Innocuous

by flamethrower

Summary

Crowley has a revelation in the shower. Not the world-ending sort or the getting-laid sort, but one of the far less fun sorts. The sort that leads you to realize that something has somehow gone very wrong. Most likely, anyway. Maybe.

Heaven, why him?

OR:

Someone decides that the only way to deal with two annoying troublemakers is to stash them somewhere out of the way, possibly to be conveniently forgotten. Crowley and Aziraphale, however, are not exactly the forgettable types.

Notes
This story can be read as a Standalone (along with its not-sequel, Eridu), OR it can be read as part of the series it's listed as. It came first and nothing from the rest of the series changes what it is—a lovenote to footnotes an excellent GO story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
It was the drain he noticed. A stupid, innocent bit of grating and pipe, nearly as old as the bloody bookshop it was lurking in. He noticed it because it was one of the few times he was in the mood for a shower instead of just snapping his fingers and willing himself clean.

What can he say? He’s always liked water. It reminds him of Eden. Things were simpler. He had one job—that he actually botched, but he claimed credit for it anyway—and everything smelled and tasted brand new. No one was burning wood or coal or sod for warmth. No pollution.*

Rain, not so much. Rain just reminds him of when tiny pockets of civilization all over the Earth had to recover from a global flood.

Crowley had curled up as a serpent in a pile of coils down alone in a (relatively) quiet corner of Hell, drops of rain from above occasionally falling down onto his body. He didn’t move for forty days. He was trying to walk his way through God’s logic, which was probably still blasphemy, but he was already Fallen, so who cares?

The angels of heaven had raised swords against their brethren and had been cast out. Yes, he could sort of see why kicking out everyone who was dissenting would make sense in the short term, but it didn’t exactly solve the problem now, did it?*

Crowley didn’t raise a sword to anyone. He was a bit busy at the time running* for his life.

All right, so biting Michael when he tried to step on Crowley was probably a sword-raising equivalent, but Michael bloody well started it.

Come to think of it, that might be why Michael was so willing to bring holy water to Hell for Crowley’s dunking. Angels and demons are of the same stock, and both of them are very good at holding grudges. Act like Her decree of forgiving others their trespasses doesn’t apply to them. Bloody hypocrites.

God had, in effect, treated the perceived human-warring problem the same way She’d treated the angel-warring problem. Again: didn’t solve the problem. At least She seemed to have figured that out afterwards, given that the humans went out and started up the whole Killing Each Other For Fun bit immediately after the flood waters dried.*

Crowley stares down at the innocuous drain, water dripping from the ends of his hair. His eyes are about on par with a human’s eyes in terms of detail, but light and darkness…well, there are
advantages to vertical pupils, after all.*[7]

The drain is almost entirely correct. It’s the right color, tempered old copper, and he thinks the pattern bored through in tiny holes is spot on.

It’s the pipe just below it that’s the problem. Aziraphale is the odd sort of angel who liked to clean up the human way often. For someone who pokes so much fun at Crowley about his hair, the angel has a great deal of bathing products to choose from. He also doesn’t mind sharing; part of their Arrangement became, at some point, the expectation that Crowley refill the contents of any of those bottles he uses. One of them is a scented hair tonic from bloody 1620.

(Aziraphale has never once smelled like that tonic. They both know who Aziraphale keeps it for, and they both will likely go into the Void at the end of eternity before mentioning a word about it.)

The angel’s fondness for human cleaning meant that the moment modern plumbing had finally been invented, Aziraphale installed an excellent bathtub and sink on the second floor of his shop. When modern showers were invented in 1763, Aziraphale added one of those, as well. It was quite literally the first (unacknowledged) shower in England.

Crowley spent a week in the upstairs shower to celebrate its invention. He might also have been rinsing off three months of ocean travel so he no longer smelled like salt, unwashed humans, rotting apples, and dead fish. That hadn’t been his best decade in terms of avoiding notice, given that his vocal support of the Stamp Act had done an excellent job of enraging everyone in North America who was a) British and b) liked to use paper…which had been far more people than Crowley realized. Like it was his fault British Parliament thought the Stamp Act*[8] was a grand idea.

It was an excellent demonic idea. It also meant fleeing the Colonies and retuning to England to hide, practically bolting into the bookshop and refusing to come out until everyone was suitably distracted by the Colonies’ War for Independence. Stupid bloody Boston News-Letter and its excellent sketch artist.

There are still historically conscious bastards in Boston who recognize him if he tries to go back. He considers the Daughters of the Revolution to be one of the most dangerous organizations in existence. At least the bloody Chattering Nuns had offered him biscuits when he gave them the Anti-Christ. The Daughters tend to offer pointed rifles and swinging baseball bats.

Aziraphale had not been impressed by the Stamp Act. He let Crowley stay, anyway. Besides, Crowley made it up to him by saving the angel from discorporation by inconvenient Revolutionary French beheading a decade later.

Showers were amazing, anyway. Humans had finally figuring out that a bath was just soaking in the same dirt they’d just been wearing, but a shower—that was cleanliness.

He isn’t so concerned about the next to Godliness part. If God wanted him, she could let him know on her own bloody time.

Copper pipes brought in the water, and even if angels and demons couldn’t get ill*[9], there are health benefits to a built-in antibacterial filter made of metal, those health benefits being that the water tasted a bit more like it should instead of being reminiscent of stale mud puddles and washwater. Aziraphale had seen no reason to get rid of the copper or the cast iron after plastics came along and made a complete mess of things.

Showers with water from plastic pipes taste like…well, like plastic. Crowley ripped out all the stupid plastic piping in his flat after he bought it and miracled everything back to copper just to be rid of the
plastic flavor. He then added three different hellishly expensive water-filtering systems just to come even the slightest bit closer to Eden-like water, and thus had the best drinking water in the entirety of southern England.

Laying a pipe from his flat to the angel’s bookshop had been a sewer adventure he never wants to replicate.

(“Crowley. About my water.”)

“What about it?”

“It tastes different.”

“Has it turned toxic?”

“Well, no…”

“Then bloody well make the tea already, angel.”

“…Right.”*[10]

The problem is that he isn’t looking at a copper-covered bore to cast iron, which his eyes are quite familiar with. He can see down that darkened pipe quite a ways.

It’s a brass-covered bore of a plastic drain.

No, wait. The real and disturbing problem is that it took Crowley five bloody minutes of staring at the stupid drain, with his thoughts constantly wandering off in different directions, to realize that it’s wrong.

His interest in shower-lounging utterly obliviated, Crowley turns off the water, dries off with a thought, dresses with another, and then spends a careful ten minutes at the mirror. He likes styling his hair with his own hands, pulling wax or clay (and sometimes outright glue) through handfuls of ginger until it stands up tall and proud enough to shame a porcupine.

It had curled, once. It had curled and flowed from his head down past his shoulders, an idea captured quite well by several Renaissance artists who were too bloody psychic for their own good.

The Crucifixion had nixed that joy. He’d chopped off all the stupid curls and spent a very drunken night screaming at Above, railing at Her ideas of justice and probably irritating everyone of consequence.*[11]

Even if Yehoshua of Galil Elyon*[12] was the Son of God (he still wasn’t certain) sent to wipe away sin by being God’s voice on Earth, no one deserved that sort of fate. Above hadn’t even done that to the Fallen. Broken their wings and tossed them from Heaven, yes, and the less said about that, the better, but no demon had been nailed to a bloody piece of wood and left to die in agony.

