.

“I- there was-” he stops. Takes a breath. Tries again. They need complete information, not frightened ramblings. “I found Lucifer and Raphael by the Tree of Knowledge. Lucifer had Raphael pinned down. I tried to intervene, and Raphael sent me away.”

“Are you sure it was them?” Michael demands, and he can see the way her knuckles have gone white on the hilt of her sword.
“Positive,” he nods. “We need to get to him. I don’t- it was- I don’t know how much longer Raphael can hold him back.”

The archangels share a look, one he doesn’t like.

“Gabriel,” Michael barks. Gabriel stands straighter, awaiting her orders. “Send your soldiers to support the gates. Sandalphon, Uriel, order yours to push forward and maintain the offensive. We need to push them back from the gates. Make sure they know who to answer to.

“We don’t have time for that!” Aziraphale protests. “Lucifer was torturing him! He was-” he stops, a pit opening in his stomach at the blankness in Michael’s eyes. “You- you all can feel him, can’t you?” he asks shakily, remembering the bond the six of them share. “You know he’s- he’s holding him off?”

“He cut himself from our minds,” Michael tells him. “We cannot sense him now. You three,” she turns back to her siblings. “Go. Meet me at the Western Gate.”

“Michael-” he starts, but the look on her face makes him stop. For the first time since he’s known her, there isn’t even a hint of warmth in her gaze. She is Heaven’s Warrior, a creature of steel and ice, and her very expression demands that she be obeyed.

“Go back to your post, Principality,” she says, and turns away. Then she pauses, glancing back at him, and for just a moment that icy expression cracks. She looks about to say something, but then her eyes close and the crack is gone. She strides from the room, a battalion of soldiers following in her wake.

Aziraphale returns to his post by the Eastern Gate. He can no longer feel another presence in the Garden. Eden is quiet, but it’s the quiet of a forest before a storm, not the unnatural stillness from before. He passes the time anxiously, alternating between staring up at the bright flashes of lightning that signal the war in Heaven and pacing the wall like a caged tiger. Every time he stops to think, all he can see are Raphael’s wide frightened eyes, and the way he had smiled, there at the end. Every part of him screams to return to Heaven, to search for Raphael, just to know that he’s alright. He can still feel his love, warm and comforting, but he’s never been a part of Raphael’s mind. His own sea-blue eyes will never fade to gold with Raphael’s voice in his head. He cannot reach for him inside, to know whether he is scared or hurt or angry. Cannot call out to his mind and offer his own love and support.
He’s pacing again when it happens. Something shivers in the air. He stops, eyes drawn skyward to a lone shooting star. The very fabric of reality *screams* at him, and that warm sense of love - of Raphael’s specific love, evaporates.

He cries out from the loss of it, falling to his knees. “Raphael!” he shouts it, knowing and refusing to accept what it means. “No. Oh please, God, no.”

In desperation he reaches out, panicking, stretching with all of his senses for that warm, comforting love. He strains, going as far as his power can reach, finding nothing but empty air. He cries out again, stretching further, knowing it’s hopeless, and then - there. Faint. Like an echo. Fading, but there.

“Stay with me,” he begs it, latching on, anchoring that love to himself and holding on with everything he has. “Stay.”

It flickers. Guttering out like a candle. Small and weak and so very dim.

“No!” he holds it tighter, drawing it back to himself. “Come back to me, Raphael. You promised. You promised to try.”

The love shivers around him, and falls back into place. He can feel it. Distant. Flickering. But there.

Two days later, another angel arrives to take his place. She looks at him with tired eyes, missing all of the primaries on one wing, a bloodied bandage around her head, and tells him he’s to report in. The Heaven he returns to is… different. Very few angels he passes are uninjured, and anyone not in the middle of some important task sits watching the world with haunted eyes. The fighting is still raging at the gates - almost to the administration buildings now, taking over the park where Raphael showed him how to feel his love, staining the white marble with ichor and turning the water of the fountains to blood.

Aziraphale is sent to the front lines, replacing a platoon leader that had just been killed. “On orders from Gabriel himself,” the sergeant tells him, a little awed. Aziraphale just nods and accepts his orders. He’s never killed anything. He doesn’t know that he can. But he will do his best, because
that is what he’s been ordered to do. And if he takes the opportunity to look for bright red and gold on the field? That’s nothing anyone else needs to know.

The battle is… it’s Hell. At least, it’s everything he’s always been told Hell could be. The screams of wounded and dying angels. Demons - twisted, horrifying creatures that hardly resemble the angels they once were - screeching and flying in to attack when lest expected. Angels falling where they stand, bodies twisting and writhing until they become something entirely unrecognizable and turn on those they had been fighting beside. Orders being shouted over the screams, as beings of immense cosmic power come together in a clash for survival. After, he remembers very little of it. Snatches of sound. Blood. Gold and black ichor staining the ground around him. Bodies lying where they fell, the fighting too fierce to send anyone in to remove them.

Once, he finds himself with a sword pointed at a demon’s throat. The creature looks up at him from the bloody grass with wide, frightened eyes, and for a moment all he can see is Raphael on the ground in Eden. He lowers his sword, just in time for another of his platoon to sever the demon’s head from its body. He turns from it, retching, blood on his clothes and skin and hair. The battle moves on around him, drawing him with it. He fights now just to stay alive, blocking, slashing, body moving the way he trained it, doing what his God orders him to do. He’s constantly looking around him, searching in vain for a flash of red-and-gold, ears straining for the call of that familiar, beloved voice.

And then, the battlefield falls silent. Above, so high up he can barely see them, two bright figures rise in battle. Red-and-black and blue-and-silver. Lucifer and Michael. Flaming swords clash, the fire spiraling out away from them as they dive and dodge in aerial combat. Their power blazes like twin suns, hot and bright and burning. They clash together again and again, neither one seeming to gain the upper hand. And then the blue figure rises, rocketing upward at an impossible speed. For a moment she seems to hang in the air above her brother. And then, she dives. Her sword flashes. Once. Twice. Three times. And Lucifer falls in a ball of flame.

His fall is not graceful. No elegant dive down to Hell. It is quick and brutal, the fall of a boulder, trailing blood and broken wings behind him until he crashes into the center of the battlefield. His body comes to rest for less than a second as the shockwave of his impact knocks them all from their feet. Then the ground opens under him and he plummets further, a million-light-year drop down into the deepest pit of Hell. Around Aziraphale demons cry out as the ground swallows them as well, sucking them down after their lord and master. The sound swells around him, a great cacophony of noise, until it begins to dwindle and die, and the last demon is sent screaming to its damnation.

There is time, then, to take stock of the damage. To see who has survived, and who has not. Wearily, Aziraphale gathers his platoon, weeping for those they lost over the long days of fighting. He took a wound in his leg at some point, he doesn’t remember when, but his leg is caked with his own dried blood and ichor. Once he’s settled his soldiers, he sees himself to the healers’ tents. He looks around when he arrives, expecting to see Raphael’s vibrant red hair and amber eyes in the center of it all. He should be here, ordering his healers about with a firm but gentle hand. Instead,
his second is standing there, green eyes rimmed in red as she directs the operation. She inclines her head when she sees him, but he knows she cannot stop just for him.

A junior healer attends him, but refuses to answer any of his questions. Any mention of Raphael is met with pained looks and stony silence. After his third attempt, he sees tears in the young angel’s eyes and stops trying. He’ll have to get his information another way.

They keep him overnight, concerned about infection in the leg wound they don’t have enough people to heal fully. Not with thousands of wounded angels to see to, and a limited number of powerful healers. He cannot heal it himself, either. He’s as drained as all the others, having spent all his power in battle just to keep alive. As a platoon leader, he gets a bed inside the Halls of Healing, where junior healers occasionally check his wound, changing the bandages when needed and making sure he keeps it clean. He turns off his body’s pain receptors, preferring not to feel the sting of it as the night wears on. It’s boring, sitting there, listening to the sounds of the wounded. Having nothing to do starts to drive him crazy, there in the dim room without even someone to talk to as all the other patients have gone to sleep. He fidgets, shifting in his bed, trying to find something, anything to distract him from his own thoughts, until he can’t take it anymore. The healers frown at him when he stands, but they don’t stop him from taking a walk once he agrees to the crutches they all but shove into his hands.

He makes his slow, wobbling way down the hall, searching for any hint of red-and-gold. He can still feel his love, so very faintly now, but it gives him no direction. No idea of where to look. So he starts at the doors and works his way back, carefully checking each room. He finds nothing, nothing at all, until he reaches Raphael’s workrooms at the very back of the building. There, the doors stand open, wide enough that he can see the small cluster of people inside. He recognizes Gabriel’s back, and Sandalphon beside him. He does not see Uriel or Raphael, but Michael sits at Raphael’s desk, wincing as his second stitches up a gash along her arm. She looks... terrible. Bandages cover one whole side of her face, while her left arm is splinted and held up by a sling. More bandages are clear under her robes, wrapped around her chest and sides. Another roll of bandages sits ready for the healer to finish her work on Michael’s other arm.

Worse, even, than the physical wounds, is the expression in her one uncovered eye. She looks... vacant. Staring ahead, focused on nothing at all.

“I promised him,” she says dully. “I said he would not Fall.”

“You couldn’t have stopped it,” Sandalphon tells her, his own voice uncharacteristically small and lost. “He made his choice, he said as much when we came for him.”

“You can’t believe what that- that thing said,” Gabriel snaps. “That wasn’t our brother anymore.”
Aziraphale winces. Of course. They just lost Lucifer. He’d been missing for months, but Raphael had said they still had hope he would return. He should go. Keep looking for Raphael. Leave them to mourn on their own.

“You avenged Raphael’s death,” Sandalphon says, words sending ice down Aziraphale’s spine. “You kept Lucifer from taking any more of us.”

Aziraphale freezes. *Avenged Raphael?* One of his crutches falls from suddenly numb hands. “What-?”

Three pairs of eyes turn to look at him. Michael turns her face away.

“Aziraphale,” Gabriel says flatly. “Why are you here?”

“I was-” he gulps, shrinking under that cool violet gaze. “I was looking for Raphael.”

“Well, you won’t find him here,” Gabriel snaps. “He’s gone.”

Roaring fills his ears, like the sound of a solar flare. “Gone?” he asks in a small voice. “Gone where?”

“He’s dead.” That was Sandalphon, bleak and hopeless and lost.

“No.” Aziraphale shakes his head. He can still feel him. He *can’t* be dead. “No. No no no no no.” He won’t believe it. “He can’t be.” He looks from Sandalphon, to Gabriel, to the healer, to Michael. None of them will meet his eyes.

“Aziraphale,” the healer says. “Perhaps you should sit down.”

“No,” he takes a step backward, away from the hard, cold eyes of Gabriel and Sandalphon, and the sorrowful gaze of the healer. “I don’t-”
“It’s true,” Gabriel says, no emotion in his voice. “He Fell. In Eden. Where he should never have been. If he’d been with us - but, well.” He gives Aziraphale a humorless smile. “He chose to go to you instead. And look where that got him.”

Aziraphale’s legs give out, and he lands on the floor with a thump. “No, that can’t be right. I can feel…” he reaches out for his warm love, but… it’s so faint. Still, even that must mean he’s alive… mustn’t it? “He- he promised.” He promised he’d come back to me, he thinks. No matter what. But no. He hadn’t promised that. He’d only promised to try. He thinks of wide, amber-gold eyes, filled with fear. Of one last smile, collapsing into terror and pain.

“You didn’t even try to help him,” Sandalphon snarls. “You just turned and ran. We would have fought for him. We would have died to keep him here.”

“He- he sent me to you,” Aziraphale protests. “He sent me away.”

“And he used the last of his power to do it,” Gabriel says, still with that deadly, emotionless calm. “He had none left to defend himself. Without it, he Fell.”

“No.” Something inside him is screaming. “No, he can’t have- I can still feel him, he can’t- he couldn’t-” He remembers the demons on the battlefield. Twisted fiends, leaking black tar-like ichor, eyes dark and soulless, foul, tainted, infernal things. He can’t imagine Raphael - his bright, shining Raphael - as one of them.

“He Fell,” Gabriel repeats ruthlessly. “And we killed him, rather than let him be taken by Hell.”

It feels like the world has been pulled out from under his feet. Like Gabriel just ripped a hole in the fabric of reality. He can’t breathe. He looks at Michael, who is now watching him with one dull silver-blue eye.

‘It’s not true,” he says, desperate, grasping for that faint love he can still feel. “Tell me it’s not true.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, voice breaking. “He’s dead. I failed him.”

A sob tears its way from Aziraphale’s chest. A great, shuddering, wounded sound. He can still feel his love, but… the truth is written plain on Michael’s face. The broken expression in her eyes.
What he can feel - what he has been so desperately clinging to - it’s just an echo, he realizes. An echo of what Raphael once felt. The only thing he has left of the archangel he loved. There, on the floor of the Halls of Healing, under the cold, hard gaze of Raphael’s siblings, the principality Aziraphale falls apart.

Chapter End Notes

Now rebloggable from my writing tumblr, where I also do WIP Wednesday and post writing updates.
Come say hi on my personal tumblr!

Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
2. Chapter 13 - healing the sparrow
3. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
4. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
5. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
6. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
7. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
8. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
9. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
10. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
11. Chapter 13 - Azreal and the first victim in the war
12. Chapter 14 - Talking with Michael
13. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
14. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
15. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Memories - Part 2

Chapter Notes

Ok, so this chapter is a bit of a monster. I actually had to delete something like 5,000 words because it was waaaay too long. I'm sorry it took so long to get up, but I hope you enjoy the rest of Aziraphale's thoughts.

Thank you so much, everyone who commented and/or left kudos. I had a really rough couple weeks, and hearing from you really helped me get through them.

Also. Guys. Please go look at this amazing art from tsukiahiru, over on tumblr. They did this absolutely adorable work of art for the flashback in which Raphael teaches Aziraphale to heal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aziraphale returns to Eden. He cannot stand the emptiness of Heaven, where once-crowded halls now echo with silence. Half of all angels are gone, Fallen or dead. And those that remain seem… lost. Like they’re missing more than just other angels. It doesn’t help that there isn’t any physical damage to Heaven. No marks of battle adorn the cold, white walls. No broken weaponry can be found on the battlefields, now grown over with perfect green grass. There are no burned buildings. No scorched roofs or shattered windows. Heaven is quiet. Serene. As if the worst violence in all existence hadn’t been wrought at its very gates just days ago. With all who remain now healed, they could almost pretend nothing had changed. And yet, there is the emptiness. The choir-mates suddenly and violently ripped from their sides. The friends and partners vanishing, killed in battle or sent to join the ranks of Hell at the end of the War. The silence of it unnerves Aziraphale. The echoes in the hallways send a sharp spike of pain through his essence. There is no laughter in Heaven anymore. He does not know if there ever will be again.

Worst of all, though, are the ice-cold eyes of the archangels watching him. Only Michael doesn’t seem to blame him for Raphael’s Fall, but even she cannot look him in the eyes. When they send him back to the Eastern Gate, he does not question it. It is a relief to return to the warmth of Eden, to the color and the noise of the Garden he knows so well. The fighting never got this far. No armies ever clashed among the trees of Eden. No siege took place at the Garden walls. The only hint of the War here is the scorched dirt on the ground by the Tree of Knowledge, the place where Raphael fell.

Aziraphale avoids it. The first time he went to check on the Tree, all he could see was Raphael’s wide amber eyes, surrounded by blue fire. Raphael’s hand, reaching out to him. That last smile, when he sent him away. The way his expression had crumbled into desperation, there at the very end. That last sight haunts him, floating in the darkness before him whenever he closes his eyes. There was nothing he could have done. He knows this. It doesn’t mean he shouldn’t have at least tried. That he couldn’t have fought harder to remain at his side until the end.
He wanders the pathways of the Garden, and in it he finds only echoes of Raphael, like the faint remnants of his love he can still feel even now. The bank of a stream now covered in forget-me-not, where the archangel taught him how to heal. The grove of flowers, where Raphael had laughed and held him close. The cave where bats had climbed on the archangel and roosted in his fiery hair. The place where Michael had confronted him, wanting to know his intentions. The spot on the wall where Raphael had made him promise to remain who he was. Everywhere he looks, there are shadows of Raphael. And every time he turns his head, he finds himself looking for that bright flash of red-and-gold.

It’s a week after his return to Eden, that he senses something new in the Garden. A presence he does not recognize. A presence radiating pain, projecting its white-hot agony in mindless panic. He follows the ache of it through the forest, until he comes upon an animal he had never seen before. A snake, of a sort. Larger than those he’s seen before, black and red - Lucifer’s colors. The closer he gets, the stronger the sense of agony. This creature, whatever it is, is in unimaginable pain. It twists around on itself, hissing, writhing in the dirt. Blood and black ichor stain the ground around the serpent, marking it as a demon, and Aziraphale almost turns away when he sees it, reaching for his flaming sword. But then the serpent opens its eyes for just a moment, and he meets the wide, frightened, golden gaze. Like that demon he couldn’t kill on the battlefield. Like Raphael, helpless in the dirt of Eden.

“Oh dear,” he says quietly, releasing his grip on his flaming sword. “You’re not supposed to be here.” Gently, he picks the serpent up, being careful of the many terrible burns and lacerations he can see on its scales. He reaches for its life pattern, the way Raphael taught him, and finds a mess of grey and broken lines. Very little of a healthy gold remains, and even that is fading as he watches. He could do nothing, and the demon would die in his hands. One more victim of the war. He’s certain that’s what the archangels would want him to do. What he should do. But… he can’t. Even if it is a demon, he cannot just stand by and let it die.

He starts with the worst wounds. A terrible gash across the serpent’s neck, just below its head, half-cauterized by whatever burned it so badly. A ragged, burned puncture that pierced the serpent through. A deep slice carved into its side. Horrible burns that span the length of its belly, weeping black ichor and pus. The serpent’s pattern fights him, rejecting his healing light. In his hands, he can feel the small body shaking, squirming in mindless fear, trying to get away.

“Poor thing,” he murmurs. “It’s alright now, you’re safe.” At the sound of his voice, something changes. The resistance in the pattern fades, allowing his power to feed into the broken lines, a bright healing blue to chase away the grey. He lets it flow, pouring it into the broken pattern, running his fingers along the demon’s scales to direct the power to where it is most needed. Wherever he touches, lines of the pattern come together, healing the wounds in the demon’s body. Then his fingers hit something, perhaps a bruise, and the serpent jerks, hissing and recoiling from his hand.
“Oh, oh dear, I’m sorry, did that hurt you?” He stops, then adjusts his grip until he can resume the healing with only the lightest touches. “Hang on, just a little more and you’ll be done,” he assures the demon. When he speaks, its trembling eases and his power flows easier through the pattern, so he keeps talking. “I know I’m not a true healer, but I can’t exactly take you to them, now can I? If Raphael were still here, he would heal you. But I don’t think the other healers would, and it’s probably best not to chance it. I do wonder how you got into the Garden though. I mean, it is on Earth, so I suppose that does make it accessible to Hell. But I had rather thought She would keep your kind out. But if that’s true, then that rather argues that you’re meant to be here for some reason. And that’s just silly, isn’t it?” If he pauses in his monologue the demon’s pattern begins to resist him again, so he continues rambling in this manner as he works, not even truly thinking about his words, until the demon’s scales are whole and undamaged.

“There,” he says, finding a rock under a warm ray of sun and placing the small body on the heated stone. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

Instantly, the demon rears up on its coils, hissing as it glares at him with bright yellow-gold eyes. “You sssssssshouldn’t have done that,” it hisses. “Don’t you know what I am?”

He had expected that reaction. The archangels said there was nothing of Heaven left in the demons. Gratitude was a heavenly trait. A virtue. It stood to reason the serpent would not be capable of feeling anything like thankful for his actions.

“You’re a demon,” he says calmly. “That’s not a reason not to help you, though.” Demon or no, this was a being that was in pain. He’d seen those anguished, frightened eyes, and couldn’t turn away. He won’t allow himself to regret that.

The serpent laughs at him, a harsh, grating sound. “Angel,” it hisses, “that’sss the only reason.”

Instead of getting angry, Aziraphale smiles. “I’m a principality,” he tells it, remembering the lesson Raphael had taught him. “I’m supposed to care about everything. I don’t see why that doesn’t include demons.”

“Don’t,” the demon snaps, uncoiling itself and sliding off the rock and into the grass. “Don’t- hssssss- don’t care about me.”

A strange urge seizes the angel as he watches the serpent vanish into the forest. “Wait,” he calls. “What’s your name?”
He does not get a reply.

Hours later, he hears another voice calling him. He turns, looking, to find Uriel approaching him along the base of the wall. She looks… terrible. Her skin is washed out, pale and dry. Her robes hang from her frame, too loose, and she watches him with red-rimmed brown eyes. He hasn’t seen her since the end of the war, and now, looking at her, he wonders if she had left the battlefield even once, before this very moment.

“Aziraphale,” she greets him, meeting his gaze for only a moment before looking away.

“Uriel. It’s… good to see you.”

She closes her eyes. “Then you must not know what I did.”

“I…” Aziraphale frowns, confused. “I suppose I don’t.” He blinks, looking closer, and sees fresh tear tracks on her face. “Are- are you alright?”

“No.” She turns her face away. “I am not.”

“Can… can I help?” he asks, worried for her. He’s never seen her so despondent. He remembers her as full of energy, always teasing Raphael and their siblings, possessing the same boundless curiosity as the bright healer.

“I didn’t come to you for help,” she tells him.

“Oh.”

He watches as she comes closer, extending a closed fist to him. “I am not worthy of this,” she says, and turns her hand over, uncurling her fingers around a bright ring of gold. “None of my siblings
Aziraphale gasps, recognizing the shape of it - wings flaring out from a central crest, curling around to meet at the tip. The pattern of lighter gold along the tops of the wings, like drips of ink over the feathers. "Raphael’s ring." He looks for hers, an almost-identical band but for the pattern on the wings - darker bands of color in deliberate spots where Uriel’s own feathers grow dark blue. Her fingers are bare.

Uriel nods, holding it out to him. "You tried to help, at the end. You sent us to him. You should not have done that."

He reaches out, taking the ring in trembling hands. "I… I should have stayed with him," he admits, feeling tears well up behind his eyes. "I shouldn’t have left him alone."

"There’s much we all should have done," she says to him. "But it is far too late now."

"Yes. You’re right." Aziraphale clutches the ring close to his chest. "Are you… are you sure I should have this?"

"No," Uriel shakes her head. "I am not. But he would have wanted it to go to you."

"Then… thank you. I… it means a lot. To have something to remember him by."

She inclines her head. Throughout the whole conversation, she has not looked him in the eyes for more than a second.

"Uriel…"

"Goodbye, Aziraphale," she says quickly, before he can say anything else. "I hope I do not see you again." Then, she disappears in a flash of light.

He looks at the ring in his hand, and considers it, running a finger along the ink-drip pattern of the wings. "Oh, my dear one…" The crest has changed, he notices. No longer does it carry the sigil of six archangels. Instead, it holds one. Raphael’s. He slides the ring onto his little finger, where it fits.
like it was made to rest there. He presses a kiss to the cold metal of the sigil, feeling that faint echo of love around him, and swallows back his tears.

It’s a few days later that he sees the demon again. He’s standing on the wall, watching Adam and Eve leave Eden when he catches a flash of red and gold at the corner of his eye. He turns, and for just a second he sees familiar amber-gold eyes and bright white-and-gold wings. A surge of joy rises up in him, and he starts to reach out. And then he blinks. And... the red is too dark. The gold, too yellow. The wings a pure, dark black instead of white with drops of gold. The lines of him are wrong too, too harsh, full of sharp, un-blunted angles where Raphael’s had always been hidden by a touch of gentleness, just below the surface.

“Well, that went down like a lead balloon,” the demon says, watching the departing humans.

Aziraphale chuckles nervously, suddenly aware that this is a creature that could kill him without a second thought. True, he’s almost certain this is the same demon he healed a few days before, but that won’t stop him from attacking. Not if demons are truly as terrible as the archangels claim. And this one is the very reason the humans are currently making their way across the hot sand.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” he asks, realizing he didn’t actually hear what the demon had said.

“I said, well that went down like a lead balloon,” he tells him, fixing him with those bright yellow-gold eyes for just a moment before turning to look out at the humans.

Aziraphale watches him carefully, though he tries to make it look like he’s watching Adam and Eve. “Yes, yes it did, rather,” he says, wondering what he ought to do. Gabriel would demand he smite the demon on sight, but he no longer has that flaming sword, and, truthfully, he doesn’t want to smite him. He would much rather just be left alone to grieve.

“Bit of an overreaction, if you ask me,” the demon continues. “First offense and everything.” He looks at Aziraphale, squinting in the bright sun, and leans in a little, like he’s confiding in a friend. “I can’t see what’s so bad about knowing the difference between Good and Evil anyway.” He watches for the angel’s reaction, and Aziraphale is reminded painfully of the way Raphael would look at him after he’d told one of his jokes, just waiting to see what he would do.

He shifts uncomfortably, letting his fingers find Raphael’s ring, grounding himself with the solidity
of it. “Well it must be bad…” he blinks, realizing he still doesn’t know the demon’s name.

“Crawly,” his companion replies, before he can ask for it.

“Crawly. Otherwise… you wouldn’t have… tempted them into it.” He looks away from that golden gaze that is nowhere near the shade he wants to see, back out over the shifting sands of the desert.

Crawly shrugs. “Ah, they just said ‘get up there and make some trouble’,” he tells him, but he won’t look him in the eye.

“Well, obviously, you’re a demon. It’s what you do.” He doesn’t ask if Hell sent him up to Eden so badly wounded, or if the passage up from Hell was what caused it. It doesn’t make much difference either way, neither option is a good one. And demons are not good creatures. They are terrible, tainted things. Things that chose War over Peace. Violence, over Compassion. Hate, over Love. They are - wide golden eyes and a last beautiful smile, wings burning black on the ground of Eden.

“Not very subtle of the Almighty though,” Crawly says, unknowingly echoing an old argument Raphael had once made. “Fruit tree in the middle of a garden with a ‘Don’t Touch’ sign, eh? I mean, why not put it on top of a high mountain? Or on the moon?”

Aziraphale refuses to look at him, afraid of what tricks his eyes might play on him with this scarlet-and-gold demon standing here, asking him questions. Raphael is dead, he reminds himself. Whatever else, Michael would not have lied to you about that.

“Makes you wonder what God’s really planning,” the demon continues, completely oblivious to Aziraphale’s inner turmoil.

“Best not to speculate,” he says, thinking of the fate of the last person he knew who had. “It’s all part of the Great Plan. It’s not for us to understand. It’s… ineffable.” Gabriel had gone on at length about it, after the War, when the archangels had gathered the survivors together to discuss what happened next. The Metatron had provided a book, in which, he said, God had written Her Great Plan. Gabriel had read passages from it, bits of things that had already happened, hints of what was to come. He had spoken of another War, worse than the last, when they could finally avenge those they had lost to Satan’s treachery, and the blood-lust in his eyes had been frightening.
“The Great Plan’s ineffable?” Crawly exclaims, sounding incredulous.

“Exactly,” Aziraphale tells him, hoping that will be the end of it. “It is beyond understanding, and incapable of being put into words.” There were words. In a book on the Metatron’s desk. A thin, leather-bound volume with a dented cover. A book he’s almost sure he saw Raphael carrying a time or two. But he doesn’t think those words are the whole of it. Surely God’s plan can’t be contained in only a few pages. She must have reasons for everything. He has to believe that. She must have had a reason for all of this. Even for the death of Raphael.

Crawly is staring at him now, frowning, looking, it seems, for something at his waist. “Didn’t you have a flaming sword?” the demon asks. The question surprises Aziraphale. He hadn’t thought the demon had been coherent enough, the first time they met, to notice such a thing.

“Uh…” Aziraphale shifts on his feet, turning his ring around and around on his smallest finger.

“You did!” Crawly says. “It was flaming like anything. What happened to it?”

“Uh, ah…” he shakes his head, trying to find something to say to explain what he’d done.

“Lost it already, have you?” Something almost like concern flickers in the demon’s gaze, and it’s that more than anything that prompts the angel to answer.

“Gave it away,” he mutters.

Crawly’s eyes widen, and a surprised smile starts to creep across his face. “You what?” he asks, and though he can hear a laugh in the words, it doesn’t feel like the demon is mocking him at all. Over the years, he’ll come to love that sound, and the slow way the smile will steal out and take over Crawly’s face whenever he does anything particularly surprising. Now, though, it makes him uncomfortable. It’s not the reaction he was expecting, not at all, and he doesn’t understand it in the least. Any angel would have been horrified. And any demon should have seen it as a weakness, and attacked.

“I gave it away!” he says, louder, as if that will make it better. “There are vicious animals. It’s going to be cold out there. And she’s expecting already! And I said ‘Here you go, flaming sword. Don’t thank me. And don’t let the sun go down on you here.’” Saying it, even to a demon, makes him feel just a little bit better. Still, that niggling worry that he’s managed to screw everything up sits in the back of his mind, reminding him that he’s already failed once, when it was most
important. What if he’s done it again?

“I do hope I haven’t done the wrong thing,” he adds, gripping the ring tighter.

“Oh, you’re an angel,” Crawly says, sounding so certain. “I don’t think you can do the wrong thing.”

For some reason, even from a demon the words are comforting. “Oh, oh thank- oh, thank you,” he stammers. “It’s been bothering me.”

“I’ve been worrying too,” Crawly says, as they watch Adam defending Eve from an attacking lion. “What if I did the right thing with the whole “eat the apple” business? A demon can get into a lot of trouble for doing the right thing.” His words are heavy, full of some pain the angel doesn’t understand. Then his tone changes, taking on a hint of mischief and joviality. “It’d be funny if we both got it wrong, eh? If I did the good thing, and you did the bad one?” He grins, and that grin is infectious, causing Aziraphale to chuckle nervously before the full weight of his words hits the angel.

“No!” he protests, “It wouldn’t be funny at all!”

“Well…” Crawly shrugs, words trailing off as water starts to fall from the sky.

“Rain,” the demon observes, holding out a hand to catch a few drops, and Aziraphale is reminded so strongly of Raphael, who always knew the name of anything new almost before it was created. He forces down a sob and lifts his wing, offering protection to him. Crawly sidles closer, coming so close the angel can smell him, all sulfur and forge-fire, with just a hint of sage. Together, they watch the humans make their slow way deeper into the desert, away from Eden.

He keeps running into Crawly, as the years on Earth pass by. And each time, there is a moment where he looks up and sees Raphael in that bright scarlet-and-gold. And then he’ll blink, and his vision will clear, and its Crawly there at his side instead of the archangel. It’s not fair, how often he’ll look up and see Raphael where Crawly should be. Not to either of them. Raphael is dead, and Crawly deserves better than to be compared to an angel he never met. Even if, sometimes, they seem so very, very similar. It makes it worse that he likes Crawly, even though he shouldn’t. The demon is... he’s loud, and unrestrained, seemingly delighting in causing chaos and mischief.
wherever he goes. But he’s kind too, though he tries to hide it. He doesn’t go after the easy targets, people down on their luck. He picks the ones that really seem to deserve it, to do the worst of his wiles upon. He sees it early on in those first days, in the way the demon is with Eve’s children, letting them climb on him, poke at him, braid his hair and tug at his wings. He sees it still, later, in the way Crawly’s eyes blaze when he sees a human causing harm to an animal, the way his hands shake and suddenly that human finds themselves in a very different situation.

He’s wild, and rough, full of sharp edges, a minefield of anger and pain, quick to remind the angel that he is a demon, and is everything a demon is meant to be. But despite that, there are days when Aziraphale feels lonely, or frightened, or the little worries in his head start to get the best of him. And on those days, Crawly is gentle with him. Needles him just enough to get him out of his own head, then provides him with alcohol, or food, or some new experience that gets them out into the wider world. And even when Aziraphale gets cross with him, when they argue or fight, he always comes back. The way Raphael couldn’t, even though he had once promised he would try. Somehow, even when they walk away angry, swearing they won’t ever speak to each other again, Crawly always finds him.

He doesn’t want to, but somewhere within those first twenty years, he starts to wonder what Crawly had done, to make him Fall. What had been so bad that someone who, even after the worst thing imaginable still retained a spark of goodness deep inside, had been cast from Heaven’s light? He knows he should be afraid of the demon. He should be wary, waiting for Crawly to take his chance to destroy Aziraphale. But… Crawly doesn’t seem to want to fight him. Oh, he snaps and snarls, talking a good game, but somehow Aziraphale knows that the demon wants to fight him about as much as he wants to fight Crawly. That’s what makes Cain and Abel hurt so much.

He’s standing at the edge of the forest, watching Eve cry silent tears as she buries her second son. Her daughters crowd around her and Adam, their own tears flowing freely for their brother. Adam is the one that cries to the heavens, cursing God and Satan both for what happened to his boy. Abel had been a sweet child, always smiling, chasing Aziraphale and Crawly around when he saw them, trying to touch their wings. As he grew, he’d stopped chasing them. Instead, he had spent long hours with them both, just talking, asking questions. He and Cain both. Crawly had always answered their questions, even when they veered into dangerous territory, like the nature of Good and Evil. It had been Crawly who taught them about the Fallen. It had been the demon, who introduced them to the idea of violence against one’s family. And it had been Crawly who had been at Cain’s side, that fateful morning.

He feels it, the moment Crawly appears at his side, stepping out of the forest like a shadow. He does not turn to look. Doesn’t trust himself not to take his sword from Adam and attack the demon right then. “Crawly,” he says, voice hard.

“I saw Cain off,” Crawly says, voice unusually subdued. A part of Aziraphale wonders at that. Shouldn’t he be gloating now? Crowing about his victory, in bringing acts of evil into the world?
“She came to him. Marked him, so all will know what he did. And so no one can harm him.”

Aziraphale keeps his eyes forward, and says nothing. What can he say, when Crawly has only done exactly what he was meant to from the start? He cannot blame him for being what he is. And yet, he finds his hands shaking with repressed anger as he watches Adam slowly shovel dirt onto the corps of his son. He had thought Crawly better than that, but clearly he was wrong.

“Are you happy now?” Aziraphale asks, before he can stop himself. The words come out cold, bitter.

“What?” Crawly stares at him, serpentine eyes wide and so very demonic.

“Are you happy now?” he repeats through gritted teeth. “Got what you wanted, didn’t you? Tempting a human to murder. I imagine that will get you a commendation from Hell.”

“Tempting a-” he sounds shocked, though of course it has to be an act. “Angel, you think I did this?”

“ Didn’t you?” Aziraphale asks him, still not looking at his face.

“No!” he protests. “No, I- … No, I wouldn’t.”

The angel glances at him, but can’t meet his eyes. He doesn’t want to see the coldness he expects there. “No? Aren’t you the one who got them thrown out of Eden in the first place?”

“Ngk, well, technically yes, but I-”

“You told Eve to eat the apple, didn’t you? And she did. And now they’re here, burying Abel. What more do you plan on taking from them, Crawly?”

Crawly reels back from him, as if slapped. “I’m not the one that gave them the murder weapon, now am I?” he says, and Aziraphale closes his eyes. His sword. Cain had used *his sword* to kill Abel.
“I wouldn’t have had to give them my sword, if you hadn’t gone tempting them,” he retorts. “I never expected you to stick around and trick them into murder, Crawly.”

“Believe what you want,” the demon snaps. “I don’t have to listen to this. I’m leaving.”

“Good,” Aziraphale tells him. “Maybe without you around, I can actually do some good for these poor people.”

Without a word, Crawly unfurls his wings and leaps into the sky. Aziraphale pointedly does not watch him go.

A few moments later, one of Eve’s daughters comes to him, looking with concern up into the sky. “Is Crawly alright?” she asks, startling the angel.

“Is… Crawly? Well. I suppose he must be,” Aziraphale says. “He is a demon, after all.”

“I know,” the child says quietly. “Only… I don’t think I’ve ever seen him cry like that before.”

Aziraphale pauses. “Cry?”

She gives him an odd look. “You didn’t see? He was crying, just now. And I thought maybe he was in pain, after the way… after how my brother attacked him, when he tried to get between them.”

“Get… between them?” the angel echoes, frowning. That didn’t make any sense. Why would Crawly try to get between Cain and Abel, if he’d been the one that tempted the elder brother to murder in the first place?

Eve’s daughter nods. “He tried to stop him. I heard him. He said families should never raise a weapon to one another.” She sniffs, and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. “That was when Cain attacked. I… I didn’t see what happened after that.”
“Crawly tried to *stop* Cain…” Aziraphale says, horror rising up from someplace deep within him. Crawly had tried to *prevent* Abel’s death. And Aziraphale had just accused him of causing it. “I… excuse me, my dear.” He has to find Crawly. He’s not sure if it’s to verify the truth, or to apologize for what he said. Maybe both. He takes off, flying high, searching for any hint of the demon, but by then he is gone.

He doesn’t see Crawly again for almost a hundred years. When he first realizes he can’t find him, he begins to worry that he’d decided to return to Hell. There’s no reason he *should* worry. One demon is as bad as another, even if that demon had tried to stop the first murder. Still, he *does* worry. His only consolation is the times when he can feel Crawly’s presence nearby. Never near enough to seek him out, but enough, at least to prove the demon is still around. It is a comfort, especially on days when he so keenly feels Raphael’s absence. Unfortunately, there are other demons around, too. He can sense them following him, though he hasn’t yet worked out where they are. Likely, they are Crawly’s compatriots. Minions, perhaps, or partners. Aiding the demon in his thwarting of Aziraphale’s miracles.

They confront him late one afternoon in a dark alley, on his way back to his lodging. Four of them. More than he’s ever fought on his own at any one time, and he does not have a weapon.

“Well, well, well,” one of them says, stepping forward, and Aziraphale can see the crimson-red of its eyes. “What have we here?”

Another moves close, leaning in and breathing deeply of the angel’s scent. “It’s an angel, my lord. The one Duke Hastur told us about.”

A sound comes from behind, and Aziraphale glances over his shoulder. Three more demons are closing in on his back, all with the same burning red eyes as their leader. “I- I don’t want any trouble,” he says, turning so his back is to a wall, where nothing can sneak up on him.

“He doesn’t want any trouble?” the head demon laughs, a harsh and cruel sound. “Well, that clears everything up then, don’t it? Angel doesn’t want any trouble. We can just pack up and go home then, eh boys?” A chorus of laughter sounds from the other demons, like saws dragging across dried bones. They advance, bringing with them the smell of brimstone and hate. Two of them on either side summon Hellfire in each hand, while two more manifest wicked claws. The leader stands back as they advance, watching with those unsettling blood-red eyes.

“Please, there’s no need for violence. I’m sure we can… reach an understanding,” Aziraphale says, feeling his corporation’s heart start to race. He looks up, judging to see if he has enough room to fly out, only to find an eighth demon perched on the roof of the building, staring down at him with
a shark-like grin.

“Oh, we’ll reach an understanding alright,” one of the demons says. “With your corpse.” The others laugh like it had just made a witty joke.

“Oh really? You sure about that?” A new voice. One he knows. He follows it to the end of the alley, where a figure stands, lit from behind by the setting sun. A flash of scarlet and gold. His breath catches in his chest. Raphael smiles at him with laughing amber eyes, just as he had been the first time he’d seen him in Heaven. “Alright there, Aziraphale?”

“I-” he blinks, and Raphael steps into the shadows, away from the glare of the sun. And - it’s Crawly, not Raphael, that’s looking at him from concerned yellow-gold eyes. “I’m fine. Crawly. Thank you.”

Crawly grins, sharp-toothed and deadly. “Well. Thank Satan for that. If they’d hurt you, I might have had to show them what real torture is. This way, I can just kill them.”

The other demons look at each other, uncertain. Their leader growls, advancing on Crawly. “You are not wanted here, serpent. We have this under control.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do,” Crawly says lazily. “Only, see, you’re on my territory. And I didn’t invite you here, so you’re going to have to go.”

“We’ll leave,” the lead demon tells him. “Once we’ve destroyed the angel. You won’t mind us doing that for you, will you Crawly?”

Crawly shrugs, and Aziraphale starts to truly worry. It only makes sense that Crawly will let them do it. After all, what is Aziraphale to him, but just another enemy? Why is he here? He wonders.