Why were humans, even potentially Divine humans, so bloody set on suffering and bleeding and dying just to make a point?

Heaven, he’s distracted again. It’s like being drunk without the enjoyment of it all.

Crowley turns back to the matter of the drain, glancing around the room.

Aziraphale is a meticulous bastard. If he’d ever updated the bath, he would have told Crowley all about it with the sort of unrestrained, horrifying zeal that should remain trapped in a decorating
magazine. He certainly would have updated the bath to his current esthetic of Stuck in 1950.*[13]

Crowley has a bad, bad feeling about that drain. It shouldn’t bother him at all, but it does. Sat—Heav—stupid porcupines help him, he really does.

It’s been two weeks since the Apocalypse That Wasn’t. One week since they scared the hell/divinity out of their respective Head Offices by refusing to die as ordered.

For the first time, Crowley wonders if maybe things had gone too well. It’s a paranoid thought, but Crowley excels at those. Paranoia keeps you from being discorporated. Or worse, shoved into a tub of holy water so that you’ll cease to exist. He has nightmares about that stupid bathtub in Hell, and he didn’t even see it. He might never take another bath again.*[14]

“Oh, bugger this,” Crowley mutters, and goes downstairs. “Zira!”

Aziraphale looks up from a book, laying down a biro he was using to write in it with. Crowley gets a close enough look to note that it’s a journal, which immediately makes his pounding heart calm back down. Aziraphale would have cut off his own hands before he would write in one of his books. Journals are…

Are…

No, actually, that’s as odd as the drain being wrong.

Normal. Pretend everything is completely normal, Crowley thinks. Because it is bloody normal!

“We’ve been holed up in your shop for nearly a week since swapping back, waiting to see if anyone was going to nose about.”

“Yes, well, you do have a flat,” Aziraphale reminds him, smiling. He looks exactly as he should, pale blond hair curled and sort of sticking up in odd patches because the angel could never be bothered with perfection regarding hair. His perfection was reserved for books. It certainly wasn’t reserved for his wardrobe…but…

He seems more pressed and precise than usual. Just a bit.

Crowley hopes he isn’t going mad. That would have been preferable several thousand years ago. Right now, it’s just bloody inconvenient timing.

Crowley waves that off. “Strength in numbers,” he replies, not wanting to admit that he really doesn’t want to go back and face the stain on his carpet that used to be Ligur. That had almost been Crowley, too, and as much as he wants to sleep in his own bed, he wants more nightmares even less.

“True enough, I suppose,” Aziraphale says.

Crowley watches Aziraphale pick up the biro again. The Not-Apocalypse was two weeks ago. That could certainly make an angel change old habits, even though Crowley had to all but drag the angel kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. He finally gave in and bought a computer that is now horrifically out of date, but the angel doesn’t even own a microwave.

They didn’t need a microwave, either of them, but the idea of it was the sort of thing you wanted to gaze upon in all its speedy-popcorn glory. Humans were brilliant problem-solvers.

Crowley is not a brilliant problem-solver. He makes problems. He doesn’t fix them.*[15]

“Did you notice the drain in the shower?” Crowley asks.
Aziraphale gives him an odd look. “Given that the water is still draining instead of flooding the bathroom during one of your extended serpentine soaks, I assume it’s still working properly.”

“Bah. You take longer showers than I do.” Usually. Unless it’s a basking sort of shower.

Who is he kidding? He does take longer showers, he’s just not doing it for the joy of soap. Dries out his scales something terrible.

“What about the drain?” Aziraphale asks, jarring him out of arguing with himself for no reason at all. “I assume you had a reason to bring it up.”

Crowley reaches out to the nearest bookshelf and lets his fingers dance along the spines. Aziraphale watches with a slight flinch, but doesn’t protest. “Did you notice anything different about it? Lack of iron pipe, for example?”

“The bookstore was willed back into existence by an eleven-year-old with a fondness for children’s books,” Aziraphale points out. “I doubt the boy has ever seen a cast iron drain, not with the way humans like to modernize everything at first granted opportunity.”

“Right. That’s…that’s a very good point.” Crowley hadn’t forgotten that, not exactly.

Except he had. He had entirely forgotten the bookshop burning, and Adam deciding to put things back the next day, neat and tidy, as if the Plagues and the Horsemen hadn’t gone for a nice ride out on the town and the M-25 hadn’t become a burning ring of hellfire.*[16]

Bloody hell, what was wrong with him? Everything was fine. Adam had gotten a bit of plumbing wrong, that was all. Crowley made himself relax. Yes, Above and Below probably really were out to get them, eventually, but he might be taking things a bit far. Things have been a bit wild since Hastur handed him a basket with a demonic baby in it. He can forgive himself for forgetting a few things, especially things he isn’t particularly fond of remembering in the first place.*[17]

“Let’s get out of here for a bit, why don’t we?” Crowley suggests. “We’ve done the Ritz, but I could go for that Japanese place you like so much.” He might be a serpent some of the time, but he detests eating raw meat unless there is a great deal of rice, seaweed, and sauce involved. The Japanese inventing the portable lunch was an utterly grand moment in a sea of grand human moments.

“Maybe later.” Aziraphale takes up the biro again. “I need to keep working on this.”

“What’s working on then, angel?” Crowley forces himself to ask casually, his fingers continuing to dance down book spines.

He’s no bibliophile, but he doesn’t think these titles are correct. Even accounting for Adam’s changes, there is something…off.

“Oh, just documenting the Apocalypse That Wasn’t,” Aziraphale answers, already distracted by the act of applying biro to paper. “I thought it best to record it while it’s still fresh, you know? Old habits and all that.”

“Old habits,” Crowley repeats, forgetting to breathe.

Aziraphale used to write books. Even before the Arrangement, the angel would show him scrolls and carefully crafted stacks of papyrus encased in leather binding. Not everyone in the world really understood the appeal of the written word at the time, but the angel knew that a certain demon did. Crowley always pretended to be utterly disinterested, but not in a way the angel would think was the truth. He would read whatever Aziraphale wrote down, from end to end or cover to cover. They
were often historical events or anecdotes of interest the angel thought worth recording, but sometimes
they were overheard stories. Humans had really started to get on with the idea of fiction, coming up
with adventures that never were for heroes that would never be.

Crowley had loved the fiction best, and Aziraphale was observant enough to notice. Those were the
scrolls or books that the angel would bring along most often.

Then the earthquake and flooding had wiped the Great Library of Alexandria off the map. So much
had been lost: history, maths, science, and fiction alike.

Most of what Aziraphale had ever written down had been stored within Alexandria’s walls. When
the waters receded and the city was lost to the ocean, Aziraphale sank into a deep angelic depression
that had nearly driven Crowley fucking starkers.

He hadn’t had anything to do with the bloody Library’s loss, and Aziraphale never blamed him, but
Crowley had felt guilty anyway. He couldn’t fix it. He didn’t like—he hadn’t wanted—

A depressed Adversary angel was no fun at all. A very depressed angel, utterly pissed and raging
against the injustice of how much knowledge had been lost, had sworn he was never bloody well
going to record another scrap of history or bit of story ever again. He would read the books, but he
would never write them.

Crowley feels hot and cold all over. He’s never liked fear. He really wasn’t all that fond of standing
up to the Prince of Hell with nothing but a tyre iron, but he did it anyway.

The fear he feels now makes that moment with the tyre iron seem pleasant. He wonders if his rapid
heartbeat is audible to an angel’s hearing.