“Sure, Focalor,” Crawly says, bored tone confirming Aziraphale’s fears. The angel braces himself, looking around for anything he can use as a weapon. “If you think my job is that easy. I mean, if I haven’t been able to do it, a moron like you is hardly going to succeed. But sure. Have at it.” He meets Aziraphale’s frantic eyes then, and winks.

Focalor, the demon leader, growls, low and deep in his throat. “You will address me with the proper respect, Crawly. Duke Focalor or ‘your grace’ will do for now.”
The demon laughs. “Oh, I can think of a few better things to call you,” he says. “Though I’m sure the words would be too big for your tiny brain.”

Focalor snarls, launching himself at Crawly, his minions not far behind. Aziraphale shouts, reaching out with empty hands, to do what, he isn’t sure. He hears Crawly yell, but the words are lost to the howling of the attacking demons. All he can see is a mass of limbs and bodies, writhing and twisting as balls of Hellfire fly between them.

It’s over in moments. The last demon drops, and he looks up, fearing what he’ll find, to see Crawly standing in a circle of bodies. His claws are extended, dripping ichor, and his usually impeccable robes are charred and spattered with blood.


“A- alright,” Aziraphale agrees, moving backwards, towards the other end of the alley. Crawly glances at him, checking his distance, before a stream of Hellfire flows from his fingers. It rises around him, so hot the angel can feel it on his face from nearly thirty feet away, scouring and cleansing the ground around the demon. Aziraphale closes his eyes, reminded of the way Lucifer’s fires had burned around Raphael that day in Eden. When he feels the heat fade, he opens them to see Crawly standing alone in a circle of perfectly clean stone, no trace remaining of the demons he had fought. The angel doesn’t understand. Crawly had saved him. Even though he had every reason not to.

“Are they…?” the angel asks, not daring to ask.

“Dead?” Crawly frowns, speaking carefully around a pair of sharp fangs. “Eh. Dunno what happenss to a demon when it’ss desstroyed. Azreal getss ‘em, but after that…” he shrugs. “Dead’ssss ass good a word ass any.” He flinches as Aziraphale steps closer, tucking his claw-tipped hands into his sleeves and turning so the angel can’t see the yellow that has completely overtaken his eyes.

“But… why?” Aziraphale wants to know. “You saved me. Why?” He moves slowly, carefully, like he’s approaching a wild animal. Which, in a sense, he supposes he is.

Crawly refuses to look at him, shifting further back into a deep pool of shadows. “Not gonna let anything get you, angel. You’re my adversary. If you’re getting killed by a demon, it’ll be me.”
 Despite the harsh words, Aziraphale can hear a hint of a tremor in his voice.

*He was scared,* the angel realizes, with a shock. *Why? Because of the duke of Hell? Not because I was in danger, surely,* he thinks. *It must have been the duke.*

“Anyway,” Crawly says dismissively, the hiss gone again from his voice. “Now that *that’s* done with. What do you say to some dinner?” His smile flashes bright in the shadows, and a second later he steps back into the light, claws and fangs hidden away, the yellow of his eyes relegated to only his irises. If it weren’t for the serpentine slit pupils, he would look completely human.

“I- um. I-” Aziraphale wants to continue this conversation. He feels like he’s missing pieces of it, pieces he needs to understand why Crawly did what he did. But one look at those guarded eyes dissuades him. It’s been a lonely century, without the demon to talk to. He’s not so eager to return to that isolation, that he’ll risk driving him away for mere curiosity. “Yes, that sounds lovely,” he says instead. “What did you have in mind?”

It’s several hundred years later, during the great flood, when he sees Crawly *truly* angry for the first time. He’s on the ship, of course, charged by Gabriel to watch over Noah and his family until they find dry land. He tries his best not to think about what lies beneath the waves. Turns away from the floating debris, before he can tell if there are any bodies. But he can’t quite forget the horror in Crawly’s eyes, when he realized God was going to drown even the children. The way, for just a second, the walls holding back the demon’s emotions had shuddered, and Aziraphale had felt that shock of horror and the accompanying rage and pain. And then his walls had rebuilt themselves, tucking away the emotions as if they had never been. But Aziraphale could still see the shadow of it in his eyes, as he watched the first rain drops start to fall.

He hadn’t been able to stay with him, as the water began to rise. Couldn’t bear to hear the screams as the terrified people as they realized the rising water was not going to stop. Crawly had just looked at him as he’d left, joining Noah on board the ark. There had been accusation in those yellow-gold eyes. And as much as he tries to feel righteous and Heavenly serene, he cannot quite stamp down the guilt roiling in his gut. *Raphael would have known what to do,* he thinks. His archangel would have known exactly what the right thing here was. But Raphael is gone, and he can only do his best with what he has. He has orders, and he must obey them, whatever else he feels.

The first hint of something wrong comes about two days into the voyage. He feels a presence, deep in the hold, under the place where they’re keeping the animals. Something that does not belong. It’s faint, almost hidden, and it takes him *hours* to track it down to a door that should not exist, according to the plans given to Noah by Sandalphon, on behalf of God. The door is made of heavy
wood, and something stings his hand when he tries to touch it. Gritting his teeth, he grabs the handle and turns it, only to find the door is locked. He extends his senses into the wood, and finds a barrier of power surrounding the room within. It hurts where his mind brushes against it, like thousands of tiny needles against his Grace, but he presses forward, trying to understand, until he catches a sense of the being that created it. The scent of sulfur and sage. Crawly.

“Crawly,” he shouts, pounding on the door. “Crawly, it’s me, Aziraphale.”

No answer.

“Crawly!” He calls louder, confident they’re deep enough within the ship that the humans will not hear him. “Open this door or I’ll blow it open myself.”

From inside he hears a chorus of frightened murmuring, and then, louder, the demon’s voice. “Fuck off, Aziraphale.”

Aziraphale narrows his eyes, suddenly suspicious. *He’s not trying to sink the boat… is he?* He doesn’t want to think it. But Crawly *is* a demon, after all, and sinking the boat of the only humans God had decided to spare in this region seems an awful lot like something a demon would do.

“Crawly, open this door, right now.”

“No.” There’s a growl in the demon’s voice, echoing with infernal power. Aziraphale ignores it.

“If you don’t open it, I’ll vanish the floor under you and let you fall into the water, see if I don’t.” He’ll do it. He really will, if he thinks the safety of these last few humans is threatened.

“Leave it angel, you don’t want to *see* what’s in here,” Crawly hisses. Under his words, Aziraphale is almost *certain* he can hear other voices.

“I mean it, Crawly,” Aziraphale tells him. What if he’s already knocked a hole in the ark? What if he’s brought hellfire to burn the wood? *He wouldn’t*, a quiet voice inside tells him. He ignores it. Crawly *is* a demon. He can’t be too careful. “If you won’t let me in, I’ll have to force it. And I won’t guarantee you won’t be discorporated.”
Silence. He starts gathering his power, readying himself for a fight, when the barrier around the door evaporates, and the lock clicks open.

“Well. That’s better, thank you.” He pushes the door open slowly, wary of what he might find.

Crawly growls as he steps over the threshold, low and deep in his throat. “Not one step further, angel,” he warns. “I will discorporate you.” He’s standing toward the back of the room, glaring at him with eyes almost entirely yellow. A lantern flickers on the wall, illuminating hands with wicked claw-tipped fingers, open and ready for a fight. His dark wings are out, like great black shadows, mantled over-

Aziraphale stops, blinking in shock. Seven children shelter under Crawly’s wings, looking up at him with terrified eyes. The oldest can’t be more than ten, while the youngest is a baby, only days old.

“Crawly… what?” he asks, staring at the little ones. “I… there aren’t supposed to be any humans here other than Noah and- and his family.” He moves to step forward, and Crawly hisses at him, wings flaring warningly. Aziraphale holds up his hands, empty, palms out towards the demon. “I-alright. Alright, I’m not going to touch them. You have my word.”

“Your word as an angel?” Crawly asks sharply, considering him, looking between his open hands and the door. Something in Aziraphale cracks at the war of emotions that’s plain on the demon’s face.

“My word as a principality,” he counters. “Sent to care for humanity.”

“Crawly?” one of the children asks, staring up at the demon with frightened amber-brown eyes.

Crawly looks down at her, expression turning impossibly gentle. “Shh, Iltani, it’s alright,” he says quietly. “This is a friend of mine.” He looks back to Aziraphale, a shuttered wariness in his gaze. “He’s not going to hurt you.”

Aziraphale nods. “I swear it.”

At last, Crawly relaxes, claws retracting back into his hands, wings folding tight against his back. “Fine. Come in then, angel. And close the door behind you.”
He does. With the door closed, it feels crowded in the small room, which is only slightly more than enough space for two adults and seven children. Crawly takes the baby in his arms and sits against the wall, where the older children huddle around him, all watching Aziraphale carefully.

“Crawly-” he starts to say, but the demon holds up a finger.

“Wait,” he says, tugging what looks like a crystal feather from his hair. He makes a sharp gesture, like plucking a string from the air, and for just a second Aziraphale sees a line of glowing gold flicker around his fingers. Then it fades, and he feels the barrier around the room fall back into place.

“There,” Crawly sags, clearly exhausted, but trying valiantly not to show it. “Nobody will bother us now.”

Aziraphale looks at the demon, then takes a seat against the wall across from him. In the small room, their knees are almost touching. “So, ah…” now that he’s here, he can’t think of anything to say. Or at least, nothing he thinks the demon will want to hear. A thousand questions are clamoring inside of him, but he's always been good at ignoring them.

“You want to know why I have a bunch of kids in your holy floating zoo?” Crawly asks, smirking at him.

“Well… yes,” the angel admits. “I thought you were off to Asia, or Australia.”

Crawly looks down at the children, rocking the baby slowly as a girl and a boy crawl into his lap and promptly fall asleep. The older girl he’d called Iltani leans against his side, her own arms wrapped around a pair of toddlers, while a boy of roughly the same age sits against Crawly’s other side, glaring at Aziraphale. The scene reminds Aziraphale painfully of Raphael, and a morning when he’d gone to Raphael’s chambers in Heaven only to find the archangels all together, the young Sandalphon in Raphael’s lap, Uriel and Gabriel on either side of him, while Michael and Lucifer were curled together against his back.

“I just spent months in Asia, I’m bored of it,” Crawly tells him. “And I don’t want to risk discorporation in Australia. You know that’s where they put all the most dangerous animals.”

“And… the children?” he asks.
Crawly won’t meet his eyes. “I couldn’t just leave them.”

“You could have,” Aziraphale points out, guilt eating away at him inside. He’s the angel. He should have been the one to rescue children, not the demon. “Most would have.”

“Like Heaven, you mean?” the demon asks, bitterness in his words. “Throw away the trash and start over. Doesn’t matter if that means innocents die too.”

Aziraphale winces, remembering Gabriel’s cruel laughter at his own shocked response to the news of the Flood. “They’re only humans, Aziraphale,” the archangel had said. “Not worth crying over.”

“It bothers you,” he observes, watching Crawly carefully checking on each of the children around him. “That Heaven did this.”

That gets the demon to meet his gaze, golden eyes flashing. “It should bother you,” he says.

Aziraphale looks away. “I never said it didn’t.” His hand finds Raphael’s ring, running his finger over the familiar shape of it, taking comfort in the echo of his love. “I just… I don’t understand why you care.”

“It’s Heaven, angel. The blessed source of all that is Good and Holy. Unconditional Love for all Her creatures, and all that rot. It’s supposed to be better than this.” He glares at the angel, challenging him.

“Well,” Aziraphale huffs, wanting badly to be offended, but only managing to be terribly sad. “I don’t see what you want me to do about it.”


“I…” He thinks about Heaven. About the coldness of the archangels. About Raphael, his warmth, and the shadow of a love he can still feel. About a simple answer to his one and only question. You care. Heaven, he thinks, is supposed to care. So how is it, that the most caring being he knows is a demon? He does not think that Heaven is what it claims to be. Not anymore. And yet… Be better.
If a demon can be caring, then perhaps Heaven can learn to care again too. It just needs time to heal from the damage of the War.

“I’ll try,” he tells Crawly.

The demon nods, and gives him a tight smile. “I’ll hold you to that,” he says.

Nearly forty days later, Crawly vanishes from the tiny room in the hold of the ark, taking the children with him. When he returns, he refuses to tell Aziraphale where they are. “So you can tell Gabriel you didn’t see anyone else when the water was gone, and it won’t be a lie.” He looks around at the ruins they’ve landed in. The remains of a town, by the looks of it. There are skeletons in the streets. Aziraphale watches his face go grey at the sight of a small body, and does not protest when the demon leads him away. He, too, can remember all too well the screams of the people as they drowned.

“What happened?” he asks Crawly, once, late one night in Babylon. The demon is tending to the gardens of King Nebuchadnezzar II - something about pride, and corrupting thousands with envy. Aziraphale is half convinced his real reason for taking the assignment is his love of flowers. He hides it well, but Aziraphale can see it in his eyes when he speaks about the varieties of plants he convinced the king to buy.

“Mm?” Crawly says, eyes on the stars as he lies in a small patch of fern and sage.

“What happened, Crawly? When you were in Heaven. Why did you Fall?”

Crawly stiffens. Just the slightest bit, but it’s enough for Aziraphale to see.

“I didn’t Fall,” he says slowly, in the manner of someone trying very hard to pretend he doesn’t care. “I sauntered. In a vaguely… downward sort of direction.”

“Oh but…” Aziraphale starts, then he notices the way the demon’s hands are shaking.
“I didn’t Fall,” Crawly repeats. “I just… had too many questions.”

Aziraphale has never heard his voice so flat, so devoid of emotion. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I didn’t- I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Upssset me?” the words are quiet, and full of ice. “You didn’t upssssset me, angel.” The demon sits in one fluid motion, turning cold yellow eyes on the angel. “There’sss nothing about- about that day that could posssssibly upssset me.” He stands, shoving his hands into the pockets of his robes.

“Crawly, I…” Aziraphale shrinks under that serpentine stare. The demon won’t hurt him, somehow he knows that in his bones. But his stomach churns with guilt, making him sick with it.

“I’m going in, angel. The King invited me to his party tonight. I ssssuggesssst you find your entertainment elssssewhere.” In the darkness of the night, his pupils are blown wide, a yawning void within rings of golden-yellow.

“Oh, but, you said you didn’t have anything else you wanted to do tonight,” Aziraphale protests, standing too. Just hours ago, Crawly had laughed at him for not knowing the name of a flower, smirked, and offered him a private tour of the garden. Not two minutes ago, he had been lying in the grass, naming the stars for him as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

“I lied,” Crawly tells him. “I’m a demon. We do that.”

Not you, Aziraphale wants to say. Not to me. Crawly doesn’t give him the chance. He turns, walking away at a speed the angel’s shorter legs can’t easily match. Aziraphale remains in the garden the rest of that night, wondering if has just ruined the tenuous friendship they had been building.

He doesn’t see Crawly for a long time after that. So long, he almost gives up searching the crowd for that tell-tale flash of red and gold. Almost. But not quite. So when he sees that familiar ember-red out of the corner of his eye, he cannot help but look. He’s in the stands at Olympia, on the
fourth day of the Olympic Games. The stadium is packed with what looks to be every able-bodied man in Greece, all of them cheering and shouting for their favorite sportsman. It’s a riot of noise and color, far more crowded than he likes, but he has to admit that the enthusiasm of the crowd is infectious.

The flash of red catches his eyes as they announce the start of the Pankration, and the contestants assemble at the edge of the stadium. He turns, searching, scanning the crowd. There. Red hair. But... not the right shade. The man beneath it too human. He sags, disappointed yet again. And then the wrong redhead moves, and there he is. He hasn’t seen him in far too long, but he would know that aura anywhere, in any form. The one he’s been searching for in every crowd for far too long. For the first time in their long years of acquaintance, he does not first think of Raphael when he sees the demon. In that moment, he can hardly think of anything at all.

Crawly stands on the sands of Olympia, the bright gold of his eyes uncovered and flashing in the morning sun. That beautiful ember-red hair, so long when he last saw it, has been cut short, curling in tight locks around his head. He is naked, as are all the athletes, the long, sharp lines of his body on full display for the gathered crowd, and more curls of dark fire can be seen at the join of his thighs. His skin shines from the use of oil, meant to warm an athlete’s muscles and protect them from the sun. He has the body of a swordsman, or a dancer. Lean, strong muscles, made for agility, for speed, for sharp bursts of movement and the precise thrust of a weapon. Looking at him now, Aziraphale cannot help but admire the shape of him, the fluid way he moves, as if bones and joints are just an option. He turns, stretching, exposing the expanse of his back to the crowd, and the angel finds a work of art in lines and colors of him.

“Antonius, son of Aesculapius,” someone calls, and Crawly steps forward to the cheers of the crowd. “Nikeratos, son of Onias.” A veritable giant of a man joins the demon in the center of the arena, and while Aziraphale knows, logically, that a mere human cannot come even close to hurting a demon, a sharp spike of fear curls in his gut. He watches, turning Raphael’s ring around and around on his little finger, as the first match of the Pankration begins. And it’s… he expects the brutality of it, this sport with only two rules - no biting, and no gouging. He even expects the matches could turn bloody. He does not expect Crawly’s opponent to start out with a swift series of punches to the demon’s abdomen. He does not expect the way Crawly dodges, ducking and rolling to the side, coming up behind his opponent and gripping his throat. And he does not expect the violent thrashing of his opponent, the heavy kicks aimed at the demon’s legs, the hands that grip at his arms, bruising, fighting for Crawly to let go.

Just before the human goes unconscious, he surrenders. Crawly drops him instantly, stepping away, and the crowd goes wild. The demon grins, wiping a streak of blood off the corner of his mouth, and waves to the assembled Greeks before returning to a bench where the other athletes have assembled. Aziraphale misses most of the next few matches, his eyes on that bright figure lounging at the edge of the stadium. Crawly, in contrast, watches the fighting with interest, seemingly completely unaware of the angelic eyes on him.

Crawly fights twice more that morning, before the contestants in the Pankration are released to
make way for another event. Aziraphale chases after him, using a miracle or two to ensure he never loses sight of the demon as he makes his way through the mess of humanity that gathers in every free spot on the grounds. He finally catches up at the gymnasium, where he makes inside just in time to see Crawly flips a coin to an attendant and disappear into an interior room. Aziraphale follows, to find a long, crowded hall and no demon in sight.

“Oh dear.” He looks around, straining his ears, but he hears nothing. He tries to reach out with other senses, but the masses of people crammed into this small area interfere with his ability to detect evil nearby. It doesn’t help that Crawly has never felt particularly evil to Aziraphale, not like some of the other demons. “Oh Hell.” He can’t do whatever it is that Crawly seems to, letting the demon find him in the most unlikely places, and he despairs of spending another century before he gets a chance to apologize to his friend.

“Psst. Angel.” Despite the noise in the room, the low whisper reaches Aziraphale’s ears on the back of a demonic miracle. He follows it down the apodyterion into one of the small anterooms, which, miraculously, is empty save for a grinning demon. He looks at him, and something tight eases in his chest.

“Crawly-” Aziraphale starts to enter the room, but Crawly stops him with a hand to his chest.

“Nuh-uh, angel. This place has rules.”

The angel frowns at him, confused, until the demon plucks at the front of his chiton. “Clothes, angel,” he says with a grin. “We wouldn’t want to break the rules now, would we? Wouldn’t be very…. Heavenly.”

“Oh- oh, but- ah,” to his horror, he can feel his whole body turning red before he can turn off his ability to blush. “Really, Crawly,” he says, irritated, but also so very, very glad Crawly is willing to tease him like this, even after the awfulness of their last meeting. “If you knew I was following you, you couldn’t have stopped somewhere else? Anywhere else?”

The demon laughs. “Oh, I can think of a few places,” he says, smirking. “But this will put us on an… even playing field, so to speak.” He gestures to his own unclothed state. The angel glances down at his very obvious Effort, and turns a deeper shade of red.

“Oh alright,” Aziraphale huffs, then returns to the apodyterion to undress. There’s something about being seen without clothing, that makes him so much more aware of his own body. It’s comfortable, this form he’s built for himself. Just the perfect combination of soft and strong, his own hard lines softened with rounded curves, a nice bit of give to his flesh in all the right places.
The light streaming in from the windows warms his back and shines through his hair like a halo as he makes his way back to the anteroom where Crawly waits in the door, and he has to remind himself to prevent the blush that starts to creep over him as the demon’s eyes sweep over his form. Crawly’s grin turns predatory for a second, gold eyes going dark with an emotion Aziraphale would have called desire in any other being. Then the expression vanishes, to be replaced by Crawly’s signature smirk.

“That’s better,” he says, then turns, leading the way deeper into the gymnasion. He stops at a room halfway along the eastern side, then ushers Aziraphale inside. There, once out of sight of any passing athlete, Crawly sinks down onto a low stone bench and sighs.

“Quiet at last,” he says letting his head rest against the wall. “Fuck, angel, do you know how many people I had to use a miracle on just to get here without being stopped? Remind me never to take an assignment that puts me in the center of the stage like this again. I’m much better at this when I can work without dealing with humans.” He shakes his head and laughs.

“So you’re, uh, here on business then?” Aziraphale asks him. Idiot. You’ve spent almost a century waiting to apologize to him, and you start out like that? he chides himself.

Crawly nods. “Yeah. You see that big guy, Theagenes of Thasos? Fought just after me, that first match?”

“The one they say is descended from Heracles?” He’d noticed the man. He seemed to be one of the better opponents, though competition was quite fierce.

The demon gives him a thumbs up. “That’s the one. I’m here to make sure he wins. Something about promoting idolatry and worship of false gods. He’s going to be a legend.”

“So… what? You’re going to fight him and lose?” Aziraphale feels a bit faint at the thought. It’s a well-known fact that men sometimes die in the Pankration. Crawly can’t die, exactly, but he could be discorporated. And Aziraphale finds he hates the thought of anything causing him pain. “Why not just… influence the match from the sidelines?”

The demon gives him a considering look. “Wouldn’t be fair then, would it?” he asks, watching Aziraphale with those bright gold eyes.

“And throwing the match is?” the angel wants to know, frowning at his friend. “Not to mention,
you’re fighting with a significant advantage over those poor humans out there.”

Crawly shrugs. “Eh. I’m not using any demonic miracles when I fight, angel. If I lose, it’s because he’s better than me. Heaven, who knows, I might not even make it all the way to the final.”

“Oh, but then- that’s, ah-” he’s not sure what to say to that. It doesn’t help that Crawly stands again, moving to the corner of the room, where Aziraphale notices he has a bag stored.

The demon reaches in and pulls out a few tools and a jar of olive oil. “Here, hold this, will you?” he asks, not waiting for an answer before shoving a strigil into the angel’s hands.

“Oh, but-” Aziraphale cuts off his protest, instead inspecting the strange implement. It’s heavy, made of a curved bronze blade and handle, and smells strongly of olive oil and sweat. He turns it over, admiring the graceful lines of the s-shape, and tests the edge against his thumb. It’s not sharp enough to easily cut, and he’s still trying to figure out what it’s for when he hears a scraping sound.

Looking up, he sees Crawly using another strigil, carefully scraping off the mess of oil, dust, and dried blood that has accumulated on his skin through the morning’s competition. “Get my back, will you?” Crawly asks, turning and presenting it to Aziraphale. “It’s bloody awkward to do myself.”

Aziraphale stares at him, stunned. He doesn’t even seem worried, just standing there, carefully running the blade of his strigil along his arms, scraping his body clean of the oil. In all their years on this planet, Aziraphale has never known Crawly to allow anyone to approach his back with a weapon, even one as dull and ineffective as this. And yet, here he is, not even watching to see what the angel, his hereditary enemy, will do with the dull blade in his hands. It speaks of a kind of trust that Aziraphale is not so certain he has earned.

“Angel?” yellow-gold eyes blink at him, and Aziraphale shakes himself free of his surprise.

“Yes, of course,” he says, coming closer, and carefully lifting the bronze, gently scraping down Crawly’s back.

“Not so soft. What are you trying to do, give me a massage?” the demon quips, and Aziraphale tries again, pressing harder, until the blade leaves a red mark on Crawly’s skin and all the oil and dust is collected on the bronze tool. “Mm, better,” Crawly tells him, and returns his focus to cleaning his limbs.
They work in silence for a time, while Aziraphale tries and fails to come up with something, anything to say. Crawly hums a bit as he works, wincing as he hits a bruise or a tender spot on his skin.

“So, uh, how long have you been in Greece?” Aziraphale finally asks, then kicks himself for how stupid the question sounds. Surely, after so long apart, he can think of something better to say than that.

“Eh,” Crawly says. “I’ve been here a little bit over a month now. Greece itself… oh, a couple decades. There’s a lot an enterprising demon can do in Sparta, for instance. You?”

“Athens,” Aziraphale tells him. “They’ve quite an interesting set-up there, with this new democracy of theirs. I’m quite keen to see where it goes.”

“It won’t last long,” Crawly tells him, a hint of bitterness in his voice. “Things like that never do. Power corrupts people, angel. Then things start to fall apart, and no matter how hard you try, it won’t be the same again.”

Aziraphale frowns at his back. “Oh, but, not always. Some of these politicians are honest and good. And equality for all is an admirable goal.”

“Sure, sure,” Crawly waves a hand dismissively. “Just make sure that does mean all, and not just a few powerful men.”

“Must you always be like this?” Aziraphale snaps, irritated. “I’ve only just found you again, and it’s been such a long time.”

To his surprise, Crawly stops, looking at him over his shoulder, then sighs. “You’re right. Sorry, angel. I guess I’m just a little keyed up right now.”

“Well.” Aziraphale sighs, irritation replaced by fondness as Crawly flashes him a tight smile. “I suppose you would be, with the morning you’ve had. I swear I thought that big man you fought first was going to break your neck before you got him.”
The demon relaxes, letting Aziraphale finish taking care of the oil on his back. “Not him. I’ve beaten him hundreds of times already in practice. We both knew how it was going to play out. He gave it a good shot though.”

Aziraphale tries not to think of hundreds of times, of other people, humans, getting to be this close to the demon. Closer. During a match, there were many times where there was not even air between Crawly’s body and another man. “You enjoy this then? This… sport?”

His companion shrugs. “It’s something to do. When I’m not causing mischief elsewhere, at least.”

Aziraphale huffs, exasperated and fond at the same time, one of the many impossible combinations of emotions this demon seems to inspire in him. “Well, I can’t say I approve of how violent it is. But it does seem to inspire people, if the energy in the crowd was anything to go by.”

Crawly hums in agreement. “I suppose it does, at that. They do pause their wars for these games after all. I suppose that’s why you’re here? Spreading peace and goodwill and all that?”

“Oh… something like that,” Aziraphale says. “That is… well. I’m supposed to be Persia, observing their attempt at invading Greece this year. But I, ah, may have implied that I thought you would be here and need thwarting.”

Crawly chuckles at that. “You thought I’d be here then?” he asks, nothing but amusement in his tone.

“Well… I’d hoped,” he says. He had, but after so long, he hadn’t really believed he would find the demon. “But I also wanted a chance to actually see this, even if just once. And with Persia being so close, and everything shutting down in Greece for the games, it really seemed like the best chance I’d get for a while.” He pauses, then admits “I… also may have told Gabriel I’d only stay for the first day, then back to Persia.”

“Did you now?” Crawly turns to look at him then, giving him that slow, pleased smile he does whenever Aziraphale has done something to surprise him. The kind of smile that starts small in the center and gradually spreads out until it takes over his entire face.

“Well,” the angel says. “I intended to only stay the one day. But it’s just so exciting, you know? The races, and all the people getting so excited, not to mention the artists and performers that come. And they have this delightful cheese vendor over by the baths. And, really, it’s not like I’m
doing any good in Persia right now, not when everything is happening here anyway. So I thought, ‘why not?’ The archangels won’t notice unless something comes up, and even then probably not.”

“Why not indeed,” Crawly says, taking the strigil from his hands and wiping the tool down with a cleaning cloth. “Well, if you’re here spreading good, I suppose I’ll just have to stay until the end of the games to thwart you, won’t I?”

Aziraphale can’t help the smile that breaks out on his face at that. “I suppose you will,” he agrees. Then he forces a frown. “Not that I would want that or anything, you understand. It’s just good to know where my enemy is at all times, in case I need to thwart you,” he adds quickly. Crawly just smirks at him.

“Well then, angel, how about we try out some of the food vendors tonight after I lose to old Theagenes?” He picks up the bottle of olive oil and pours some on his hands before rubbing it along his arms. “I’d ask you to lunch now, but I’ve only got a bit before the next set of matches.”

“I… suppose I could be tempted,” he admits, which is as much of a ‘yes’ as he can give. Crawly seems to understand, because his smile widens and a mischievous sparkle lights his eyes.

“Well then,” Crawly finishes applying the oil to his arms and bends to work on his legs. “I’ll meet you by the baths after sundown?”

Aziraphale nods. “Yes, alright.” Then he pauses for a moment, remembering everything he’s been wanting to say for the past hundred years. “I… Crawly, about what happened in Babylon…”

The demon waves a dismissive hand at him. “It’s forgotten, angel. All good.”

“Oh. Well then. That’s… good. I- yes. Good.” It seems too easy, somehow. He’d been expecting another fight over this. Or perhaps for Crawly to deny anything had even happened. He hadn’t expected to be forgiven so readily.

The sound of loud footsteps outside the door cuts off anything Aziraphale might have said, and Crawly straightens. The big athlete he’d mentioned earlier, Theagenes, sticks his head in the room and grins when he sees the demon.

“Antonius,” he says, giving the demon an excited, toothy smile. “It’s about time for us to return to
the stadium. Are you ready to face your defeat?”

Crawly laughs at him. “I think it’s you who should be worried,” he says, quickly stowing his strigils in his bag. Somehow he finished applying the oil to his body between hearing Theagenes outside and the door opening. “Seeing as how I’m the one that is going to beat you.”

“Oh, you have it wrong, my friend,” Theagenes tells him. “But we’ll see soon enough, won’t we?”

“Sure,” Crawly says. “Provided you even make it far enough to face me.”

Aziraphale watches them go, then slowly retrieves his clothes and returns to his place in the stands. And if his heart is in his throat every time he sees Crawly on the stadium floor, well, it’s only that he doesn’t want anything to happen to his enemy before he’s had a chance to thwart him once and for all. That’s all it is. Surely it isn’t worry that Crawly might be discorporated. Not at all. And if his all-too-human heart doesn’t stop racing until he sees those bright golden eyes staring at him as they walk through the market under the moonlight, well, who’s to know but him?

It’s some years after that, Aziraphale finds himself in trouble once again. He doesn’t know what he did, that upset the spice merchants. All he knows is that quite suddenly he was rounded up, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death in the arena. He’s sitting in his cell, listening to the roar of the crowd outside and wondering if he dares chance the miracle that would get him out of this, when he hears someone walking down the hall, whistling.

He frowns, wondering if he should ask them to cut it out, when the whistling stops outside of his door.

“You know,” a familiar voice says, “I would say you were asking for trouble, but I really have no idea what got those bastards so pissed at you.”

“Crawly!” He hides his pleasure behind a scowl. “Come to gloat, have you?” This isn’t the first time he’s shown up when Aziraphale needed him. He’s done it so many times now, always with that smirk, swooping in at the exact right moment. He doesn’t know how he does it. He wishes he knew why.
The demon grins at him. “Maybe a little. Not every day you see an angel in the arena.”

Aziraphale rolls his eyes. “If you’re going to be like that, do it elsewhere please. I need to focus.”

“Just miracle yourself free,” Crawly suggests, leaning against the wall and watching him. He’s dressed as a gladiator today, adorned in leather armor with a sword hanging at his side. He’s watching Aziraphale with curious gaze, and for a moment Aziraphale sees a deeper amber-gold in his eyes.

He shakes the thought from his mind. “I would,” he says testily, “but I’ve been reprimanded for using too many miracles lately. And I don’t want to test Gabriel. He’s in a bad enough mood, what with all of us being ordered away from Her son, I don’t want to draw his attention.” He doesn’t like that cold, hard look in the archangel’s eyes. Doesn’t want to know what might happen if he gives him an excuse to punish him.

“Hmm.” Crawly sniffs. “Well, I suppose I could always cause a prison break.” He grins. “Imagine the chaos. All sorts of thieves and ruffians running about the streets, causing trouble.”

Aziraphale glares at him. “Well, don’t on my account. I’ll manage on my own well enough.” Part of him wants to just be grateful for the demon’s assistance. But he’s an angel. He can’t let himself be constantly pulled out of danger by a demon. Even this demon.

“Oh?” Crawly raises an eyebrow in amusement, and something in his expression pushes the wrong button in the angel. “How’s that going for you?” he wants to know.

“Just fine,” he snaps. “Go away Crawly, I don’t need your help this time.”

“Well!” The demon glares, offended, and Aziraphale wants to apologize, even though he knows he really shouldn’t. “Maybe I won’t help you out then.”

“Good. I don’t want your help.” That’s a lie. “I’ll get out of this myself.” Another lie.

“Good. I have more important things to be doing.” That one stings. He knows he’s unimportant to the demon, just someone with whom to pass the time. And he shouldn’t care. This is a demon, after all. And yet… he wants to be important to Crawly. However silly it is, he wants to be someone important to the demon.
The next words he speaks, he speaks out of hurt. “Then go do it. You’re not wanted here, Crawly.” He instantly regrets it, when he sees the stricken look in the demon’s eyes.

But then sharp pain on his face disappears as if it had never been, replaced by cold indifference. Crawly sniffs, standing and stretching like an offended cat. “Well then. Good luck I guess.” He turns on his heel, and walks away. Aziraphale waits, listening, waiting to hear the moment when Crawly turns around. He always does. Except… he doesn’t. The door at the end of the hallway clangs shut, and when he reaches out he can no longer feel that familiar presence in the area.

Hours later, he’s shoved into the arena with a sword in his hand.

“Citizens!” An announcer cries, as he blinks in the hot Mediterranean sun. “We have something unusual for you today! A last-minute entry, who claims to be blessed by the gods themselves!”

Aziraphale turns with the crowd to look at the gate behind which his opponent waits. Slowly, they open to reveal bright scarlet and gold.

“Crawly,” he whispers, shocked. The demon steps onto the sand, raising his sword to the cheers of the crowd. He turns then, saluting the town dignitaries overseeing this event, every inch of him projecting a cocky sort of confidence.

The angel stares at him, eyes wide. Was this it? Had Crawly finally decided to face him, demon to angel, as their very natures should demand? Fear runs cold in his blood. He’s seen Crawly fight. If the demon has decided to kill him, he doesn’t stand a chance. He’s a strong warrior, true. He’s trained to fight. But he’s never been able to kill. And he does not know how many creatures the demon before him must have destroyed.

The signal comes to start the fight. Crawly surges forward, and Aziraphale just manages to get his blade up to block him. He expects to see a snarl on the demon’s face, but when he meets Crawly’s eyes around their crossed blades, all he sees is amusement. Then he actually winks, before pulling back for another attack.

“What?” he asks, startled, and almost misses the thrust at his shoulder.
“Play along, angel,” Crawly mutters. “I’ve got this.” Then he tries for another blow.

This time Aziraphale meets it with a clash of metal. Sparks fly, and Crawly grins.

“Good! I knew you could fight!” he laughs, jumping away from Aziraphale’s attack. The angel surges forward, keeping him on the defensive, but his grin never wavers. They are, Aziraphale is shocked to discover, evenly matched in skill. Crawly has more precision than he, moving with deadly efficiency, but Aziraphale has more pure strength behind him, forcing the demon into a retreat under the force of his blows.

“What are you doing?” Aziraphale hisses at him, the next time they come face to face.

“Giving them a show,” he replies with that cocky grin. And a show it is. Crawly preforms some very tricky, spectacular attacks, fighting with his signature flare. In contrast, Aziraphale is steadier, not chancing the riskier, more flashy moves in favor of a strong offense and solid defense. As a result, neither one truly gains an advantage over the other, and their corporations start tiring fast.

“Ready, angel?” Crawly asks, crouching down and slowly circling him, looking for a way past his guard.

“Ready for what?” Aziraphale demands, tracking his movements. “Just what your you planning?”

“This!” Crawly launches himself forward, down and then up, under the angel’s defenses, knocking his blade aside. Aziraphale feels a surge of fear, expecting the sharp pain of a blade in his gut, but instead he’s pulled close, against the demon’s body. The crowd roars in his ears, expecting to see a bloody death, sound growing until - it goes silent. He blinks, looking up, to find they’re standing in the middle of a farmer’s fields.

Crawly releases him then, stepping back until there’s a good four feet of distance between them. “See?” he says with a laugh. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Wasn’t so- Crawly, I- what?” Aziraphale stutters, brain still processing the past few minutes. “Where are we?”

The demon shrugs, looking at the wheat surrounding them. “Mm… not far, I think. Not exactly sure how far. But not very. Might want to head out soon, before those spice merchants spot you.”
He grins. “What did you do to them, anyway? I’ve never seen them so upset.”

“I truly have no idea.” Aziraphale tells him. “I was simply asking questions about where they get their stock. Surely nothing deserving of a sentence to the arena.” He’s still distracted, watching Crawly, who lazily swings his sword in a few complicated patterns at his side, before shoving it into the sheath on his belt. The demon doesn’t seem at all bothered by the fact that they were just fighting each other in the arena not moments before.

“Why did you do that?” the angel finds himself asking, before even deciding to make the inquiry.

“Hm?” Crawly asks, a hand shading his eyes from the sun as he surveys the land around them. “Oh? Fight you? Well, seemed like you needed to let off some steam.”

He gapes at the demon. “Let off some steam?!”

“Yup.” The demon glances at him, then looks away. “Seemed like a good a plan as any.”

Aziraphale can’t think of a single thing to say to that. He’s still trying when Crawly stretches, wings unfurling around him.

“Well then,” he says. “I should be going. Lots to do. People to tempt, Heaven to thwart, you know how it is.” He shows Aziraphale his signature cocky grin. “See you later, angel.”

“Wait!” Aziraphale reaches out, attempting to grab his arm, but moves just a hair too late. Crawly launches himself into the sky, and disappears.

“…thank you,” the angel says, though of course Crawly is not around to hear it. He doesn’t understand this at all. There’s no reason for the demon to keep rescuing him. And he never asks for anything in return. He’s just… there. Always there, right when Aziraphale needs him.

He doesn’t see Crawly again, until he’s standing in the crowd at Golgotha, watching the Son of God be nailed to a cross. A familiar presence appears at his side, just over his left shoulder. He
doesn’t need to look, to know it’s the demon. He knows the feel of his aura by now, even if he has done his best to hide his essence from detection.

“Come to smirk at the poor bugger, have you?” Crawly asks, and Aziraphale doesn’t understand the bitterness in his voice.

“Smirk? Me?” he asks, glad, at least, for the distraction from the tragedy taking place before them.

“Well, your lot put him there.” He’s watching Jesus, his uncovered eyes unreadable. Aziraphale can’t help but wonder if Crawly thinks he had anything to do with this. You’re an angel, Crawly had said, so long ago now. Be better. He can’t help but feel like he’s let the demon down somehow, though he knows there was nothing different he could be doing.

“I’m not consulted on policy decisions, Crawly,” he says. He’s glad he isn’t. He doesn’t think he would have been able to go through with this, even if it will save so very many humans from the clutches of Hell. He doesn’t know if he could sacrifice even one man, even if it were to save thousands.

“Oh, I’ve changed it,” the demon says, throwing him off balance from the speech on policy and necessity of this that he had been about to unleash.

“Changed what?”

“My name.” He doesn’t take his eyes of the sight before them, staring straight ahead as the sound of hammer striking metal fills the air. “Crawly just wasn’t doing it for me. It’s a bit too… ‘squirming-at-your-feet’-ish.”

Aziraphale frowns at that. He hadn’t thought people could just… do that. Change their names. Then again, he was fairly certain Crawly couldn’t have been the demon’s true name. Gabriel said that most demons lost their Heavenly names, along with everything else they had once been. He wasn’t sure how true that was, as Lucifer and several of the Lords of Hell still used theirs. But perhaps it was only true for the lesser demons, like Crawly. If that were true, then perhaps it wasn’t all that strange after all. He wouldn’t have a sigil, the mark of his true name, so changing it would mean nothing at all. Unconsciously, Aziraphale brushes a finger across Raphael’s sigil. He can still feel the love that his archangel left behind, warm and comforting even now.

“So, what is it now?” he asks. “Mephistopheles? Asmodeus?” Names he had heard once, demonic
sounds that any Fallen being might pick. He’s not sure how he’ll feel, if he has to call his… friend? Enemy? Counterpart? Something like that. They don’t suit him, not in the least.

“Crowley,” the demon says. The sound of it… fits, somehow. He hums in acknowledgment, but says nothing else, turning the name over in his thoughts. Crowley. He decides that he likes it. It’s much better than ‘Crawly’, at any rate. It feels like a piece in the puzzle that is this demon sliding into place. And yet, something else is unclear. Crowley stands still at his side, and something about his silent vigil feels… personal. Like he’s here for a reason, and not just to see what’s about to happen.

“Did you, uh, did you ever meet him?” Aziraphale asks, glancing back to see the carefully controlled expression on the demon’s face. *He must have*, he thinks. He’s never seen his eyes so devoid of emotion.

Crowley pauses before answering. “Yes,” he says. “Seemed a very bright young man. I showed him all the kingdoms of the world.” That careful blandness is in his voice, too.

*What is he to you?* Aziraphale wonders. *Why come here, when you knew Heaven would have agents here? It might not have been just me. And any other angel would have killed you on sight.* It’s not what he asks. What he asks, is “Why?”

The demon’s expression, when he looks at him, is still unreadable. “He’s a carpenter from Galilee,” he says quietly. “His travel opportunities are limited.” There’s a sadness to the words that the angel doesn’t understand at all.

*Why does he care?* He wonders, reaching out, trying to feel Crowley’s emotions. But there’s a wall around the demon, like a glass barrier. He can see there’s something there, some powerful feeling, but he cannot reach it. Cannot feel what it is.

“That has got to hurt,” the demon comments, as Jesus cries out in pain. “What was it he said that got everyone so upset?”

Aziraphale can tell he knows that answer already. He tells him anyway. “Be kind to each other,” he says.

“Ah. Yeah. That’ll do it.” There’s no surprise in the words, and once again Aziraphale thinks of hard golden eyes in the dim light of a ship’s hold. Of bitter words, spoken out of pain and anger at
an unfeeling Heaven. Be better.

*Is that what you asked of Her?* Aziraphale wants to ask him. *Did you question Her Goodness? Is that why you Fell?* He stays silent. He cannot just ask whatever he pleases. Asking questions is what killed Raphael in the end, after all. They stand together, watching, as the sun rises higher in the day. As the Son of God dies on the cross.

Aziraphale leaves once darkness falls, as Joseph of Arimathea removes the body from the cross. Crowley remains. He finds him again the next day, at the place Jesus’ mortal form was buried. He does not react when Aziraphale joins him, and the angel wonders if he’s even moved once since he took up his vigil, hours before. He waits beside him, standing guard together in silence, waiting for word that God’s plan for Her Son has succeeded. As the night passes, Aziraphale’s mind begins to wander. *How can Heaven do this?* He wants to ask. He won’t. He will not question. He can’t. He’s still loyal to God. To everything Raphael stood for. Even as he wonders what Raphael would have done, if he were here in his place.

“Are you… alright?” Crowley asks him when daylight has come and gone. It is the first thing either of them have said all day.

“I… yes, I’m alright,” Aziraphale says. “Are you?”

Crowley looks at him then, golden eyes wide and surprised. “Course I’m alright,” he says. “You know me. I’m always fine.”

“Hmm.” He won’t call him on it. If he wants to pretend he isn’t upset, Aziraphale won’t push it. Silence falls between them once more. They don’t speak again until, two days later, the stone closing the tomb rolls away from the inside, and the Son of God appears before them.

“My Lord,” Aziraphale bows deeply, reverently, holding back his fear for the demon at his side. He does not know what Jesus will do to a servant of The Adversary.

“I didn’t think you’d make it out,” Crowley says, and Aziraphale gasps, fear shooting cold down his spine. He can’t shield the demon now, can’t even hope that Jesus will just ignore his presence, not when he’s so blatantly drawing attention to himself.

And yet… Jesus just laughs. “For a few moments there,” he says to Crowley, “I almost didn’t.” Then, miraculously, he *smiles*, holding the demon’s eyes with his own, steady gaze. “It was worth
Aziraphale watches as a complicated series of expressions cross Crowley’s face. Eventually, he nods slowly, a small smile curving the corners of his lips.

“Yeah,” the demon says. “Yeah, I think it was.”

Before Aziraphale can make sense of that, Jesus turns to him, reaching out and taking his hands, pulling him from his bow. “Aziraphale, Angel of the Eastern Gate. I have heard a great deal about you.” His eyes hold the angel captivated, impossibly ancient and knowing, like looking into the heart of the universe.

“Lord?” the angel asks, unsure if that’s good or bad. Who, he wonders, would speak to the Son of God about him, of all people? At his side, Crowley shifts, unconsciously brushing Aziraphale with his arm. He can’t have done it on purpose, but still, it grounds him, pulls him back to himself before he gets lost in the fathomless depths of Jesus’ gaze.

“It isn’t as hopeless as it might seem,” the Son of God tells him. “You are not alone.”

Aziraphale nods. “I know.” He isn’t. He never has been. He can’t help glancing at Crowley as he speaks, noting the concerned way Crowley is watching him. He’s smiling, he realizes, and quickly schools his expression into something more neutral before the demon notices.

“Take care of each other,” Jesus says, watching until Aziraphale and Crowley both nod. Then he claps them both on the shoulder, and walks away.

Aziraphale watches him go, considering his words. What did he mean, by ‘it isn’t as hopeless as it might seem’? Then he shakes himself, storing his thoughts away for later, to examine when he’s alone. Instead, he turns to Crowley, who seems just as lost in thought as he had been. “Well then,” he says. “Lunch?”

He doesn’t respond, staring off into the distance without seeing.

“Crowley?” Aziraphale calls him, and the demon blinks, and then he smiles. It’s not a smile Aziraphale has seen on him before. There’s no bitterness in it. No pain. No sharp edges. It’s open, sweet and honest, and purely Crowley. It vanishes in an instant, but it was there, of that Aziraphale
“Yeah, angel,” the demon says. “Let’s get lunch. My treat.”

After the incident with the Black Knight, Aziraphale gets sent on another quest for Arthur. This time, it’s chasing down yet another hint about the Holy Grail. Really, he understands the importance of the thing, but the whole search is getting just a bit ridiculous. He wishes someone would just find the damnable thing, so the Once and Future King would stop sending all his knights out on wild goose chases anytime someone even vaguely mentions the word ‘grail’. He’d even gone so far as asking Gabriel about it, but the archangel had laughed in his face, and that had been that.

Back out in the damp, cold weather, Aziraphale thinks about Crowley’s offer once again. If he’d said yes, he could be in his nice warm room, with a good book and a warm fire. And if Crowley meant it, and did the same, it would even have the same result. No miracles. No temptations. Net 0 gain for either side. Still, it would be wrong. He knows it would be wrong. Raphael would be disappointed in him, he thinks, for considering his own comfort over the miracles he’s been tasked with delivering. Still, he can’t help but think about the offer. After all, it’s been over four thousand years, and neither he nor Crowley have really gained any ground against the other. Perhaps they should… but no, he said no. And that is that.

In any case, Aziraphale returns to Camelot after several weeks spent in muddy fields, only to find the whole castle buzzing. Apparently, from what he can gather, a master sword-smith is here, and all of the younger knights have been spending hours staring at his rather impressive collection of blades.

“He’s to be presented to the King tonight,” Lancelot tells him as they walk together to the Great Hall. “They say he’s here to see Excalibur, and claims he won’t leave until His Majesty grants him permission to look upon it.”

“And what does the king think?” the angel wants to know, curious. He’s rarely seen Arthur allow another to so much as breathe upon the magical blade.

Lancelot shrugs. “He does not deny that this man’s weaponry is superior to many of our own swords. I believe he intends to commission a set of knives, should the meeting tonight go well.”
“High praise, indeed,” Aziraphale comments, knowing that a commission from the king granted much more than just the cost of the blades. It brought business to the smith from those who followed Arthur, and even from the rivals of the king, who would not wish to be seen with inferior weaponry.

“It is well earned,” the knight tells him. “See here,” he draws his own blade, offering it up to Aziraphale for examination. “This workmanship is unlike many I have seen. The balance is perfect, and the blade holds its edge far better than my previous sword.” He balances the blade across one finger to demonstrate, showing how easy it is for him to keep it from tipping one way or the other. Aziraphale leans in to inspect it, and is surprised to find that Lancelot is right, the weapon is extremely well-made. He has seen better, but those blades were forged in the fires of creation. This weapon was made here on earth, and with the tools available to a human blacksmith. In that light, it is a marvelous piece of work.

“You said he’s here to see Excalibur?” Aziraphale asks, as Lancelot returns the sword to its sheath on his belt. “Did he say why?”

“Why else would a great sword-maker wish to see King Arthur’s sword?” the knight inquires. “It is a peerless blade, gifted to our King by God Himself.”

Aziraphale hums in agreement, and leads the way into the Great Hall. He isn’t about to correct anyone on the proper gender of God, though he wonders where the humans got the idea that She was male. He supposes it’s all about power, in the end. And in this day and age, the men have more obvious power than women, therefore God must be male to hold all the power of Creation. In truth, God can be whichever gender She chooses, or to have none at all. But he isn’t posing as a priest here, and it would be out of place for Sir Aziraphale to correct the pious Sir Lancelot on a matter of religion.

In the Great Hall, Arthur welcomes him back from his quest, and orders him to relax and recover after what, to any mortal, would have been quite a harrowing journey. For Aziraphale, it had been very uncomfortable, but not all that difficult. He’d been nearly discorporated twice in encounters with highwaymen and brigands, but he hadn’t trained in the armies of Heaven for nothing. He could use his sword, when the situation called for it. He just vastly preferred it never reach that point.

And so, Aziraphale takes his seat at the table, and relaxes, settling in to enjoy the meal with his fellow knights. Gawain has just started regaling him with a tale of a joust he had missed when the doors to the hall swing open once again, and the young knight Galahad ushers a very familiar figure into the room. At the sight of him, Aziraphale drops his goblet.
“Crowley of Sheol, Master Sword Maker,” Galahad declares, bowing to Arthur and Guinevere and gesturing for the demon to come forward.

Crowley inclines his head in thanks to the young knight, then he glides across the Great Hall. Aziraphale can’t help but watch the fluid way he moves, ember-red and a darkened gold in the dim light, like candle flame made flesh. He stops just before the dais and bows deeply.

“Your Majesties,” he says when he straightens. “It is truly an honor to stand before you.”

“Master Crowley,” Arthur says, leaning forward and examining the demon with an evaluating gaze. “I have heard many good things about your work.”

“Your Majesty flatters me,” Crowley says, and Aziraphale hides his snort behind an abrupt cough. *Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t you, my dear?* He thinks, watching the way the king is looking at his friend. *Don’t push it too far, or he’ll know you don’t mean it. Arthur is no fool.*

“You seem surprised,” Gawain mutters in his ear. “Do you know this Master Crowley?”

“I… yes,” Aziraphale admits. “He and I… we come from the same place. I was not expecting to see him here.”

“I thought you said you came from Arcadia,” Lancelot says, eyes on Crowley’s lithe form. “Yet he claims to be from this ‘Sheol’.”

“Ah.” The angel frowns. “Well, yes. I imagine that was where he went after he left Arcadia. We were both… very young, at the time.” It wasn’t a lie, exactly. They had been several thousand years younger, back then. And while Arcadia is another term for Heaven, Sheol is a synonym for Hell. Clever, really, of Crowley to think to use it has his place of origin. It is both the truth and a convincing cover story at the same time.

At the dais, Crowley kneels, presenting to the king a thin wooden box inlaid with opals.

“A gift for Your Majesty,” the demon says, lifting the lid. Guinevere gasps, and beside Aziraphale Lancelot twitches like he wants to stand and go to her.
Arthur reaches down and pulls a dagger from Crowley’s offering, testing its edge on the edge of his sleeve. The fabric parts with all the resistance of butter.

“Remarkable,” the king says, balancing the weapon on a finger by its point. “I have not seen a finer blade.”

“I cannot believe that, Sire,” Crowley tells him, with a pointed look at Excalibur. “I have heard your own sword is the match for even the forges of Heaven itself.”

“Ah, yes.” The king reaches down, and unsheathes the blade. “I believe this is your true reason for coming here, is it not?”

Crowley inclines his head. “Your Majesty is wise,” he says, and try as he might, Aziraphale can’t hear the mocking tone he expects in the demon’s voice.

The court goes quiet, all eyes on the dais as Arthur lift his sword, extending the hilt out towards the demon kneeling at his feet. Reverently, Crowley accepts it. Aziraphale holds his breath, uncertain of what he intends. He doesn’t need to be worried. Crowley kneels, running his long, elegant fingers along the blade, testing the edge on the pad of his thumb. At a nod from the king, he stands and runs through a series of basic exercises, feeling the movement of the blade through the air. The knights around Aziraphale tense, unhappy at seeing their unarmed king so close to a stranger who so clearly knows how to use the weapon in his hand.

“It’s alright,” Aziraphale says quickly. “Crowley won’t harm him.”

“How do you know?” Lancelot demands, and the angel notes his hand is now wrapped around the hilt of his sword. “I thought you were young when you last saw him.”

“Well, he can’t have changed that much,” Aziraphale tells him. “He may be a little… rough around the edges, but he’s a good person underneath.” He stops, blinking, as he processes what he’s just said. A good person. Crowley. Crowley, the demon. And yet… he did not lie. He thinks of frightened children, sheltered beneath ink-black wings. Of tears streaming down his face for a murdered boy. Of casual rescues, never expecting anything in return. You’re an angel. Be better. Crowley’s words. A demand for Aziraphale to live up to all the pretty ideals of Heaven. Of Tobit and his son, and the wounds the demon had taken in order to keep the boy alive. Of how, in all the thousands of years they’ve known each other, he’s never once seen Crowley be cruel. He should have realized it long ago. Crowley is a good person, underneath all the sharp angles and biting words. He doesn’t think the demon would ever forgive him for saying so, but, he realizes, this is a truth he can’t deny. At the core of him, Crowley is good.
“Why does he cover his eyes before our king?” Gawain asks, frowning as Crowley brings Excalibur close to his face, the dark lenses of his glasses nearly touching the metal.

“He… ah, well, you see,” this answer is trickier, as he doesn’t know what Crowley has been saying to explain his glasses. Surely no one has seen his eyes, or the pious and God-fearing Knights of the Round Table would have already chased him from the kingdom. “He has… an eye condition,” he tells them. “Yes. It’s an eye condition. It makes light of any kind painful for his eyes. And many people find them… unsettling, to look at. It’s easier for him to keep them covered.”

The knights, blessedly, seem to accept that explanation. They remain quiet as the demon nods decisively and lowers Excalibur, kneeling again before King Arthur and presenting the blade to him with both hands.

“Well?” Arthur asks, accepting the sword. “Does it meet your expectations?”

Crowley nods. “Indeed, it does, Your Majesty. Truly, there is no other blade on Earth that is its equal. A sword like that, it cannot have been made by human hands.”

“Indeed?” the king says, sharing a glance with his queen. “We had long suspected it could not be completely mortal in origin, but if not men, then who would create such a thing?”

The demon shrugs. “It isn’t for me to say, Majesty. All I can tell you is that no human smith forged your sword.”

“I see. Thank you, Master Crowley. We have been most impressed with your work. I hear many of my knights have commissioned you for a blade of their own. If you wish it, a place can be made for you in this court.”

Aziraphale watches Crowley at that, unsure of what he wants his answer to be. It would be… nice. To have him nearby for once. To perhaps spend a few years with him without having to make up some sort of excuse to do so. On the other hand, it would be very difficult to explain to Gabriel why he let a demon anywhere near Arthur or his knights.

Crowley bows deeply. “I am honored, Sire. But I’m afraid I’m not one to settle in one place. With your leave, I will stay a season or two, long enough to finish the orders I have received. But then I must move on.”
Arthur’s smile is wistful at that, and Aziraphale remembers how much the king enjoys their journeys outside of Camelot. He always seems more alive, when away from the castle walls. “I understand,” he tells Crowley. “But know you will always be welcome among my court. Please, join us for tonight’s feast.”

“There you are, Sire,” Crowley says, bowing, and Arthur turns away, dismissing him. The demon scans the room, breaking out in a wide grin when he spots Aziraphale. He doesn’t come to him immediately though, instead he allows himself to be drawn into conversation with Sir Bors and a few of the older knights. Aziraphale is left looking after him, and wondering whether or not it would be appropriate to get up and go to him. He wants to, but after the way they had parted… well. He isn’t sure what reception he would get. He doesn’t think Crowley is carrying a grudge, but he also can’t understand why the demon would appear here, of all places. He’s still mulling it over when Lancelot places a full mug of ale in front of him and tilts his head expectantly towards the group of knights now surrounding the demon.

“Your friend likes attention,” he observes.

“That he does,” Aziraphale says, trying not to watch the way Crowley is gesturing wildly, his expressive hands telling a story as much as his voice. He remembers him in Olympia, flushed with success after winning a match, drinking in the cheers of the crowd. He would never accept direct praise, often getting angry if Aziraphale insisted, but he did like to be the center of attention.

“He likes to do things well, and be recognized for it,” he tells Lancelot. “A trait many of our fellows share.”

Lancelot grunts an acknowledgment, but keeps an eye on Crowley all the same. Dinner is served, and Crowley is led away to sit with Bors. Aziraphale tries not to show his disappointment, though Gawain picks up on it enough to make jokes at the angel’s expense. He manages to make it through the meal without constantly turning to look for the demon, but only just. Once dinner is finished, and courtiers begin to break away to pursue their evening activities, Aziraphale goes looking for his friend. Of course, as usual, Crowley finds him first.

“So,” a familiar voice drawls in his ear, and he turns from the edge of the balcony to see Crowley leaning casually against a pillar, grinning at him. “Nice place, this.”

“Crowley,” Aziraphale says, keeping his voice flat. “What are you doing here?”
“Here?” Crowley shrugs. “Got tired of the damp. I figure, I’m not doing any bad spreading foment out there. Might as well come see what you were up to. Not like I have anything better to do.”

“Hmm.” The angel frowns at him. “You’re not still on about us working together, are you?” If he asks again, he’ll have to say no again. And he finds he really doesn’t want to leave this conversation angry.

He gives Aziraphale a calculatedly innocent look. “Who, me? Nah, you’re right, terrible idea. Don’t know why I thought of it.”

“Well then.” The angel looks at him, unconvinced. “As long as that’s the case…”

“Oh, it is,” Crowley tells him. “Now come on, tell me about this place.”

Aziraphale sighs, and complies. Crowley is a wonderful listener, as he tells him all about life at court. He sits beside him in a corner of the Great Hall near the fire, resting his chin on his hand and watching the angel as he talks. He doesn’t remove his glasses, and Aziraphale finds himself missing the sight of those vibrant yellow-gold eyes. Still, Crowley is a wonderful conversation partner. He makes all the right noises in all the right places. He listens, asking questions sometimes, and commenting on what Aziraphale says. It’s gratifying, to have someone listen to him like this, and truly understand what he’s trying to say. Gabriel never really pays attention to his reports. He’s not even sure his written reports are ever read.

“It sounds like you really respect this king,” Crowley observes when he starts talking about Arthur and Guinevere.

He looks to the dais, where Arthur now sits with his queen and a few of his most trusted knights, laughing and talking. “I do,” he says. “Very much so. He’s a good man.” He smiles, watching Guinevere laugh at something the king says.

“Have you ever gotten a good look at that sword of his?” the demon wants to know.

“Excalibur? I’ve seen him use it, yes. It’s an impressive weapon.”
Crowley shakes his head. “Not what I mean, angel. Have you ever seen it up close, when you weren’t fighting someone?”

“I… huh.” Aziraphale wracks his memory, but can’t think of a single time he’s seen Excalibur up close. “I must have at some point, but I’m afraid I can’t remember when.”

“It’s yours,” Crowley tells him.

“What? Dear boy, don’t be absurd,” he starts to laugh, thinking his friend to be joking, except Crowley doesn’t join in.

“It’s yours,” the demon repeats. “’S why I wanted a look at it. You heard me earlier, didn’t you? When I told him it wasn’t made by human hands?”

Aziraphale gapes at him. “What? But… that means… no, it can’t be. Can it?”

Crowley nods. “Yeah. It’s a flaming sword. Right from the forges of Heaven.”

“But… how can you tell?”

Crowley watches him through the lenses of his glasses. “I just can,” he says. “I used to work those forges, remember?”

“Then how can you tell it was mine? You made stars, not swords, you said. Couldn’t it be any sword from Heaven?” the angel asks. “I mean, others must have made their way to Earth after all these years.”

He shrugs. “Eh. I can feel it. Feels like… like you. Can’t really explain it more than that.”

“Oh. Well, I… huh.” Aziraphale takes in the information. “Well then. I guess that’s… hmm.” It feels strange, to know the sword he gave away is now considered legendary. A mark of the True King.
“Hey, Sir Aziraphale!” Sir Kay calls from halfway across the hall, walking toward them from the small group around the king. He grins when he reaches them. “I hear the king has another mission for you!”

“Oh no,” Aziraphale mutters privately to Crowley. “Not another one. I only just got back.” He raises his voice so Kay can hear. “Where to?” he asks.

“You’re off to the north this time,” Kay says with a laugh. “More snow and cold!” He laughs again at the look on Aziraphale’s face. “Don’t seem so excited,” he adds. “The rest of us are getting sent out too. Turns out Merlin found more rumors about the Grail, and Arthur wants us all to investigate.”

Aziraphale sighs. “I see. I assume the king will have someone provide me with the details?”

Kay nods. “Aye. You’ll hear all about it before it’s time to leave. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some bad news to break to the other lads.” He claps Aziraphale on the shoulder, nods politely to Crowley, and makes his way to a small knot of younger knights, who all look up eagerly at his approach.

“North,” Aziraphale complains. “And it’s almost winter.”

“Let me go,” Crowley says abruptly.

“What?” Surely he’d misheard that.

“I said, let me go,” the demon repeats. “I’ve been needing to get up that way anyway. Might as well take care of your quest while I’m at it.”

“Why would you do that?” the angel wants to know, confused. It makes even less sense than when Crowley had taken on the healing of Tobit for him. Then, Crowley had had some sort of score to settle with the offending demon, and had been willing to do Aziraphale’s healing in return for the chance to face it.

Crowley tilts his head to the side, just watching him. “Well,” he says slowly, “I guess it just seems like wasted effort, us both going.”
“And what would you get out of it?” the angel asks, narrowing his eyes.

“Well, I do have a temptation due in the Mediterranean,” he admits. “You could do that for me, if you wanted.”

“Crowley,” Aziraphale says, exasperated, but still just a little amused by the demon’s persistence. “I told you, we can’t just… not do our jobs.”


“Oh, but…” he tries to come up with a good argument against it, but if the work is still getting done… there’s nothing that says he has to be the one doing the miracles.

“Think about it,” Crowley advises. “Nobody will notice. You know they don’t even read our reports. As long as we’re both seen to be doing our own work sometimes, doesn’t it make sense to just… share the load?”

Aziraphale shakes his head. “I really shouldn’t. It wouldn’t be right.”

“You’re telling me you’d rather spend weeks in the cold, wet, and snow, instead of nice warm Rome? Come on, angel, you don’t really expect me to believe that, do you?” The demon lowers his glasses, so he can look at Aziraphale over the rims.

“I…” he can picture it already, weeks spent up near Scotland, chasing yet another rumor of the grail while Crowley lounges in warm roman baths and eats oysters without him. Well. Maybe not the oysters part. Crowley never does seem to eat when he isn’t around.

“Come on, angel,” Crowley pleads. “How long have we known each other? Don’t you think it makes sense to just… work together? It’s not like either of us are getting anywhere on our own.”

He should refuse. He really, really should. It would be the Right Thing to do. And yet, he thinks about yet another quest. And probably more after that. It would be so nice to trade off with the demon.
“I’m not tempting anyone to murder,” he says firmly. “And I won’t do anything that directly counteracts my orders, or there’s no deal.”

Crowley grins at him. “Fair enough,” he tells him, and offers a hand. A week later Crowley heads north, while Aziraphale catches a ship for Rome.

Years later, he is in Japan when he feels a flare of power from halfway across the world. Grief and anger, radiating out through the universe. Every supernatural entity on the planet must have felt it. Certainly, the humans do. The Buddhist monks he had been about to take tea with look around, unsettled, though they don’t quite know why. The waves of grief flare higher, and then abruptly shut off. Aziraphale stands, and excuses himself from the monks. A snap and a miracle take him to the source of the emotions, and what he finds is…. devastation.

The city of Harim, just miles from Aleppo, had been leveled. Nothing remained of the citadel built by the crusaders but rubble and smoke. Fires, started by fallen candles or lamps or cook-fires, still smoldered under the debris. The cries of the wounded and dying filled the air, joined by the shouts of rescuers who worked to recover those caught beneath fallen walls and ceilings. It’s…. He hasn’t seen such devastation since the Flood. It looks like the hand of God Herself came down and flattened the city. And in the center of it all, sits Crowley.

His fiery hair is covered in dust, curling wild and untamed around his head. His clothes are torn and dirty, the glass in his lenses shattered on one side, the lens itself crushed on the other. He’s seated in the rubble, as if he hadn’t even noticed the buildings falling around him.

“Crowley!” Aziraphale shouts, projecting his horror and rising anger into his voice. The demon doesn’t even flinch.

“Crowley, what are you doing?” he demands, coming closer. “Look at me.”

Crowley doesn’t look up. He’s bent over a large piece of what might have once been the ceiling, two scrolls laid out in front of him. As Aziraphale draws nearer, he can hear him muttering under his breath.
“Must have miscounted. Come on, idiot, think. They have to be here somewhere.”

“Crowley.” Aziraphale puts a hand down on one of the scrolls. *That* gets the demon’s attention. He looks up, exposed eyes wide and tormented, and for just a moment the angel sees amber-gold instead of deep yellow.

“I can’t find them,” he says quietly, sounding… lost. “Angel, I can’t find them.”

Something inside Aziraphale aches at the emptiness in Crowley’s voice. The demon seems completely unaware of the world around him, not even realizing that one leg of his pants is starting to burn. Aziraphale puts the fire out with a snap, moving to put his hand on Crowley’s shoulder.

“Can’t find who, dear boy?” he asks, but Crowley has turned back to his lists. He leans down, looking over the list, and recognizes a scroll he himself had copied from Heaven’s Archives. A list of every single angel currently working for Heaven. The other scroll looks to be its match, in Crowley’s spidery handwriting, listing every demon on the books for Hell. With a sinking feeling, Aziraphale thinks he knows what Crowley is doing.

“My… my legion. Angels under my command before the War. I can’t find them all,” Crowley says, distractedly, eyes frantically scanning first one list, and then the next.

“Oh.” Aziraphale knows what that means, even if Crowley doesn’t see it. “Oh, my dear boy.” There’s only one reason why a name would not be on either list. And that is because there’s a third list that is not in the Archives of Heaven and Hell. A list that belongs only to Azreal, holding the names of those angels and demons who have died.

“I just… I’ve got to keep looking. I must be missing something.” His fingers move back to the top of the lists and starting again.

Aziraphale sighs, and puts a hand on top of his. “My dear, you know better.”

“I do not,” Crowley insists, shaking his hand away. “They’re here. They have to be.”

The angel considers arguing, but he knows Crowley too well by now. He won’t hear him like this. Instead, he reaches for the scrolls.
Crowley twists, picking up a scroll and turning so Aziraphale can’t reach it. “Go away, angel. I’ve got to finish this.”

“No, you don’t,” he says. “How many times have you been over these lists already?”

“No enough.”

“And how many times do you plan to go over them, Crowley?” He wants to be angry. He wants to scream and rage about the destruction around them. Wants to blame Crowley for all of the humans who must have died. But. He can feel the earth beneath his feet. The shifting of the planet underneath them both. This earthquake was building for a very long time. It would have happened sooner or later, even without the blast of infernal power Aziraphale had felt earlier. And Crowley…. He’s never seen that expression in his eyes before. That lost and desperate look that he’s sometimes glimpsed in the demon’s gaze before it’s hidden and locked away, replaced with his characteristic optimism. He’s not hiding it from him now. Aziraphale isn’t even entirely sure Crowley realizes he’s really there.

“As many times as I need,” the demon hisses. “I will find them.”

“Fine.” Aziraphale reaches out and grips the top of the scroll. “But not today. Today you’re done.”

“No.” Crowley puts the scroll back down on his makeshift table, leaning over it protectively, eyes locked on the names.

“My dear boy, please. At least let me take you someplace more comfortable.”

“No.”

“Crowley…” Aziraphale frowns at the bags under his eyes. He had given the demon the list of angels a week ago, and he looks as if he hasn’t had any rest since that night.

“When did you last sleep?” he asks his friend. “Or eat. Or do a temptation?”
The demon’s only reply is more muttered name and locations. Aziraphale can feel his frustration building again, his grief and anger rising, and the earth beneath their feet starts to move again. He frowns, thinking quickly, and then he makes a decision.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” he says. And then reaches out, touching a finger to his forehead. “Sleep.” Crowley collapses. Aziraphale carefully sends the scrolls to his destination before lifting his friend into his arms. The demon is surprisingly light, barely more than skin and bones. Aziraphale arranges him as gently as he can, until his legs are over one of the angel’s arms, and the other supports his back. His head lolls against Aziraphale’s shoulder, and the angel takes a moment to notice the heady scent of him - all sulfur and forge-fire and sage.

“Come on now,” he says, though no one can hear him. “Let’s go someplace quiet, hmm?” A small miracle, and they’re in a house several thousand miles away, in a place where there are no fault lines for Crowley’s power to disturb. No one will bother them here. He settles the demon on the bed, putting the scrolls on a table that’s in sight, but not within easy reach for when he wakes up.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” he tells him then. “This is all I can do for you for now.” Even asleep, he looks tormented, his face twisted in a mask of pain. He turns over as Aziraphale watches, curling in on himself as if deflecting an invisible blow.

“Oh, Crowley,” Aziraphale sighs, and pulls a chair up beside him. “What am I going to do with you?” He reaches out with his power again, looking for a way in through Crowley’s walls. He’s convinced that if the demon will just let him in, he could help soothe this pain in him. But the walls are still there, hard as diamond, keeping everyone out. He does his best, wrapping a flood of calm and contentment around them, easing all of the pain he can still reach. It’s not enough, but it will have to do.

“Zira…” Crowley mutters as he starts to pull away.

“What is it, my dear?” Aziraphale asks, though he can sense that Crowley is still deeply asleep. Perhaps even dreaming.

“M… sorry,” he sighs. “Miss you…”

“Don’t be sorry, dear one,” the angel tells him, gently running his fingers through his crimson hair. “I’m right here. It’ll be alright.”
Some of the pain leaves Crowley’s face at his words, and the demon sighs again, falling deeper into sleep. Aziraphale continues to run his fingers through his hair, cleaning dirt and debris from the soft scarlet tresses, smoothing out the snarls and untangling the knots in the way he had once done for Raphael. Crowley doesn’t braid his hair as the archangel did, however, so he miraculates up a ribbon and uses it to gather the masses of gently curling hair and tie it up in a neat tail. Already his expression has relaxed, lines of pain and care fading as he works.

“I wish you would trust me,” he says quietly. “I wish you would let me help you.” He knows he won’t though. Even after five thousand years of companionship, there are still pieces of himself that Crowley keeps locked tightly away. Tucked behind those walls in his mind, where Aziraphale cannot reach him. It reminds him, almost, of Raphael there at the end, unwilling to let Aziraphale stand at his side. He had been completely powerless in the face of Raphael’s pain, unable to act when he didn’t understand what was wrong. Now, though, he can at least do something. He can at least be here for him when he wakes. And listen, if he wants to talk. He may not be able to take away the pain, but he can try to help bear it. So he sits, and he waits for Crowley to awaken, determined not to fail him in the way he had failed Raphael.

Three days later, he’s startled out of his reading by a noise from the bed. He looks up to see Crowley watching him with dim eyes, ormolu in place of true gold.

“There you are. Are you feeling better?” He smiles, but Crowley doesn’t smile back.

“Harim. The city. What happened to it?”

“Ah.” He had hoped that Crowley wouldn’t remember that. He’d been so focused on his work, Aziraphale had allowed himself to believe he hadn’t even noticed the earthquake. “Well... It’s gone, isn’t it?” His friend asks, turning over to stare at the ceiling. “I destroyed it.”

“It’s gone, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“How bad is it?”
Aziraphale has never wanted so badly to take his hand, but he knows the gesture would be unwelcome. “My dear, it wasn’t your fault. It-” He shifts, moving to stand between Crowley and the small table with the scrolls. There’s a third scroll there now, one that had appeared a day ago next to the bed. A commendation from Hell, for the work Crowley had done in Aleppo. One of the deadliest earthquakes in human history. Nearly 230,000 humans dead. The citadel in Aleppo destroyed. Harim flattened. A military fort and several other small towns left as rubble. Aftershocks were still being felt in the region, with many residents sleeping outside for fear their homes would fall on them in the night. He should have destroyed the commendation as soon as it arrived, but he hadn’t been sure it was the right move. Now, he wishes he could miracle it away without the demon noticing.


“I… bad. It’s bad.” His hands come together, and he starts to fidget with his ring, turning it round and round on his finger. What would Raphael do here? he wonders. How would he heal this? The ring, as always, holds no answers for him.

“I see.” The demon closes his eyes. “I guess that’s… ‘good’, right? ‘M a demon, after all. I should do bad.”

Aziraphale looks at his drawn face and remembers yellow-gold eyes and sharp words. You’re an angel, aren’t you? Be better.

“Did you want to do bad?” he asks quietly.

Crowley turns his face to the wall.

“Crowley. Did you want to do bad?”

For a moment, he thinks the demon won’t answer him. And then, he sighs. “… No.”

“Then do better,” he says simply.

Crowley laughs. The sound is rough and harsh, like nails on glass. No joy in it. “Do better. Do
better, he says. Oh, angel, that’s rich. Asking a demon to do good. What will you think of next?”

“I’m not asking ‘a demon’ to be good,” Aziraphale says, irritated but not quite certain why. “I’m asking you.”

“Then you’re even more foolish.” The demon still won’t look at him. “I’m the worst demon there is.”

Aziraphale shakes his head. “The worst demon there is wouldn’t feel even the slightest guilt about causing that earthquake. Are you trying to tell me you don’t care that people died?”

“I don’t.”

“Liar.” If he knows anything, it’s this. Crowley cares. He cares more than any demon has a right to. More, even, than many angels Aziraphale has known.

Crowley sighs, closing his eyes and turning his face to the wall. “Go away, Aziraphale. I want to be alone right now.”

“No.” He’s not sure he’s doing the right thing here, but he is certain that leaving Crowley alone is the wrong one. However much the demon might snap at him, he’s in pain. And Aziraphale is no healer, but he knows that Raphael would not leave someone hurting so badly. And if Raphael wouldn’t, then he can’t.

The demon curls into a ball on the bed, and as Aziraphale watches, his skin slowly starts to change, turning black and scaled. His body stretches and twists, until suddenly the man-shape of him vanishes, and a serpent lies coiled tightly under the sheets.

“Oh dear.” The angel moves closer, fascinated. Crowley hasn’t shown him his serpentine shape since that first day in the Garden, and he hadn’t taken the time to admire him then. Now, he peels back the covers and stares at the iridescent black of his scales. They shine against the white sheets, contrasting with the violent carmine-red of his soft underbelly. One large golden eye blinks up at him, before the serpent hides his face under a loop of his own body.

“You are quite beautiful, you know,” he says, wanting badly to touch, to see if his scales are as smooth as they look.
Crowley hisses a warning as his hand nears the demon, and Aziraphale pulls back. “Alright, I won’t touch you. But I’m not going away either.” He settles down on the bed next to the serpent, and summons his book back into his hands. Crowley remains coiled as he starts to read, but he knows the demon well by now. He knows he won’t be able to stand the silence for long.

Sure enough, perhaps fifteen minutes later, he feels a nudge at his hand and looks down, finding the serpent’s head resting against his fingers. As he watches, Crowley rears back and then pushes at his hand again. Obligingly, Aziraphale raises it from where it had been resting on his leg, and the demon wriggles closer and slides up over his knee. Then he stops, glancing up at him, as if to ask ‘is this okay?’.

The angel smiles fondly at him. “Well, alright then, you wily serpent,” he says, and Crowley coils himself back up in Aziraphale’s lap. Hesitantly, he drops his hand back down, until it rests on one of the demon’s coils.

“Oh!” he says, surprised, and Crowley’s head shoots up, alarmed. “No, no, it’s alright,” he rushes to assure his friend, letting his fingers drag along the smooth scales. “It’s just… you’re quite warm.”

“’M a demon,” Crowley hisses. “Not a bloody garden snake.” He sounds annoyed, but doesn’t make a move to get away. He doesn’t say anything more, so Aziraphale continues his slow caress, up and down, enjoying the smoothness of the scales under his fingers. The only response he gets is a slight squeeze around one leg when he stops for a moment to turn a page.

They sit together like that for some time. He doesn’t know how long. The sun is going down, when eventually he hears a soft hiss.

“What was that?” he asks, frowning.


“How many…” he squints in the dim light, finding it hard to read that serpentine face. He reaches out, trying to feel the demon’s emotions, but encounters only a high, cold wall around his mind. Even the anguished turmoil from before is gone, hidden away as if it had never been.

“Angelssss.” The serpent looks up at him, and it’s in his eyes that Aziraphale finds the pain he
cannot sense. Deep, ancient hurt, so vast it makes him want to weep. And then Crowley blinks, and it’s gone.

“The ones you… can’t find?” He glances at the scrolls. They won’t have any answers for him, he knows.

“I will find them,” Crowley tells him. “They were healers. Scientists. They should not have been on the front lines.”

“Even healers Fell,” Aziraphale says, remembering frightened amber-gold eyes, beautiful white-gold wings burning to black.

“Not these,” he insists. “Not like me.”

He almost corrects him. The words are on the tip of his tongue, ready to tell Crowley the truth he does not want to face. But then… he remembers Michael’s cold, lifeless gaze. The way she said ‘I failed him’, as if Raphael’s Fall was her fault. He does not want to see what losing so many under his own command will do to his friend. Over three hundred… unless he had been of a higher rank than he claimed, that would have been most of his battalion. To lose so many… he doesn’t know what he would have done. Aziraphale himself only lost fifty-seven of the five hundred angels he’d been given to command. He had only known them for a short time, but he still remembered their names, if not their faces. He cannot think of anything to say. Certainly nothing that would make Crowley feel better. So he says nothing, instead simply continuing the soothing motion of his hand against the demon’s scales. It’s not enough, not nearly, he fears. But it’s all he has to offer. Crowley sighs, and rests his head on the angel’s knee.

He wishes he knew what to do. What would heal this ache. He’s no healer. No Raphael, able to heal an argument before it even starts. He misses him fiercely, like there was a piece broken off of him. All he has left of the archangel is the echo of his love, but comfort though it is, it cannot help him heal this pain. His thoughts go around and round as time passes around him there in the quiet house. Though he rarely sleeps, he still starts to get drowsy, nodding off and catching himself, unable to resolve the turmoil in his mind. With Crowley a heavy, warm weight in his lap, Aziraphale relaxes. His head falls to rest against his chest, hands slowing and then going still, and then… he’s dreaming.

*He knows he’s dreaming. There’s no other way this could be happening. He’s back in Eden, walking along the bank of a stream. The sun is shining warm across his face, and he raises a hand to shade his eyes. There’s someone waiting for him up ahead, sprawled against the trunk of a tree, surrounded by a patch of wildflowers. Scarlet and gold flash in the morning light, and he hides a smile. Crowley.*
He opens his mouth to call out, to chide the demon for being here in Eden, but as he gets closer, he realizes - the gold is too deep, more amber than yellow. The scarlet is too bright, vibrantly red. Gold, like stardust, glitters across his skin and hair, throwing of sparks when he turns to watch Aziraphale approach. The angel’s hands cover his mouth, and he stifles a sob.