Crowley swallows, his mouth strangely dry. “Right, course. Recording important bits of history.
Thought you’d given that up, is all.”

Aziraphale gives him a surprised look. “Give up writing books? No! Whatever gave you that
impression? Aside from mucking up guarding the Eastern Gate, it’s practically what I’ve done the
entire time I’ve been on this planet!”

Crowley stares at him. And stares at him some more. “Biros too, then, huh?”

Aziraphale would use a good biro sometimes, but he still had a fondness for quills and ink pots.
Biros were new. Quills and ink had been around for millennia. Crowley had always supposed the
angel and his quills were a comfort thing, though he himself didn’t miss the mess of inky feathers.

There are no quills or ink pots on Aziraphale’s desk. “One more detail Adam missed, right? The
quills,” he says, when Aziraphale gives him a blank look. “I don’t even see your favorite.”

Aziraphale carefully sets his biro down again. “I say, are you feeling quite all right, Crowley? I’ve
not used quills in…oh, ages. I didn’t want to risk spilling ink on the books.”

That is so plausible that Crowley, for a brief moment, feels the intense relief of belief.

Except his hand is now resting on a book that Aziraphale lost to the fire, one that Adam hadn’t
known how to properly replace. After things were set back to rights, this particular spot on the shelf
had become home to a signed copy of the collected works of Rudyard Kipling. Quite nice, that, he’d
thought upon its discovery. Crowley always appreciated that Kipling had listened to his suggestion
regarding the inclusion of a snake that liked children. Evil serpents were old hat.
He’d gotten tired of being the evil Serpent of Eden about five minutes after the stupid apple was eaten.*[18]

Before the fire, the book on this particular shelf had been a volume that Aziraphale fretted over losing, as there are only twelve other copies known to exist. *Tamerlane and Other Poems* had a listed author of a *Bostonian*, but Aziraphale’s copy was autographed by a very confused Edgar Allen Poe.

Crowley takes *Tamerlane* from the shelf with his usual, Aziraphale-mandated care, and flips the cover open. The inscription is exactly the same, words written by a man who was utterly baffled by the idea of anyone wanting his signature on a poorly received book.

Oh, Heaven. What the fuck is he supposed to do now?

Crowley puts the book back on the shelf. “I suppose I’ve gone too long without a proper night’s sleep, Zira.”

When he glances over, Aziraphale is rolling his eyes. “You don’t need to sleep.”

“No, but sleep is amazing.” It’s an old argument. The angel would rather spend his time reading or researching. Crowley likes the freedom of dreams, because they’re the only freedom he has from himself.

“I’m going to head back upstairs for a bit, maybe faceplant into that bed you never use.”

“All right, then.” Aziraphale has already returned to writing. “I’m really not certain why it matters, but even I will admit you tend to be better if you’ve slept off a few temptations.”

Crowley doesn’t answer, because that was odd of Aziraphale to say that, even if it’s true. He trudges back up the staircase in the back room.

He doesn’t go to Aziraphale’s small bedroom. He goes straight back to the bathroom.

[1] There is a distinct difference between tasting only the minerals of the earth and the broken-down remains of what some dead sod had for breakfast three hundred years ago.

[2] See: the only drinking water available in Hell

[3] You don’t get used to it.


[5] Crawling

[6] “Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done.” Genesis 8:21

[7] Debated advantages, but a better ability to see true color in darkness is considered to be one of them, not merely shapes in the darkness.

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stamp_Act_1765 If you’re looking for a Revolutionary War powder keg, this is pretty much it. It just took another decade to position it properly for the explosion.

[9] There are exceptions to every rule. Crowley just wants to pretend those exceptions don’t exist.
There really are a lot of things they choose not to discuss.

He only considers two beings to be of consequence.

Or Naṣrath. Picky, picky.

1950 still had showers. Crowley wouldn’t have minded.

His flat has only ever had a shower. This is a good thing. His destruction of a bathtub in that flat might have caused his plants to simply fall over dead from witnessing one horror too many.

Fixing the Apocalypse was an entirely self-centered motivation and therefore doesn’t count against him.

Again: he does not fix problems. He makes them. Adam probably had a very good point about the no-messing-about thing.

Like a burning car.

Accidentally inventing Reverse Psychology was pretty much the worst thing ever. Hell gave him a commendation for brilliant thinking. Crowley used it to barter his permanent posting on Earth, but that didn’t mean he had to like it.
Crowley shuts the bathroom door, shoves a towel along the bottom, miracles a few towels over the vents, and turns the shower on full blast. Then he touches the showerhead, silently instructing it to spew out steaming water without end, no matter what the boiler downstairs thinks of the affair.*[40]

Crowley leans over the sink, staring into the mirror as it begins to fog up. “Fuck,” he whispers, yanking off his glasses so he can see his own golden eyes reflecting back at him. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

He wants this to fail, but he can’t exactly bring himself to pray that it will fail. He doesn’t particularly like the idea of doubting his own mind for the rest of eternity.

The mirror clouds over completely in about five minutes. Crowley swallows, takes a breath, and raises his finger to the glass.

Mirror magic is not the sort of thing anyone should muck about with. Even demons follow that particular rule. Mistakes can cause incidents. Mirrors can open doors.*[41]*[42] Sometimes even the Fallen don’t know what the result will be. More than one of his demonic brethren have been eaten by mysterious things from Somewhere Else. Crowley has the dubious honor of witnessing one of those incidents for himself.*[43]

Fortunately, consuming the summoner usually contents whatever thing did the eating, and they go back home on their own. The offending mirror is ground into dust, and the warning goes through all the caverns of Hell once more: Do not fuck with mirror magic.

Crowley was never very good at doing what he was told. He is, however, not an idiot. He has what no other demon has: a best friend with the right sort of books that have useful glyphs, sigils, and proper translations.

If this doesn’t work, then he’s being paranoid.

He’s terrified that it’s going to work.

Seven sigils. Seven is a holy number, not the sort he usually works with.[44] He begins mirror-writing through the steam, one careful sigil after another, following the lines of an invisible circle. He’s a bit worried the glass might burn him as he traces out the seventh sigil, but it continues to be harmless wet glass beneath his finger. Each sigil remains clear, refusing to fog over again, so he’s on the right track.

Or he’ll be eaten. Whatever. Being eaten might be preferable to being insane.*[45]

Crowley is shaking by the time the circular space within the sigils clears away, wiped clean by the invoked symbols. He leans closer, his heart in his throat. He’s not fond of that sensation.

Wasn’t the execution attempt enough? Wasn’t the bloody averted Apocalypse enough? When will he
be done paying for his sins?

It’s been six thousand fucking years, and he still doesn’t even know why he Fell! He only ever asked questions, no matter what color anyone’s wings were!* He didn’t even want to be in anyone’s fucking war in the first place!

His voice emerges as a croak, but it does the trick. “Aziraphale. Aziraphale. Aziraphale.”

The sigils light up with a surprisingly gentle glow, not the usual dramatic and demonic flare. He’s momentarily distracted by that oddity, and then he notices the new image in the center of the circle.

“Oh, God,” he whispers. He doesn’t care at the moment that he just called upon his rather absent Creator.

He knows Aziraphale is downstairs, writing in that stupid journal with a biro. He always makes a great deal of noise when he steps out. Even if he doesn’t, he’d leave a note for Crowley to say where he’s gone.

It is also entirely, utterly possible that Aziraphale could have quietly stepped out and stolen down to the café down the street. It’s a new little addition to Soho, one with horrific scones but coffee that would tempt Satan himself.