Raphael stands then, a bright column of flame in the peaceful Garden. He comes to Aziraphale, that gentle smile on his lips, and takes his hands in his.

“Aziraphale,” he says, that beloved voice he had never believed he would hear again. “I’ve missed you.”

“I- you-” he stammers, unprepared for how solid his hands feel against his own. “Raphael”. He flings himself at the archangel, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him close. And… he’s warm. Warm, and solid, and so, so real.

Raphael laughs, that wonderful, bright sound that had been the first in all of Heaven. He clutches Aziraphale to him just as hard, burying his face in the principality’s shoulder. Aziraphale realizes he’s crying, but he doesn’t care. This is Raphael. He’s here. He’s solid, and warm, and … he remembers the War. Raphael, terrified, pinned to the ground under the Tree. He pulls back, not letting go, just enough that he can see the archangel’s face.

“Aziraphale?” he asks, confusion forming in his open, honest gaze.

“You- you’re dead,” he tells him sadly. “You Fell, and then you died. This… this isn’t real.”

He expects Raphael to disappear at that, or perhaps gradually fade away. Maybe to wake up, back on Earth with Crowley asleep in his lap. Instead, Raphael just nods.

“It’s a dream,” he says solemnly. “A gift from your subconscious.” Then he grins. “Which, of course, means we can do all sorts of things in here.” There’s that spark of mischief in his eyes as he laughs again, and, oh Aziraphale has missed him.

“Raphael,” he says, trying for stern, but his voice breaks on the syllables, and his eyes fill with tears.
The archangel sobers, eyes turning sad, and he brings his hands up to rest on Aziraphale’s shoulders. “I am sorry, love. I didn’t want to leave you.”

“Then why did you?” he demands, sharper and angrier than he intended. “Why did you Fall?”

Raphael looks away. “I had too many questions. That was enough.”

“You knew,” he accuses him. “You knew you were going to Fall. Why didn’t you try to stop it?”

“It’s all part of Her Plan,” the archangel tells him, shrugging. “Ineffable, right?”

Aziraphale glares at him. “Don’t joke! You died, Raphael!”

Raphael sighs, reaching out and wiping the tears from Aziraphale’s face. “I know. I know, and I’m sorry.”

“You’re gone,” Aziraphale sobs, clinging to the warmth of him. “You’re gone, and here I am, alone on Earth, trying to make sense of it all on my own. And it’s—there’s so much I don’t understand. And Heaven... so much of what Heaven does now seems wrong somehow. Cruel. Not at all what Heaven is supposed to be. Crowley says I should try to be better, but I try, and it doesn’t help. I’m not enough, not to heal all of Heaven. I can’t even— I can’t even help Crowley, and he’s the closest thing to a friend I have.”

“I know,” he repeats. “And it’s not fair. None of it is. But you have to find the answers on your own.”

“I just...” he hides his overflowing eyes in Raphael’s shoulder, body shaking with his pain. “I want you back. You could fix this, I know you could.”

“I believe in you,” Raphael says softly. “You’ll find the right thing to do.” He wraps his arms around him and holds him close, letting him cry until all his tears are spent.
In the morning, he opens his eyes to an empty room. Crowley has gone. But on the table, where the scrolls had been, he finds a box of sweets and a short note - two words, in Crowley’s messy scrawl. *Thanks, angel.*

A few years later, he finds himself in what will become Cambodia, in one of Jayavarman II’s wondrous hospitals. He’s meant to be spreading knowledge, but he finds himself spending time walking through the halls of the hospital, remembering Heaven’s halls of healing. It smells similar, of herbs and healing poultices, reminding him so strongly of the scent of Raphael. It’s in the small kitchen he’s most struck by it. Through the open windows he can smell petrichor, that smell of ozone before the rain. With it, he gets the scent of hearth-fire, and the healing herbs the Angkor doctors use. He closes his eyes and drinks it in, feeling the echo of Raphael’s love all around him. Sometimes he feels as if it’s been getting stronger lately, though perhaps that is just wishful thinking. Whether it is or isn’t, he’s grateful to still have at least that much left of him. The feeling of his love, and the gold band around his little finger.

He lingers there, standing by the window, taking in that familiar, beloved scent. Petrichor, hearth-fire, and herbs. It’s…. Missing something, he thinks. Something important. He can’t put his finger on it, but it leaves him feeling agitated. He turns away from the window, and back to his duties. There’s a patient here he’s meant to keep alive, for reasons he does not know. Sandalphon delivered the mission, and, as usual, would only tell him exactly what to do and nothing more. So he gets to work, using a miracle to send the doctors to other patients, and reaches for this man’s pattern. It’s the work of minutes to fill it with light, curing the sickness that would have killed him slowly had it been allowed to remain.

He still has that sense of something missing as he leaves the hospital. Like he’s forgotten something important. It’s only when he passes a doctor making a salve that he realizes what it is. The salve contains sulfur, long considered to be good for skin condition, and the pungent scent of it hits Aziraphale’s sensitive nose like a punch. It was this scent that he’d been looking for, under the petrichor and herbs. But Raphael had never smelled of sulfur. That scent belongs to Crowley - sulfur, the metallic tang of forge-fire, and the earthy, astringent smell of sage.

Guilt coils in his gut. Crowley deserves better from him, he thinks, than to be compared to Raphael. It’s not fair of him to do it. Still, there are times when the demon reminds him so strongly of his lost archangel. Moments when he looks up to see Crowley laughing, and for just a second sees gold-flecked skin and amber-gold eyes. Sometimes, he’ll hear his voice and his first thought is ‘Raphael’. It was worse in the beginning, when any sight of red and gold brought Raphael to mind. Now though… now there are moments when he thinks of Raphael, but sees a serpentine gaze and a sharp-toothed smile. It worries him sometimes, that he’s forgetting Raphael’s face. He doesn’t know what he’ll do, if one day he turns around and realizes he can no longer picture that beautiful amber-gold gaze, or that gentle, warm smile.
The night after Crowley asks him for Holy Water, Aziraphale finds he cannot rest. He paces his shop, anxious, his mind concocting all sorts of scenarios in which Crowley uses the Holy Water on himself. Not even his favorite books can distract him from his racing thoughts. What if Crowley finds another way to destroy himself, and Aziraphale’s last words to him were words of anger? Perhaps he was too hasty, dismissing him like that. Perhaps he should have heard him out. But then again, why would he want Holy Water? What possible use could he have for it, other than self-destruction? The angel’s thoughts go around and round, never settling. Eventually he makes up his mind. He must talk to Crowley. Understand why he wanted the Holy Water. Decided, he stands and miracles himself over to the demon’s flat. He’s never been inside, but he’s dropped him off here a few times - enough to know, at least, which door is his. Not that he could mistake it, the demonic power in the flat is easily detectable to his angelic senses. Aziraphale strides up to the door and knocks firmly, three times. He gets no response. So he waits a little, then tries again.

Is he out? Aziraphale wonders, fear sinking into the pit of his stomach. Did he…? But no. Crowley had no way to get Holy Water himself, that was why he had asked Aziraphale. Still… the silence is worrying. Aziraphale can feel him inside the flat, the red-and-gold wellspring of his power pulses steadily from a room further inside. Aziraphale knocks again, and sighs when he again gets no response.

“Crowley, open this door at once!” he demands, loud enough he knows the demon should be able to hear him, even in the furthest part of the flat. “I mean it, Crowley. Open up, or I’m coming in anyway.” Nothing. He puts a hand against the door and presses against it, willing it to open. Instead of complying, he feels a sharp sting against his palm, and the force over the door expands, pushing him backwards. Aziraphale reaches out, testing it, his own blue-white power mixing with red-and-gold, and - Pain fear exhaustion pain panic tired so tired not safe not safe pain regret tired pain keep out keep out keep out KEEP OUT! The wards around the flat pulse with a surge of infernal power, and Aziraphale is shoved back against the wall.

“Crowley!” He stands the moment the wards release him, returning to the door. This time, they flare up against him the moment he puts his hand against the wood. Again, he’s hit with a wave of pain, exhaustion, and fear. And when he tries to return to the door, the power holds him back, knocking him over again when he starts to get too close. At last, after what seems like hours of struggling, Aziraphale gives up. He can feel Crowley still inside, but it’s clear he isn’t going to let the angel in. Instead, he goes back to his shop and writes a letter, miracling it into Crowley’s flat where the demon will find it.

The first few tries of his letter are angry, expressing exactly what he thinks of demons who go looking for something as dangerous as Holy Water, and then magically block their friends from
getting to them to make sure they’re alright. But each time he tries to send one he pauses, hearing Crowley’s voice in his head. You’re an angel. Be better. He doesn’t have to give in to his anger like this. And really, he realizes as he tries, yet again, to come up with a letter he can send, he isn’t truly angry. He’s afraid. Afraid of what Crowley will do, if he gets the Holy Water. Afraid of being left alone, again. He sighs, and puts pen to paper once more. This time, though short, he’s satisfied with the results.

Crowley, he writes.

We were both too hasty this morning at the park, and may have said things we do not mean. If you wish, I am willing to hear your reasons for requesting the Holy Water. I do not approve of the request, and cannot, in good conscience, give it to you. However, I am willing to listen. Perhaps we can find some other way to do whatever it is you need. One that doesn’t involve undue risk to yourself.

You know how to reach me. I will be here. Please do not do anything rash.

Sincerely, Aziraphale.

He receives no reply. Days later, he returns to the flat. The wards will let him up to the door this time, but no further. Crowley is still inside, but beyond that he has no sense of his friend. He could be doing anything at all. But he does not come to the door that day, nor the next, nor any of the other times Aziraphale tries to reach him in the half-century that follows. He writes letters, miracling them into the flat, only to have them go unanswered. All he can think of is that Crowley has decided to take one of his long naps. He’s taken them before, of course. The longest had been two decades, just after the end of the black plague. By the time this one reaches its 30th year, he starts to wonder if the demon will ever return again. He uses some of his power to watch the flat, something to alert him if the demon ever stirs from beyond its walls, but he never does. Aziraphale keeps testing the wards every so often, each time not sure if he wants them to break.

He thinks sometimes he can even feel Crowley reaching out for him in his dreams. It’s faint, fainter even than the echo of Raphael’s love, but he can feel it. Just briefly, once every few years. It never fails to make him wonder what the demon is dreaming of, and how Aziraphale might fit into it. Still, it’s not enough. He misses his friend, as much as he tries not to. He knows he shouldn’t. Crowley is a demon, after all. He can’t help it, he misses him anyway.

Fifty years have passed, by the time he finds a letter in his box, signed by Crowley. It’s brief, but it
lets him know the demon is, at last, awake. He expects to see him any day after that. Expects him to come sauntering into the shop with a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates, acting like he hadn’t just spent the last half century asleep. But he doesn’t come. Not that year, or any of the next couple decades. He’s out of the flat, Aziraphale knows. He can sense that much. Sometimes he even thinks he can sense him close by. But he doesn’t make himself known. And the angel isn’t sure he can or should go to him. So he waits. They exchange infrequent letters, though Crowley’s are always short and devoid of details. He avoids all mention of visiting, and ignores any invitation Aziraphale makes.

By 1941, he almost gives up hope that he will see the demon again. Crowley has been awake for years now, and still he has not spoken to him. He takes to attempting more and more risky things, like saving children in an active war zone, in hopes that the demon will come to rescue him like he always has. Miraculously, none of the danger he expects ever materializes on these trips, and Crowley never comes to his rescue. It’s ridiculous, of course. There’s no reason why he should want to see the demon again. And yet, here he is, wanting little else.

He tries to avoid the battlefield as much as he can. It helps that Gabriel specifically ordered him not to interfere, so he at least has an excuse. He still tries though, haunted by a memory of Crowley’s hard golden eyes and the plea in his voice when he had said be better. He can’t do it. It reminds him too much of another battlefield. Of the screams of angels and demons alike, fighting and dying as their world is torn apart. Of wide amber eyes on the ground of Eden. So he returns to London, and does his best to support his chosen side in other ways. He wonders, sometimes, if Crowley is supporting the other side, but he just can’t see the demon aiding in something so vile. No, he decides, Crowley wouldn’t. He’s probably around causing mischief for both sides somewhere.

He takes the job to catch the German agents looking for prophecy books, in part because he wants to do something about this war, even if Gabriel has forbidden it, but also in part because it seems like the kind of thing Crowley would get mixed up in. He finds the books and goes to the church, only to find he’s been working with a German agent this whole time. He’s afraid, when the guns come out. It’s not just the discorporation, but the threat of being stuck up in Heaven. He hasn’t been back there, save for a few in-person reports, since the War. But if he returns without a body, will Gabriel give him another one? Or will he keep him in Heaven this time, and not allow his return to Earth?

And then, the doors open behind them, and he feels a familiar presence enter the church. And while there should be something wrong about seeing a demon standing on holy ground, all he can manage to feel is relief. Crowley is here. For the first time in nearly a century, he’s here. Real. Solid. And Aziraphale tries to act like it hasn’t been that long. Tries to keep up the appearance of being enemies like they always do at first, but it’s hard, when all he wants to do is go to him and make certain this is real.
And Crowley saves him. Again. He’s lost count now, of all the times Crowley has rescued him from certain discorporation. But this time… this time he has to help. And it’s…. The bomb drops, and he can feel the explosion all around them as he hastily throws up a barrier of pure power to keep them both alive. He doesn’t have time to think, only to act, and in that moment he dives right for Crowley, wrapping his arms and his power around him and holding him close, safe, adding an extra barrier around them both to keep out even the smallest splash of Holy Water from that font.

It’s over in seconds, and they’re standing in little more than a pile of rubble. He clutches tight to the demon still, relieved by the solidity of him beneath his fingers. The scent of him is all around them, sage and forge-fire and sulfur. It smells like safety to him. Like home. He doesn’t want to let go. Finally, Crowley laughs and reaches up, prying his hands from his shirt.

“We’re good now, angel,” he says, stepping back. “We’re safe.” He perches on a bench and removes his glasses, cleaning them of dust and debris.

“That was very kind of you,” Aziraphale says, because he can’t think of anything else to say. What do you say to someone you haven’t seen in almost a century? Especially when that someone has just saved your life again.

“Shut up,” Crowley tells him, but he doesn’t sound upset. And the angel holds back a sigh at how reluctant his friend has always been to accept praise.

“Well, it was,” he insists, unwilling to let him get away with wiggling out of being thanked this time. He looks around, trying to think of something he can offer in gratitude, and- his books. The rare, priceless books of prophecy he’d brought as bait for the Nazis. He forgot to shield them from the bomb. He’d been so worried about the demon he hadn’t even thought. “Oh, the books,” he says, wondering if he’ll even be able to miracle them back together, or if he’ll even be able to find any pieces of them remaining. “I forgot all the books. They’ll have been blown to-”

Crowley stands, barely limping though Aziraphale knows his feet must have been terribly burned by the consecrated ground, and pulls a familiar bag out of the rubble. He doesn’t look him in the eyes when he presses it into the angel’s hands.

“Little demonic miracle of my own,” he says, as if it’s nothing. As if he hasn’t just done something forbidden yet again. As if he didn’t just save an angel, and then do something kind for that angel in rescuing his books. “Lift home?”

Aziraphale watches him walk away, and a very particular feeling swells within him. A feeling that, if he’s being honest, has been growing for a long while. Perhaps even since the ark. Or Eden. It
mirrors and expands around that faint echo he can still feel of Raphael, strong and steady. Love, in its most specific form.

Crowley, he thinks, looking for the ember-red of his hair in the dark night. The gold of him is hidden away, like it always is these days. Secret. Something only Aziraphale gets to see. Like the kindness at the heart of him. And the pain he tries so hard to hide.

I love him, Aziraphale realizes. It makes him feel guilty, because he can still feel the way Raphael had loved him. The way he had loved Raphael. But... Raphael is gone. Has been gone, for nearly six thousand years. And Crowley... Crowley is here. Crowley is always here when he needs him. Even when he has no right to expect it, like tonight. Crowley makes him laugh, even when he doesn't want to. And he's been so patient with him, never forcing Aziraphale to do anything he does not wish to. He is, as Aziraphale had realized in the Great Hall of King Arthur's court, a good person, demon or no. And... and he loves him. It's as simple as that. Even if he does not think Crowley will love him in return.

Time passes, and Aziraphale’s love for Crowley does not fade. Loving Raphael had been easy, natural, like breathing. He had loved Raphael since the day he smirked at him and asked what he thought of his lesson. Or perhaps even before that, when he first saw him, a bright column of red and gold, laughing and telling him to care. Crowley though... loving Crowley was more difficult, not in the least because if Heaven or Hell ever found out, that would be the end of them both. He doesn't want to love Crowley. But he does. And so he gives him the Holy Water, when he knows the demon will try to get it anyway. And he stays close. They have dinner sometimes. Go on walks in the park. See concerts. They work together, trading miracles and temptations, for nearly seventy years. Until one evening, the end of the world begins.

Crowley comes to him, after dropping off the child. He can tell the demon is worried, but he doesn’t expect what comes out of his mouth. He’s upset, Aziraphale can see that much before he even starts to speak. He braces himself, expecting to be pushed away. To be kept in the dark, like he had been with Raphael. For Crowley to tell him to wait, that even though he’s almost vibrating with nerves, he doesn’t need help. To let the demon take care of it, and not worry.

Instead, what Crowley says is “We have to stop it.” We. He tries not to feel so pleased about that, not when he has to say no.

“We can’t stop it. It’s the Great Plan.” He doesn’t want to say no, but what can they do? If this is what God has planned... he can’t go against the Word of God.

So Crowley argues with him, the way he had almost two thousand years before, using logic
alternating with emotions until Aziraphale finds the one thing he can give in to. And then, he agrees. They shake on it. This time, this time Aziraphale won’t be forced to sit back, not even knowing there was something he could do. This time, he’ll be there, for as long as he can. And he has something else he can try. Surely, Heaven can’t truly want the world to end. Maybe, just maybe, Aziraphale can reason with Gabriel and the other archangels. They knew how much Raphael had loved Eden and all of God’s creatures on Earth. Perhaps they will be swayed into sparing the planet.

He’s surprised by how good Crowley is with the child, Warlock. Seeing him with the boy, it reminds Aziraphale painfully of Raphael. Raphael had been brisk when patients came into his infirmary with preventable injuries. He hadn’t suffered fools, and would treat the foolish with cold efficiency. It’s the same way Crowley interacts with Warlock’s parents. They probably never realized his dislike for them, even as it was blatantly apparent to the angel. But Raphael had also been gentle with the fledglings, treating their broken limbs and scraped knees with careful fingers and soothing words. He’d been kind to angels wounded in an accident, easing their fear with calm facts and his gentle smile. And he had been especially careful with the injured creatures of Eden, treating them with the same respect and care he gave the fledglings.

It’s that gentleness he sees, when he finds Crowley carrying the baby Antichrist through the gardens, singing a soft lullaby. It’s that kindness he sees in the way Crowley comforts a crying Warlock, murmuring soft reassurances as he puts a bandage on a scraped elbow. And it’s that careful, soft love he’d felt from the healer that he sees in Crowley when he comes upon them in one of the mansion’s large gardens, the boy curled up and sleeping against the demon’s side. Crowley raises a finger to his lips, cautioning Aziraphale not to wake the child, shifting to wrap his arm around Warlock and pull him close. The angel passes them and then turns back to look before he goes on with his work, and sees Crowley lean down and press a kiss to the top of Warlock’s head.

One day, when he’s watching the boy, Warlock looks up at him and frowns.

“What is it, young master?” he asks, wondering at how the lad has managed to perfect the same expression Crowley gives him when he has a question. He’s eight, and full of curiosity.

“Why don’t you like Nanny?” Warlock asks.

“What?” Aziraphale frowns at him, surprised. “Why would you say that?”

Warlock shrugs. “Dunno. Nanny seems sad sometimes, when she looks at you. So I thought maybe it was like Mum and Dad. But Nanny’s so nice, I don’t know why you wouldn’t like her.”
“I do like her,” Aziraphale assures him quickly. “Very much.”

“Then why is she sad?” the boy wants to know.

“Have you asked her?” the angel asks him. *Why is he sad?* He wonders.

Warlock shakes his head. “Not yet. I wanted to ask you first.” He waits, watching expectantly for Aziraphale’s answer.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I don’t know why Nanny would be sad.” He can’t think of any reason Crowley could have, to be sad when he looks at Aziraphale. Unless, perhaps, he thinks they won’t succeed.

“Did you know her before she was my nanny?” the boy wants to know.

Aziraphale smiles. Did he know Crowley before this? Six thousand years, they’ve known each other. “She’s one of my oldest friends,” he tells Warlock, and means it.

The boy grins at him. “Then you should make sure she’s not sad. Give her some flowers. I think she’d like that.” He turns and runs off, into the garden. Aziraphale watches after him and can’t help but laugh. Give Crowley flowers? The demon would only mock him for it, not knowing the gesture was made from love.

Three years later, he approaches the bandstand to meet Crowley, and realizes he has a decision to make. He has to choose between Crowley, and Heaven. And... it hurts. Because Crowley *is* his oldest, and dearest friend. He loves him, specifically, and with everything he is. But in the end, he is an angel. And he has to obey the word of God, no matter how much he might wish otherwise. He has to do the right thing. And the right thing is to convince Heaven to call this off. When presented with evidence, Gabriel *will* do the right thing, he’s sure of it. But to do this, he has to turn Crowley away.

*Crowley will understand in the end,* he tells himself. *He always comes back, doesn’t he?* Be better,
Crowley had asked of him. Be the angel he’s supposed to be, even when Heaven isn’t. This is what a good angel is supposed to do. He holds tight to Raphael’s ring, finding comfort in the cool metal under his hand, and the echo of love that surrounds him. Crowley will understand, once Heaven calls this whole thing off. Aziraphale will get them to back down. And then he’ll have to apologize. But he must do it this way. Crowley cannot help him in Heaven. And if he knew what Aziraphale was planning, he’d try to help. He might be found out, or Gabriel might force Aziraphale to kill him. It’s too dangerous. So he steels himself, and prepares to do what he must. He will send Crowley away. Then he will go to Gabriel, and convince him this is wrong. And then, when it is safe once again, he will look for Crowley and explain.

Heaven will do the right thing in the end. They must.

Denying Crowley is the hardest thing he has ever had to do. He wants to say yes. He wants to give in, when Crowley asks him to run away. He can’t. He still believes that Heaven will be better than this. That, perhaps, he can show them how to be better than this.

“It’s over,” he says. And the expression on Crowley’s face goes blank. Pain floods out from the demon, endless, bottomless pain. Aziraphale stands still, frozen in place, overwhelmed by the intensity of it. He hadn’t thought… had never expected that the demon could feel such deep anguish. This is old pain, ancient, agony carried for years and years behind those hard, thick walls within his mind. And… something else. Something shivers in the air around Aziraphale, trembling with an unseen force. Then it pops. Like a glass bubble shattering. And he feels the demon’s heart break.

He loves me, he thinks, elated. And then Oh. Oh no. Oh Crowley. There is love in what he can sense from the demon, yes. But it’s in pieces, the shattering remains of a heart. It joins the pain around him, multiplying it tenfold, until it swamps him completely. By the time he’s managed to surface under the flood of pain and heartbreak, the demon has gone.

Crowley. I went too far. His first instinct is to go after him. But he can’t. As much as he wants to, he has no time. Hours, before the armies will be massing.

He’ll understand when I explain, he tells himself, though now he isn’t so certain he will. Unconsciously he reaches for the comforting echo of Raphael’s love, only to find it missing. All he can feel now is the shade of Crowley’s pain.

Heaven disappoints him, in the end. Even the Metatron, the Voice of God, refuses to listen to
You should be better than this! he thinks angrily, staring at the open portal. He wants to cry in frustration. This is not the Heaven he believes in. Not the God he has spent his life serving. And now he understands how Raphael could Fall. How someone as good and kind as Raphael could look at Her Plan, and see that this is wrong. That they have spent their lives serving a power that speaks one thing - Love and compassion for all - and does another.

Crowley, he thinks, stepping away from the portal. He has to get to Crowley. Only, Crowley hangs up on him. He won’t listen. And Aziraphale feels cold fear settling deep inside. If he can’t reach Crowley… He’s not given time to think of other options. Shadwell appears, and Aziraphale is forced through the portal.

In Heaven, he is given another choice. He could rejoin his platoon, just like all of Heaven expects. Lead them in the coming War. There’s no getting out of it now. If Heaven wants a war, then Heaven will get a war. He could go along now. Fight. And when it’s over, and Heaven has won… what then? Would he be allowed to return to Earth? Perhaps pick up the pieces of whatever remains, and start again? Or would he be sent to another planet, to guide and care for a whole new race of creatures? He would remain an angel then. Remain in God’s favor. It is what he is supposed to do.

But. Be better.

Better is standing at Crowley’s side as he says clearly this is wrong. Better is standing up for what he believes, and protecting those who need his protection. Better is caring, and loving, and living for everything Heaven is supposed to be. Better is bitter tears, shed as a young boy is lowered into the ground. Better is a demon, coming to the aid of an angel even though everything they are says he should not. Better is dark wings, mantled over seven children whom God had ordered drowned for the sins of their fathers. Better is a naked back turned to him in trust that he will do no harm. It is a cocky grin and a swift sword, bearing him out of the arena. It is the quiet despair in bright yellow-gold eyes as the Son of God is sacrificed for humanity’s sins. It is a good person, offering a hand in partnership again and again, even when that hand is rejected each time. It is an agonizing, haunted search for missing angels, and the soul-crushing pain of realization when they cannot be found. It is a demon willingly entering a church to save an angel’s life. And saving that angel’s books, simply because he knew the angel would miss them. It is a desperate request for help in preventing the end of the world, and a demon who is gentle and kind to the child Antichrist.

Better is Crowley, who is somehow more angelic than even the greatest and most powerful of the angels.

Aziraphale’s choice is clear. He cannot stay in Heaven. He must return to Earth. To his demon.
And to the end of the world.

After it all, he follows Crowley onto a bus. There is so much he wants to say, but he cannot quite find the words to begin. So he starts by simply being there, where he hadn’t been before. Sitting beside him, rather than behind or in front. Before he can sort through his thoughts, Crowley falls asleep against his shoulder. Aziraphale sighs, and shifts until they’re both in a more comfortable position. This close, he can smell the fire and soot from the Bentley, the scent of burning metal and melting tires. The sour tang of fear and sweat from their close brush with the end of everything. And under it all, the scent of forge-fire, sulfur, and sage. Home.

He reaches out with his power, brushing against Crowley’s essence, and feels the cracks in his walls. The hints at the soul-deep, crushing pain within. But also love. That specific love he had sensed before, when he had broken Crowley’s heart under the bandstand. It’s faint, hidden, but now that he knows what to look for, he can feel where it is. Strong. Steady. Very like the love he felt from Raphael. He can almost feel the echo of the archangel’s love once more, a part of his own heart, right where it has always been. But it’s drowned out now by the present love, Crowley’s love, like a candle engulfed in a wildfire. He thinks he ought to feel guilty, like he’s replaced Raphael. The moment the thought comes to him, he can almost see the way the archangel would scowl at him for saying it.

_I’m dead_, he imagines Raphael would say. _It’s time you found happiness for yourself._

_I have_, he tells the figment of the archangel in his thoughts. _I think you would approve of him, if you met him._ Raphael would have loved Crowley. Or perhaps he would have hated him. They are so very similar, in so many ways. He’ll never know for sure what his first love might have thought, but he likes to think they would have gotten along very well.

Thinking of Raphael reminds him of Heaven. And of what they have both just done. Heaven will be coming for him, he knows. And Hell will come for Crowley. It will take both of them, working together, if they want to get out of this alive. They have Agnes’ prophecy to help them, at least, but even that will only get them so far. Panic rises up in him, thick and hot, at the thought of what either side would do if they got their hands on Crowley.

“They can’t have you,” Aziraphale tells the sleeping demon firmly. “Neither of them.” He closes his eyes, and relaxes into the weight of him at his side. _You can’t have him_, he says to God, praying, perhaps for the last time. _You will not take this one from me. You will not harm him again. And neither will Hell. He is mine, and I will die before either of you touches him again._
Chapter End Notes

Expect the next chapter sometime on the weekend of the 4th! I hope everyone has a joy filled holiday, and a wonderful new year!!

Now rebloggable from my writing tumblr, where I also do WIP Wednesday, and post status updates on the progress of the fic
Come say hi on my personal tumblr!

Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
2. Chapter 13 - healing the sparrow
3. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
4. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
5. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
6. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
7. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
8. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
9. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
10. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
11. Chapter 13 - Azreal and the first victim in the war
12. Chapter 14 - Talking with Michael
13. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
14. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
15. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Chapter Notes

So here we are in a new year. Thank you all so much for sticking with me for so long. Your comments and kudos truly make my day every time. <3 I hope your new year is filled with light and love and so very many good things.

I'm so, so lucky that some wonderful people have found inspiration for this fic, and have created wonderful art for it. Please take a look - links collected in the end notes. They're all amazing, and I'm absolutely blown away.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Crowley had seen a church once, somewhere in rural Alabama. The building had been destroyed by a tornado, and the entire thing was lost. In that building, there had been a beautiful set of century-old stained-glass windows. It was those windows, more than any other part of the church, that the people had mourned. Instead of accepting they were gone, the people of the church combed through the wreckage for any tiny scrap of glass that they could find. A diminutive old woman collected those pieces carefully in her wizened hands. She laid them out in her workshop, taking care to put everything back in its place, just as it had been. She had worked hard, and long, too long. She worked herself into a sickness that in the end took her life. But she did the impossible. She took the shattered remains of something wonderful, and put it back together again. They would never be quite the same as they had been, of course. Nothing so thoroughly damaged ever could be. But they were whole once more, and just as beautiful.

Now, here in his flat, released from Aziraphale’s memories, Crowley feels like those broken windows. A thing that once was beautiful, torn apart by agony and despair. Broken pieces of a whole, laid out bare for all the world to see. Carefully taken in delicate hands and glued back together again. Look close, and you can see his heart in a thousand tiny pieces, the soldering clearly visible - lines of bright lead to hold the shards in place. He’s not whole yet, not by far. But, looking into Aziraphale’s earnest sea-blue eyes, he’s starting to believe that his angel may just be able to put those last remaining shards back into place.

“You see?” Aziraphale says, squeezing his hands tightly. “You’re not second best, my dear. You never have been.”

Crowley opens his mouth to respond, but can’t think of a single thing to say. “I… you… ngk.” His mind is a maelstrom of emotions, thoughts moving almost too fast for him to catch. “I don’t understand.” He had had no idea he’d been that important to his angel. Hadn’t even considered that he could be. There were so many times, when he believed Aziraphale simply tolerated his presence. Or that he would have preferred another demon, any other demon, to share the earth with. But now… there was no lie in Aziraphale’s memories. No falsehoods, or obfuscation. Only honest fact. Pure memory, played out in the space where their essences combine. Those memories,
those emotions, they were real.

“What don’t you understand?” Aziraphale asks him, and he can feel him reaching for their essences again, preparing to show him more. There’s something almost frightening in that - that willingness to bare his most important memories for Crowley. He’s so ready to give all of himself, holding nothing back, and asking nothing at all in return but that Crowley believe in his love.

“I’m not… angel, it doesn’t make any sense. You had an archangel in love with you. How can you look at me and see anything that can even start to compare to that?”

Aziraphale meets his eyes, squeezing his hands again. “It’s actually quite simple,” he says. “You see, Raphael was the one that taught me to care about the Earth. But you, love, you’re the one who showed me how. Who continues to show me how, each and every day.” He shakes his head, expression turning thoughtful, and a little bit sad. “And, the thing is, well. The thing is, if Raphael were standing here next to you, if he were alive and well and still the same wonderful being I fell in love with all those millennia ago? Even if that were the case, I would still choose you.”

The demon can’t help but stare at him at that. “You… would? Even though I’m just a demon?”

“You are not ‘just’ a demon,” Aziraphale snaps. “But even so, I would. I don’t care that you’re a demon, Crowley. I care that you’re you. I would love you even if you were human, or something else entirely.” His voice is so sure, so steady, where Crowley would have expected it to waver, hesitant and uncertain. In the place where their essences combine, Crowley can sense his conviction.

“And, well, maybe it’s a little silly, but…” Aziraphale looks down, at their intertwined hands where they rest on his knee. “I loved Raphael. But loving him was like loving the sun. Bright, wonderful, but too much at the same time. He was an archangel, with everything that entails. To love him was to love everything he stood for, everything he represented. And to share him, not just with Her, or his siblings, but with everyone. Every single angel, and every creature on Earth. Everyone and anyone that might call out to the Archangel of Healing. And he would have been terribly disappointed in me for wishing it could be otherwise.” He sighs then, and reaches out, gently raising Crowley’s chin until he looks him in the eyes.

“But,” he says quietly, “I am a selfish creature at heart. I would have put up with having to share Raphael, because there was no other option. But you, Crowley. I love you in a much more… human way. Specifically. Selfishly. I meant what I said on the bus. You are mine, as I am yours, so long as you wish it to be so. And you, I will not share.”
Crowley blinks wet eyes, feeling the tears leak out and begin to flow down his cheeks. “You mean it.” For once, the void is completely silent. Not the screaming silence of emptiness, but the calm and steady quiet of a church in contemplation. “You love me.”

Aziraphale nods. “Yes. I do.”

“Why now?” The words slip out, unbidden, carrying his pain. “Why tell me all this now, and not… before?”

The angel looks away, shame coloring his cheeks and rippling through their combined essences. “I was afraid. At first, I just wanted to be a good angel. And a good angel isn’t supposed to love a demon, let alone befriend one. And then… I- I didn’t know if you loved me in the same way I love you. Sometimes I suspected, but I didn’t know, not until I felt your heart break. And by then it was too late. I needed to get to Heaven if I wanted to convince them to call off the war. And I couldn’t have you coming after me. And then…” he takes a deep breath. “I was also afraid of what Gabriel would do to you, if he or the other archangels ever found out how I feel. They would have taken it as a betrayal, I think. Of Raphael, or his memory. They wouldn’t understand. And they tend to… destroy the things they don’t understand.” He shows Crowley another memory - standing in the bookshop, a cold jolt of fear running down his spine when Gabriel drops in and almost discovers Crowley’s recent presence.

“They’ll still see it as a betrayal,” he adds into the silence between them. “But I don’t care anymore. I chose you, not Heaven. And even if they kill me for it, I will not regret that choice.”

_They touch you over my dead body_, Crowley thinks. He’s never raised a hand against his young siblings. Even when they came to kill him, he greeted them with open palms. But if they think they can so much as harm a hair on Aziraphale’s head, he will stand against them. He can’t quite make his voice work to say it though. There are still too many emotions swirling around within him. Joy. Love. Hope. Fear. Anger. Grief. A million different variations thereof. He opens his mouth and then closes it again, unable to break the silence that echoes around them in his empty flat. And under it all, his secret hangs heavy on him, weighing him down.


“I need… I…” He needs to laugh for pure joy. To kiss him. To pull him in and press their lips together, breath mingling, like he’s imagined so many times before. He needs to cry, to grieve for everything he has lost, and all the hurt Aziraphale has suffered over the years. He needs to scream from the pain of it, and to sing for love and delight. He’s a maelstrom inside, a tempest, the conflicting emotions raising storm winds in him fit to capsize the sturdiest of ships. “I- time. I need… I need time.” Time to think. To process. Time for his head to catch up to his heart. Time for his shattered soul to understand that this is real. Time to drown out the echoing whispers that
Aziraphale looks disappointed, but gives him a small smile, bringing their joined hands to hips lips and brushing a kiss across Crowley’s knuckles before releasing him. “Take all the time you need, my dear. I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

“Right.” Crowley tries not to notice how cold his hands feel, falling empty to his sides. “Right. I’ll just…” he stands. “I’ll, ah… I’ll be right back.” He doesn’t run, but it’s a near thing.

The door to his workroom closes behind him, a solid, steady barrier. He lets himself sag against it, sliding down until he can sit, legs drawn up to his chest, and rest his forehead on his knees.

“Fuck.” He moans quietly, hoping Aziraphale can’t hear him. The angel has just offered him everything he has ever wanted, aside from the love of his siblings. He should be overjoyed. Ecstatic. Euphoric. Exultant. And he is. He is. He’s just… it’s too much, all at once. He can’t stop his mind from racing ahead of his heart, and showing him all the ways this can go so terribly, horribly wrong.

Tell him, a voice inside says. Tell him now, who you were. And there’s the problem. Because, while Aziraphale has chosen Crowley, the demon-that-is, he does not know the whole story. He does not know the true fate of the archangel-that-was. And no matter what happens next, no matter how tightly Crowley binds his past, or how deep he buries it, the shadow of Raphael will haunt them both forever.

He should tell him. Before this goes any further, Aziraphale needs to know what really happened to Raphael. But that part of himself is locked so deeply inside, buried beneath so many walls and layers of pain. Hidden behind the strongest and oldest of the barriers within his mind. He’s not sure he’s even capable of lowering those walls enough to let the angel see inside. Still. He’ll find out some day, he thinks. Better to tell him now.

But will he still love you, once he knows? A voice whispers, hissing in the darkness of the void. He claims the demon is easier to love than the archangel, but what will he say when he knows they are one in the same?

Are they, though? Another voice asks - the careful, cautious part of him that has always sounded
just a little like Michael. *He says he can still feel Raphael’s love. That it’s different from yours.*

*How strong is his love for you, really?* Wonders that hissing voice that still sounds like Lucifer. *How long will it last? Years? Decades? Not forever, surely. He’s not stupid enough to love you forever.*

Crowley squashes that voice down brutally. For once in his life, he refuses to listen to the dark words of doubt in his mind. *I believe in him,* he tells the echoing void. *What he just showed me, that wasn’t a lie. That wasn’t false. He loves me.* That feeling, that strong, steady, wonderful feeling of love that Aziraphale had shared with him, it was a mirror of his own. Just as strong. Just as deep. He does not know if he deserves it. How could he, when he has already proved himself unworthy of even the all-encompassing Love of God Herself.

*How could he still feel Raphael’s love?* That careful part of him asks, cutting through the echoes from the silence. *All this time, in all those memories he shared, he could still feel Raphael’s love.* How? That love was locked away when he Fell, along with the rest of his past. *No one* should have been able to sense it. He’d made sure of that. But he can still remember the feeling Aziraphale had shown him. Faint, like the echoes of his siblings he can sometimes feel in the void, but warm and real, not a figment of his imagination.

He wades through the labyrinth of walls in his mind, pushing through the pain until he reaches the deepest layer. The walls are as he had left them, thick and high, impassable. Even here, surrounded by his pain, he can feel the deep agony radiating from inside this last barrier. A memory he is not yet strong enough to face alone. He shoves it back, building another wall between the core of him and Raphael’s last memory. Locking it further away. The agony recedes, and he passes through his innermost walls.

Inside, he finds his sigil. The fiery swirl of lines that mark him as Her Healer. As Raphael. As bright as the last time he had looked upon it, six thousand years ago. The false sigil he uses as the minor demon Crowley pales in comparison. That symbol is a dull, ember-red. The sigil of an archangel is full of light, swirling with threads of fire-red and molten gold, burning with the intensity of his power. He still does not understand why She did not take it from him when he Fell. It should have vanished like his Grace, torn away from him a little more with each question until Lucifer ripped it free. And yet here it remains, a reminder of all that he has lost.

Still, as he looks harder, he notices differences in the bright sigil. Changes in the slant of the lines, the curl of the curves. Subtle, but clear. Making it into something between the sigil of the Archangel Raphael and the sigil of Crowley the demon. And something else. Something so small, he almost didn’t see it. A hair-thin line of blue-white essence connected to his sigil and his life-pattern, wrapping around the heart of him, anchoring him to… someone. It flows out from him, passing through his walls and vanishing, back to the being it came from.
What the-? He thinks, reaching out and brushing it with his thoughts. Who-? Oh. Of course. Of course. Who else could it be, but Aziraphale?

The angel’s pattern had somehow been bound to his, a single fine thread of pure gold stretching out across the universe and weaving itself into Crowley’s, unnoticed. This, then, was how Aziraphale could still feel his love, even when Crowley locked it all away behind his walls. And it would feel different to the angel, almost separate from the rest of his love, which filtered out through so many barriers within him. The love Aziraphale recognized as ‘Raphael’s’ came straight from his core, carried through a link that should not have been able to exist. For six thousand years, it must have been here. Binding them together. Letting his angel feel his love, even as he tried to keep it hidden. How hadn’t he seen it? It should have pulled at him, like a splinter. His pattern should have rejected the intrusion. Anyone who could see the patterns should have noticed a piece that didn’t belong. But no one had.

“That’s it!” He sits up, adrenaline coursing through him. He closes his eyes and breathes in, focusing, until, when he opens them again, he sees his life-pattern hanging in the air before him. And there it is. That strand of Aziraphale, woven so firmly into his own that he can only find it because he knows to look. Choose your faces, he thinks. His punishment is bound to be Holy Water. And he knows his siblings. They will want to make an example of Aziraphale, in case any other angel thinks to go against their authority. Hellfire is the most likely option. And Hellfire won’t hurt him, any more than Holy Water will harm the angel. They could go in each other’s places. But changing their faces won’t fool an angel. Swapping corporations won’t get past a demon. Beelzebub and the archangels are far too smart for that, when all they have to do is look at the patterns to see what doesn’t belong. But if he weaves their patterns together, if he binds himself to Aziraphale until there is no way to tell whose pattern is whose, then they have a chance. He can make it so Aziraphale’s pattern appears as his, and his mimics the angel’s. It’s risky. If anyone thinks to look too closely, they’ll be exposed. But he doesn’t think they will. Not if they can act enough like each other not to raise suspicion.

The question is, will the angel agree to it? Binding their patterns together… he’s never known it to be done before. It would be an extremely intimate act, even more so than the joining of essences. Almost like the joining of souls. At the thought, the silence screams in his head, the void in him begging to be filled once again. He’ll have to be extremely careful, to avoid binding more than just their patterns. And to make that binding loose enough that he can undo it once the danger is past.

Light from the window catches his eyes. Dawn. They have mere hours before Heaven and Hell will come looking for them.
“Aziraphale!” He skids to a stop before the couch as the angel looks up, a relieved smile on his lips.

“Crowley, I—”

“I know how to save us!” he says quickly. “I know what Agnes’ prophecy means.”

“Oh.” Aziraphale’s face falls, but he sits forward, all of his attention on Crowley, “Okay. Tell me.”

Crowley paces as he speaks, full of nervous energy. “It’s our patterns,” he says. “Or, well, our corporations and our patterns. See, any punishment Heaven has for you won’t work on me. And anything Hell has planned for me won’t work on an angel. They’ll probably use Holy Water, so I’m betting Heaven will use Hellfire on you. But if I go in your place, if they think I’m you, well. Hellfire can’t kill me. And when Hell takes you, thinking they’ve got me, their Holy Water won’t even burn you. So we choose our faces. We choose each other’s faces.” He pauses, but Aziraphale doesn’t seem averse to the idea so far. “But,” he adds, “you know that won’t work on its own.”

“Right,” the angel agrees. “They’ll be able to see our essence. Not even exchanging our bodies will help that.”

“Yes, exactly! So we have to find some other way for our essences to look like each other. And I think I have a way to do that.”

“Go on,” Aziraphale encourages him when he falls silent, unsure about his reception to the rest of his idea. “What’s your plan?”

Crowley swallows back his apprehension and forges on. “Right. So. So our life patterns reflect our essence. Or our essence reflects our life patterns. Something like that. I never did bother to learn which. But if I weave our patterns together, I can make it so yours looks like mine, and mine looks like yours. Unless they really examine us, and they know what to look for, nobody will realize we’re not each other. Er. That I’m not you, and you’re not me.”

The angel considers it, then nods. “Alright. Let’s do it.”

He blinks at him, stunned. He hadn’t expected he would accept so quickly. “It’s… very intimate,” he says, just so he knows. “Closer than joining essences. You’ll feel everything I feel.” All his
love. And all his pain.

“I know. What do you need me to do?”

“You… know?” Crowley asks, staring. “But…”

“My dear,” Aziraphale says, giving him a look that is impossibly fond. “I have healed. I know enough about life patterns to understand what you’re saying.”

“Then… you don’t mind?” He feels like there’s a wire disconnected somewhere in his brain. It can’t be this easy.

Aziraphale stands, moving closer, until they are inches apart. Until, if he looks, he can see their life-patterns start to overlap. Then he reaches out and takes Crowley’s hand, bringing it up until it hangs in the air beside the glowing golden strands.

“Love,” he says, “I just spent several hours showing you my most important memories. And for the past six thousand years, nearly all of them have been about you. I can say with some confidence that sharing your emotions is not only something I will endure; it is something I very much desire.”

“Ah- alright then.” Crowley takes a deep breath, and grips the strands of their patterns. Then he pauses. “Wait.” Acting on wild impulse, he grips Aziraphale by the shoulders and leans in, closing the last few inches between them, bringing their lips together in a kiss. It starts off chaste at first, a gentle meeting of skin and mingling of breath, but then Aziraphale presses back, wrapping his arms around Crowley and pulling him close. The next few minutes are a blur of sensation and emotion, with more love that Crowley had ever thought possible flowing openly between them, filling him, until there’s no more room for pain.

He gasps as they break apart, feeling bereft. He can still taste him on his tongue, sweet and spicy, the scent of old books, cocoa, and myrrh. “Angel,” he says, the word full of reverence and every single ounce of his love. “I love you.”

“I know,” Aziraphale tells him, pulling him close and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “And I love you.”

Crowley closes his eyes. “There’s something you need to know, before- before we go any further.”
About me. About who I was.” He needs to tell him. He needs to tell him now, or he fears he never will.

“Then tell me,” Aziraphale says, then glances at the light growing outside the windows. “Tell me once we’re safe.”

“Alright.” He bites down on the words he had been about to speak. This can wait until he knows Heaven and Hell won’t interrupt them.

Aziraphale starts to move away, and Crowley instinctively wraps an arm around him, keeping him close. “Stay there?” he asks, when the angel looks at him curiously. “It- ah,” he feels a blush creeping up his cheeks despite his best efforts to stop it. “It’ll be easier to work this way.”

His angel laughs, seeing his words for the excuse they are. “Alright, my dear.” His arms tighten around Crowley’s torso, and he shifts closer, until there isn’t even room for air between their bodies.

Please, Crowley prays into the silence when Aziraphale rests his head on his shoulder. Mother. Please let me keep this. Don’t take him away from me again. Then he picks up the threads of their patterns, and begins to weave them together.

By the time he’s finished, the sky is fully light. At some point they had moved to the couch, and Aziraphale now sits in his lap, head on his shoulder, fast asleep. Crowley takes a moment to survey his work. The neat golden lines of their patterns, woven together, worked with patience until his own life-pattern appears as Aziraphale’s, and Aziraphale’s seems to belong to him. It shouldn’t have been so easy to do, and yet it was. Perhaps, he thinks, it is because of that strand of Aziraphale’s life-pattern that bound itself to his so many centuries ago. The patterns had already been joined; they just needed a little push to come together the rest of the way. He’s going to have a hell of a time undoing this once they’re safe, but that’s a problem for another time. Now, he shakes his angel gently, waking him from his exhausted slumber.

“Time to get up, angel,” he says, running a hand through soft white curls. “We need to switch bodies now.”

“Mmph.” Aziraphale grumbles, hands gripping fistfuls of his shirt as he curls tighter in on himself.
“Angel, wake up,” Crowley insists, shaking him harder. He’s reminded of Warlock, who always hated mornings. It usually took three loud alarm clocks and some vicious threats to get the lad moving before noon. “If you don’t get up now, I’ll throw water on you,” he tells his angel.


“Good. Time to switch. Unless you want Gabriel to swoop down on us here and find you in my lap.” He gives Aziraphale a wicked grin, imagining the shock on his brother’s face if he found them like this, and laughs at the angel’s expression.

“No,” his angel says primly, standing and straightening his clothes. “No, that would be less than ideal.”

Crowley snorts. “That’s an understatement.” He stands too, though his clothes know better than to get rumpled. “Right. Are you ready?”

“Give me a moment.” Aziraphale finishes arranging his outfit, double checking the buttons on his waistcoat and the knot of his bow-tie. “Alright. There. Now, how does this work?”

The demon frowns. “I’m not really sure. You’re the one that’s possessed someone before. I’d imagine it’s a little like that, only we both have to do it at the same time.”

“Perhaps if we start out from where our essences meet?” Aziraphale suggests. “Then we could separate, but go back into the other’s body.”

Crowley shrugs. “It’s worth a try.” He reaches out, and pulls one last thread of their patterns into place. Everything snaps together, and they both gasp in unison. It’s a flood of sensory information as their minds try to cope with two sets of input. Four eyes blink together. Two sets of lungs inhale. Crowley tastes Aziraphale’s scent on his tongue, while registering his own scent of forge-fire and sage from the angel’s nose. Gradually the sensation fades, until Crowley is only using his own senses once again. And then, the emotions hit. Aziraphale’s fear and worry and love, slamming down on Crowley like an avalanche, driving him to his knees. Aziraphale clutches at him, just as overwhelmed by Crowley’s own agony. The demon reaches out and pulls back on his pain, shoving it down deeply behind walls as thick and high as he can make them.

“Angel? Angel, talk to me.” He grips Aziraphale by the shoulders, projecting as much calm and
comfort as he can into their joined patterns.

Aziraphale blinks watery blue eyes at him, and Crowley is suddenly shocked by the feeling of absolute wonder that comes from his angel.

“Oh, Crowley,” he says, drawing them both back up until they’re standing chest to chest. “My dear, I thought I knew, but I had no idea.” Guilt and pleasure course through Crowley along with the wonder, and he can only assume the angel can feel his own confusion.

“You love me,” he clarifies. “I knew it before, but this… I never imagined I could be this lucky.” The angel’s love flows through them, winding around Crowley and making a home in the heart of him. Feeling it settle there, deep inside, he wonders if he’ll be able to survive the day that love is taken from him.

Aziraphale touches his face, caressing his cheek with gentle, soft fingers. “I wish you would know how much you deserve this, my dear.”

He lets himself bask in that love and concern for just a moment, before pulling away. “Come on, angel. Time’s wasting. Let’s get this body swap over with.” Then he breathes in, and reaches for his own essence. Beside him, Aziraphale does the same.

The place where their essences meet is easier to reach this time, taking only a thought to access. Aziraphale’s ocean, Crowley notes, is nowhere near as turbulent this time as he approaches. What little waves there are calms quickly, going flat and glass-clear in moments. His own tempest is still violent, full of crackling lightning and high storm winds, but then there’s a firm pulse of love from Aziraphale, and the winds slow.

I think I just… felt for a body and sank into it, Aziraphale tells him, sending him the memory of possessing Madame Tracey.

Huh. Feels weird, Crowley comments, sending back the feeling of a shiver. I didn’t know it felt like that.

You’ve never… possessed anyone, then? His mental voice is full of curiosity and confusion. Crowley projects back a shrug.
Nah. Never had a need to. The thought of it, shoving his essence into some human’s body, disgusts him. It seems rather a lot like putting on someone else’s dirty clothes, while they’re still wearing them.

Very like, Aziraphale agrees, picking up on the feeling in Crowley’s mind. Madame Tracey is a good woman, but it was quite uncomfortable wearing a body that wasn’t mine. But, well… there’s a feeling of fondness that comes through their bonds. I don’t imagine yours will be anywhere near as bad.

Well then. Crowley grins, projecting that smile into their combined essence. Let’s find out. He reaches for the angel’s body, and feels Aziraphale do the same with his. On three. One. He braces himself, letting go completely of his corporation. Two. He winds tendrils of himself into the pattern of Aziraphale’s body, gripping it with his essence and finding a good place for him to enter. Three. He shoves himself into Aziraphale’s form, letting his pattern encompass it, binding form and spirit together. Aziraphale does the same. A brief moment of disorientation, and then he blinks and looks up into his own serpentine yellow eyes.

“Well that was… interesting,” Aziraphale says with his voice. “Much easier than taking an inhabited body, at least.”

Crowley shakes his head, fighting the strangeness of suddenly being several inches shorter. He holds a hand up in front of his face, watching the way the angel’s perfectly manicured fingers move at his command. His old ring is still on Aziraphale’s hand, a thin band of gold angel wings joining at a crest. The last time he’d worn it, it held six sigils. His, Lucifer’s, Michael’s, Gabriel’s, Uriel’s, and Sandalphon’s. Now it holds only one. His. He traces the lines with one fingernail, and wonders if Aziraphale has noticed the changes to its shape.

“Well?” Aziraphale calls to him, worry pulsing through their patterns. “You- ah, your body… it’s…”

He looks up to see exactly what’s bothering the angel. Aziraphale had summoned a mirror, and stands before it, examining the form that normally belongs to Crowley. But, without the demon inhabiting it and ordering them hidden, the scars that mark his body have all risen to the surface. He can clearly see the dark pink lines of the wounds that should have killed him. Those same wounds, which Aziraphale had healed six thousand years ago. He knows what the rest of his skin looks like too, though it’s hidden by his clothes. His flesh marked with the scars of hundreds of battles.

“Here.” He reaches out and takes hold of his (Aziraphale’s?) hand, palm down, and presses his fingers into the scar there. A pulse of power hides it before the angel can begin to notice.
“You learn to hide your scars in Hell,” he says. “Or you don’t live to regret it.”

“Oh, but…” Aziraphale stares in the mirror as the dark mark at the base of his neck begins to fade. “Are these…?” His lower lip wobbles, and Crowley already knows what he’s thinking, can feel his guilt and worry pulsing in the place where their essences are joined.

“No, angel. These aren’t from defending you.” He smooths a finger over the remains of the wounds his siblings left him. A soft brush of a touch against his neck. Two fingers pressed to the angry red mark on his chest that’s already slowly fading to pink. His palm comes to rest pressed against Aziraphale’s side. “Falling’s a violent business.”

The angel frowns, his own hand moving to cover Crowley’s. “You always said you ‘sauntered vaguely downward’, ” he says, a note of accusation in his voice.

Crowley grins at him. “I did. It’s that last step that gets you, every time.”

“You never did say,” Aziraphale muses, and with their patterns joined together, Crowley can feel his curiosity. “What made you Fall?”

A wave of pain rises up in Crowley and passes through them both. He can only hope the angel cannot feel the echoing void inside. “I just asked questions, angel. That was all it took.” He’d always been meant to Fall of course. If it hadn’t been questions, it would have been something else. But he’d allowed himself the questions. Continued to ask them, even after he knew he shouldn’t. And that had been all it took to separate him from his Grace.

Aziraphale stumbles, his borrowed body’s normally pale skin going paler, and he catches on Crowley’s shoulders for support.

“Angel?” Crowley holds him by the elbows, supporting him until he gets his feet under him. A feeling of deep sorrow flows into him from the angel, shot through with the bitterness of guilt and regret.

“I’m sorry,” Aziraphale apologizes, leaning against him. “I didn’t- I forgot how painful it is for you.”
“Sorry, sorry, hang on, let me just…” Frantically, Crowley locks away more of his pain, throwing up even more walls to hold it back, away from his angel.

“No.” Aziraphale catches his hands. “Don’t do that.” And he pours his love into Crowley’s soul, bright and radiant, burning away the pain he hadn’t yet managed to block off, filling him with light until he pulls away, overwhelmed by the sheer power of it all.

He gasps as the pain evaporates, vanishing into the ether as if it had never been. Just a very small piece of his pain, but even that little bit gone is like a boulder lifted from his shoulders. “What?” he whispers, when he can speak again. “What did you just do?”

“I healed you,” his angel tells him. “The only way I know how.” Crowley blinks at him, stunned. Instead of flooding the lines of his pattern with healing energy, Aziraphale had flooded his mind with love and light, burning away the pain in the same way he would chase sickness from a life-pattern. He can still feel that love coursing through him, more powerful than anything he has ever felt. He wonders if any love this strong could do it. If platonic love, or familial love, could achieve the same result. The part of him that used to love helping Uriel with her scientists wants to try it, just to see. But of course, he has no one else who loves him so strongly in any way.

“Angel, I…” he lets his wonder and confusion flow through their joined patterns, and is met with more compassion and love.

“I know.” Aziraphale smiles, his honest, sweet smile. It looks so out of place on Crowley’s face, all ember-red and flashing gold in place of pure white and pale sea-blue. “You aren’t alone now. You don’t have to hide your pain from me, dear boy. I will gladly share the load.”

“Angel. Aziraphale. You- that is, we-” he stumbles over his words, unable to find just what he wants to say. Outside, a car backfires in the street and he looks up to see the sun already high in the sky. “Shit. It’s getting late.”

Aziraphale moves to check his pocket watch, and Crowley can’t resist a laugh as his hand fails to find a pocket where he expected. “Wrist watches are a thing, angel,” he says, tapping the face of his diver’s watch. “It’s…” he squints at the numbers, thrown off by the strange angle. “A little after ten.”

“Oh!” the angel frowns, hands going to the pockets of Crowley’s incredibly tight pants. “What-?” He pulls Crowley’s phone from a pocket, where it vibrates once more and then stops. “Your phone was ringing. Who is ‘Hellspawn’?”
Crowley takes it, making a face when his fingerprint doesn’t open the biometric lock, then entering his code. He has two messages, both from Adam. The first reads Fixed reality. Sorry about your car. Please tell Uncle Aziraphale sorry about the bookshop. The second one, the one that had just arrived, is slightly more urgent. I think Heaven/Hell are coming for you and Uncle Aziraphale now. I tried to use Anathema’s tarot cards to read your future and all I got was the death card.

“Right, that’s that then.” He looks up at the angel. “Adam says he thinks they’re coming for us.”

“I thought you said we’d have twenty-four hours.” Aziraphale looks at him, concerned. “Could Adam be wrong?”

Crowley considers it. “Well… it’s possible. But…” He closes his eyes, and reaches into the void, gritting his teeth against the raw and burning agony of his shredded bonds to the archangels.

“What are you doing?” Aziraphale demands, voice tight with the pain that filters in to him through their patterns.

“Checking.” He grits his teeth and reaches through the bonds, searching, until he comes up against solid mental walls. This time, he keeps going, probing each set of walls until he finds one with fresh cracks just starting to spiderweb across its surface. Gabriel, he thinks, recognizing his little brother’s mind beyond the walls. He finds a crack just big enough to reach through, and extends a thread of his thoughts until he brushes against Gabriel’s mind. He can read only the surface thoughts without giving himself away, but what he gets is more than enough. Pain, anger, and guilt fill his brother’s mind. He’s planning. Signing papers. Putting a plan into motion. Then his thoughts freeze, shock and pain coursing through him like lightning.

Crowley pulls out just in time, as Gabriel’s questing mind turns to react against the intrusion. Behind him, the spiderweb of cracks grows wider, like a glass windshield about to shatter.

“It’s today,” he confirms, feeling sweet relief as he lets go of the still-raw remains of his bonds. “They’re signing the papers for it now.”

Aziraphale is staring at him. “How do you know that?” He rubs a hand over his forehead. “Crowley? What was that you just did?”

The demon looks away, examining himself in the mirror, running his fingers through Aziraphale’s
cloud of pure white hair and tugging on the lapels of his jacket. Every moment they spend here is another moment wasted. If Heaven is signing paperwork, Hell could be moving at any moment. “We don’t have time to explain it,” he says, wondering how he would even start. “Just trust me on this, alright? They’re moving now.”

“Alright.” Trust radiates down their shared patterns, mixed with love and not an insignificant amount of concern. “You’ll explain it to me later, though?”

“Yeah, angel,” he promises. He’ll have to, if he wants Aziraphale to understand about Raphael. “I’ll explain everything.” He just hopes that once he does, Aziraphale will still love him.

He goes to the bookshop, because that is what Heaven would expect Aziraphale to do. Aziraphale remains behind in his flat, because that is what Hell would expect of Crowley. They agree to meet back at the park in a few hours, if nothing happens before then. Crowley half expects to be abducted from the cab on the way over, but he reaches Soho without issue.

Entering the bookshop is one of the hardest things he’s ever had to do. He stands before the doors, staring, and all he can see is fire. All he can smell is smoke. It takes a monumental effort to reach out and put a hand on the door. The wood under his fingers is cool rather than fire-hot, though he still flinches before grabbing the handle, expecting the metal to burn his hand. He opens the door, letting it close behind him with a soft thump. He half expects smoke to sting his eyes, but there is no fire here. No candles. Not even a lit match. He cannot sense even the remnants of the portal to Heaven.

Slowly, he moves through the shelves, hearing only the echo of his own desperation. He’d been terrified, the last time he was here. Unable to find the angel. Certain he was dead. That same fear rises up in him, until he can almost feel the flames licking at his skin. He’s not here he reminds himself. Aziraphale is safe, back in his flat. And yet, he can’t help but remember the pain of knowing the angel was dead. Of feeling the crystal feather shatter in his hands and the wards he’d placed evaporate, unable to save him from death. “I can’t find you,” he whispers. “Where are you?”

Before panic can overtake him again, he feels a pulse of love flow through him. Aziraphale. Whole and alive, wearing his body, back in his flat. He focuses for a moment, looking past the physical world, and watches the way his pattern moves, taking comfort in the place where their lines are woven together. He’ll have to undo this when they are safe, he knows. But there’s something about it that quiets the screaming inside. He hasn’t heard the echoes in the void since he began to weave their patterns together, and the silence is not quite so loud as it had been before. It is not the same as the connection he had to his siblings. It doesn’t fill the void in him completely. But it is enough,
for now, that for the first time in six thousand years he does not feel as if he is dancing on the edge of madness. It hurts, how very badly he wants to stay like this, the silence held at bay by the love he can feel coming from Aziraphale. Still, he knows they cannot keep this connection. It is far too dangerous for the angel. He must take care never to let Aziraphale too near that void inside, for fear it will destroy him.

Crowley roughly grabs at his emotions, shoving them deep behind his walls. He won’t let Aziraphale suffer his pain if he can help it. To keep his mind off of it, he wanders through the bookshop, taking stock of everything it contains. All of Aziraphale’s favorites are back, including his prophecy books, and his collection of obscure bibles. There are also a couple new sections of children’s books, courtesy of Adam. Crowley suppresses a grin when he reads the titles, and wonders what the angel’s reaction will be when he sees them. He tries not to be too obvious when he spots himself in the mirror. Aziraphale’s shop is not warded like his flat, and prying eyes could look in on him at any time. But still, he takes a moment, now that he’s alone, to really look over the body he’s wearing.

Aziraphale’s form is one he knows well. How many hours over the years has he spent staring at his angel, admiring the beauty of him? It feels very strange to see that beloved, gentle face in the mirror wearing his expressions and reacting to his thoughts. It’s stranger still, to look at his eyes and see them in Aziraphale’s sea-blue. He has never been able to get his own body to change his eyes, even when it would have been easier to fit in with the humans. Part of him is afraid that this body’s eyes will change on him now, but the form is still locked to Aziraphale’s life-pattern, just as his own body is bound to his. They will not change or give him away. He made sure of that when he wove their patterns together.

He wants to remove the angel’s clothes, to truly see his body in all its glory. He remembers brief glances, moments stolen together in places and times when nakedness was the norm. That time in Olympia, when he’d had him alone and unclothed for nearly a full half hour. It had taken all of his willpower then, not to give in to his desire. To not even look, for fear of what the sight would start in him. He’s never allowed himself to give in to carnal needs. He does not take pleasure in the physical, it has never been his way. His job has always been to tempt, not to be tempted himself. And yet, as always, Aziraphale is the exception to his rule. He wants. For as long as he’s had a physical body, he’s wanted the angel. It is so very human of him, this desire. And he knows he felt that same desire in Aziraphale. Perhaps, once all of this is done, if Aziraphale forgives him for the secrets he has kept, he can finally allow himself to look. Perhaps even to touch. But until then, he has something much more important to attend to. Keeping Aziraphale alive.

Heaven doesn’t come for him in the bookshop. He isn’t willing to risk another look into Gabriel’s mind, but it makes Crowley anxious, waiting for them to make a move. He paces slowly around the shelves until it’s time to go meet the angel in the park. It’s one of the weirder things he’s ever had to do, walking up to himself. It’s even weirder when he watches his own eyes light up at the sight of him, face breaking out into a grin before Aziraphale catches himself and forces it into a
more neutral expression. He’s still trying to adjust to seeing the angel in his body, when he catches sight of Azrael.

Little Healer, the angel of Death speaks into his mind. Good luck. And then, the archangels make their move.

They drag him up to Heaven. His former siblings. Four, where once there were six. They’re cold, so cold now, like statues instead of people. They’ve closed themselves off from even each other, living only for Her word and Her orders. Crowley watches them, desperately afraid and trying not to show it. If they recognize him, if they somehow sense his essence and Aziraphale’s are mingled and look closer at the pattern he taught them how to see, the whole game will be up. They’ll both die. He tries not to think about the last time he was here, the last time he’d been welcome in Heaven. His reception is far less kind now. They bind him tightly, roughly and are not the least bit gentle when they drag him through the pearly gates. The shredded remains of their bond screams at him, inflamed by their proximity, worse now than it has ever been.

It nearly kills him, to see up close how they are with Aziraphale. He’d known how they were, of course. Aziraphale didn’t speak of them much, but when he did it painted a picture of malevolent neglect. He’d been prepared for harsh words and indifference. Had even braced himself for outright violence and abuse. But this… They treat him like he’s nothing. Like he’s less than nothing. Like he’s not worth even the ground beneath their feet. And it makes him so desperately angry, and so, so sad. He’d once thought of extending their bond to Aziraphale. Had talked about it with Michael, even. Of getting Aziraphale to teach their younger siblings how to care for humanity and all the creatures of the earth. He’d been so sure then, that they would love him just as he did. That they would have welcomed him into their family. Once, he might even have been right. But the archangels before him have forgotten how to love, how to even attempt to care. They’ve lost so much of what they were. It hurts to be near them, and not just from the proximity to the broken ends of the bond. He aches for himself, and for them, and how much pain they must have been in to wall themselves up and cling so tightly to what they were told that they dared not even question how they felt.

Crowley watches them, and wonders if they would have become like this if he had remained Raphael. If, somehow, he could have saved them from this fate. Or would he, too, have become as cold and closed off as his younger siblings, a granite pillar in place of his heart. The thought chills him as Gabriel looks down on the gentlest, most loving being Crowley has ever known with so much hatred he would have thought the archangel to be a demon. It’s that look in his eyes that breaks Crowley’s heart. The look in all of their eyes. Hard. Cold. Emotionless. They have become what the Plan had said they were always meant to be. Soldiers of God, who do her bidding without question and without remorse. And as much as he understands that this is the result of Lucifer’s actions, his own Fall, and Her plan, it still infuriates him. They have allowed themselves to become this. They chose it. They continue to choose it, over love, over peace, over everything they claim to champion. And suddenly, though his mind still aches, his heart still cries out for what was, he’s just so terribly, awfully angry.
These are his siblings. He taught them everything he knew. He knows he taught them how to love. The importance of love, and kindness, and taking care of one another. But they’ve forgotten it all. Everything he ever told them, about what an angel was supposed to be. ‘Be better’, he’d told Aziraphale once. But it was never Aziraphale that needed to be a better angel. Rage rises up in him, but he bites it back. Let them shove him around as they lead him, bound and gagged, into the heart of Heaven. As much as he wants to give into that anger, he won’t. They have proved themselves no longer worth his rage or his tears. And Aziraphale is more than worth everything.

They leave him in an empty room, close to the quarters he had once shared with them. The halls of Heaven are just the same as they had ever been, unchanged even by the violence of the War. He remembers this room, with windows that once looked out on Eden. Now they reveal the wonders of the world, from the great pyramids of Egypt to the Christ the Redeemer statue of Brazil. Crowley looks at them all, and wonders if Uriel ever studies them, in the same way she used to study the plants and animals of the Garden by his side. If Sandalphon and Gabriel ever look out over them and marvel at their beauty. If Michael stands before these windows and lets the magnificence of it calm her before addressing her troops. They used to spend so much time here, in these rooms that overlook Earth. He closes his eyes and remembers.

“Raphael! Look!” Gabriel, smiling, glowing with joy and accomplishment, presents him with a star he’s just created.

“It’s beautiful,” he tells his younger sibling, and his smile becomes even brighter. “Your best yet.”

“You spoil him, Brother.” Michael sits beside him, working on a series of planets. Her words are chiding, but she smiles as she speaks.

“Perhaps he is deserving of the spoiling,” Lucifer says, lounging on a chair next to Michael, eyes closed as he basks in the warmth of Creation.

Uriel laughs. “Can he spoil us?” she asks. “When Mother made us all just the way we are?”

Love flows between them, free and unburdened. Sandalphon comes to stand near Raphael, watching Michael’s hands as she forms an ocean.

“When are you going to teach us how to use our swords?” he wants to know.

Michael and Raphael share a look, and a thought wrapped in fond exasperation that says ‘that one
loves that weapon too much’.

“When we’re done here,” Michael tells him. “Why don’t you go help Gabriel with his stars?”

Sandalphon rolls his eyes but obediently crosses the room to stand beside Gabriel at the forge.

“I don’t want to learn to fight,” Uriel says, sharing her reluctance with them. “I want to go back to the Garden.”

Raphael smiles and kisses her on the forehead, radiating his love for her. “And so you shall, little sister. You and I will go and help the Gardeners. I hear Mother asked them to create something called an ‘apple tree’.”

Uriel brightens, glowing enough to rival Gabriel. “Can I come with you this afternoon? I want to see the new creatures She’s invented. Lucifer says She’s making some in Her image next. Isn’t that right, brother?”

“Lucifer talks too much,” Michael says, with a frown for their eldest sibling. He’s been away more than ever since She gave them Uriel and Sandalphon, working with Her no doubt on the next batch of angels. He’s never far from their bond, at least, though even his thoughts have been distant lately. Sometimes, Raphael thinks he might even be able to block them out. Of course, that thought is ridiculous. There is no block between them. Their bond is unbreakable.

Lucifer grins, and sits up to drape an arm across Michael’s shoulders, broadcasting amusement and love. “Perhaps it’s you that doesn’t talk enough, my dear sister.”

Any reply Michael might have made is drowned out by a loud “Hey!” from across the room. A spike of irritation passes through them from Sandalphon, and Raphael turns to see their youngest sibling engaged in a wrestling match with Gabriel. He’s on his feet in an instant.

“Give it back!” Gabriel cries, trying to pry his star from Sandalphon’s grasp. Before he can intervene, they fall to the ground and the star tumbles from Sandalphon’s hands, hitting the floor with a resounding CRACK, shattering. A burst of hurt comes from Gabriel, and shame from Sandalphon.

“That was my star,” Gabriel says, carefully not looking at his brother though they all can feel his
“I’m sorry,” Sandalphon tells him, remorse flowing through their minds. “I didn’t mean to break it.”

“It’s alright,” Raphael tells them, taking them both by the shoulder and turning them to look at the place the star had fallen. “See?” the broken pieces hang in the air, shimmering with all the colors of the world. “You created a nebula.”

“Woah!” Gabriel smiles, bright as the sun once again. He grabs Sandalphon’s hands. “Come on, let’s go make some more!”

Contentment passes between the six of them. This is how it is, was, and ever will be. It is Heaven. It is all he has ever wanted.

“Aziraphale.” Michael’s voice breaks him out of his contemplation. He looks up and sees her, his beloved older sister. Her face is cold, expressionless. So unlike the way she used to look at him, when even if she was scowling, he could see the love in her eyes.

“Michael. It’s… good to see you.” The void is screaming at him. He can feel each individual shred of their bond, searing his soul with white-hot agony. A large part of him wants nothing more than to reach out to her, to be wrapped up in the safety of her wings. He wants her to hold him close and promise him that everything will be alright. But he knows better, now. He cannot hide himself in his sister’s wings and ignore the world like a child. And her promises of safety mean nothing at all to one of the Fallen.

“I wish I could say the same.” The archangel stares down at him with hard ice-blue eyes. “You have disgraced yourself, Aziraphale.”

Crowley holds Aziraphale’s head high. “I rather believe I did exactly as she had planned.”

“Yes, the Ineffable Plan. Gabriel informed us of what you said.” She sniffs. “We are waiting for a response from Her on that. Unfortunately, you will not be seeing it.”
He nods, maintaining Aziraphale’s steady, calm demeanor. “I take it you mean to destroy me, then?”

Something like regret flickers behind Michael’s eyes. “I am sorry, Aziraphale. I gave command of Earth Operations to Gabriel. It was his decision.”

“Why?” This might be his only opportunity to ask the question that has been bothering him since he learned she had relinquished her position. “Why give up your command?”

Impossibly, her face goes even more blank. “You of all people should understand that,” she says. Then, when he continues to look at her blankly, she continues. “I failed him. Raphael. Just as you did. I promised him he would not Fall. If I could not save my own brother, how could I expect to do better for ten million angels?”

“Oh.” It’s all he can think to say. Anything he wants to tell her would give him away, and he can’t risk it. Not when his angel’s life is on the line.

“In any case,” she continues briskly. “I came as a courtesy to you, for what you once were to my brother. I owe you a warning. You will be executed. Do not try to get out of this, or it will go worse for you.”

“And… the demon Crowley?” Crowley asks, allowing his voice to shake just the tiniest bit with the fear Michael would expect in him.

“Hell will deal with him,” Michael says. “I will deliver the Holy Water myself.”

“Youself?” He can’t keep the surprise from his tone. Holy Water, he had expected. But he had also expected that they would send a minor angel to do it. Someone low ranking, who could be spared if Hell decided to attack. He hadn’t thought the eldest remaining archangel would take it down herself.

Michael looks away. “I owe him a debt. In payment, I will see to it that his death is swift.”

Crowley allows her to see his confusion, unable to remember any point in the past six thousand
years which might have led to Michael feeling indebted to him. Seeing it, she gives him an ironic tiny smile, absent of any real mirth.

“There was a moment, several hundred years ago now. I asked him a question, and he responded with another. Are any of us the same people we were before the War?” She looks down. “He showed me that we have all lost ourselves. I had hoped that Armageddon - that revenge - would help us to regain them. Thanks to you, I must now find another way.” She starts to leave but turns back, meeting his gaze one last time. “I am sorry, Aziraphale. It will not comfort you, but know that, had Raphael survived, I would have welcomed you into our family gladly.”

The door closes behind her with an ominous thump.

He waits for what feels like hours after that, though it’s hard to tell with the cold, unchanging light of Heaven. He grounds himself in the constant stream of love and worry he can feel from Aziraphale. The angel must have been taken by Hell by now, but Crowley cannot detect any fear. There’s just worry for Crowley, a strong sense of resolve, and a rising sense of anger. He wishes they could be bound together mentally, so that he could share Aziraphale’s thoughts as well as his emotions, but letting the angel into his mind is not an option. The pain he has locked away inside would devour his gentle angel whole.

Uriel and Sandalphon come for him eventually, wearing identical scowls.

“Up, traitor,” Uriel growls, roughly grabbing at his bound hands. The ropes are tight, but he’s surprised to find that they do not burn him as a heavenly object should. Perhaps it is simply because he is in Aziraphale’s body. Or perhaps it is because he’s not being particularly demonic at the moment. Whatever the case, he’s grateful. It would be that much harder to meet Uriel’s sneer with a level gaze if he was fighting physical pain in addition to the agony burning through his mind.

“Traitor?” he asks, mildly amused.

“The worst kind,” drawls Sandalphon. “We’re all surprised She hasn’t made you Fall.”

Crowley allows himself to be dragged to his feet. “Isn’t that an indication that I did what She wanted all along?” he asks, then doubles over, gasping, as Sandalphon’s fist connects solidly with
his ribs.

“All it means is that we get to decide what to do with you,” his little sister tells him. Then she frowns, roughly yanking his hands closer to her face, her eyes drawn to the gold band on his smallest finger. “You no longer deserve this.”

“Wait!” he tries to pull away from her, but she holds his wrist tightly in her vice-like grip. He struggles, not wanting to lose Aziraphale’s ring, not when it’s so important to the angel. “Please.”

“Please,” Sandalphon echoes, sneering. “I always thought Raphael was a fool to trust a spineless worm like you. Take it, Uriel. The ring of an archangel does not belong on the hand of this demon fucker.”

“No!” Crowley closes his fingers against his palm, using some of his own power to keep it on Aziraphale’s hand.

Uriel’s delicate fingers close around the precious metal. “You dishonor his memory. Consorting with demons, interfering in Her plans. I-” she tugs on the ring, attempting to remove it. Crowley feels the signet grow white-hot, just before his sigil emits a bright flash of light, blinding them all. Uriel drops his wrists to cover her eyes, stumbling back from the brightness as if it burns. Instantly, the light fades. Crowley blinks the spots from his eyes, squinting at the ring. The sigil of Raphael glows a deep cherry-red, like lava flowing through the lines and curves of it. Joined to it, loops of blue-white melting into the red as if they had always existed together, is Aziraphale’s sigil. The demon stares at it, stunned. He doesn’t understand. Six rings had been created by Lucifer to bear the sigils of their family. When he Fell, the other five faded from the crest of his ring. Now, it holds only his own altered symbol and Aziraphale’s mark. It cools as he stares, until the joined sigils are simply dark lines etched into the gold.

“It doesn’t matter,” his sister snarls, blisters forming where she had touched the metal, though his own hand is unburned. “You won’t be keeping it much longer.”

They lead him to another, larger, empty room. There’s only one chair, right in the center. They time him to it, though Uriel is careful not to touch the ring as she binds his wrists to the arms. Then she and Sandalphon step away, and he’s left looking at a large fire pit in the floor a few feet away. He tries not to let his relief show. He had been right. Their punishment for Aziraphale would be Hellfire.

And then, from behind, he hears Gabriel’s voice. “Ah. Aziraphale.” He gives Crowley a pat on the shoulder as he passes, full of fake joviality. At his touch, the shreds of their bonds start to scream,
echoes of his thoughts rising in the void. Gabriel’s walls are still cracked, and cracking further, though his serene face gives no sign of it. “So glad you could join us.” He walks further into the room, standing feet away as if Aziraphale were something contagious, to be avoided.

Mentally Crowley counts to ten, dragging back on his feelings until they’re under control and he can act as calm and steady as Aziraphale would. “You could have just sent a message. I mean, a kidnapping in broad daylight.”

“Call it what it was - an extraordinary rendition,” his little brother tells him with the coldest smile Crowley has ever seen. “Now,” he addresses his younger siblings without looking away from Crowley’s bound form. “Have we heard from our new associate?”

Uriel doesn’t look at Crowley when she says “He’s on his way.” At her side, Sandalphon gives him a nasty grin. He bites back his anger at them, though he wants to scream. How could you do this? He wonders. How can you destroy an angel who has only ever tried to do the right thing? Looking at them, he almost doesn’t see the brothers and sister he raised. There is no joy in Uriel. No ambition in Sandalphon. And, for all the projection of good cheer in Gabriel, his little brother is as cold and dead inside as stone.

“He’s on his way.” Gabriel’s face breaks into an excited grin, though the expression does not reach his eyes. “I think you’re going to like this.” He walks closer, leaning down to look Crowley in the eyes. “I really do. And I bet you didn’t see this one coming.”

Crowley meets his gaze with Aziraphale’s steady sea-blue eyes, and does not look away. Oh, he knew what you would do. You’ve become predictable, little brother. Distantly, he notes a surge of surprise from his angel, and assumes that Michael has arrived in Hell with the Holy Water.

“You don’t get this view down in the basement,” another voice says from behind him. One of the disposable demons. Creatures bred in Hell, who had never once seen the halls of Heaven. He’s fought hundreds of them before, keeping his angel safe. This one seems to be no different from the rest. He pours the Hellfire into the fire pit, and Crowley watches it rise to the ceiling. The angels all take a step back from the searing heat of it, but to the demon it feels pleasantly warm, like a hearth-fire on a cold night.