Seated opposite Aziraphale is himself.

“No.” Crowley pounds on the mirror with one fist. “No, no, no!”

Too easy. It was too bloody easy. They’ve trapped him and replaced him. Aziraphale might have escaped Hell, but Crowley never left Heaven.

Maybe they were never in Heaven or Hell. Maybe that was part of the ruse. Maybe…maybe they never switched?

Crowley shakes his head. Yes, they had. They had left Heaven and Hell—Aziraphale asked for a rubber ducky, for fuck’s sake!—and swapped back, and everything had been fine.

“AZIRAPHALE!” he shouts at the glass, but this isn’t the right sort of spell for that. His angel can’t hear him. Neither can that bloody copycat bastard sitting at the other side of the table, acting like he has the right to be there in Crowley’s place. Like he has the right to wear Crowley’s skin and hair and clothing. He’s probably drinking coffee with too much sugar in it.*

Crowley growls at the glass, his breath emerging as a sibilant hiss. No. Not if he can help it.

He can fix this. He can.

Fuck ineffability. He will fix this.

Then he moans in distress and lets his head thump directly against the mirror. No, he can’t. Not by himself. He doesn’t even know where he is! All he knows is that isn’t his Aziraphale downstairs, and that isn’t himself in the bloody mirror. He’d asked it to show him Aziraphale. That’s how the stupid spell works. It doesn’t latch onto faces or names. It finds souls, and it did find him, in the wrong place, and—and—

“FUCK!” Crowley howls, breaking the mirror with his fist. The fracture disrupts the spell. The mirror steams over again, sigils and all fading away to foggy nothing.
For good measure, he kicks the cabinetry, the tub (Ow, fuck!), and the toilet tank, knocking it off onto the floor and making a complete mess. He punches a hole through the nearest wall.* Then he slumps down in front of the closed door.

* [48]

Think, you complete imbecile.

Crowley leans back, looking up at the ceiling. Point the first: he doesn’t know where he is, but it’s not London. Not his London, anyway. Point the second: that isn’t Aziraphale downstairs. Point the second-and-a-half: Aziraphale is still somewhere reachable, or that bit of mirror magic wouldn’t have worked. Point the third: there are inconsistencies in the shop, things returned that should still be gone. Point the fourth: that stupid drain pipe.

Point the fifth: his hand really bloody hurts.

Crowley heals his hand as he realizes that he broke a few bones whilst punching things. That leads him to a contemplation of swapping over to steel-toed boots, given that he broke a few toes, as well. Then he waves his hand, miracling the bathroom back to rights.

If that isn’t himself, and that isn’t Aziraphale downstairs, then who are those fucking doppelgangers? Where is his Aziraphale? Why could they fool him for hours or days or weeks, and then muck it up by getting all those details—

Those bloody details.

It isn’t just the shop. It’s the angel.

Aziraphale not only didn’t notice the racket, he didn’t come upstairs to ask why Crowley felt the need to destroy the bathroom. His angel would have asked straight away, possibly a bit horrified, even if it was an easy mess to fix.

This Aziraphale never notices anything Crowley does, not unless Crowley prods at him directly. Not unless there is an active conversation, some sort of back-and-forth, going on between them. Aziraphale all but ignores Crowley, continuing on with his reading, and with his new (creepy) project of writing in journals with biros he claims to like. He doesn’t speak to Crowley unless spoken to.

Why didn’t Crowley notice? Crowley didn’t have much else to pay attention to. He should have noticed the journal and the biros at once, even if the books escaped his notice. He can’t even figure out when Aziraphale’s behavior changed!

He has suspicions, of course. If this is some sort of punishment, or entrapment, it certainly isn’t Hell’s doing. They aren’t nearly as concerned with details as they should be, and they sure as Heaven wouldn’t have put Crowley into a situation that would have made him happy—at least until he noticed the faults, anyway.

Who wouldn’t have noticed that Aziraphale gave up on one of the things that used to define his existence several thousand years ago? Demons wouldn’t have seen the bookshop before the fire, but others would have. Aziraphale did have rude visitors right before the Apocalypse, after all. Who would have realized the importance of distracting Aziraphale with a fake bloody Crowley who couldn’t even get his blasted hair spiked properly?

Heaven, that’s who. This is Above’s doing, whatever this is. Crowley will bet his bloody car that it was the idea of some fucking daft angel.

Above and Below have never really paid attention to their agents on Earth. Not unless something
unpleasant needed to be done, like the time Below ordered Crowley to seduce Catherine the Great because Crowley was her “type.”

Oh, he really didn’t want to remember that, not right now. Not ever, actually. That had been… unpleasant. Unpleasant and sticky.*[49][50]

Above would definitely have paid attention to the smallest detail, and then gotten the most ridiculous things wrong. It’s a spotless track record, that habit of theirs, and they’re determined to keep at it.

Below wouldn’t have tried this sort of scenario in the first place. It wasn’t how the system worked. They would have given Crowley his worst fears on repeat and then televised it for the entertainment value, not tried to play him with a fake version of his angel.*[51]

Crowley rubs his face with both hands. He doesn’t know if Aziraphale is trapped in another almost-perfect recreation of London, or if they left Aziraphale in the real city and replaced a demon with a Crowley-appearing agent of Heaven.

No, idiot. Think of auras. It would have to be a demon volunteering for that sort of job, or Aziraphale would have noticed at once.

What else would Heaven and Hell do with an angel and a demon they couldn’t get rid of with hellfire and holy water? They would put them aside, distract them. Keep them from working together again. They would want to ensure there would be no more doing away with regularly scheduled Apocalypses.

Crowley lets his head thump back against the door several times. Above might have been smart enough to separate them, but it’s bloody inconvenient.

He really needs his angel right now. He doesn’t know how to fix this alone.

* * * * *

“Changed my mind,” Crowley says in a cheerful voice as he comes stomping back down the stairs. “Neighbor phoned my mobile to let me know that she’d only agreed to water my plants for a few days, not a fortnight.”

“How inconvenient that she make you be responsible,” Not-Aziraphale says with a smile, not looking up from the journal. The biro is scribbling away at speed, but somehow the printing still emerges as his angel’s precise handwriting. “You’ll be back, yes?” he asks, looking up. There is a bit of fearfulness in his eyes, as if Not-Aziraphale is really afraid that Crowley won’t come back.

Crowley manages a nod. “Yeah. Course I will.” *I might need to read half your bloody books, anyway.* “I’ll be back in a day or so, just in case sleep rages out of control.”

Not-Aziraphale snorts. “As long as it doesn’t rage itself into two centuries’ worth.”

*It was only one century,* Crowley thinks, annoyed.*[52] A particularly dull century, he’d told Aziraphale, but that was mostly an excuse. He hadn’t wanted the dreams to stop. “Oh, I doubt that will be a problem. So much to do, mischief to be up to, that sort of thing.”

Not-Aziraphale shakes his head. “Good evening, Crowley. I’ll see you soon.”
“Er. Yeah. Ciao.” Crowley slides his glasses out of his pocket, puts them on, and leaves the shop.

Saints and demons, he does not want to go back to his flat. That carpet stain still haunts him…but he has to. His next step needs to be performed away from prying eyes.

Can he even get away from prying eyes? Someone might literally be watching every move he makes.

Bugger. It really doesn’t matter. Even the illusion of privacy will be better than none at all. Not-Aziraphale could be an angel in disguise, a simulacrum, or even a fucking clone.*[53]

The Bentley is outside, right where he left it…yesterday? Day before? Bugger if he knows.