“Can I ask a favor?” the disposable demon asks the archangels, grinning, as he closes the pan that he’d carried the Hellfire in. “Can I hit him? I’ve always wanted to hit an angel.”

Sandalphon gives Crowley another nasty smirk. “Go for it.”
Crowley turns his gaze to the demon, and watches him come closer. He fills his thoughts with each and every disposable demon that thought it could attempt to harm his angel, and what he did to them in return. Then he meets the disposable’s eyes, unafraid. There is nothing this thing can do to him that he would not gladly suffer for Aziraphale, but he will remember this one. And when he is free, he will hunt him down for daring to lay a hand on his angel.

The disposable demon backs down from his stare, scampering back to Hell like a frightened rabbit. Crowley hides his amusement. Perhaps he won’t track him down after all. Sometimes the disposables can be smart.

Once they’re alone again, Gabriel carefully skirts the fire to glare at Crowley. “So,” he says. “With one act of treason, you averted the War.”

“Well, I think the Greater Good,” Crowley starts, wondering if they’ll actually allow him to say a few words in his own defense. They don’t.

“Don’t talk to me about the Great Good, sunshine,” Gabriel almost growls at him. “I’m the Archangel fucking Gabriel.”

Crowley has to bite his tongue to keep from giving a smart retort. I thought you were Gabriel, he would have said, had he still been Raphael. Not just the angel that’s fucking him. The little brother he’d known would have turned red and attacked, throwing himself, fists flying, at his elder brother. And Raphael would have laughed and caught his hands, fending off his attack until he could get him in a headlock and pin him until he cried for mercy. But those days are long gone. Instead, he has to sit, silent, while the siblings he loved condemn the angel he has pledged his heart to.

“The Greater Good was we were finally going to settle things with the opposition, once and for all,” Gabriel tells him, and the demon can sense the bloodlust in his words. How very much his siblings wanted this war. The very air of Heaven is saturated with their anger.

Uriel steps forward, tearing the ropes from his wrists without actually touching him. “Up,” she orders, and moves back.

Crowley stands, adjusting Aziraphale’s clothing. “I don’t suppose I can persuade you to reconsider,” he asks, though what he wants to do is drag them all down to stand before their mother’s throne and demand She hold them accountable for their actions. “We’re meant to be the good guys, for Heaven’s sake.” You’re meant to be the Good ones. You’re meant to be better than
“Well, for Heaven’s sake, we are meant to make examples out of traitors,” Gabriel tells him. “So… into the flame.”

Is that what I was? He wants to ask. Was it making an example of me, when you slit my throat and tossed me over the edge? He knows that wasn’t it at all. What they did to him was done out of pain, and anger, and a Plan they had believed they must follow. And here, now, Aziraphale has shown them that they were following the wrong plan all along. This isn’t an example. It isn’t even truly to punish Aziraphale. It’s a reaction born of pain and uncertainty, a base animal instinct to destroy the thing that is causing them hurt.

Crowley walks forward, reminding himself to seem afraid but determined, as Aziraphale would. He does not want to think of his angel walking willingly into his own death, but he knows Aziraphale well enough to believe that he would. If he still believed in the guidance of the archangels, he wouldn’t protest. Not even his own demise. Not when he knew that protesting would do him no good.

“Right,” he says. Then looks at them. His siblings. As they wait, expectant, for the moment of his death. “Well… Lovely knowing you all. May we meet on a better occasion.”

Gabriel meets his gaze with cold, dead eyes. Inside, he can feel the bonds screaming. The part of Gabriel that his little brother has long locked away is struggling violently against his walls, the pain of it leaking out through the spiderweb of cracks in his mind. Part of him, at least, knows this is wrong. But Crowley feels him shove that part away, trying in vain to rebuild the crumbling edifice that imprisons his soul.

“Shut your stupid mouth and die already,” Gabriel tells him. In the void, the demon hears older words. Raphael, we have come in judgment of your sins.

He cannot help but take a parting shot. Words he wonders if they will remember, from that day on the field of battle six thousand years ago. Sarcastic now, though he had truly meant them then. “I accept Her judgment, and submit to Her will.” He steps into the fire.

It’s like stepping into a sauna. Fire and steam rise around him, engulfing him completely, though it burns his skin no more than a hot shower. The power of Hell courses through him, filling him with that familiar infernal energy like the charging of a battery. His exhaustion floats away, carried on the electric tide of power. It takes no effort at all to redirect the hungry flame away from Aziraphale’s clothing, just a pinch of power, instantly replaced by the inferno raging through him.
He basks in it, like a serpent in the sun.

“Ahh.” He releases a long sigh, feeling the healing effects of Hellfire on his tainted soul. Then, he looks out through the fire to see the archangels staring at him in horror. He lets out a great breath, blowing a stream of fire at them, and watches them skitter backwards like cockroaches suddenly exposed to light. Gabriel, at least, puts his arms out to shield his siblings, grasping at Sandalphon’s hand.

“It- it may be worse than we thought,” he says, squinting to see Crowley in the heart of the fire.

“What is he?” Uriel asks. Crowley grins. Through their patterns, he can feel Aziraphale enjoying himself. Scared, yes, but also amused, and angry. And over all of that, his love. Love Crowley had never imagined he would feel again.

“What I am,” the demon tells them, standing at the very edge of the fire pit, “Is none of your concern.” He knows the image he must make, half engulfed in Hellfire, half out in the light. He’s a thing of Hell, who has joined himself to a being of Heaven. He’s not entirely sure what he and Aziraphale are now. But whatever it is, he hopes they will find out together.

“Stay back,” Sandalphon warns, his sword appearing in his hands.

Crowley has to make an effort not to laugh at him. Sandalphon is good, but he hasn’t spent the past six thousand years fighting to keep an angel alive on Earth. He hasn’t killed a prince of Hell, or faced off against two dukes who want nothing more than to destroy him. Six thousand years ago, he could beat Sandalphon with some effort. Now? Now it would be easy. But doing so will not help him keep Aziraphale safe.

“Come now,” he says instead. “There’s no need for violence.”

The archangels trade troubled looks. At last, Uriel steps forward. “What do you want?”

He frowns at her, considering his answer. “What do I want? Well. What I want is to be left alone. Myself and the demon Crowley, both. I want to be returned to Earth. No reprisals. No assignments. No end of the world.”

“Done,” Gabriel says, panic clear on his face.
The three of them escort him to the gates, and the elevator down to Earth. He almost says something several times, on that long, silent walk. There’s so much he wants to say to them. He wants to yell at them, to rage at their treatment of Aziraphale and their callous disregard for the humans they were supposed to love. He wants to pull them each close, hug them tight, and tell them how much he loves them even now. He wants to break down the walls between them, and take away the pain he knows they have locked deep within. He wants to be their brother, the way it used to be. Instead, he walks quietly before them, exactly as they would expect from Aziraphale. He lost his siblings six thousand years ago. He cannot be the brother they need. But he can be what Aziraphale needs.

At the elevator, he turns to them on impulse, looking them each in the eyes with a steady gaze. “I’m disappointed in you,” he tells them, watching Gabriel’s face. “I had thought Raphael taught you better than this.” He turns to Uriel, then Sandalphon. “All of you. You’ve become the opposite of everything he wanted you to be.”

“You may get to leave, but you don’t get to talk to us about Raphael, traitor,” Uriel spits, regaining some of her earlier anger. Crowley frowns at her with Aziraphale’s face.

“Oh?” he asks, arching an eyebrow. “Remind me. Which of us stabbed him in the back with a flaming sword?” For just a moment, without his knowledge, his eyes darken to a deep amber gold. The eyes of Raphael. Then he blinks, and Aziraphale’s sea-green-blue returns. “I may be a traitor,” he tells them. “But at least I remember how to love. I think you’ve forgotten even that.” Then he turns his back on them, and walks away.

Chapter End Notes

Expect the next chapter in two weeks!

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Art by amazing people!
Raphael teaching Aziraphale to heal
The glass feather shattering
The archangel family
Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 17 (Heaven) - an archangel family moment
2. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
3. Chapter 13 - healing the sparrow
4. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
5. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
6. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
7. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
8. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
9. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
10. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
11. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
12. Chapter 13 - Azreal and the first victim in the war
13. Chapter 14 - Talking with Michael
14. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
15. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
16. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Wow. Second to last chapter. Looking at the size of this thing, I can barely believe I've written so much in just over half a year!

Thank you so much to everyone who commented and left kudos! I haven't had time lately to respond to comments, but I promise I will soon. Every single one of them has made my day. I can't tell you how much I've re-read your comments and smiled. Knowing you all enjoy my work makes it all worthwhile!

Leaving Heaven behind for good, for the second time in his life, is surprisingly easier than Crowley would have expected it to be. He watches the elevator doors close on Gabriel’s face, and realizes that he doesn’t want to stay. Not even a little. Seeing it again like this, harsh, cold, impersonal, it reminds him of everything he hated so long ago. The rigid expectations. The hypocrisy. The unanswered questions. An empty throne in a silent hall where God was meant to be. He had loved the idea of Heaven. Of a place that is Good and Pure, without pain or sadness. He still does. But an idea is only thought, and the reality has fallen far short of his dreams.

He aches for his siblings, and the love they once shared. But their hearts are trapped within a prison of their own making, and he cannot save them from themselves. He does not know where he would even begin to try. Even if he were still Raphael, he doubts there is enough warmth left in all Creation to thaw the icy walls they have wrapped around themselves. The family he longs for is only a memory now, though he can still remember the way they had once worked together. A perfect team, protecting each other as they fought the growing tide of evil. But now, to them, he is just another one of the Fallen. Something fit only to be destroyed. He wonders if they remember their fear, their uncertainty, the first time they encountered a true demon. How even then, they had only begun to grasp what it all would mean.

He’s working on the creation of a new medicine with Uriel when they feel a sharp stab of fear course down their bonds.

“Gabriel!” Uriel gasps, dropping a flask. It shatters on the floor, spraying green liquid everywhere.

Raphael doesn’t hesitate. He grabs his staff from against the wall, and starts to run. Uriel joins him a second later, and together they reach out, bending the universe around them, following the
fear to where Gabriel is. They stumble out into chaos. Cries cut through the air as a squad of Guardian Angels battle a group of... something. Creatures that look almost like angels, but twisted, with black wings and reptilian features, fighting with sharp claws and sharper teeth. Gabriel is there in the thick of it, his deep purple wings flared wide as he roars in anger.

“Brother!” Raphael darts forward, staff blocking a blow that would have torn a hole in one of his left wings. Then he turns, folding all six of his own tight against his body, lashing out to either side with his weapon.

“Raphael!” Gabriel nods to him in thanks, before he’s forced to defend himself again. They move together, the three of them, linked mind-to-mind. They know what the others will do before they do it, moving to act in concert, a triad of death among the chaos of the battle. The three of them press forward, surging past the guardians, into the thick of the oncoming hoard. They fight with fire and fury, the wrath of avenging angels. These things, whatever they are, have come to their home and defiled it, tainted Heaven’s purity with the stink of evil. It cannot be allowed.

Raphael’s staff changes in his hands, the base becoming a blade that burns with holy fire. He slashes at the enemy, keeping them at bay while he watches their patterns, looking for a place to strike the killing blow. At his back Uriel fights with deadly grace, darting in and back out, black ichor coating her flaming sword. At her side, Gabriel roars challenges, his own weapon swinging wildly as he attacks without caution, trusting to his siblings to guard his rear. Sandalphon soon joins them, rushing the enemies in brash charges, bowling them over with the force behind his attack. They are powerful, formidable fighters. But still, they are nearly overwhelmed by the sheer number of the enemy.

Sandalphon! He shouts through their bond, alerting his youngest brother to an enemy at his back. Sandalphon turns, blade arcing in a flash of light to remove the creature’s head. Uriel cries out, and Raphael turns, already swinging his staff. Two quick jabs to points in the pattern and her attacker falls. Gabriel rushes in, a vicious slash slicing in two a creature that had been about to bite Raphael. Raphael projects his thanks, diving forward to block an oncoming attack from a group of three creatures. One screams as it dies, Uriel’s sword in it’s throat. Sandalphon snarls as he kills another, turning to run his sword through two more. Bodies pile up around them, black ichor oozing across the ground.

He’s starting to tire, when he feels Michael drawing nearer. Soon, the stomping of feet heralds the approach of a company of soldiers, his elder sister at their head. The enemy creatures break at the sight of her, turning tail and scattering, fleeing into the fields of Heaven. Raphael watches them go as Michael issues orders to her angels, sending squads out after the retreating enemy. Then, he turns to the wounded. His siblings all have minor injuries, scrapes, cuts, bites, but nothing serious. He himself has several wounds - the worst being a deep bite in his arm that bleeds sluggishly. A strip torn from his robes binds it until he can heal it later.
Two of Gabriel’s Guardians are dead - taken from behind when they were ambushed. The other three all have serious wounds - deep bites and claw marks that take all of his concentration to repair. He’s still working on the most badly injured Guardian when someone nudges him aside, a familiar power sliding into the patterns around him and gently moving to take his place. He looks up to see Anael beside him, pushing his hands away so she can knit the gash under them together.

“Michael needs you,” she tells him. “Let me take over here. I brought some of our apprentices as well. They can use the practice.”

“But-” Raphael frowns at his second, ready to argue.

“No buts,” Anael says firmly. “Michael sent me to get you, provided you weren’t needed here. She said you were concentrating so hard she couldn’t reach you through your bond. You’ve healed the life-threatening injuries already, and there’s nothing else we can’t take care of ourselves. Now let me get the young ones some practice, and go see what your sister wants please.” He’s known her long enough to know any argument will be fruitless, so he picks up his staff and stands. He passes a group of five apprentices, giving a few comforting claps on the shoulders as he walks by. They look scared, but move towards the injured Guardians without hesitation. Raphael makes a mental note to praise them later. Anael picked well when she chose who to bring. Gabriel may not approve of him promoting a Virtue to such a high rank, but as far as Raphael is concerned, Anael is the best healer he has.

Uriel greets him as he approaches the place where his siblings have gathered, her normally impassive face bearing fear and confusion.

“We caught one of the creatures that attacked us,” she explains, grabbing his hand and reaching through their bond for comfort. “It’s - we don’t know what it is. It isn’t like anything else I’ve seen before.”

Raphael projects calm and safety into her mind, squeezing her hand before letting go and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “It’s alright, little one,” he tells her. “It cannot hurt you, not with all of us here.”

“That’s not…” she shakes her head, and he feels her disturbance in her thoughts. “I don’t think it’ll hurt me. But, Brother, it says it was an angel.”

“Ah.” He shoves away the cold spike of fear her words create, locking it away deep inside so his siblings do not feel it too. He must be strong for them. “It’s possible,” he admits slowly. “Lucifer has spoken of this. Of angels that have Fallen from Her Grace and become... something else.” He
thinks about the patients he’s lost lately. Over seventy angels have died in the Halls of Healing since the first mysterious attack, and more than half of them bled that same black ichor that stains his robes and saturates the ground of the battlefield.

“But… I always thought that was theoretical. Something that might happen, in the future. Not… not now.” Uriel knows what it means, if angels are Falling. They all do. Lucifer told them about the coming War, and as much as he doesn’t want to believe his older brother would do this, he cannot deny that something very wrong is happening - and Lucifer is at the heart of it.

“Sparkler!” Michael has seen them. “Come look at this.”

He releases Uriel, moving to stand closer to his elder sister. Gabriel is at her side, glaring down at a creature on the ground before them. Sandalphon stands over it, sword at the ready in case it tries to escape.

“What do you make of it?” Michael wants to know, indicating the creature.

Raphael touches his fingertips to the scar on his palm, using the reminder of Aziraphale to steady him before turning his gaze to the captive.

The creature at his feet snarls up at him, writhing against its bonds. Patches of pebbled skin cover large parts of its face in a sickly green-brown color, like old vomit. Broken black wings hang, useless, from its back, feathers covered in ash and grime. Glassy black eyes meet his, devoid of any emotion but hate. The thing’s hands end not in fingers, but wicked six inch claws that still have dried flecks of red and gold blood along the edges. Seeing Raphael staring, it bares its teeth - sharp, grey, and knife-like bits of bone protruding from diseased gums. Black ichor runs from a cut on its cheek, sluggishly dripping onto robes that might once have been white.

“What are you?” he asks it, appalled. Worse than its physical form is the pattern he can see wrapped around it. The jagged edges of it, where some part of the creature had been ripped away. When he looks for its essence, he finds a hole, a deep empty void that might once have housed an angel’s Grace. His fingers itch with the instinct to heal, but stronger still is the fear - his desire to run, far and fast, until even the sight of this thing is purged from his mind.

“I am you,” it hisses, watching him with hungry eyes.

Gabriel backhands the creature, throwing it back into the dirt. “Raphael is nothing like you,” he
growls with disgust.

“Isn’t he?” the creature asks. It watches Raphael instead of Gabriel. “When all that pretty gold is burned away, what will be left?”

“You lie,” Raphael spits, horror rising inside of him. “I have not turned away from God.” Is this what he is going to become? If he keeps asking his questions, falling further and further from Her Grace, is this to be his fate? Her Great Plan for him?

The creature laughs. “Look then, on your future,” it says, spreading it’s bloodstained arms and broken wings and torn life-pattern as wide as the ropes around it will allow. “I am what happens when She turns away from you.” It’s gaze flickers to Michael, who stares at it in revulsion. “You know of what I speak.”

“Demon,” she says, voice shaking. “That is what God has named you.”

“You were an angel.” He doesn’t know why he says it. He knew it, it didn’t need confirmation.

“I was as you are.” It folds its wings, the broken pattern folding around it until the torn lines are barely visible, but he can’t take his eyes away from the gaping wound where its Grace had been. “I was one of the first Lucifer chose. I wonder how long it will be, before he comes for you?”

This time it’s Michael that hits the demon, smacking it in the ribs with the flat of her blade.

“You will not speak to him like that,” she commands. “Raphael will not Fall.”

The demon turns its dead-eyed gaze on her. “Haven’t you wondered about him? He’s so close to Lucifer, isn’t he? Always defying Her and asking his questions. Spending time away from Heaven and Her light. How much do you trust him, really?”

Michael’s voice is cold as ice. “I trust him with my life. And with the lives of every single angel under my command.”

“Raphael doesn’t need protecting.” That’s Uriel, glaring at the demon, but Raphael can feel the uncertainty in her mind. “He’s Mother’s Healer. She won’t turn away from him.”

“Are you sure?” the demon asks, grinning at them all with those sharp, blood-flecked teeth. “Anyone can Fall. I am proof of that.”

“Who- who are you?” Raphael asks, though he really doesn’t want to know. This creature disgusts and terrifies him, and he can’t help but remember his page in Her Plan. His questions shall lead him to descend unto the fires of the Fallen.

It laughs again. “Don’t you recognize me?” it asks. “Look close, Raphael. You know my name.”


He leans in, until he can smell the demon’s fetid breath, examining face and pattern, looking for something he can recognize. Something in its bleeding essence sparks at him, and for a moment he can see three great heads in place of one. Four great wings, covered with eyes. Cherubim. One of the guardians of the Tree of Knowledge. Two, he knows, have been missing. One, he knew well. Had spoken with him often, waiting for Aziraphale to finish some task deep within the Garden. He squints, staring at the creature. If the pattern was just a little different, the missing lines shaped just so, those cold shark-like eyes bright and alive with curiosity... He reels, stumbling backwards into Gabriel’s comforting grip.

“Berith,” he whispers. “No.” This demon - this former angel - had been one of the favored, blessed with the honor of guarding the Tree. When he had vanished, Raphael had assumed he had been killed, like so many others. It had never occurred to him that one so blessed by Her could Fall.

Berith’s sharp grin widens. “Oh yes.” he laughs. “And I have seen what the Plan holds for you Raphael. When Lucifer calls, you will answer.”

Before Raphael can reply, Gabriel’s sword swings through the air, severing Berith’s head from his body. “He won’t,” Raphael’s little brother tells the corpse. “We won’t allow it.”
It’s only later, when he returns to his rooms, that Raphael remembers the gash on his upper arm. Wearily, he unties the bandage and looks in the mirror to examine the cut. What he sees chills him to the bone. Removing the bandage reopened the wound, and blood trickles down his arm. Mixed in with his own gold and red is the same black ichor that had come from Berith’s wounds.

A bright pulse of love from Aziraphale shakes him from the memory, reminding him that he is not alone. He had known then that he would Fall. But as much as it hurt, as much as he lost, he can’t entirely regret it. He may have lost his siblings, but he still has Aziraphale. And today he won his angel’s freedom from Heaven, just as Aziraphale is freeing him from Hell. Together, they have the Earth, and everything on it. Adam. Warlock. The Bentley. The bookshop. Fine wine. Fast cars. Dinner in fancy restaurants. Long walks in the park. Nights spent drinking on a ratty old couch surrounded by books. All the things he fought so hard for these past eleven years. They can be themselves now, in ways Raphael never could have imagined. Heaven may have disappointed and rejected him, but that doesn’t mean he can’t now forge his own piece of paradise with Aziraphale.

So he goes to the park, to their usual bench, and waits. Through their joined patterns, he can feel Aziraphale’s amusement, and then a moment of triumph, and he knows he managed to convince Hell to leave them alone. Crowley leans back and lets the angel’s emotions run through him. For the first time in six thousand years, he doesn’t feel so completely alone. It’s wonderful. Better than he could have imagined. So when Aziraphale joins him, and they’ve switched back to their own forms, he feels free to ask the angel to accompany him to dinner. They’ve done the impossible, after all. They deserve the celebration.

“Crowley…” Aziraphale asks, as they walk across the park in the direction of the Ritz. “Did you… did something happen to my ring?”

When the demon glances at him, he sees the angel frowning at the crest, where his own sigil is now joined to Raphael’s. “I’m sorry, angel,” he tells him, letting him feel his guilt. “I don’t know what happened. Uriel was trying to take it from me, and I knew how much it means to you, so I was using some of my own power to keep it on. Only when I did, something went wrong. It pushed Uriel back, and the sigil changed. I don’t know what happened. I can try and fix it though.” He’s not sure he can fix it, but if Aziraphale wants, he’s willing to try.

Aziraphale considers his words, still looking at the ring, and the way his crest is now joined to that of Raphael. “I see. Then, thank you, dear boy, for keeping it safe.” He reaches out, and before Crowley can react, gives the demon a quick, gentle kiss on the cheek.

Crowley blinks at him, stunned, both by the kiss and the unexpected reaction. He had half expected the angel to be angry.
“It’s been changing for a while now,” Aziraphale explains, tangling their fingers together and tugging Crowley forward to continue their walk. “I’ve never been able to figure out why.” He shrugs. “Perhaps it’s something to look into another time. For now, I’ll just be glad to have it back. And gladder still that you are safe and sound.” He sends a pulse of pure love through their joined patterns, burning away a little more of Crowley’s pain with its light. Crowley stumbles, falling against the angel’s shoulder, and feels warm hands catch him and hold him steady until he finds his feet.

He looks down into sea-blue eyes, and feels the love flowing between them both. “Angel, I—” there’s too many things he wants to say. Too many emotions churning inside.

“I could have lost you today,” Aziraphale says quietly. “I would have, if you hadn’t been clever enough to come up with a plan. And now, we don’t really know what is going to happen. I refuse to let another moment go by where you don’t know how very much I love you.”

“Oh.” Crowley can’t help the small smile that forms on his lips, any more than he can help the blush creeping up his cheeks. “That’s alright then.” He doesn’t say the words, but he doesn’t have to. The pulse of love he sends back says it all for him.

It’s only later, when they’ve returned to the bookshop, that Crowley remembers that he should unbind their patterns, now that there’s no longer a need to appear as each other. They’ve settled in to their usual seats, Crowley sprawled on the couch like a lazy cat, Aziraphale in the armchair - though Crowley gets the feeling he would have simply taken the other side of the couch, if the angel hadn’t been worried about overwhelming him. It’s ironic, that the one who once complained that Crowley moved too fast is now worried about out-pacing the demon.

“Well then,” he sighs, taking one last moment to bask in the feeling of Aziraphale’s contentment and love. “I suppose I should, ah, untangle us, now that we’re safe.”

Aziraphale turns to him, startled. “Oh, but… must you?” Regret flows between them. “Couldn’t we just… keep it?”

“You… you want me to leave it? You- really?” His hand hangs in the air, halfway to the point where he could start untangling their life patterns. Uncertainty wars with joy inside him. He can’t be asking to keep the bond. Crowley can’t be allowed to keep this… can he?
Aziraphale reaches out and pressed down on his hand until it rests on the arm of the couch. “I mean it, my dear.”

He blinks. Frowning. That wasn’t the reaction he expected. “If you want, I can leave it,” he says slowly, trying to process the idea that Aziraphale isn’t eager for the bond between them to be removed. “But you’d still feel things. It’s not you can’t just shut it off.” He wants to keep it. To keep feeling that wellspring of love from Aziraphale. To be bound so tightly together that he’ll never again be too late to save him. And, selfishly, he doesn’t want to lose the way it eases the screaming of the silence within.

“I don’t want to be able to shut it off,” the angel says firmly. “I told you before, I want to share your emotions. I want to know what you feel. Unless…” worry flows from him down their bond. “Unless you don’t want it. Then of course you can-”

“No!” Crowley says quickly, interrupting. “No, I-I want to keep it,” he clarifies. “I just didn’t think you’d want it.”

Aziraphale rests his hand on Crowley’s arm. “I do. Very much.”

“Oh. Well then. I guess, ah,” he can feel the blush creeping up his cheeks, but can’t manage to stop it. “I guess that’s alright then.”

The angel smiles. “Yes. It is.”

Crowley grins back, feeling lighter than he has since even before his Fall. Perhaps it’s just adrenaline, or the hellfire bath, or even just the giddiness of having survived something that should have killed them, but he can feel joy bubbling up inside, warm and bright and sparkling.

Aziraphale sends him another pulse of love, mixed with his own joy and relief. “I have to say, I can’t imagine how this all could have worked out any better.”

The demon nods, raising his glass in a toast to his angel. “Hah, yeah. I still can’t believe it worked. I thought for sure someone would think to look closely.”

“Yes, well. I’m rather glad they didn’t, all things being considered,” Aziraphale says. “Though, can you imagine Michael’s reaction, if she’d found us in each other’s bodies?”
Crowley laughs, drunk on the feeling of a weight lifted. There’s no Hell breathing down his neck. No Heaven watching with disapproving eyes. Armageddon is over, and the world did not end. He’s as whole as he’ll ever be, and Aziraphale is here with him, safe and happy and free. “We’re free!” he crows, and for the first time since his Fall his laugh is as clear and bright as the first time it was heard in Heaven.

Aziraphale freezes, shock coursing through him to Crowley, immediately followed by guilt and uncertainty.

“This Crowley,” he whispers. Then, carefully, as if afraid the demon will break, he takes his hand. “My dear,” he says, quiet, serious. “May I ask you something?”

Crowley looks at his face, and that light, happy feeling evaporates. He knows exactly what it is Aziraphale wants to ask. And despite his earlier conviction that he had to tell him, he’s not ready. He’s not ready at all. “I’m not drunk enough for that,” he mutters, looking away. He’ll never be drunk enough for that. But instead of reaching for the bottle, he expels the little alcohol he’d drunk from his system. If he has to have this conversation, he’s going to have it sober.

“You don’t have to answer,” Aziraphale tells him. “And if you tell me I’m wrong, I promise I won’t bring it up again. But I have to ask.”

He nods, mouth too dry to speak.

The angel takes his hand and turns it over, gentle fingers feeling out the lines of his palm. “There’s a scar here,” he says quietly. “You hid it before I could see, when I was in your body. But I could feel it there, like all the others. May I see it now?”

It takes little more than a thought before his scars fade into view. And there it is, the thin white line from the base of his thumb, crossing the creases of his palm all the way to the beginning of his heart line.

Aziraphale traces the scar with the pad of his index finger, a growing sense of realization and horrified guilt flooding through their patterns. “How… did you get this?”

Crowley swallows, trying to wet his bone dry mouth. “You know how. You were there.”
Aziraphale’s eyes are wide, and his grip tightens on Crowley’s hand. A burst of sorrow/pain/anger/joy/love/guilt rises up inside him, a storm of emotion that swirls around them both, echoed and amplified by Crowley’s pain and fear. “Raphael?”

The demon looks away. “Knew you’d get there eventually.”

“Oh, my dear,” he whispers. His hands are shaking around Crowley’s now. “What- what’s the most important part of being-” he stops. The silence between them expectant, waiting.

“A principality.” Crowley finishes softly. The first question he’d ever asked Aziraphale. He doesn’t look at the angel. He can’t quite bear to see whatever expression is written across his face. “You know, you weren’t looking for an answer that day. Even if you were asking a question.”

He can feel the angel’s confusion, fighting against his guilt. “I wasn’t?” he asks.

“No.” He can’t help the small smile that crosses his lips, even as he keeps his eyes solidly on his his shoes. “You already had your answer. You just needed someone to tell you you were right.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Aziraphale demands. “Six thousand years, and all this time you were right here!” He feels a flash of anger from the angel, anger that is quickly eclipsed by hurt. “I believed you were dead. I- I mourned you.”

“If I had,” Crowley asks slowly, “if I had said anything, before, what would it have changed?”

“What would-” Aziraphale splutters, “What-? Everything, Crowley. It would have changed everything. I would have-”

“Exactly.” Crowley holds up a hand, cutting off any argument. “You would have changed how you acted, how you dealt with me. It would have become obvious to Heaven that something was going on. And I know Michael. She would have investigated. And then she would have found out about us, and you know what they do to angels caught fraternizing with the enemy. And that’s even if you believed me, which, be honest angel, wasn’t bloody likely.” He grins at the indignant expression on Aziraphale’s face. Then he sighs and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, hands clasped before him as he meets his angel’s eyes.
“Aziraphale. Look at me.” He snaps his fingers and his shirt vanishes, bearing the rest of his scars. He removes his glasses, exposing eyes that have gone fully yellow, demonic and serpentine as ever. He lets his fangs drop down, and feels his tongue shift to something a bit more forked and snakelike. Scales creep up his spine, appearing in patches across his exposed skin. Six dark wings unfurl behind him, night-black where once they had been white dripping with gold. This is his true nature, as close as he can get in this human body. Broken, tainted, and scarred. Infernal. Demon.

“This is what I am now. Can you look me in the eye and tell me you would have been happy to see me, if I’d returned to you in Eden? If you asked me my name on the wall and I told you Raphael?”

“I-” Aziraphale’s eyes fill, and Crowley can feel his the guilt and pain eating away at him. “Crowley. Raphael. I-”

“Don’t,” Crowley snaps, wincing. “That’s not my name anymore.”

The angel takes a deep breath, gripping his emotions tightly and taking the time to examine them before he responds. “Of course, you’re right,” he says a moment later. “I’m sorry my dear. You are who you choose to be. I just… it’s a bit of a shock. That’s all. I didn’t realize, and I’ve spent so long trying not to compare you, but… oh!” He gasps, a fresh surge of guilt flowing from him, and covers his mouth with his hands. “Oh, Crowley, I promised you, didn’t I? That last day before the War. You came to me on the wall and told me you were going away. That you might not be you if you returned. And I… I promised to know you, if you came back to me. Oh, I’ve broken that promise so badly. How can you ever forgive me?” Tears spill from his eyes and down his cheeks, each one carrying the bitter sting of guilt.

Crowley shakes his head emphatically, projecting as much love and comfort as he can into their joined patterns. “No, no angel. That’s- I spent the better part of six thousand years making sure you wouldn’t ever find out. I didn’t want you to recognize me. And besides. You kept the promise that really mattered.”

“The promise that… really mattered?” Aziraphale lowers his hands to look at Crowley in confusion, turning the gold band around and around on his little finger.

“Yeah.” He smiles, leaning forward to tap one long finger on Aziraphale’s chest, just over his heart. “You stayed yourself, even when it would have been easier to change into someone else. You promised me that, too.” He waits until the angel looks him in the eyes before continuing. “There were so many times when I wanted to give up. When giving in and letting myself just be the creature everyone expected me to be would have been so much easier. But you were always there. A steady, kind, gentle presence in my life. And I knew if I gave up, I’d lose that. I’d lose you. And that wasn’t a price I was willing to pay.”
“My dear,” Aziraphale sniffles, wiping away tears with the back of his hand. “I still should have known you. The similarities… all the times I thought I saw Raphael when I looked at you… the proof was right there, and I didn’t see it.”

“Nah. You had no reason to think the archangels lied. When they told you I was dead, they even believed it. After all, they’re the ones that killed me.” Crowley’s hand goes to the mark on his chest, where Uriel’s blade had pierced his heart.

Shock races through their patterns and Aziraphale sits up, staring at him. “What?”

Crowley looks up, surprised. “You didn’t know? I thought Gabriel told you.”

“I…” the angel frowns. “He said they did, but I didn’t believe they would have actually done it themselves. I… I guess I just sort of assumed they sent others to do it.” His eyes go to Crowley’s scars, still visible in the bright, warm light of the bookshop. “When I found you in the Garden, you were badly wounded. Mortally so. Was that…” he can’t bring himself to finish the question, but he doesn’t need to. Crowley knows what he meant to say.

“Yeah. That was them. After they… well. After they did what they came to do, they tossed my body into the pit.” That particular memory is still far too painful to revisit, locked away tightly in the deepest part of his mind. He ignores it, focusing instead on the blue-green of Aziraphale’s eyes and the feeling of their life patterns joined together. “It took me a while to climb out of the pit. I don’t really remember that part. All I remember is pain. And then… you found me. You picked me up out of the dirt and healed my wounds, even though you should have killed me on sight.”

“Well,” Aziraphale smiles at him. “I could hardly just leave you there, as wounded as you were.” His eyes go distant as he recalls that day, so long ago. “You were so badly wounded. I honestly don’t know how you survived long enough to climb out of the pit. Most would have died long before reaching Eden.”

“I, ah… I have a theory about that, actually,” Crowley tells him, remembering the thread of blue-white essence attached to his sigil. He’d had a lot of time when he was in Heaven, left alone in that cold, empty room, to think about it. And about what it might mean.

“Really? What?” Aziraphale leans forward, curious, and Crowley makes a decision.
“It’ll be easier to show you,” the demon says. He reaches for the place where their essences combine, and a moment later feels Aziraphale do the same. This time instead of lingering in that place of sea and storm he pulls Aziraphale into his mind, into that same blank grey space before the monstrous labyrinth that holds his soul, locked behind layers of pain.

Oh, my dear, Aziraphale says, projecting guilt and grief as he takes in the high, thick walls. I’m so, so sorry.

Don’t be. Crowley moves between him and the labyrinth, remembering all too well the last time the angel had tried to touch it. This isn’t your fault.

He feels a sense of regret from the angel, and another surge of guilt. But it is, isn’t it? Not all of it. But enough. All those times when I wasn’t as careful with you as I should have been. When I hurt you, without even realizing what I was doing.

It’s not your fault, Crowley tells him again. You didn’t know. And I sure as Heaven didn’t want you to find out. To you, I was just another demon. And that was exactly how I wanted it.

You were never ‘just another demon’ to me, Aziraphale snaps. Then reconsiders. Well, maybe at first. But that changed so quickly I barely remember it. But for six thousand years, you have been the one constant in my life. Someone I could always rely on. I’m just sorry it took me so very long to realize.

Crowley knows the angel can feel his love and forgiveness. Well, he says, I wouldn’t be me if I’d made it easy for you. I’m just glad you did before you found out about… you know. Raphael.

Did you ever plan on telling me? Aziraphale wants to know, turning his full attention back to the demon. Who you were?

The demon shakes his head, surprising him with the strength of his reaction. Never, he says firmly.

Aziraphale’s hurt surges around him, aching and confused. But… why? He wants to know. Why didn’t you tell me from the start? You can’t honestly think I’d have turned away from you just because you Fell, do you?

Pain rises up, pressing against his walls, and it takes all his strength to keep it from breaking out
with Aziraphale here in his mind. Against his will, echoes rise from behind that last locked memory. Gabriel’s voice.

**Don’t trust it, Uriel. It’s no longer our brother.**

*After what happened when my family found me? He says, mental voice low, carried on a current of his anguish. I had no reason to believe you wouldn’t turn away. Or, worse, you’d only tolerate me out of a sense of obligation. A duty to the archangel I used to be. I didn’t want that.*

*Then what did you want? Aziraphale asks. Why seek me out?*

Crowley shrugs, not sure he can really put it into words. Instead, he shows Aziraphale his longing. Regret, and love, fear, and pain. *I missed you,* he says simply. *And I wanted you to know me as I am. Not just the shadow of what I was.*

*Oh, Crowley.* Aziraphale moves then to surround him with his essence, engulfing him in love and comfort. *I do, he assures him. I do see you as you are. I just... I wish you would have trusted me. I could have-*

*You couldn’t.* Crowley pulls back, an old, familiar fear pulsing through him. *You would have started to ask questions. And I wouldn’t risk that.*

*But that wasn’t your decision to make!* Aziraphale insists, anger flaring up around them. *It was my risk. My choice. You should have let me make it myself rather than just deciding for me.*

*I wanted you safe,* Crowley all but shouts. *I needed to know that, if nothing else, there was one good thing left in all of Heaven.* The walls of his mental fortress shake, and he can feel the void waking up inside, echoes whispering in the dark corners of his mind.

*And I needed you,* Aziraphale shouts back, his mental voice resonating with the echoes. *I was so alone, and I missed you so much, for so long.*

Outside in the physical world, Crowley reaches out and takes Aziraphale’s hands in his. *You always had me,* he tells him, and shows him a series of memories. Walking along the wall together after the rain. Watching Adam and Eve together from the shelter of a small tree. Laughing together
back room of the bookshop the day after it opened. Crowley watching Aziraphale from afar on
battlefield during the first world war, redirecting a bomb so it wouldn’t hit his troops. The car ride
back from the church in 1941. Walks in the park together, bickering contentedly in the warm sun.
Talking late at night in the Dowling’s garden. Standing side-by-side on the tarmac of the Taddfield
air base.

*Oh.* Aziraphale’s anger quiets, fading into solemn reflection. *I did, didn’t I?* More memories flow
from the angel. Crowley protecting him from demons. Crowley watching him with wary eyes,
wings mantled over a small group of children. Crowley sitting at his feet, letting him heal his
wounds from his fight with Asmodeus. Crowley standing beside him as they watch the Son of God
hang on the cross. Crowley in Camelot’s smithy, intent on his work as his hammer strikes steel.
Crowley’s frantic eyes as he searches a pair of scrolls for names he’ll never find. Crowley
sprawled out on the surface of the moon, eyes on the stars. Crowley appearing out of nowhere to
rescue him from Nazi spies. Crowley in the bookshop, drunk out of his mind, but still trying to
convince him to help him stop Armageddon. Crowley stopping time because Aziraphale threatened
never to speak with him again. And now, back in the bookshop, Crowley, scars bared, reaching
across the space between them to hold his hand.

The demon sends him a pulse of love, projecting his own affirmation. *I may not be able to be
Raphael for you anymore. But whatever I am is yours, for as long as you want me.*

*Always,* Aziraphale says, a fierce possessiveness passing through their bond. *As I am yours. Until
the end of Creation itself.*

Love flows between them, brighter and warmer than even the hottest of Heaven’s forges. And far
more precious than the light of Her Grace.

*What is it you were going to show me?* Aziraphale asks, after a moment of basking in their
combined love. *Not that this isn’t lovely. I could stay just like this forever.*

*Oh, right.* Crowley remembers the angel’s question. How had he survived when he wounds should
have killed him? *Hang on, I need to make a path.* He concentrates on his walls, forming a tunnel
through them all, right into the heart of him. He makes it deep and strong, to keep his pain away
from Aziraphale.

*Don’t touch the walls,* he warns when he’s finished.