He forgot to remove the no-parking lines, and some ambitious copper clamped a lock onto the rear tyre. Crowley rolls his eyes, makes it go away, and gets in.

She doesn’t smell right. Of course she doesn’t. The only angel who’s ever been inside this car is Aziraphale. Instead of what has become a comfortable blend of aging leather, a hint of reptile, very expensive cologne, metal, wood, and Aziraphale’s scent, it only smells like plastic, leather, and vinyl. It’s the worst concentration of New Car Scent he’s ever encountered.*[54]

Idiots. It’s a 1926 Bentley. They weren’t using petroleum-based plastics in the 1920s. The only petrol-based plastic in this car is in the form of cassette tapes and their covers, and those are all shut up in the glovebox.

They’re supposed to be, anyway. Instead, they’re scattered all over the passenger seat.

Crowley puts the car in gear and scowls while fumbling around for one of the cassettes in question. How did he not notice the bloody plastic smell? He did maybe-drive this car yesterday.

Was the plastic smell in the car yesterday?

Shit! Shit, fuck, Heaven, Hell, and bollocks! He can’t remember.

He glances at the cassette while steering around a screaming woman with a pram—honestly, people, use the bloody crosswalk! That’s why Aziraphale suggested them in the first place!—and his scowl grows.

Who the Heaven is Ed Sheeran, and why is this cassette in his car?

He drops that one and picks up another while taking a shortcut up the walkway around a mailbox, ignoring the usual screaming. Katy Perry? He knows who that is, but is her music even available on cassette? His cassettes are still cassettes because he never bothered to update the radio and its cassette deck to a CD player. Didn’t seem worth the effort, and since everyone is now switching to digital, his laziness works in his favor.*[55]

The next one he digs up is by Adele. The one after that is One Republic. Shawn Mendes. Halsey. What did Above do, raid a Top 40 list and choose things at random? How hard would it have been to take a look into his real car to see the tapes scattered over the passenger seat?*[56]

“No Queen? No Sex Pistols? No bloody Handel?” Crowley rolls his eyes and shoves a cassette that’s labeled Panic! At the Disco into the Blaupunkt. “Bloody savages, the lot of you.”

At least this tape isn’t bad. Above must have only noted the album art said Pray For The Wicked and not looked further. “(Fuck a) Silver Lining” is growing on him.
“We’ve been falling
Falling
It’s like we fell to the top
I was born to cut a million
Cut my teeth and made a killing
Now I’m dodging
Dodging
Everything you think that I’m not
Archetype of television
Was lost in thought but held my vision.”

“Huh.” Crowley shrugs and pushes the pedal down towards the floor.*

A bit later, time enough to realize that Panic! At the Disco can stay in the car, he cuts across the cat’s eyes, makes a highly illegal U-turn, and parks the plastic-cursed Bentley in its usual spot in front of his flat. That looks correct and proper, at least.

Who is he kidding? Everything looked proper until the stupid drain pipe caught his eye. The first major fuck-up he’s encountered is the car.

Crowley gets out, walks away, turns back around, and snaps his fingers. By morning, she should smell like proper wood, metal, and aged leather again, if still lacking in Aziraphale and cologne.

He considers things for a moment before taking the stairs instead of the lift. If he’s being pranked (terrifyingly, effectively so), or there are demons still looking for him in this whatever-it-is, he doesn’t want to be trapped in a box with one. All out of holy water.

On the way over, he’d been a bit surprised when the whatsit allowed him this sort of freedom of travel, especially without bringing along Not-Aziraphale. Then again, it’s a creation of Heaven powered by bureaucracy. Of course it does. He could probably travel the entire planet. It might even create an illusion of his descent to Hell, if he felt like taking a walk Downstairs. Michael has been there, recently, and would know how to make it real if anyone asked.

No thanks. Even if it’s a fake Hell, Crowley still wants to avoid it whenever possible.*

He enters the flat cautiously, alert for traps, demons, angels, or even bloody butterflies. * Anything the slightest bit out of place that might be dangerous, rather than just being annoying.

His largely empty living room looks like a perfect replica, and smells correct. He ducks into the kitchen and checks every cabinet and drawer before opening the fridge, where he locates a chilled bottle of Baileys Chocolate Irish Cream and a box of chocolate truffles he’s been saving for the next time he needs a favor from Aziraphale. In short, the kitchen is exactly as it should be. That’s the problem with being a modern minimalist—not as many details to get wrong.*
There were angels in his flat. Crowley shudders. That is probably not any worse than Hastur and Ligur, but they all want to kill him, so he feels pretty justified in how much Do Not Want the thought generates.

He pushes open the door to the office he only keeps for dealing with the occasional human and looks down.

There is no stain in the carpet. No sign of Ligur’s melted corporation at all.

“Oh, come on!” Crowley shouts, utterly miffed. “I melted a fucking demon in my flat, and you couldn’t even get that right?”*

Then his heart seizes in terror. Maybe it never happened.

He nearly falls down when he finds the bucket that held the holy water. By tripping over it.

Crowley makes certain the bucket is dry, picks it up, and hugs it. Satan’s sake, his heart can’t take much more of this shit.

[40] The boiler is so used to this sort of nonsense that it gave up protesting forty years ago.

[41] In certain senses of the word. Portals would be more accurate. Opening doors sounds safe. Opening portals should be all the warning someone ever needs not to do it.

[42] They still do it anyway.

[43] He didn’t exactly like Alastor, anyway.

[44] Even he knows seven is safer, even if it doesn’t necessarily like him anymore.

[45] Probably. (Not really.)

[46] He might have been a bit more cautious if he’d known exactly how far Lucifer intended to go, but he doesn’t actually recall joining them. He just wanted to know why they had black wings. Why they were so unhappy.

[47] He blames Aziraphale for his sweet tooth. Bastard.

[48] Sometimes Crowley forgets that not everyone upgraded from the old plaster and lath to drywall. Drywall doesn’t punch back.

[49] He should have gone with the rumors of deviant behavior from the start. Those were much more effective.

[50] It is not his fault that people believe them. That would be like claiming fault for why humans can be so bloody stupid.

[51] He already thought his best friend was dead once this millennium. That scenario on repeat would quickly produce the most easily broken soul Hell ever crushed. He’s rather glad it’s notBelow who pulled this nonsense.

[52] He wouldn’t have wanted to see the results from the Plagues, anyway.

[53] Over the millennia, Crowley has observed that Above sometimes gets into some weird shit.
They’ll hear about an idea that filters its way up from Earth, and as Heaven retains the power of creation, try it out. The results are usually unwanted.

[54] New Car Scent is not his fault. It’s the sort of horror only a human could come up with.

[55] Convincing the Blaupunkt to become a digital receiver/MP3 player is probably not going to go over well with the Bentley. It is old and set in its ways, and those ways are cassettes and analog.

[56] The Bentley growled at the angel who tried to peer in the windows. Then the door handle scorched the angel for being rude. Crowley would be very proud.

[57] He’d suspect the tape really had been on purpose, especially considering “Say Amen (Saturday Night)”, but he started cackling halfway through “Hey Look Ma I Made It” so he chalks the first two up to coincidence.*

*He probably shouldn’t have.

[58] It’s not just the water. It’s the Everything. Also, Hastur is down there. Hastur doesn’t remain terrified for very long.

[59] Butterflies flap their wings and the world changes. Crowley has lived long enough to see the butterfly effect in action, thank you very much.