*Crowley…* Aziraphale examines the tunnel, and the walls around it. But he moves forward, careful
to keep any part of his essence from even brushing against them. Crowley leads him on, deep inside his mind, into the place where his sigil rests. This place, at the core of him, is brighter than the grey outside in his mind. There’s color, and life. To Crowley’s eyes it looks like a grove from Eden, the ground lush with plant-life and stars hanging in the sky overhead. And in the center of it all is his sigil. The bright, fiery lines that adorn his soul with the name She gave him. Or at least, it used to be the name She gave him. He can still see the marks of the old symbols, like faint afterimages. But now… it had been subtly changing over the years, shifting closer to the one he had chosen for himself. He’d seen as much the day before, when he’d examined it for the first time in millennia. But in the few hours since then, it had undergone a drastic transformation.

Oh… the angel breathes, reaching out a thread of thought to touch the red-gold lines of it. So that’s why the ring is changing.

It still glows with the power of an archangel, the loops and curves of it declaring him God’s Healer. But the name no longer reads as Raphael.

Now, his sigil spells out Crowley in lines of shining fire.

I don’t… I don’t understand. He touches it himself. It’s real, the purest representation of everything he is.

I think I do, Aziraphale tells him gently. When you kept me safe from Heaven today, you also freed yourself. You chose to be who you are, instead of who everyone expected you to be. Your sigil has been changing slowly, as you accept yourself. But now you chose to embrace it, to be simply Crowley, instead of the demon Heaven and Hell both expect. Your sigil reflects that choice.

He considers that, and decides it’s the best explanation he’s going to get. Certainly, God isn’t going to come down and explain it to him. And it fits with his other theory. The reason why he’s even alive now, when by all rights he should have died.

Makes sense, he says eventually. Our sigils are part of us, after all. Tied in to the deepest part of our souls. He moves then, the form of his thoughts flowing around until he finds the place where Aziraphale’s essence is woven into the red and gold of his sigil.

Do you remember when you felt me die? He asks then, and even braced for it he isn’t ready for the flood of grief that flows from the angel.
Yes, but... mixed in with the grief is confusion.

You tried to catch me. You reached out with your power, but it wasn’t enough. Then you went further, even though you shouldn’t have been able to. You reached right into the fabric of reality and found the last part of me that was fading away. You held on to it, anchoring me to you. To your essence. He touches that thread of essence with a thought, following it from the place it joins his sigil, back up until it meets with the heart of Aziraphale.

That’s what kept me alive. It’s what drew me up from the pit and all the way to Eden. It was you.

Shock comes from the angel, and he touches the place where his essence and Crowley’s sigil are joined. I did this?

You did. He looks at the place where they are joined. I...I could try to undo it, I think. I know you didn’t mean to bind yourself like this, and-

Don’t you dare. Aziraphale moves between him and the sigil, pushing him back. If this is what kept you alive, then we’re keeping it, and that’s final. I’m not going to risk losing you again.

Crowley gives in. He hadn’t wanted to undo it, but had felt the need to offer, in case Aziraphale didn’t want it. Alright, angel, he says. It stays.

Back in the physical world, Aziraphale takes a breath, reorienting himself in his own body. Crowley watches, taking the time to sort through his own feelings. He can still feel Aziraphale’s love, and that’s the one thing of which he is absolutely certain. The minute hand on the clock hasn’t moved more than half an hour since Aziraphale first took his hand and asked to see his scars, but it feels like years have gone by.

At last, Aziraphale’s hand goes to the ring on his finger, and he stops, frowning. “My dear,” he says, looking up at Crowley, and removing the ring from his finger. “This belongs to you, doesn’t it?” He holds it out, offering it to the demon.

“No.” Crowley takes it, looking at the sigils on the crest. His new sigil is there, etched deep into the gold as if it had always been. “This ring belonged to an archangel. And now, it belongs to you.” Gently, he slides the ring back onto Aziraphale’s hand. “Besides,” he says, “I like seeing you wear it.” Then he raises Aziraphale’s hand to his lips, brushing a kiss across his knuckles.
“Crowley,” Aziraphale blushes, then looks down, folding his hands in his lap. “I… I am sorry. I should have done more for you. That last day. I should have tried to-”

The demon shakes his head. “No. You shouldn’t have.” He folds his wings, hiding them again, and orders his scars to fade away, putting himself back to the form he likes best. “I sent you away for a reason. You were in no danger of Falling. Lucifer would not have been able to drag you down. So he would have killed you. I wasn’t a match for him then, and neither were you. Even together, we would have lost.”

“But-” Aziraphale opens his mouth to protest. Crowley holds up a hand.

“No. You did exactly what I wanted you to do. I don’t blame you for anything.”

“I blame me.”

Crowley looks at him, and sees the sincerity and guilt in his eyes. “Then I forgive you.” He smiles. “That’s got to be a first. A demon, forgiving an angel.”

Aziraphale laughs, giving him a weak smile in return. “I would imagine you and I are responsible for quite a few firsts, these past few days.” He can still feel his guilt, the sorrow and regret that wrap around his soul. Just as he can still feel his own pain, locked tight within his walls. They aren’t done with this conversation yet. Six thousand years of grief and pain are not healed in less than a day. But they’ve made a beginning. A start. And that is enough for now.

“True enough.” Crowley leans back against the couch. “But I think I’m all out of first for a while.”

The angel hums in agreement. “Mm. I think we should both lay low for a while, don’t you?”

Chapter End Notes

Ok, brace yourselves, next chapter is going to hurt. Rather a lot, before it gets better.

Expect the next chapter in two weeks!

Now rebloggable from my writing blog!
Come say hi on my personal blog

Art by amazing people!
  Raphael teaching Aziraphale to heal
  The glass feather shattering
  The archangel family

Flashbacks so far

1. Chapter 17 (Heaven) - an archangel family moment
2. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
3. Chapter 13 - healing the sparrow
4. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
5. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
6. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
7. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
8. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
9. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
10. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
11. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
12. Chapter 13 - Azreal and the first victim in the war
13. Chapter 18 - The first demon
14. Chapter 14 - Talking with Michael
15. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
16. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
17. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Oh wow. Here we are, the final chapter! Thank you so much for sticking with me on this long, wild ride. It’s truly been a joy and an honor to work on this, and I’m absolutely blown away by the response to this project of mine. (Notes at the end regarding a sequel, if you're interested!)

Content Warning: This chapter has graphic scenes of siblings fighting. If that's upsetting for you, please take care of yourself first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They retire to a small cottage in the South Downs. It sits just above the shore, by a small cliff with an excellent view of the stars. Crowley parks his Bentley in the drive and builds a greenhouse in the yard, filling it with terrified plants. Aziraphale fills the inside of their house with books, though he still keeps the bookshop in Soho. He even occasionally opens it, when the mood strikes him. They get visitors sometimes too. Adam and his friends. The woman Aziraphale possessed and Sergeant Shadwell. Anathema and Newton. Even Warlock, though they haven’t quite yet told him what they are.

It’s not always easy. There are too many shadows in their past for it to be. But for them, it’s worth it. More than worth it. Every night, Crowley goes to sleep wrapped in Aziraphale’s arms. Every morning he wakes to the smell of fresh coffee in the kitchen, and the sounds of his angel puttering around the house. Sometimes they talk about taking trips, going somewhere, doing something, but for now they just want to be together. After six thousand years of expectations and demands, it’s nice to take the time to just breathe.

There are days where Aziraphale looks at him differently, just as Crowley had feared. Days when he finds the angel watching with that same old expression - the one that means he’s trying to find the angel underneath the demon. Moments when Crowley says something, or does something, and a shock of recognition flows down their shared patterns, and he just knows that Aziraphale is seeing Raphael. But those days, those moments, are fewer than he thought they would be.

More often come the moments when Aziraphale reaches out and Crowley flinches back, expecting at any second for everything he has to be taken from him. He doesn’t let Aziraphale into his mind again. He wakes up in a cold sweat some nights, remembering the way his walls crumbled the moment the angel first touched them. The way his pain rushed out to swamp him, snuffing out his light and overwhelming his essence. In the worst of his nightmares, he doesn’t move fast enough to shove him from his mind, and his pain tears Aziraphale apart.
The angel is remarkably patient with him. It’s trial and error at first, until he learns the signs that Crowley needs space or time alone. Harsh words are said and apologized for on both sides, more than once. But in the end they make it work. Because despite all the years of pain and grief, and the shadow of what was that haunts them even now, their love is steady and true. Crowley can feel it in the pattern of the universe, woven into the fabric of life itself.

Life is good, right up until one late morning, more than two years after the failed apocalypse, when one of his usual nightmares shifts.

_Nebulous images swim before his eyes, shifting until he sees the cold white walls of Heaven. He’s speaking but the voice he hears is not his own. “Well I’m not sitting here discussing it any longer. We know what we felt. We know what we saw. And we can spend another two years discussing it, or we can act.”_

_Michael and Sandalphon sit in front of him, nodding. “We know who we have to talk to,” Sandalphon drawls._

_The door opens, and Uriel enters, carrying a stack of papers. “We have authorization,” she declares._

_He stands, and speaks in Gabriel’s voice. “Then it’s time. Time to go talk to Aziraphale.”_

Crowley wakes up drenched in the sticky sour sweat of fear. He can still feel Gabriel’s grim determination, and when he catches sight of himself in the mirror, for just a moment he would swear his eyes were purple. The archangels are moving. Coming to earth. Coming for Aziraphale. Crowley throws himself out of bed and into his clothes, all but falling down the stairs in his rush to get to the angel, afraid that he’ll already be gone.

_“Angel!”_ He explodes into the kitchen, only to find Aziraphle at their little gas stove. He turns, alarmed, as Crowley enters, and the demon can see that he’s absolutely covered in flour. There’s a bag of it on the counter, though it looks like most of the flour is now coating the cabinets and the stove. Splatters of pancake batter decorate the floor, the walls, and the angel himself.

_“Crowley?”_ Aziraphle asks, when the demon simply stares. He’s holding a cookbook in one hand, while the other clutches a spatula. The whole sight is just so ridiculously normal and endearing, something he’s seen dozens of times now, but every time it reminds him of just how lucky he is to have Aziraphale in his life. Of how much he loves this ridiculous, _wonderful_ angel.
He has to keep him safe. He knows it in his bones. Just as he knows that he cannot bring himself to shatter this fragile peace his angel has found. To watch as his eyes widen in fear, as once again his former siblings invade a place that he had believed safe and his.

“My dear?” Aziraphale steps away from the stove, looking at him in worry.


“Oh, my dear one.” Aziraphale looks at him with so much compassion. “I am sorry. You were sleeping so peacefully when I got up, I didn’t want to wake you. Perhaps I should have.”

“Nah.” Crowley forces his fear down, back behind his walls where Aziraphale will not feel it. He’s already thinking up an alternate plan. If he can get Aziraphale out of the house, perhaps he can head this off. Send his siblings away. The angel won’t even have to know there was any danger. “’S alright. Just dreams.”

“Well.” Aziraphale has learned by now, how prickly he gets after his nightmares. So instead of pulling him into a hug like he so clearly wants to, he simply points to the table with the spatula. “Sit. I’ll have breakfast ready in a moment.”

Crowley sits, watching as Aziraphale manages to flip a pancake. He’s been attempting to do his cooking without any miracles lately, with mixed results.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” he asks, after a moment of tense silence. Crowley shakes his head.

“No.” He looks out the window to his private garden. It’s early December, and beyond the gate to their little cottage the snow is already thick on the ground. Inside the fence, however, is a different story. His garden blooms year-round, a marvel of tropical plants and local flora. His greenhouse is used primarily for vegetables that he sells at market in the appropriate season- he doesn’t want the locals asking too many questions, after all.

“Drat.” He looks up, noticing the acrid smell of smoke, and finds Aziraphale throwing water over a burning pancake. “Damnation.”

Crowley chuckles. “Language, angel.”
Aziraphale rolls his eyes at him. “I think it’s justified. That was the last of the batter.”

“So… no pancakes?” Crowley guesses, an opportunity presenting itself in his mind. A way to get Aziraphale safely away for long enough that he can send his siblings packing.

The angel hangs his head. “I’m sorry, my dear. I had wanted to make you breakfast, but…”

Crowley waves a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it.” Then he forces a grin, one that hopefully feels genuine to the angel. He’s buried his fear as deeply as he can, knowing Aziraphale will respect his privacy and not pry, even though he can probably still feel at least a hint of his terror. “I’m more in a pizza mood anyway.”

“Pizza?” Aziraphale asks, lighting up. The demon laughs.

“Yeah, remember that place in Naples? The one with the mosaic on the wall you said was a fish?”

“Ah yes, if I remember correctly you thought it was a dog. The place was run by those two delightful old ladies.”

Crowley nods. “That’s the one. That pizza they had, the one with onions and mushrooms -”

“And sausage,” Aziraphale adds, licking his lips. “Oh, that does sound good.”

The demon hides his relief. He has him. “You know, that sounds like exactly what I need right now. Do you think you could just… pop over and get us some?” It’s a pretty big miracle to travel that far, but they’ve both been experimenting with larger and larger miracles lately, trying to see how much they can get away with. Perhaps that’s what drew the archangel’s attention.

Aziraphale frowns at him. “Are you sure? I was thinking we could stay in today. Maybe sit by the fire, and I could read to you…?”

Crowley shakes his head, though he wants nothing more than to curl up next to the fire and feel the
warmth on his skin, while the angel’s soothing voice washes over him.

“Nah. I think I’m going to spend some time in the greenhouse today. My tomatoes are getting a little out of line.” It’s not a lie. That had been his plan for the day, right up until he woke from that nightmare.

“I…” Aziraphale looks at the mess around them, and sighs. “Alright. We need to have something to eat at any rate. And I think I’ve just about exhausted my cooking abilities for the day.”

“Great!” Crowley pushes his chair back from the table and stands. He needs to get Aziraphale out of here now. He doesn’t know how much time he has before the archangels arrive, but it can’t be much. He can feel their anger building through the broken remnants of their connection to him. “If you go now, you might make it back in time for dinner.” Even that’s unlikely. The two elderly women that run the restaurant had taken a particular liking to Aziraphale the first time Crowley brought him. Ever since then, they’ve been lucky if they can escape the very talkative ladies within three hours of arriving.

“Oh.” Aziraphale’s face falls. “You don’t want to come with me?”

He does. Very much so. But protecting him from the archangels is far more important than a date. He shakes his head. “Like I said, I have some tomatoes to take care of. I know you hate being here when I yell at them.”

“Well, they might grow better if you just tried being nice, dear.” It’s an old argument now, worn in around the edges and lacking any real sting.

“And what happened to the last plant you tried being nice to?” he asks. Aziraphale winces. It had been Mrs. Dowling’s prized rose bush, and it had almost died before he’d given in and gone to Crowley for help with the thing.

“Exactly,” Crowley says. “So I think it’s better for everyone if you just leave me to it.”

Aziraphale sighs. “Fine then. I’ll go to Italy today. But the next time I want crepes, you’re the one going to Paris for them.”

“Like you don’t enjoy talking to those crazy old bats,” the demon says, laughing at him. “Here,
let’s clean this up, and then you can get going.” He picks up the back of flour and starts to scoop as much of the stuff off the counter as he can. They have very little time before his siblings arrive, but he can’t hurry. If he rushes, Aziraphale will know something is up.

They spend a good half hour cleaning. Crowley does his best to hide his impatience, but it’s still a relief when Aziraphale declares the kitchen ‘clean enough’. Crowley drops the last of the dishes into the drying rack, and turns to go, intent on checking the wards around the house while Aziraphale prepares to leave.

“Wait a moment, love,” Aziraphale says, catching Crowley’s hands in his. Slowly, and with deliberate intent, he brings them up and gently brushes the demon’s fingers with his lips.

“Ngk.” Crowley’s brain short-circuits, like it always does when he does this. Two years in, and he still freezes every time.

“One day,” Aziraphale tells him, “I’ll get you to believe you deserve this.” Ge leans over, and kisses his cheek. This close, he can reach out with his essence and send a bright flare of love into Crowley’s soul. It burns away some of his pain. Just a little, barely noticeable. But it adds up. Each little gesture, each small pulse of love, multiplied by thousands over the past two years. His pain is so much less now. There are even rare days when he almost forgets that it’s there.

“I love you,” says, stepping away and releasing him. They both want more, but this is the line Crowley holds for now. Brief moments, gentle kisses, the barest brush against the labyrinth of his mind. Any longer, and closer, and even now he’s afraid his pain will overwhelm his love.

“This might be the last time I see him,” Crowley realizes with a sharp pang. If he isn’t quick or clever enough, if the archangels get around him, he doesn’t know what they will do. He reaches out and catches the angel by the hand. Aziraphale looks at him, surprised, but smiles when the demon pulls him close, wrapping his arms around him in a tight hug.

“Love you, angel,” Crowley whispers into his hair. *I always have. And I always will.* He wants to say it, but he holds himself back. It would only cause Aziraphale to be suspicious, and he cannot have him returning early. Not when he can feel the coming attack. Aziraphale sighs contentedly and relaxes against him, and Crowley breathes in his warm familiar scent one last time. Then he moves back, taking his face in his hands and looking into those wonderful blue eyes. The angel’s hands fall to rest against his hips, and he looks at the demon with a question on his face.

“I just…” He almost tells him. Almost lets him know of what’s coming. But he can’t. Not if he wants to keep him safe. So instead he smiles and shakes his head, throwing up more walls around
the fear so it does not filter through to the angel. “Sorry angel. Guess I’m in a weird mood this morning.” He kisses him gently on the forehead, and then lets him go. “Bring me back some bread sticks too, yeah?”

“I- okay. Alright.” Aziraphale frowns, and Crowley can feel him probing through their joined patterns. He lets him feel his love, and the echoing from the void. With any luck, he’ll just assume it’s one of his bad days, when the void screams its silence at him and magnifies his pain. Those are the days he takes off on his own, roaming the beach or going up to the cliffs to stare up at the stars. It would make sense for him to send Aziraphale away then, to have a little time to himself in their home.

“You’ll call if you need me?” the angel asks before leaving.

Crowley nods. “Yeah, angel. I’ll call.” He forces a smile and kisses Aziraphale goodbye, doing his best to act like nothing out of the ordinary is wrong.

He waits for them in the garden. His garden, with a cobblestone path he put in by hand and a carpet of forget-me-nots springing from the cracks, lush plant life in all shades of green around him. Beyond his gate it is winter, but in here it can be whatever season he wants it to be. His own perfect Eden. The fat flakes of falling snow do not intrude beyond the fence, content to fall around their little cottage, filling in any trace of someone entering or leaving their garden. He watches it fall, obsidian sword planted tip-first into the ground. Aziraphale’s presence can still be felt in the house, but Crowley knows he is gone. It will take him hours to get away from the grandmothers that own the pizza place. It should be enough time.

_{Please, Mother,} he prays. _Let it be enough time. Don’t let Aziraphale come back before this is over._

He senses them before he sees them. Four powerful presences, suddenly appearing within his range. He grips the hilt of his sword, and waits. The void echoes with their nearness, sending raw spikes of pain through his mind that get stronger with every step they take.

“You can’t have him,” he calls to them, when they’re close enough to hear. “He doesn’t belong to you anymore.”
Michael’s face holds only disdain as she looks at him, as if he’s barely worth the dirt under her heels. “Out of the way, demon,” she orders. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“Actually,” he says, watching her come closer with wary eyes. “It does. You see, he’s mine now. I love him. And I don’t let go of what I love.” It’s a pointed jab, even though he does not blame them for what they did to him. They were only following Her plan, doing what they thought was right. What he does blame them for is their treatment of Aziraphale. *Shut your stupid mouth and die already.* Gabriel had said it with such coldness, such complete and utter disregard for the life of an angel under his command. If it didn’t make him so, so angry, it would break his heart. He can still remember when Gabriel had been kind. When the very thought of death had horrified him.

“If you don’t move,” Gabriel threatens, “we’ll go through you. You may be immune to Holy Water, but you’ll die like any other demon with a sword in your gut.”

Crowley can’t help it. He laughs, sharp and bitter and full of shards of glass. Gabriel hasn’t fought in a single battle that wasn’t already decided before it began. His victims have all been defenseless humans, incapable of matching the might of a great archangel. Or lesser angels, unable to defy the command of one so powerful. His greatest tests have been on the practice grounds of Heaven, while Crowley has been fighting for his life against the forces of Hell for six thousand years. He’s no longer the gentle healer, content to restrict himself to a staff lest he do too much damage with his blade.

“If you think you have a chance of beating me, you are badly mistaken,” he says, once his laughter has died. “I’ve killed thousands of the Legion of the Damned. I’ve destroyed three Dukes of Hell. Murdered two of its Princes. All to keep Aziraphale safe. Compared to them? You are nothing. Go away before I humiliate you in front of your siblings.”

Gabriel growls, ready to shout, but Michael puts a hand on his arm, silencing him. They come to a stop in the snow just outside of his gate, arranged in a half circle with the two eldest in the center.

“We will enter,” Michael tells him, ice in her voice. “We will speak with Aziraphale. And depending on what he says, we may even leave him alive.”

“Why?” he demands, leaning lazily against the fence like his nerves aren’t vibrating with tension. “What could he possibly have that you don’t?”

It’s Uriel who answers him. “He knows something,” she says quietly. “Something we need.”
“About what?” he rests both hands on the hilt of his sword, ready to use it at a moment’s notice.

“Raphael.” Michael stares straight at him, almost as if she did not speak. Only the echoes rippling through the void inside prove that she had.

Crowley feels his face go cold. “That angel is dead,” he snaps. “All of Hell knows the story. Heaven’s great Healer, murdered by his own siblings before he could complete his Fall.”

“Exactly,” Gabriel says with false joviality. “Which is why Aziraphale will tell us how it is that we all felt Raphael when we banished the traitor from Heaven.”

Shit, Crowley thinks, trying to remember that moment over two years ago now. Had he given himself away somehow? He can’t remember. “Perhaps it was just your guilty consciences,” he suggests. “After all, from his account Aziraphale and your brother were quite close. I’m sure he wouldn’t have approved of your attempted murder. Though of course that is a lesser crime than fratricide.” He’s trying to make them angry, to throw them off-balance. He cannot win against all four, if they are thinking clearly and logically. But if he gets them angry enough, they’ll start making mistakes. Getting in each other’s way. It’s then that he’ll have a chance.

Gabriel charges at him, only to be stopped at the gate by the wards Crowley has in place. They’d been the first thing he’d done, once he was back to full power after the apocalypse. Wards around every inch of their land, specifically designed to keep both Heaven and Hell out. He laughs, lifting a crystalline feather from his pocket and holding it tauntingly in front of his face. “Ah-ah,” he says, showing them the way the wards are tied in to his power. “You don’t get to come into my home without my permission.”

“We’ll see about that,” Sandalphon snarls, raising his sword and advancing, point-first, until the wards will not let him approach further. Keeping an eye on the other three, Crowley draws power from the rest of his wards, weakening them to reinforce this one. Uriel joins her younger brother, pressing the tip of her own blade against the invisible wall. Gabriel moves to her side, adding his own sword to the effort.

It’s a struggle to keep them back. Without the power of a Fallen archangel behind him, Crowley would never have been able to sustain the wards even this long. But he does have that power. And his barrier holds.

“Leave,” he orders through gritted teeth. “Or you’ll regret it.”
Michael meets his eyes, watching him with a calculating gaze. She points her weapon at the ground and does not move closer. He’s grateful. It’s hard enough countering the power of his three younger siblings. He won’t be able to hold out if she joins them.

“What are you?” she asks, curiosity warring with fear in her voice.

A surge of power from the younger archangels draws his attention back to them. He releases one set of wings, using them to steady himself as he brakes his wards against their attack. Sweat starts to roll down his face, his body straining with the effort of it.

“All together,” Gabriel cries, shoving more power against the wards. “On three. One…”

Uriel’s blade starts to glow, imbued with the full extent of her power.

“Two…”

Sandalphon follows suit, and Crowley’s wards shudder under the assault.

“Three!”

The three of them throw the full force of an archangel into their attack, shoving their blades against the wards. Crowley cries out, wings flaring wide as he holds the crystal feather out before him. Everything he has goes into the working, keeping the wards intact.

His siblings surge again, and a second pair of Crowley’s wings break free. He flaps them rapidly, sending great gusts of wind against the archangels. They lower their heads and continue to press on.

“Leave. Us. Alone!” Crowley shouts, forcing himself a step closer, bringing all of his will to bear on keeping this one wall against them.

“No,” Gabriel growls. As one, they release their pressure on the wards. Unprepared, Crowley stumbles forward. And then they strike. All at once, all three swords aimed at the same point in his wall.
Crowley uses his wings, flaring them to steady himself as he scrambles to keep the wards from breaking. A wordless cry of effort is drawn from his throat and he strains, every shred of his power now focused on the ward in front of him. Against three archangels, even that is not enough. Crystal shatters in his fingers, and he’s blown back by the force of the ward breaking. He thinks fast, releasing his third set of wings. He needs all three to catch himself in the air, righting his tumbling form and turning to land in front of his siblings. The three attackers stumble forward as the barrier evaporates, colliding with the low stone fence around the cottage.

“Get back,” Crowley hisses, his sword already up as he lands. He swings at Gabriel, forcing him away from the gate. Uriel and Sandalphon move with him, backing up to clear a space. Crowley snaps his fingers and the gate slams open, iron cracking against the stone wall. He stalks forward, blade raised to point at his siblings.

“You are not welcome here,” he snarls. “You think you can just come in and take him? Like he’s your property? Like after everything you’ve done, he’d be willing to speak with you? No. I will not allow you to do to him what you did to me.”

“No.” He almost misses the soft sound from Michael. She reaches out, grabbing Sandalphon’s shoulder, pulling him back from his attack. In the next instant Crowley spins, black blade knocking Uriel’s flaming sword aside and ducking under Gabriel’s wild swing.

“STOP!” Michael cries, blasting them all with a wave of her power. His siblings freeze in their tracks. Crowley pauses, halfway through an attack meant to separate his little sister from her weapon.

Michael steps forward, coming closer, inspecting not just his face but also his essence. Looking through his walls, to the sigil that proclaims him Her Healer, with all the power thereof. And deep into the void, where the broken and shredded remains of his bond to her still hangs. He doesn’t try to hide it. They’ve come here because of him. So they are going to deal with him. He won’t hide his past away when doing so puts Aziraphale in danger.

“No,” he says again, horrified realization washing across her face. “You can’t be-”

He removes his glasses, tossing them to the side and meeting her ice-blue gaze with angry yellow-gold. “I am what your God has made me.”

“Sparkler?” she asks, hesitant, fear in her voice like a terrified child.
“Not possible,” Gabriel declares, staring at Crowley. “He’s dead.”

“What?” Crowley asks bitterly, touching his throat and allowing the scar there to rise to the surface. “You think I wouldn’t look any different? Being murdered and then tossed into a boiling pit of sulfur tends to change a person.”

“Raphael.” Uriel’s eyes are wide and frightened. “You can’t be him. You- I-” her voice breaks on a sob and she falls silent.

The demon touches his chest, where, hidden beneath his shirt, he still has the scars from Uriel’s blade. “You did exactly what was expected of you,” he tells her softly. “I don’t blame you for that. Any of you.”

“Don’t listen to it, Uriel,” Sandalphon warns. “It’s a demon. It’s just playing tricks with our minds.”

“Am I?” Crowley asks him, fingers brushing his side where Sandalphon had attacked him so long ago. He can feel the memory of it fighting him, battering against the strongest of his walls, trying to rise from the depths of his mind. “And how would a mere demon know exactly what you did that day, when you attacked me under Gabriel’s orders?”

“Raphael died,” Gabriel insists. “We all saw it.”

“Yet here I am, little brother,” Crowley drawls. “Right where I’ve been for the past six thousand years.”

He stands and faces them right there in the snow, framed by the gate to his own private Eden. “You want to know why you felt Raphael the day you tried to destroy Aziraphale for only ever doing what he believed was right?” he asks, meeting each pair of eyes in turn. “You want to know how I survived?” He laughs; a bitter, broken sound. “I lived because he saved me. He bound his essence to mine as you killed me. And then, when I pulled myself up from the pit, burning and bleeding, he found me. Aziraphale, the one you were all so happy to overlook, who took your harsh words and abuse for six thousand years, saying nothing while you did your best to make him miserable. He found a demon dying in the dirt of the Garden and, not even knowing who I had been, he healed me. That is how I lived. Because he took pity on a defenseless creature and saved its life, while you all wallowed in your guilt and pain, following a plan you’re all too closed-minded to see is wrong.”
“Liar,” Michael accuses, pointing her sword at him. “If Aziraphale knew you were alive, he would have told us.”

Crowley shakes his head. “He didn’t know. Not until we freed ourselves from the control of Heaven and Hell. When we were finally free to be ourselves, and not what God or Satan or whoever expected of us.” He sneers at them, letting them see his rage. “And only after I learned that he loves me as I am, demon or no. Which is more than I ever got from Heaven.” That’s unfair, and he knows it. They had loved him for himself too, once. But he doesn’t feel like being fair.

“If what you say is true,” Gabriel says slowly, “then bring Aziraphale out here. Let him explain himself.” His serene mask is cracking, revealing pain in his eyes that track across Crowley’s face, scanning for any hint of his Fallen brother.

“No.” He plants his sword in the dirt at his feet, standing in the gate like an immovable barrier.

“Prove it,” Michael demands, a tremor in her otherwise sharp voice. “Prove you’re really Raphael.”

Crowley’s heart aches for the desperation he can see in her face. He can’t tell what it is she wants - for him to be lying, or for what he said to be the truth. He isn’t sure she knows either.

“I can’t prove something you’ve decided not to see,” he tells her. “But I know you. I remember how you broke your leg in three places in a battle just before the start of the War. And how the next day you dragged me down to the practice fields even though you weren’t fully healed. You were going to talk to me about my visits to Aziraphale, but instead you learned what I had already known. That I was going to Fall, and there was nothing you could do to stop it.”

She stares at him, sword still pointed at his chest, but he can see the blade is shaking.

“Where is Aziraphale?” Gabriel demands, latching on to the one thing he’s certain of. They came to speak to Aziraphale, and that is what he is determined to do.

“You can’t see him,” Crowley tells him. “I won’t let you.”

“Why?” his little brother demands, taking a step closer.
The demon raises his blade, holding it between them. He meets Gabriel’s amethyst gaze, and remembers his words as he ordered Aziraphale to step into the flame.

“Because I was the archangel fucking Raphael,” he snarls. “And you cannot have what is mine.”

Michael yells, rushing him in a ruthless attack. He just manages to get his sword up in time, blocking a strike that would have severed his head from his body. She tries again, attacking recklessly, no thought in her movements but the urge to kill the thing that is causing her pain. Crowley parries, then surges against her, slashing rapidly, forcing her back until he’s beyond the fence, standing in the falling snow.

His younger siblings stand back, watching, waiting to see what will happen next.

Michael lunges at him, using all her skill as Heaven’s Warrior. She’s better than him in this. He’s always known that, but now he has occasion to realize just what that means. Each attack takes just a little more effort to block, while she knocks aside his blade with the ease of long practice. For a few moments they fall into the pattern they used to have when they practiced together, trading blows with rapid efficiency. But she’s learned to hide her pattern now. He cannot see the weak points in her to exploit. Fueled by rage and pain, she falls upon him, slashing and hacking with only one intention - to kill.

She bears down in a vicious thrust, all her power behind it. Crowley’s sword clashes against hers, throwing sparks where Hellfire meets Heavenly flame. They strain there, neither one willing to give up. His arms feel heavy, and he struggles to keep his blade from inching closer to his face. He’s not as strong as her, he knows, but he’s holding his own. He takes a step forward, pushing her back.

And then he hears it, an ominous crack. His blade shudders. The obsidian is ancient now, nicked and dented with the marks of thousands of battles. He’s cared for it well over the millennia, but even a Hell-blade can only take so much abuse. With an almighty crash, it snaps, showering them both with black shards. Michael’s sword comes down, the holy blade searing his infernal flesh as the point enters his chest, just under the scars Uriel had left.

Crowley gasps, unable to even scream against the searing pain. Michael lets go of the weapon, stumbling back. Staring at her, Crowley grips the hilt with both hands and falls to his knees.

“Aziraphale,” he whispers, realizing what it means that he has been defeated. Without him to keep
them away, the archangels will go after him. And this time, there won’t be anyone to save him from their punishment.

He pulls the sword from his body, throwing it away with weakening arms. The archangels watch him, still as statues, expressions all varying stages of shock and pain. He cannot let them have his angel. He has one last trick, one final defense that Crowley can try. It might not work, but it’s all he has.

He sends a pulse of love down the fading pattern of his life, hoping Aziraphale can feel it. And then Crowley grips the shredded remains of his bonds to his siblings and lets every single one of his walls crumble to dust, flooding the bonds with his pain. He takes all of his anguish, all his pain and fear and longing, and shoves it through the broken pathways in their minds. He watches them freeze as they feel it, the pain of Falling, of having everything he ever was and ever loved ripped from him in an instant.

He bears down, forcing more of his pain through the raw and bleeding bonds. Six thousand years’ worth of pain. And it hurts. God, Satan, somebody it hurts. Like it was happening all over again. Every moment, every drop of pain he ever felt, each one happening all at once. Armageddon. The bookshop burning. His heart shattering under the bandstand. Sitting on a park bench, knowing he’s going to have to kill the child he’s raised. Accepting a basket carrying a baby and the end of the world. Aziraphale handing him a tartan thermos. The pain of walking on holy ground. Harsh words in the park. Paimon’s taunts.

Michael screams, dropping to her knees and crying out.

Michael’s face, her shaking hands holding a staff that once belonged to him. A little boy dying in his arms, begging him to save a sister that has already died. Searching scrolls for names he’ll never find. The Son of God hanging on a cross for a reason even he doesn’t entirely understand. The burning pain of claws ripping through his flesh as he fights a prince of Hell, keeping it from killing Aziraphale.

Sandalphon falls, curling into a ball and covering his ears as if that will keep out the pain. Uriel gasps and bites her lip until it bleeds.

The screams of children fated to die by the word of an absent God. The cries of a father as he buries one son while the other is banished for the murder. The fright in Aziraphale’s eyes when he notices Crowley. Hiding the name She wasn’t kind enough to take from him when he Fell. The agony of pulling himself up from Hell, drenched in his own blood. The lingering ache where Her Grace had once been.
Tears streaming down his face, Gabriel advances, sword shaking in his grasp.

“Stop it,” he begs. “Stop. Please.”

Crowley can’t stop. He’s burning. The flames of Hell surround him, cauterizing, changing, burning away the archangel until only the demon remains. One last memory fights against his grip, the pain of it running deep through his soul. Six thousand years, he’s danced around it, avoided it, locked it tight within himself. And for six thousand years, the pain of it has only grown stronger with the passage of time, festering like a gangrenous wound, full of agony, and rage, and the bitter sting of betrayal. Crowley fights to keep it back, to lock it away again. He did not mean to knock down this wall. If he lets this pain out, it will destroy them.

The memory defies him, sending white-hot bolts of pain through his mind, shooting like lightning down the broken bonds.

Gabriel’s sword falls from limp fingers and he sinks to the ground, staring, sightless, into the void.

Crowley screams, wings flaring wide as he strains against his own memory with everything he has. The void rises up, engulfing him.

Fissures crack open in his soul, breaking and burning, a mirror of those tearing through the souls of his siblings.

“Raphael! Please!” Uriel cries out, collapsing against her brothers.

He tries to stop. He can’t. It’s like trying to plug a dam with your finger. Once the leak starts, there is no stopping it. Another scream is torn from his throat. Long and loud, full of all his pain.

A distant part of Crowley registers a faint pop. And then the sound of a basket hitting the ground.

“Crowley!”

“Crowley! Crowley, what’s wrong? What happened? Oh God, you’re bleeding. Crowley, answer me!”

There’s so much fire here. It burns. It has never stopped burning.

“Shh, shhh, my love, my dear one. It’s alright. You’re safe. You’ll be alright.”

A pressure against his last mental barriers, insistent, trying to get in where no soul has been in over six thousand years.

“Let me in, my dear. It’ll be alright. I’m here. I’m with you. Just let me in.”

“Can’t,” he bites out, fear joining the pain. Aziraphale is here. Aziraphale can’t be here. It isn’t safe. He’ll be killed.

“Let me in, love. I know you’re scared, but it will be alright. I promise. I promise you you’ll be alright. We’ll both be alright.” His essence feels like water, washing over Crowley’s mind.

“No!” He’s burning. Always burning. The water feels so good, he wants to let it in. He can’t. He has to hold the pain back. Can’t let this memory free. Can’t let the water touch it.

The presence finds a fissure and flows through it, cool water to soothe the flames.

“There we go. Just breathe with me, dearest. You can do it. There, just breathe.” The water rushes through the cracks in his soul, pushing back at the licking flames. It won’t reach him here in the screaming silence. He’s on his own, like he always has been. Like he always will be. Just him and the hungry, aching void.

“It hurts. So alone, it hurts.” The words echo through his soul.

“You’re not alone.” The water reaches the void, flowing around it like a cool stream. “You never have to be alone again.”
The void echoes with harsh words. Demon. Liar. Unforgivable. The memory fights his hold, and it is winning.

“Just let me in, my dear,” that beloved voice insists. “You won’t be alone. I’ll be with you, always.”

“Not alone,” he gasps through the flames. He’s losing his grip. He can’t do this on his own.

“Never again.” He knows that voice. A steady rock to cling to in a storm.

He lets down the last of his barriers, and the water flows into the void. At the same moment, the memory breaks through. It rises to the surface of his mind. He has time for one frantic moment of connection, desperately reaching for Aziraphale through the silence. They come together within the void, blue-white essence mixing with scarlet-and-gold. For two seconds, he thinks he can hold out. And then the bottom drops out of his world and he’s in freefall.

Outside, Aziraphale screams as Crowley’s pain rushes down their bond. He pushes on with watering eyes, diving deep into his demon’s soul.

_The demon that had once been Raphael watches the battle rage from the shelter of a lonely tree at the very edge of Heaven. So much death, so much pain, and so much more to come. And for what? For Her Great Plan? Was this all what She really wanted? Why? What good could this do? He’d asked those questions, and more. He’d been damned for them, and he still doesn’t know the answers. He has no answers for anything anymore. Silence echoes in his head where once five bright voices rang, an emptiness more painful than any wound. He’d been too careless when he thought to cut Lucifer away, breaking his bond to their siblings and saving them from his rage. He hadn’t meant to sever his bonds to them as well. But now his soul reaches out in agony, only to encounter broken and shredded pathways in his mind._

“Raphael.”

_He turns, and there they are. Four archangels, where six once stood. He sees them flinch at the sight of his face, the changes his Fall has made in him. He has not yet been able to force himself to look, but he can tell from the fear in them that he no longer appears as himself. He knows his hair_
is darker, his wings now black as night. Lucifer had dressed him in armor dark as ebony, but it lies discarded in a pile at his feet. He stands before his siblings in nothing more sturdy than a torn and dirty robe that might, once, have been white.

“Raphael,” Gabriel repeats. “We have come in judgment of your sins.” His voice is hurt and angry, full of accusation. “You have defied God’s law, and must be punished.”

The creature that had once been their brother nods. He can see the pain in him. In all of them. Tears flow down Uriel’s cheeks and stain Sandalphon’s eyes an angry red. Gabriel’s face is a mask, his jaw clenched so tight it could break. And Michael… Michael has turned to ice. Her eyes are flat and cold, completely devoid of emotion.

He has two options here, and both end in his death. He is a demon now, their sworn enemy. By God’s orders, they cannot allow him to live. They will try to fight him. To kill him. To put him down like a rabid animal. **He will face his kin in combat, and lose all that he is.** This is it. His destiny. And he can fight it. Fight them. Maybe defeat one or two of his siblings. Kill them. But he knows himself, as he knows them. He cannot defeat all four of them. In the end, he will lose. It’s only a matter of how much damage he can cause before he does. Or, he can give in. Accept what is to be. He will still die, but none of them will be harmed. He doesn’t even have to consider it. It is the easiest choice in the world.

He bows his head and spreads his arms, offering them a clear target.

“I accept Her judgment, and submit to Her will.” The words taste of bile and dust.

“Oh, my poor, poor dear.” A voice sounds inside his head. This voice is loving, loves him. It has no place in this, the darkest of his memories. He is no longer worthy of such love.