[60] They managed it anyway.

[61] They thought a melted demon’s remains might upset him. They were right, but for the wrong reasons. Angels aren’t very good at understanding demonic motivations unless it involved human souls.
Mirror, Mirror

Chapter Summary

What he needs now isn’t a mere window. He needs a door.

Crowley’s plants shiver at his approach, but not the way they usually do. He scratches his head, trying to figure out what he’s even dealing with.

Fuck it. He waters them all, mists the delicate ones with the proper sprayer, and skips his inspection of their leaves. They’re not his plants, anyway.*[62]

The bathroom mirror is the only mirror on a wall in his flat. Unlike the bathroom mirror at the bookshop, Crowley doesn’t need to worry about fogging it up with steam. This particular spell isn’t going to be temporary.*[63]

He uses a black Sharpie to begin circling the entire large square with the right sort of sigils. What he needs now isn’t a mere window. He needs a door.

He won’t get a door, not without potentially inviting in something that might eat him. This is merely the closest thing he knows how to make. It won’t give him a way out, but it will make him heard.

It will give him sound.

Crowley tosses the Sharpie behind him to clatter on the tile and takes off his glasses. He studies each and every sigil around the mirror, lingering for long, impatient moments until he’s certain they’re correct. He can’t afford to get it wrong. He’s a bit bloody terrified that he’ll get it wrong, anyway.

Crowley never really stopped talking to his Creator; he just doesn’t tell anyone about it. No one appreciates a praying demon—not other demons, and certainly not angels. She is probably not much fond of it either, but he hasn’t been struck by holy fire yet. *[64][65][66]

“Please, God, let nothing come through this stupid mirror and eat me.” Crowley takes a breath. “Aziraphale. Aziraphale. Aziraphale.”

The sigils, much more complicated than the simple viewing spell he made earlier, light up with a fiery glow. Crowley eyes them, disconcerted. That still isn’t hellfire, but as long as the spell works, he ultimately doesn’t care. He’ll tell Aziraphale about it later. Because he is going to be talking to his angel. He will. He will accept nothing less.

The image clears and becomes a view of the street in Soho, centered upon Aziraphale. He’s walking back to the bookshop, the café outing done with. Crowley can hear muted London traffic, as if it’s coming from far away. The false bastard Crowley—Crowley is rather starting to hate Not-Crowley—is strolling down the walkway with the angel at his side, as if he has every right to be there.

Go away, Crowley thinks, glaring at Not-Crowley. Go away. Find something else to do. Go muck about with the M25 and turn it into another diabolical disaster or something.*[67] Just leave already!

Maybe Someone is listening, or it’s just stupid luck, but the false Crowley hops into the same
Bentley parked in front of Crowley’s flat and drives away at a speed that is far too slow. That should have been a blatant hint, but by Heaven, it took Crowley noticing a bloody drain pipe for him to cotton on that something might be a bit off.

Crowley turns his attention to the Aziraphale in the mirror, who is watching the Bentley depart. Then he pushes open the door to Ezra Fell’s Used Books and closes it behind him. The mirror switches to an interior view of the bookshop, following along. Crowley remembers to keep breathing, glad the spell is doing exactly what he told it to do.

The closed sign in the shop window remains firmly in place. Aziraphale locks his doors, tugs the blinds a little further down for good measure, and turns away from the door.

Crowley swallows. Aziraphale has a thoughtful look on his face, as if he’s dwelling on something he isn’t certain of. His angel is dressed in his favorite camel jacket and tartan that is a bit too mindful of a sofa. Then he doffs his jacket to reveal a very nice white shirt hiding beneath the jumper. Tartan aside, at least Aziraphale has always known how to dress appropriately.

He hasn’t necessarily known when to dress appropriately, but Aziraphale does understand style. Sort of. He usually lags about fifty years behind, but Crowley got used to that sort of thing a long time ago.*[68]

Both Aziraphale’s jumper and shirt are a bit rumpled. Aziraphale’s curly hair is mussed up to match. Already, he looks more like Aziraphale than that imposter Crowley left behind in Soho.

Crowley’s gut clenches in fear that he won’t be heard. Do it now. Do it before you’re too afraid to say a bloody word. “Aziraphale!”

Aziraphale spins around at once, a smile blooming on his face, before he realizes that the door is firmly shut, that Not-Crowley hasn’t come striding back into the shop. “Must be imagining things,” he says with a faint chuckle.

“Oh, fuck, angel, you’re really not,” Crowley says in desperation.

Aziraphale turns right back around, peering around the bookshop. “Now, look: I just saw you leave. Whatever you’re up to, it’s not very funny.”

Crowley lets out a wavering, unhappy laugh. “Aziraphale, I’m currently a bit terrified, so maybe save the accusations of temptation and mischief for later, yeah?”

“Terrified? But—” Aziraphale breaks off whatever he was going to say. “Crowley, what’s the matter? Why can’t I see you?” He pauses. “You didn’t go and get yourself discorporated, did you? I’ve warned you about your driving!”

“No! I’m not…” Crowley hesitates. “Okay, I’m almost certain I’m not discorporated. I’m just… somewhere else. You might be, too.”

Aziraphale’s expression twists in faint humor. “I’m in my bookshop, Crowley. Or can you not see that?”

“I can see you just fine.” Crowley tries to sound a bit less wobbly. “I’m using a mirror spell—”

“ANTHONY J. CROWLEY, THAT IS EXCEPTIONALLY DANGEROUS!”

Crowley winces. Aziraphale’s voice is coming through loud and clear. Very loud. His ears might never be the same. “Angel, I know what I’m doing. No, scratch that, no pun intended. I know what
I’m doing up to a certain point. After that, I don’t… I don’t know what to do. All I can tell you is the bastard who just drove off in my car? That is most certainly not me!"

“All right. Let’s say I believe you.” Aziraphale also sounds much more like himself than the bloody Not-Aziraphale that Crowley left behind in Soho, fussy and determined. “Is there any way to see you? This talking into thin air thing is a bit odd.”

“You’re a bloody angel!”

“And I keep my thoughts and prayers to myself, thank you very much,” Aziraphale retorts primly.

“Right. Uh, do you still have Magical Doorways and Keys? Second volume, I think. The one written by Below that wandered its way topside.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I suppose—well. I’m not certain that Adam would have known to keep that.” Aziraphale wrings his hands together a bit fretfully. He does that every time he’s reminded of his lost books, even if he appreciates having the shop back. When they paid Lower Tadfield a brief visit last month, Aziraphale had thanked Adam profusely while trying not to let on that he’d like to shake the Anti-Christ up a bit and beg him to spit out the rest of his missing books.

No, his angel had done that. Not-Aziraphale hasn’t been fretting over much of anything. Crowley tries not to groan in frustration. He’s a bloody unobservant idiot.

“I mean, there are an awful lot of replaced books…”

Crowley huffs out a laugh that sounds far too close to despairing. “Angel, if they’ve fucked up the same way for you that they did for me here, I’ll bet you a quid that it’s exactly where you remember it being.”

“But where is here?” Aziraphale asks, but he’s already searching among the stacks, running his finger along book spines as he searches for Magical Doorways.

“I’d be a lot less terrified if I knew, believe me,” Crowley answers. “The places I’ve been today look like your bookshop, and Soho, and London, and my flat in Mayfield—which is where I am now—but they got things wrong.”

Aziraphale frowns as he continues searching. “What things did they get wrong?”

Crowley feels suspicion curl up in his gut. “You already suspected something. Didn’t you?”

“Mm,” Aziraphale says, a sound that could be agreement, or it could be indigestion from the new café’s terrible scones.*[69]  “Well, Crowley?”

“Just find the book,” Crowley begs. He doesn’t know how to describe the sigils if the book isn’t there. “We can compare notes after you find it.”

“Who are this mysterious they you keep—” Aziraphale’s eyes widen as he pulls a book from the shelf. “Oh, good heavens. Tamerlane and Other Poems? I thought I’d lost that one!”

“You did lose that one, Zira! Focus!” Crowley resists the urge to pound on the mirror with both fists. “Magical bloody Keys!”

“Yes, yes, yes. Fine.” Aziraphale tucks Tamerlane beneath his arm and continues the search. “Ah. Here we are. Three hundred years, and it still has a bit of a bite to it.”
“Sorry,” Crowley says, yet again. He’d copied that one out from the original, just for Aziraphale, so that it would be safe for an angel to handle…but he was still a demon, one who’d been copying a book chained to a shelf in Hell.*[70]

The fact that Magical Keys keeps biting Aziraphale might not even be Crowley’s doing any longer. It might be Above’s stupid replication job.

“No, no. That’s all right, dear,” Aziraphale murmurs as he takes both books to his usual table. The sound of the annoying endearment makes Crowley’s stupid heart feel lighter. “I remember they were gone. Tamerlane was replaced by Rudyard Kipling.”

“A signed copy, yeah. I remember it, too. Magical Keys was definitely gone, because every book from Hell was gone along with it.”

Aziraphale nods and opens up Magical Keys, gently turning each page. “Where do you suggest I begin?”

“I don’t recall the page number. I memorized it so I wouldn’t need the book, since I did the sensible thing and gave it to you.” Aziraphale smiles at the compliment while Crowley wracks his brain. “Forget page numbers. Try descriptions. You’re looking for a spell that talks about windows to the soul. It’s meant for finding souls, but demons like to be cryptic. Worse than bloody angels that way. The spell should be accompanied by an illustration of a mirror. There would be forty-nine sigils going all the way around the mirror, and each one touches the other. No gapping. The sigils are taken from one of the Holy tongues, but they’re not letters any longer.”*[71]

Aziraphale keeps turning pages. “It should work for me, then? No need to paint the sigils in blood or anything, is there? No need to be Fallen?”

“I used a Sharpie marker on my bathroom mirror, angel,” Crowley says dryly, feeling a bit heartened when Aziraphale smiles again. “No, you don’t have to be Fallen. It’s dangerous magic, but it’s not actually demonic. I think it was demoted to Hell because doing it wrong gets people eaten.”

“That sounds like a sensible reason to me.”

Crowley nods, even if Aziraphale can’t see it. “Yeah. Me, too.”*[72]

“I think I’ve found it,” Aziraphale tells him a few minutes later. “Corruption of the old languages is so annoying. Window to the soul, indeed,” he mutters. “Except…it does seem to be exactly that. This spell will find the soul you’re asking for, and no one else.”

“It helps to have a unique name,” Crowley supplies. “Imagine if there was more than one Aziraphale. Then you have to figure out how to be more specific. I’d be asking for Aziraphale, the angel who gave away a burning sword at Eden’s eastern gate.”

“I doubt there is more than one of those.” Aziraphale continues reading. “Whereas in your case, I think I should be that specific and more.*[73]*[74] Crowley, this says it’s a permanent spell. The only way to turn it off is to break the mirror.”

“Yes.”

“Bother.” Aziraphale lifts a dry quill—Crowley’s stomach unknots out of sheer relief to see it—and tucks it into the proper spot of the book to mark his place. “I’ll need to use the one in the back room. The bathroom would be inconvenient, and the one out here would most certainly attract attention. Does this spell—”
“It follows you,” Crowley interrupts. “All the time. Otherwise I’d still be staring at a Soho walkway instead of you.”

“All the time?” Aziraphale turns pink. “Er. Isn’t that…excessive? I mean…privacy…and…”

Crowley grins in bemusement. “If you tell me to bugger off for a few hours, I’ll bugger off for a few hours.” Why on earth would Aziraphale need—

No, he isn’t finishing that thought. He really does get them both into enough trouble as it is.

“I’ll be granting you the same courtesy.” The view on the mirror switches to the back room, with its comfortable furniture, clutter, and a bottle of wine that Crowley desperately wants to drink dry, refill, and repeat.

Aziraphale is murmuring under his breath as he reads the sigils surrounding the mirror illustration. “This is quite complicated, a blend of languages, certain indicators…yes, I see how this works now. Oh, dear. Anyone could use this, Crowley. Even a human.”

“Why do you think our respective Home Offices are in agreement about leaving mirror magic alone?”

“Right, yes.” Aziraphale digs around and comes up with the white paint marker he uses to update the bookshop’s hours on the door. He begins to slowly copy each glyph onto an antique mirror that’s been hanging on the wall since the shop opened.

Crowley bites at his own hands so he won’t scream with impatience. It took time to replicate the spell here, too, and he’s used it before. He doesn’t want his angel to be eaten by something Other.

Aziraphale pauses before he writes in the last glyph. “I’m almost certain a variant here would be safe.”

“A variant?” Crowley nearly slams full-body into the mirror in alarm. “Aziraphale, that’s a terrible idea!”

“Actually…not for this one. I don’t think so, anyway. I believe I can attach this mirror to yours with a bit of the old tongue.”

Crowley rubs at his sore nose. “So, like a video call.”

“Like on a mobile? Then yes, I suppose it is rather like that.” Aziraphale considers the final glyph at the top of the mirror and then writes in something completely different than what the spell calls for.

“You’ve never used Skype* [75] before in your life.” Crowley is still trying to interpret the different sigil—his name is involved somehow—when the view changes.

He’s suddenly facing Aziraphale, who looks pleasantly surprised to find that it worked. “Oh, thank—thank Somebody,” Crowley whispers. “Somewhere. Whoever. Thank them.”

Aziraphale is beaming at his accomplishment. “That did work rather nicely, yes.” He sets the book down with his usual care, drops the paint marker in a drawer, and turns to face Crowley again.

“Mind you, I’m still not convinced this isn’t an elaborate prank, or one of your games meant to encourage me to mess about with your sort of mischief.”

Crowley stares at him in disbelief. “What?”
“Crowley.” Aziraphale sighs. “You started talking to me through this mirror spell of yours just after the Bentley left. Of course I’m going to think it’s you trying to pull a fast one.”

Crowley blinks a few times. “Angel, no matter how fast I’m driving in London, I can’t get back to my bloody flat that quickly!”* [76]

“Fair point,” Aziraphale admits, and then peers closer. “You’re wearing different clothes.”

“Sure am.” Because it wasn’t me, he doesn’t say aloud.

“And your hair is…well, much more like your usual than what I saw earlier.”

Crowley nods. “That, too.”

“And you’re not wearing your glasses,” Aziraphale notes.

Crowley hurriedly slaps his hands to his face and realizes, too late, that Aziraphale is right. Aziraphale doesn’t mind Crowley’s eyes, but Crowley doesn’t really like to let his guard down unless alcohol is involved. “I—it’s habit,” he says, staring down at the sink. He only takes them off when sober if he’s alone.

Aziraphale must have been thinking the same. “I usually only see you without your glasses with alcoholic intervention.” When Crowley glances up, Aziraphale looks saddened by that. Then his eyes narrow. “Come to think of it, I’ve not seen you take off your glasses for days now, and you got absolutely soused last night!”