“We don’t want to do this, Brother,” Uriel says, voice shaking. “Please come back. If you repent-”

He shakes his head. “No, little one. I do not regret my questions. They needed to be asked, even if She never answered. And now She has passed Her judgment on me. I have Fallen. You know what that means. What The Plan says you must do.” Repentance will do him no good here. He has already Fallen, and God does not forgive.

“You don’t believe in the Plan,” Sandalphon says, desperation in his words. “You said She
couldn’t be that cruel.” He had, though it seems like eons ago now. Before Lucifer had handed him a book and told him what was inside.

The demon cannot meet his little brother’s eyes. Cannot bear to see the pain written there and know he can do nothing to take it away. “I was wrong.”

He turns to Michael, and wills his voice not to shake as he pulls aside his robe, bearing his chest. The easiest place for her to strike and end his life. “You have your orders. I will not fight you.”

Michael gives the smallest shake of her head.

“Oh. This is his fate. But if he somehow avoids it, if he returns to Lucifer, even the broken remnant of an archangel will be burnt out of him until all that is left is rage and pain. A true demon. The hollow shell of what had once been an angel, now a puppet with Satan on the strings. “You know what Lucifer will do to me if I live.”

“You deserve it,” Gabriel says, so angry now, so full of fire. “Demon. You deserve it for turning away from Mother. And from us.” He holds his sword up and ready, pointed at the demon’s heart.

He turns to him. “Do I?” he asks bleakly. “Does anyone deserve to burn forever, until everything they were is turned to ash?”

“Crowley, this isn’t real, it’s in the past.” That voice again. Behind his siblings, he can almost see another, someone infinitely dear and familiar to him. But no. The battlefield is empty. There are only the five of them here. And a gaping hole where the sixth once stood.

“Raphael, no,” Uriel says. “Please. Why are you doing this?”

“Why?” he laughs, like broken glass tearing at his throat. “I had no choice. All I did was ask questions. I wanted answers. Explanations. To know the reason behind our Mother’s Great Plan. I wanted to know why. And Her response was to let me Fall. To pull her Grace away from me, little by little each day, until our brother could complete the job. I didn’t do this, little sister. She did.”

“Brother,” Sandalphon’s eyes are pleading. “This isn’t you. You’re ours. One of us. You promised.”
The demon shakes his head. He’d promised them they would have to kill him for him to leave them. And this is the moment where he dies. “Can’t you feel it?” he asks his siblings. “I’m not one of you anymore.”

“No. You’re **mine**.” The voice is soothing, gentle, but firm. “They can’t have you.”

“You’ll always be one of us!” Uriel insists, reaching out for him. He takes a step back, out of her reach.


“No,” Michael whispers, and her own sword vanishes from her hand. “I can’t.”

The demon meets her eyes and she flinches but doesn’t look away. “It’s alright,” he tells her. “This is not your fault. You could not have stopped it.”

“Crowley. You have to stop this. It’s over. It’s been over for six thousand years.” He doesn’t think he knows ‘Crowley’, but the name stirs something in him. Not that it matters. He’ll be dead soon, and whatever this voice is will have to find someone else to pester.

“Gabriel, he is our brother,” Uriel protests, gripping the hilt of her blade.

“Not anymore.” Gabriel advances. “And if you don’t stand down, you’ll share his fate. Sandalphon. Draw your sword.”

Sandalphon looks between his brother and the demon, clearly torn.

“You have a duty, Sandalphon,” the demon that was once Raphael reminds him. “Do it.” To make it easier he bares his fangs and hisses, flaring midnight-black wings. His little brother draws his blade and holds it in shaking hands.
“No!” Uriel points her sword at Gabriel, defiant. “I won’t let you do this.”

“Crowley, dearest, you have to wake up now.” The voice again. Soothing, like cool water on the places where his soul burns.

“Raphael, you have been found guilty of questioning the wisdom of your God. The sentence for your transgressions is death.”

“Gabriel, stop!” his little sister cries.

Gabriel shifts, starting towards her. The demon moves on instinct, blocking the attack with the only thing he has - his own body. Gabriel’s sword bites deep into his hands, blood and dark ichor welling up around the blade and running down his arms. Behind him, Uriel screams. At the same time a sharp pain stabs through his chest and he looks down. The point of a bright blade breaks through the skin just over his heart, fire licking at the blood that streams from the wound.

“Uriel,” he gasps, choking on the blood that bubbles up in his throat. Gabriel stumbles back in surprise.

“My dear, you simply must wake up now.” The voice echoes inside. He knows that voice. But Uriel’s sharp intake of breath distracts him.

He turns to look at her as she pulls her sword from his back, the hilt falling from numb fingers. It hurts more that he can’t feel her shock, or Gabriel’s rage, or anyone’s love. The silence of it burns inside his head.

Uriel stares back, eyes wide and terrified. “Raphael - I - I don’t-”

Gabriel’s blade kisses his throat. “Don’t move, demon.”

“I’m sorry!” Uriel sobs, reaching both hands out to him. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I -”

“Don’t be,” he tries to say, but all that comes out is a wet sort of gargling. His vision starts greying out around the edges, and he isn’t really sure how he can keep standing. His limbs feel
cold and heavy, and he cannot make his legs respond.


“I-” Sandalphon hesitates, staring as blood trickles down from a corner of the demon’s mouth.

“It’s not Raphael, it’s a demon,” Gabriel insists. “Do it. Do it now!”

Crying out in rage and pain, Sandalphon closes his eyes, swinging wildly. His blade connects with the demon’s side, cutting a deep gash and throwing him back against Gabriel.


Gabriel grabs him roughly, gripping hard enough to bruise though he can barely feel it. “You are not my brother” Gabriel growls in his ear. “He promised he would die before he left us.”

The demon tries to respond, but cannot make his voice work. He can feel the blood bubbling in his mouth, taste the iron of it on his tongue. He should have died the moment a holy blade pierced his heart. He does not know why She would be so cruel as to draw this out.

His little brother’s sword slices through his throat, and then Gabriel drops his body to the ground. He lands with a wet thump, the sound magnified by the way the world has gone strangely silent around them. No battle sounds reach his ears. No calls of birds or animals. Not even the wind in the trees. All he can hear is a sickly gurgling in his throat, and the echo of Gabriel’s words. He promised he would die before he left us.

“I don’t want to leave you,” he tries to say, but his body will not function anymore. He reaches for their bond, trying to project his love for them one last time, but his head is empty. He is alone. And he is dying, surrounded by his siblings, but without even a hand to hold to ease his passing.

“Don’t you dare,” the voice warns him, filled with terror. It washes over him, amplifying his own. “You don’t get to leave me, Crowley.”

He can’t close his eyes, and can only watch as Uriel falls to her knees in the pool of blood that is
spreading fast from beneath his body.

“No. No no no. Please, no.” Uriel pulls him close, staining her white robes with his blood. “Raphael, no, please. Gabriel, you bastard! How could you?!”

He can’t tell her it’s alright. Cannot reach her to comfort her in any way. She cradles him in her arms, frantically shoving healing energy into a pattern he knows has already passed beyond repair.

“Uriel.” Michael comes closer now, and gently takes his corpse from their little sister.

“Michael, I-” Uriel is silenced by the look on Michael’s face.

“He is dead,” she declares, voice empty of all emotion. He tries to move, to make a noise, to tell them he still yet lives. He can’t. Not that it matters. Even if he is alive now, he will die. Nothing could survive wounds such as this, inflicted not just on his physical form, but on his essence from the touch of a holy blade.

Michael’s hands shake as she carries what is left of her brother to the edge of Heaven.

“Rest now, Brother,” the warrior says quietly in the ceremonial language of the archangels. “It is time to return to the fire, from which all things are made.” The last rites given to any angel. For just a second, she clutches him to her chest. “I am sorry, Raphael. I couldn’t save you.” Hot tears splash against his face. And then, she lets him go.

“Crowley!”

He has a moment where he thinks he sees someone reaching for him. A fleeting glimpse of bright blue eyes. And then he’s falling. He’s falling fast. Down and down and down. Fading. Falling. Burning. Alone. At the end of his fall is The Pit. At the end of his fall is the End. At the end of his fall is Death. His soul belongs to Azrael now. In desperation he broadcasts his pain, flooding the raw and burning remnants of his bonds to his siblings with all of his physical and mental pain - the last supernova flare of a dying star. He cannot hear their minds. He is alone.

The light goes out. And he is still falling. Still alone. Dying.
It isn’t the Pit that breaks his fall this time. No splash down into pools of boiling sulfur. No violent explosion as 14,600,000,000 joules of kinetic energy slam into the ground. There is no impact at all. He’s falling and falling and falling until, quite suddenly, he’s not. He takes a great, gasping breath, and realizes that he isn’t bleeding either. His fingers find only the familiar smooth lines of his scars when he raises them to his neck and chest. He’s no longer wearing the bloody and ash-stained robes of his memory. He’s in what feels like the same black trousers and soft grey shirt he’d been wearing when he stepped out of his gate to face down his siblings.

Crowley sits up, wincing. The wounds may be gone, but he can still feel the sting of Uriel’s blade through his heart. It’s dark, wherever he is. He can’t feel any wind, or cold, or even warmth. There is no sound of birds singing, or crickets chirping. There is no sound at all. He knows he’s standing on something, but he can’t even feel the ground beneath his feet. It’s just… nothingness. Everything the same shade of darkness, in every direction, as far as he can see.

Light starts to grow in the distance, a faint glimmer of lighter grey against the black. With nothing else to do, Crowley starts trudging towards it. The wounds of his physical body don’t seem to affect him here. He feels no pain as he walks, nor does he get tired. There is simply the endless darkness, inching ever so slowly towards the light.

He doesn’t know how much time passes, but eventually the world around him turns from deep black to a faded grey.

**Little Healer. I have been expecting you.**

Crowley looks up to find Azrael watching him.

“Azrael.” He gives a polite bow. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” He’s almost certain he knows why Death is here, but he still has to ask.

**I bring a message from God,** Azrael tells him.

“A message?” Crowley scoffs. “What could She possibly have to say to me?” She hasn’t spoken to
him since the creation of the humans. He hardly believes She would have anything to say to him now.

Azrael doesn’t react to the venom in his voice. **She wishes you to know you have done well.** **Even better than she predicted.**

Crowley laughs, angry, like shattered glass. “Well you can tell Her that I don’t need Her praise. She can fuck right off.” He doesn’t want Her approval. Doesn’t need it. What he wants is for Her, and Her Great fucking Plan to leave him and Aziraphale alone.

**Whether you need her praise or not is immaterial,** Azrael continues. **She has decided to give you an offer. One she has made to no other demon in all of creation.**

“No.” The demon says flatly.

No?

“No.” Rage rises up inside, mixed in with a deep and abiding hurt. “I want **nothing** she has to offer me. Everything I have, I made for myself. She doesn’t get to waltz back into my life after - after **everything,** and act like She gives a damn just because I did whatever the heaven She wanted in Her bloody Plan. A bit of praise doesn’t make up for what She did.” He knows he shouldn’t talk like that, especially not to Death himself, but he can’t help but be filled with fury at the very idea that God could just come back to him, after all this time, like She’d never thrown him away in the first place.

Azrael simply watches him from his grinning skull, as inscrutable as ever. **I would not throw Her offer aside so readily, little healer,** he says. **Do you know what is happening to you right now?**

Crowley shrugs. He doesn’t **know,** but he can guess. There’s only one reason Death would come to him. He remembers the sound of Michael’s blade being pulled from his chest, and the warm gush of blood the followed it. “I’m dying, aren’t I?”

Death inclines his head, and gestures to the side. The air there goes fuzzy for a moment, before a picture appears. In it, Crowley can see his siblings, slowly picking themselves up off the bloodstained snow. A picnic basket overturned on the path to the cottage. And Aziraphale, hunched over his broken body, desperately trying to stop the bleeding.
Your life belongs to me now, Azrael tells him. But it does not have to end. You have been granted a choice.

The demon forces himself to look away from way the crimson blood and black ichor have started to stain his angel’s favorite suit. Aziraphale doesn’t seem to even notice, steady hands pressing down on his wounds, his lips forming words Crowley can’t quite make out.

“A choice?” he asks, wary. In six thousand years, he has never even once heard of someone being offered a choice at their death. People have tried to bargain with Death, to cheat Death, some have even attempted to defy it. But in the end, Azrael comes for them all. There is no escaping when he has determined your time is up.

Heaven still needs a healer, Azrael explains. And who better than the angel that was originally crafted for the job? Your imminent death presents an opportunity. The demon Crowley must perish, but from that death Raphael can be reborn. You can surrender all that you are and be made anew, forgiven of all your sins.

Crowley frowns in confusion. “You can’t expect me to believe She’s just going to let me come back.”

Not you, the angel of death says. The archangel Raphael. All of your experiences since Falling will be wiped away. You will be returned to Heaven a clean slate, untainted by memory of your fall from Grace. It will be as if it never happened.

“And you think the others will just accept that? I Fell. I’m not their brother any longer.”

Azrael glances at the window showing them Aziraphale and the archangels. Michael staggers to her feet and starts forward. Crowley can’t hear what she says, but her lips form the shape of Aziraphale’s name. His angel doesn’t look up. She comes a step closer, and Aziraphale makes a sharp gesture. Holy flames flow from his fingers to form a ring of fire around where he kneels beside the demon’s body.

They will not remember. To them, it will be as if you simply went away for a very long time.
“And how long will that last?” Crowley demands bitterly. “How long until I find something I don’t understand, something She won’t explain? I’ll just start asking questions and Fall again.” He knows himself too well to think otherwise. Unless they remake him entirely, his curiosity will always be his downfall.

She is willing to offer you the opportunity. What happens once you return is up to you.

Crowley opens his mouth to argue further, but just then something with the force of a speeding truck strikes his heart. He staggers back, hands going to his chest, which aches with a sharp and heavy pain. In the window, Aziraphale cries out, calling lightning to his hands once again and bringing it down to shock Crowley’s body. The demon feels the electricity rock through him once again.

Your heart has stopped, Azrael observes. He will not be able to restart it.

He’s right. Between one shock and the next, Crowley realizes he cannot feel it beating behind his ribs. Aziraphale tries five more times before collapses over the demon’s body, hands fisted in his bloody shirt. Crowley doesn’t need to hear him to know the desperate fear that must be in his voice as he sobs.

“Stop it,” he demands. “I don’t need to see this.” He doesn’t want to see what his loss will do to his angel. Can’t bear to see his face when he realizes that, once again, the one he loves is dead.

You must choose now, Healer, Azrael says, ignoring him. You may relinquish all of your memories, all of the past six thousand years. Return to Heaven. And belong with your family once again. Or you may die now, as the creature you have become.

The offer is still tempting, even now, after all that has happened. To be an angel again. A Healer. Her Healer. To return to the light of Heaven and forget the darkness of Hell. Forget the past six thousand years of pain. Forget Falling. Forget losing his family. Forget…. Forget Aziraphale.

“What about Aziraphale?” he asks, though he knows the answer already. This kind of offer doesn’t come without a catch. He looks away from the angel’s anguished expression, but not before he sees Gabriel try to cross the barrier of fire Aziraphale had conjured around himself. A blast of power flares out from the angel, knocking him back into the snow. Aziraphale doesn’t even seem to notice. He pulls Crowley’s limp form into his lap, cradling him close, pressing their foreheads together as he keens.
Azrael shakes his head. **The Principality Aziraphale will remain on Earth. He will not be allowed to influence you in any way, lest you remember your past and Fall once more.**

He would lose Aziraphale. But he would regain his family. His family would fill the void within him, that screaming, echoing pit of silence that even now he can feel gnawing at the corners of his mind. But it would open another void. Another loss. One he would spend eternity with, never quite knowing what it was he was missing. And… Aziraphale. He knows what the angel would want him to choose. He’d want him to return to Heaven. To live, even if it meant that he would no longer remember their love. But could he do it?

He thinks of six thousand years of protection. Of a sword in his hand, raised in defense of his angel. Of dinners in Rome. Walks along the Seine. Plays at the Globe. Concerts in the Sydney Opera House. Of battles fought in dark corners, so the angel wouldn’t ever know the cost of his safety. He thinks about the apocalypse, about eleven years spent raising Warlock. Working at Aziraphale’s side. Harsh words under a bandstand. And confessions of love in the dark of the night. He thinks of two years of careful touches, soft glances. Of bright bursts of love. Hands carding through his hair as he lies with his head in the angel’s lap. Of a steady warmth at his side. Of desperate fingers gripping his and declaring that he would never be alone again.

He thinks, too, of Adam. His nephew, so bright and wonderfully human. Of Warlock, who clung to his skirts and wanted to know the answer to everything. Anathema, with her sharp wit and sharper gaze. Newt, awkward and bumbling and unable to believe he deserved the love of such a woman. Of Shadwell and Madam Tracy, and their strange sort of romance. Of the woman who asked questions. Of the man that followed her. Of the Son of God, who willingly walked into Hell to give them all a chance at redemption. He would forget them all, too.

He thinks about the Bentley, parked outside the cottage, ready to be taken on a drive. Of the bookshop, crowded and quiet, smelling of home. Of their cottage, his little Eden in the back, the telescope in the attic, the library that is slowly taking over all the rest. Home. **His** home. **Their** home. A place they have made their own, more than Heaven ever was.

He would have to give all of that up. Forget it all. Forget all of the pain and joy and loss and love that brought him to this point. To do so… it would unmake him.

“He shall face his kin in combat, and lose all that he is,” he quotes. Azrael nods.

**It is written,** he agrees.

“But is that the Great Plan then, or the Ineffable one?” Crowley demands.
It is Her plan, the Angel of Death says. It is neither Great nor Ineffable. It simply is.

“So I forget, or I die. Not exactly pleasant choices.”

But you will choose, Azrael tells him. His lifts one bony hand, and Crowley’s life-pattern appears in the air above it. It is fully grey, lifeless, full of broken lines held together only by the bright gold power of Aziraphale’s life, woven to his, binding them together. Even that is not enough. The demon can see where his pattern is breaking apart, crumbling away from Aziraphale’s a little more with each passing second.

Crowley sighs. “Right then. I guess I don’t have much time to decide, do I?” Azrael simply looks at him, and begins to carefully disentangle the angel’s pattern from Crowley’s own.

In the end, it isn’t a hard choice. Either way, the person he is will be no more. And perhaps it is selfish of him, but he would rather by far die knowing who and what he is than spend eternity as someone else. He doesn’t even really need to think about it.

He remembers standing before the Metatron, and declaring his choice in the War. His choice had been clear then. It is even clearer now.

“I’ll keep my memories, thanks,” he says, looking Death in the eyes. “I’ll die as myself, and not anyone else.”

So be it, Azrael declares, gripping Crowley’s grey and fading pattern in a skeletal hand. Demon Crowley, you-

“No.”

Crowley turns, shocked, towards the source of the sound. Aziraphale stands there, the broken half of Crowley’s sword held out before him, pointed at Death in a clear challenge. He looks back at the window. There, Aziraphale sits, hunched over Crowley’s body; the broken obsidian blade on Crowley’s chest, one hand holding the demon’s fingers clasped around the hilt, the other pressed against the side of his face. Crowley looks back behind him, and Aziraphale is still there, glaring at Azrael.
No? Death asks, sounding amused.

“You can’t have him,” Aziraphale says firmly. “I won’t allow it.”

“Aziraphale,” Crowley steps towards him, suddenly very afraid. Wherever this is, it’s a place between life and death. If he dies here, Aziraphale could be trapped. Or worse. “You can’t be here.”

“It seems as though I can,” the angel says. “I’m not letting you die again.”

Crowley starts to gather what remains of his power, hoping he has enough to send Aziraphale back home. “You don’t have a choice. Face it, angel. I’m dead. You can’t change that.”

“I can try.” Aziraphale grits his teeth and tightens his grip on his sword.


“Aziraphale. Angel. Go.” He doesn’t understand how he even got here, but it doesn’t matter. What does is that he needs to leave, immediately. Before Death loses his patience and decides to just take them both. He throws his power over the angel and orders the universe to take him home.

To Crowley’s surprise, the angel throws his power off with a blast of his own, knocking it aside before Crowley can get enough of a grip to enact the spell. “You don’t get to send me away,” he says, meeting Crowley’s startled gaze with his own steady blue-green. “Not this time.”

“Don’t be an idiot, you’ll just die too!” His voice is sharp, full of icy fear and desperation.

“That’s my choice to make,” Aziraphale says. “I let you make it for me last time, and you Fell. I’m not going to make that mistake again.”

“Angel-”
“I won’t lose you again,” he shouts. He brandishes his weapon, moving to stand between Crowley and Azrael. Holy fire races down the edges of the Hell-blade and past the broken end, to meet where the point had once been. In his hands it has become a thing of both worlds, a weapon of Heaven and Hell combined.

**Would you take his place?** Azrael asks, and Crowley cannot read the emotion in his voice. It could be anger. Or it could be amusement. **Die in his stead?**

“No-” Crowley starts to say, but Aziraphale cuts him off.

“Yes.”

**Very well.** Death extends a finger to the glowing golden lines of Aziraphale’s pattern, and the light starts to flow from it into the grey and broken lines of the demon’s.

Crowley acts without thinking. He does the only thing he can think to do, launching himself at Azrael, claws extended. Death throws him off, into the air. He twists, getting his feet under him, and lands, skidding back past Aziraphale. He charges again, this time taking a punch in the gut that knocks him back and away. If he’d been in a physical body, he would be bleeding internally now. As it is, his essence aches from the blow, like a bruise on his soul.

The angel stands stunned for just a moment, before he gives a wordless battle cry and surges forward, blade lowered. He slashes low, aiming for Azrael’s knees, only to be blocked by a bright steel sword. Somehow, between one blink and the next, Azrael summoned his own weapon.

The demon charges once more, headfirst this time, ramming into the angel of Death and knocking him off balance. Aziraphale swoops in over his shoulders, slashing at Azrael’s chest. This time Death flaps his great wings and propels himself backwards, away from the attack. Aziraphale presses in on him, swinging again, until his Holy-and-Hell-Fire weapon is knocked aside. Azrael forces him back under a flurry of attacks, until Crowley jumps at him from the side, claws raking down bone in a move that would have sliced open a human’s face. Aziraphale moves in, attempting to stop Death from slicing Crowley in two, but only ends up getting under the demon’s feet.

They stumble backwards together, and Crowley grabs the sword from the angel just in time to block a downward swing from Azrael aimed at Aziraphael’s neck. He darts away and tosses the blade back to the angel, dodging Death’s next series of attacks. Aziraphale shouts as he attacks Death from behind, only to be knocked backwards by a powerful blow from Azrael’s wings.
Crowley launches himself forward, but Azrael catches him, easily throwing him back and away. This time he crashes to the ground and rolls to his feet just in time to see Azrael’s sword plunge into Aziraphale’s chest.

“NO!” Pure raw, chaotic power flows from him, blasting Death away from the angel. It’s too late. “No. No, no, no, no, no.” He slides to his knees at Aziraphale’s side, catching him as he falls.

Aziraphale gasps, this body of pure spirit tearing open at the site of the wound. Crowley can see the edges of his pattern already turning grey. He steadies him, trying to shove healing power into him before it’s too late and desperately trying to hold his spirit together. The lines of Aziraphale’s life resist his magic. He doesn’t have enough power, he can only try to keep him alive by pulling tight on the weaving with his own now-glowing pattern.

“You idiot,” he says, though he’s crying too hard to sound properly angry. “I told you to go.”

“I couldn’t… leave you.” Aziraphale’s voice is no more than a whisper, and fading fast. “You… would have done… the same.”

**I did warn you. You cannot fight Death and expect to win.** Azrael stands over Crowley’s shoulder, his sword nowhere to be seen.

“No.” Crowley refuses to accept that. “No, it’s not - He wasn’t even supposed to be here. It’s not his time. Angel, tell him. It’s not your time.” Aziraphale is fading under his hands, his form turning insubstantial as the pattern of his life starts to die. The angel’s sea-blue eyes catch on Crowley’s frantic yellow-gold for just a moment before falling closed.

“I … love you.” Aziraphale says, struggling with each syllable.

“No no no,” Crowley shakes his head. “No. You can’t die. You can’t.” He looks up at Azrael. “It was supposed to be me. Only me.”

“My choice.” The angel squeezes his hand weakly. “Don’t… regret… it.” The grey has almost reached the center of his pattern. Unless Death holds him here, Aziraphale will be gone in seconds.

“Give him my offer,” Crowley says suddenly, pulling Aziraphale close and glaring at Azrael. “The offer you made me. Give it to him.”
That offer was for you alone, Death says. I cannot give it to another.

“But Heaven needs a healer. You said so yourself. He can heal. I taught him myself. Let Aziraphale go in my place.”

Azrael shakes his head. I am sorry, little healer. I cannot do what you ask.

Aziraphale’s form is almost mist in his arms, his pattern fading away from the places it was joined to Crowley’s. The demon makes a decision.

“Then I’ll take it. I’ll be Her healer,” he says quickly. “Just - just let him live, and Heaven can have Raphael.”

You would not accept this offer for yourself when you were dying, but you will do it now for him. Why? Azrael wants to know.

“Why?” Crowley shrugs. There are so many reasons. “Because this world needs him. Because I can’t imagine an Earth that doesn’t have Aziraphale here to guide it. Because he deserves so much more.” He stares defiantly at Death. “Is that enough? How about because this world and everyone on it owes him their very existence? Or because without him, I would have died six thousand years ago?”

In his mind he can feel the cool, soothing water of Aziraphale’s essence still lingering within him where the angel forced his way inside, trying to save him from himself. Even that is fading, though he throws up walls upon walls, every single defense he’s built within his mind now turned inward, trying to keep Aziraphale alive if only long enough to convince Death to spare him. “Or what about this? Because even though this will destroy everything I am, I know he would do the same for me?”

He looks down into Aziraphale’s face. His expression is peaceful, as if in sleep. Crowley closes his eyes, and turns his gaze back to meet Azrael’s eyeless stare. “Because I love him. Because losing him would unmake me as surely as returning to Heaven will.”

Azrael considers his words with agonizing slowness. Crowley waits, heart in his throat. At last, just as the last of Aziraphale’s pattern fades away, he nods.
We have a bargain, Death declares. Aziraphale’s life pattern snaps back into place. **The angel Aziraphale will live. The demon Crowley will be lost. And the archangel Raphael will return to heaven.** He offers his hand.

“Done.” Crowley can already feel the life flowing back in to his angel. He reaches out and takes Azrael’s skeletal hand, sealing the deal with a firm handshake.

Azrael pulls his hand back, drawing Crowley and Aziraphale’s joined life-patterns with it until they hang in the air between them. **Now, he says, this is a most peculiar weaving you have made. It is almost a shame to unravel it.**

“Then don’t,” Crowley tells him, already knowing that’s impossible. To take the demon apart and bring back the archangel, the whole thing will need to be taken down to the last string and then woven back together in the old shape, cutting off any growth in the lines and removing any connections.

Azrael laughs. **You made a deal, healer. Do not-** he stops, tilting his head to the side, as if hearing words that the demon cannot. **Now that is odd…** He stares at the pattern before him, then turns that same fathomless gaze to Crowley.

**I see it, Lord.** Crowley sucks in a breath, holding himself very still. If Death is talking to God, he has no idea what might happen. **They were desperate to keep each other alive. It is the only explanation.**

Azrael waits, listening. Then - **I do not think-** and another pause, longer this time.

**Very well. It shall be as you say.**

He gives Crowley his full attention. **You are in luck, healer. You have done something I cannot undo. And so we are left with only one option.** He runs a finger along the lines of Crowley and Aziraphale’s combined patterns.

Pain rips through him, shredding his very essence with the force of it. He doesn’t even have time to scream, before the world tilts around him and he’s falling yet again. Tumbling down into the
endless void of Death.

Unexpectedly, he lands. This time, unlike all the others, strong arms catch him up and pull him close before he hits the ground. “Shh,” a soft voice says in his ear, and he realizes he is screaming. Has been screaming, for some time. “Shh, I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

Who? He can’t think through the pain, rippling through his being. Can’t remember anything beyond how much he hurts, body and soul.

It’s alright, my dear, that same voice, inside his mind now, cool and soothing and full of relieved joy. You’re safe. You’re home.

Home. His mind presents him with an image. A small cottage by the sea, filled with books, the garden exploding with life. A beloved presence inside, warm and welcoming.

Yes. Home. You’re home, Crowley. We’re both here. And somehow, we’re both alive.

Crowley? He tries to push aside the fog of pain and think. That’s me, isn’t it? My name. The name he gave himself. The name that is somehow more his than Raphael ever was.

Yes. Crowley. My dear boy. He can hear a heartbeat in his ears, steady and constant, like his head is against someone’s chest. Those familiar arms surround him, anchoring him.

The pain is fading fast. Soon it will only be a memory. As it leaves him, awareness rushes in. Cold wind on his skin. The smell of the sea in the air. Birdsong. Earth. Their cottage. Home.

Aziraphale?

Relief flows through him, Aziraphale’s emotion. Oh my dear. Yes, of course it’s me.

The angel’s essence is all around him, filling the place where his labyrinth of walls had been.
Thoughts flow freely between them, almost as if they share one mind. His pain is… it’s not gone, but it’s less now, muffled somehow, wrapped within Aziraphale’s love. The barrier around his sigil is down, and his mind is no longer a grey, dead maze. It’s filled with the life that he once confined to the core of himself, spreading out more with every breath. Even now he can see plants springing up, creeping out to the corners of his mind where shadows used to lurk. The warm scarlet and gold light of his sigil has banished those shadows, glowing brightly, twined within and around another symbol. Aziraphale’s sigil, bright blue-white lines mixing organically with his, as if they had always been meant to be.

And perhaps strangest of all, he cannot hear the screaming silence of the void. When he examines it, he finds the hole in his mind filled with the cool, soothing water of Aziraphale’s essence, drowning out the echoes with his love.

What… happened? He asks, reaching out to touch the small ripples of water in the void.

You reached out to me, Aziraphale tells him. Just before the memory overtook you. Before it began to kill you. Even with our patterns woven together, there wasn’t enough for me to hold on to you once you started to die. I could feel you, though, your essence, trying to connect to mine. So I just… did what felt right. He pulls his essence away from the void, allowing Crowley to see inside it. And there they are, four broken bonds, raw and bleeding with fresh wounds where he forced his pain through them. The fifth, merely the scarred remnant of a connection. And beside them, something new. One pure cord of blue-white, mixed with his own scarlet-and-gold.

He touches it with a tendril of thought, rocking back in surprise when he feels the power inside it.

A true bond. He can feel it now, deep inside, soothing the empty ache of loss he had thought would always be there. This is no joining of patterns, of physical bodies and emotion. No, this is far deeper than that. A true binding of essence, of thought and heart and mind. A bond so deep and fundamental that only the greatest of violence could ever sever it entirely. Soul-bond. He had never thought to experience a whole one again. But here it is. His very being, joined irrevocably to Aziraphale.

Is… is it alright? Aziraphale asks, and he can feel his hesitance.

Alright? Crowley can only laugh, bright and joyful. Angel, this is more than alright. He doesn’t need to project his emotions, he knows that the angel can feel it all. His love, joy, and relief. Then he stops, confusion flowing through him. But… how? I should be dead. I thought-

Aziraphale’s pain hits him. Anger and frustration. Yes, he says sharply. We need to talk about this
tendency of yours to sacrifice yourself.

I... he has no reply to that. *It wasn’t supposed to be a sacrifice. I thought I could beat my siblings. Send them away, so you wouldn’t have to deal with them. I know they haven’t been kind to you. I didn’t want you to have to deal with that again.*

*Idiot,* Aziraphale chides him. *I thought, after Armageddon, we had decided we would face things like this together.* Through the bond, Crowley can feel his pain and fear, frustration at being left behind yet again, and terror that Crowley will do this again, leave him behind in the name of protecting him instead of asking for his help and facing whatever comes together. That next time he won’t be quick enough, and he’ll lose Crowley for good.

I... Crowley knows the angel can feel his guilt. *I’m sorry. I’ll try not to do it again.* He can’t promise, but he’ll try. It will be next to impossible in any case, now that they share this bond.

*Good enough.* And Aziraphale forgives him, like he always has. He won’t forget though, Crowley can tell. That’s probably for the best. *Now we should probably deal with Gabriel and the others, before they get over their shock at seeing us come back to life.*

*Gabriel. Michael. I almost forgot.* Adrenaline courses through him, and he opens his eyes.

And there they are, standing just outside of the charred ring in the snow that is all that’s left of the fiery barrier Aziraphale conjured to keep them at bay. Between them, inside the ring of the angel’s power, stands Death.

*Little Healer,* he acknowledges Crowley. *Principality.* He inclines his head to Aziraphale. Then he turns to the archangels.

“Azrael,” Michael bows low, glancing from him to Crowley and Aziraphale, still seated on the ground. The others follow suit. Crowley can hardly imagine what they must be thinking. They would have seen him die. Then Aziraphale. And then the angel had come back to life. And then finally Crowley had returned, and with him Death had appeared.

*They are not to be touched,* Death declares, gesturing to the demon and the angel. *Your God has spoken.*
“They’re ours,” Gabriel protests. “Aziraphale is an angel. And the demon-”

They are no longer of Heaven, Azrael states. Aziraphale’s eyes widen, and Crowley feels his fear at the words. Nor are they of Hell. He pulls himself into a sitting position, wrapping an arm around Aziraphale’s shoulder and holding him close.

They have become something in-between, Death tells them all. No longer under your authority.

“But-” Gabriel begins to say something, but Azrael silences him with a look.

Crowley. Aziraphale. He turns his back on the archangels. You have been given a new task.

Crowley opens his mouth to defy Death and whatever God has planned for them, but Aziraphale silences him with a mental warning and the tight squeeze of his hand.

You are charged with maintaining the balance on Earth, Azrael continues. You are to ensure than neither side maintains the upper hand. Only with such balance, can Her creations make their own destiny. As you have.

He pauses, fixing them both with an expressionless face that somehow still manages to convey gravity and expectation. And then, he is gone.

For a moment, there is only silence. The wind blowing through the trees, and the sound of waves crashing upon the shore. And then Crowley laughs, resting his head on Aziraphale’s shoulder and shaking with it, fear and joy and pain and hope all churning inside and coming up in a sound that’s just slightly hysterical.

“Raphael -” Uriel says, reaching out. “I-”

He flinches at the sound of her voice. He can’t do this. He doesn’t have the energy left that facing them will require. “Not now,” he says, sighing with exhaustion.
“But-” Sandalphon, too, starts toward them, but Aziraphale stops him with a sharp look.

“He said not now,” Aziraphale snaps. “And his name isn’t Raphael anymore. It’s Crowley.”

Crowley takes a deep breath, soaking in the feeling of the bond between them. Help me send them away? he asks Aziraphale.

Of course, love. The angel stands, helping Crowley to his feet. The demon’s exhaustion is almost overwhelming, and Aziraphale reaches through their bond, giving him some of his own energy to keep him on his feet. Then he turns, looking at the archangels, his eyes glowing with Crowley’s yellow-gold.

“We’re going inside, and I am going to make sure his wounds are healed,” Aziraphale declares, glaring at Michael, who closes her eyes.

“And then we have quite a bit to discuss,” the demon adds, thinking of Azrael’s words. His own gaze shines with the same blue as the sea. They move together, hands joined, perfectly in sync. It feels amazing, better than he remembers, those times when he had acted as one like this with his siblings.

“You can come back later,” Aziraphale allows, though Crowley can feel his reluctance to do it. “If you promise to behave.”

“But if you so much as threaten him,” Crowley adds, “that’s it. Whatever we are now, we don’t belong to you.” Then he retreats from the bond, though he can still feel it, warm and bright within him. He does not release Aziraphale’s hand.

“You’re still my family,” he says, looking at them with his own golden, serpentine eyes. “If it means anything to you. I never stopped loving you.”

Aziraphale is less forgiving. “Heaven knows why, but he does.” He frowns at them, and the remaining half of Crowley’s sword bursts back into flame in his free hand. “So I’m going to give you fair warning. You won’t hurt him again. I won’t allow it.”

“Angel,” Crowley says, warning.
“I mean it,” Aziraphale adds. “You get one chance. That’s it. Come back in a few weeks. We’ll talk. But don’t expect we’re just going to let you have whatever you want.”

“We understand,” Uriel says, surprising them both. “We’ll leave. I think - “ she glances at her siblings. “We have much to discuss ourselves.”

Gabriel stares. “What? No! I’m not leaving until I get some answers. Aziraphale-” he starts forward, face a mess of confusion, fear, and pain.

Aziraphale raises his weapon, but Sandalphon gets to him first. He puts one big hand on the back of Gabriel’s neck, and shakes his head. “Don’t,” he says firmly. “We’ve done enough damage today.”

Crowley watches in shock as his youngest brother pulls Gabriel back to stand beside Uriel. And then, the three of them vanish, leaving only Michael behind.

“Michael,” Crowley says, reaching out to her, aching in sympathy with the agony on her face.

“I… Sparkler…” She looks at him with wide, anguished eyes. Then her expression closes off. “Goodbye.” She returns to Heaven in a wave of white light.

When he can no longer sense them, Crowley sags against Aziraphale, completely exhausted. The wound in his chest hurts, and even with the angel’s help, he barely has the energy to stand.

“Well,” he mutters. “That was… something.”

Aziraphale sighs, exasperated and fond. “Come on then,” he says. “Let’s get you inside.” He wraps an arm around Crowley’s shoulders, holding him up as they stagger slowly back towards the cottage.

“Wait.” Crowley stops, waiting until Aziraphale looks at him.
“I love you,” he tells the angel, letting it fill the bond between them. He’s not sure why he needs so desperately to say it, but he does. “I- what I did today, I just wanted to keep you safe. I can’t lose you.”

“And you won’t,” the angel says, giving him a soft smile. “But you must know that I cannot lose you, either. You shouldn’t be so reckless, my dear. You need to let me help you. I can, you know.”

Crowley thinks about Aziraphale standing between him and Death with only half an obsidian sword. If he hadn’t come, Crowley would be dead now. “I know,” he says. “I just…”

“You think you have to protect me,” Aziraphale tells him. “But you’re not an archangel anymore. It’s not your responsibility to keep me safe in Eden, away from all danger.”

“Angel…” he turns in Aziraphale’s arms so that they’re standing face-to-face.

“I love you, Crowley,” Aziraphale says quietly. “Whatever comes next, with this new task of ours, I want to face it together. With you.”


They stand together in silence, here in their own private Eden, holding each other close. And for perhaps the first time in his entire existence, Crowley finally, truly, feels free.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you all so, so much for reading this. I hope you’ve enjoyed The Truth Remains as much as I have writing it!

My plan for the sequel is this: I'm going to take a week or two off of writing to focus on some stuff at work. Then I'm going to post a couple short or one-shot fic I've been playing with. I plan on starting work on A Promise Unfulfilled by April, and I'll post the chapters as they're complete. If you're interested in seeing what happens with the other archangels now that they know about Crowley, please check it out!
Now rebloggable from my writing blog!
Come say hi on my personal blog

Art by amazing people!
- Raphael teaching Aziraphale to heal
- The moon scene with Crowley and Michael
- The glass feather shattering
- The archangel family

Flashbacks, in chronological order

1. Chapter 17 - an archangel family moment
2. Chapter 10 - Questions (spans the length of Raphael’s life in Heaven)
3. Chapter 13 - healing the sparrow
4. Chapter 1 - meeting Aziraphale
5. Chapter 7 - joking with his siblings
6. Chapter 5 - part 1 - healing Eve
7. Chapter 4 - a walk in the Garden
8. Chapter 3 - Lucifer gives him The Book
9. Chapter 2 - making Alpha and Beta Centauri
10. Chapter 6 - Aziraphale’s comfort / Confronting God
11. Chapter 11 - Sandalphon’s worries
12. Chapter 13 - Azreal and the first victim in the war
13. Chapter 18 - A captured demon
14. Chapter 14 - Talking with Michael
15. Chapter 8 - the last conversation between Aziraphale and Raphael
16. Chapter 12 - Speaking with Metatron / Raphael’s Fall
17. Chapter 19 - The death of Raphael
18. Chapter 5 - part 2 - tempting Eve

Works inspired by this one: Shattered by Ellezaria

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