“I did not!” Crowley protests automatically. “I was out gluing bloody coins to the walk because Adam said no messing about with people,*[77] but he didn’t say no to pranks, and I’ve been so bored, Zira!” Then he stops to breathe. He doesn’t need to breathe, but panic certainly pushes a corporation’s buttons on that front. “Been a bit less bored since I realized that I might be in a really well-designed prison cell, though.”

Aziraphale’s lips press into a thin line. “Hmm.”

“Hmm?” Crowley glares at him. “What does hmm mean?”

“It’s a human sound indicating the processing of a thought,” Aziraphale retorts. “Hush for a moment. I’m thinking.”

Crowley huffs and turns away from the mirror. “Right, right. Think away, then.” He sits down on the closed lid to the commode and tries to remember if he knows how to turn a direct doorway like this into a real doorway. Probably not. He never needed one.

He really didn’t want to take that chance on being an Other Something’s lunch.

“Things…haven’t seemed right,” Aziraphale finally says. Crowley lifts his head to find that his angel has stepped closer to the mirror, so his face is clear. His eyes are very large, and very, very blue.

I remember that color, Crowley thinks, which is an utter nonsense thought, because of course he does. He’s seen Aziraphale’s face often over the last six thousand years.

“I mean, you were you,” Aziraphale continues, sounding fretful. “You were acting like you, but it—I thought you were upset over the hellfire and holy water bit, still, and were playing it off like you were fine so I wouldn’t worry, or ask you about it.”
“Well, I’ve done that, too,” Crowley admits, scratching the back of his neck. “Not for the reasons you might think, but…I did.”* [78]

“What I’m trying to say is that I realize, ridiculously too late, that I wasn’t dealing with Crowley Avoiding His Feelings,” Aziraphale says, amused. “This was someone going through the motions. Your clothes were the same. You spoke the same way. Your aura felt similar enough, if a bit restrained, maybe. But all of it…it’s a sham, isn’t it? A flimflam.”

Crowley snorts. “A flimflam?”

“It’s a perfectly acceptable term,” Aziraphale returns stiffly. “And that—that is exactly what I mean.”

“What? What do you mean?” Crowley asks.

“I would say things like flimflam, and you wouldn’t…you would just…” Aziraphale looks outright distressed. “You acted like it was normal. You didn’t tease me about being trapped in the wrong century, not at all, and I didn’t even notice. I realized just now how you were driving, and how I could simply ignore such a thing is so unfathomable! How did you realize that I wasn’t myself, Crowley?”

“You were using a fucking biro and recording the history of the Not-Apocalypse,” Crowley says, wondering how much of Aziraphale’s not-noticing might be…wishful thinking.

Aziraphale straightens bolt-upright out of sheer outrage. “Writing a book, a record—I would never—not since Alexandria—what the fuck, Crowley?”

Crowley smiles. His angel resorting to swearing is always a bit fun. “You’ll laugh. That’s not what got my attention, not at first.”

“Oh?”

“It was the plumbing,” Crowley admits, feeling his cheeks burn with embarrassment.

“The plumbing.” Aziraphale starts to chuckle. “Dear me. What about the plumbing?”

“It was bloody plastic!” Crowley yells, throwing his arms up in the air. “The drain in the shower was plastic, not the old cast iron. I thought at first maybe Adam had gotten it wrong, and your bloody Biro Doppelganger suggested the same, but then I found books that you’d grieved over, angel. Then you told me you were writing out our recent history, and looked at me like I was bonkers for suggesting you’d ever stopped!”

Aziraphale shakes his head. “I’m such a fool. I asked after your plants. I suppose I was wondering if Adam had put them to rights properly. You said they were fine, but too healthy—that you’d have to speed up the job of scaring them into dying so you could get on with the next batch.”

Crowley’s jaw drops. “If I ever figure out how to get over there, I’m killing him. I don’t care if he’s real or some bit of holy programming. I’m making him dead—how did you not realize that wasn’t me?”

“Because—because—” Aziraphale abruptly looks ashamed.

“Because I’m a demon,” Crowley finishes quietly. “It’s all right, angel. I understand.”

“No.” Aziraphale is still miserable. “I don’t think any of it is all right in the slightest.”
Neither of them sleep for a very long time after that. Not that Aziraphale is in the habit of sleeping, but Crowley is starting to feel knackered by dawn of the second day after the drain pipe revelation. They talk through the kidnapping, their respective pending executions by holy water and hellfire. Both Aziraphale and Crowley are certain that actually happened, that Heaven and Hell sent them away, and the two of them swapped back into their respective bodies.* [79] Then they discuss the differences from what Adam recreated and what they find themselves in now. Aziraphale, after wandering off for a bit to explore the shelves, is all but convinced that the books in the shop are all exactly the way they should be. “Heaven does keep track of where the books are, you know,” he explains. “It’s part of the Librarian’s job. The record would exist before the Not-Apocalypse. They would just need to reference it to know how to populate the shelves.”

“Why skip out on the Apocalypse, though?” Crowley asks. “I mean, that’s a tip-off, right there.” Aziraphale purses his lips. “Dear Crowley: given what I’ve seen and experienced from my Head Office in the past few years, I think they might honestly be stupid enough to be convinced that we’re too daft to figure out the blatantly obvious.”

Crowley tries not to grimace. “Yeah, same problem. They just…weren’t they smarter? Before the war?” Aziraphale frowns. “You don’t recall?” Crowley shakes his head. “No. No, I—”

*God, it hurt. Father, why?*

Crowley swallows. “Light speed fall into a pool of boiling sulfur. I don’t think I wanted to remember, not after that.”

“Crowley.” Aziraphale rests his fingertips on his side of the mirror. “I’m so sorry.”

Crowley shakes his head. “I’m better off as a demon, angel. At least I have free will and a brain in my head, even if it’s not the sort that’s sharp as a tack.”

“Don’t denigrate your own intelligence. You were smart enough to recognize that the Apocalypse was a terrible idea even when I was willing to give up and go along with it.” Aziraphale hesitates. “You were willing to question heavenly genocide while I just…watched it happen. I know books, Crowley, but I don’t…I’m not brave. Not like you.”

“Pfft. Brave, he says.” Crowley rolls his eyes up at his bathroom ceiling. The leftover spots of water damage from the flat above his, caused by a briefly leaking pipe, are missing. “I’m really not. Besides, look what being brave got me?” He spreads his arms. “Cast out of Heaven, sent to do Hell’s dirty work while they sat down there on their collective arses, waiting for another chance at war!”

“Brave enough to take a little boy’s hand, tell him that whatever happened, it was his choice, and you’d support it,” Aziraphale says. “Brave enough to wave a tyre iron at Lucifer.”

Crowley snorts. “At least you had a flaming sword.”

The most irritating thing is that they can’t recall a single event after the successful switch that might be a clue as to how they ended up in two separate and realistic maybe-cages with doppelgangers running about. Most of the people they’ve encountered are so close to being themselves that it’s quite easy to believe they’re real. Even Anathema, when Aziraphale phones her and puts the call on speaker, doesn’t quite sound like herself.
“Heaven or Hellish entrapment?” she says, sounding distracted. “Hmm. No. That’s not my forte. Wrong religion. Who did you say you were again?”

Aziraphale hangs up the rather simple mobile that Crowley finally convinced him to invest in. “Well. That discouraging.”

“That was weird,” Crowley counters. If this really was a pre-Apocalypse situation, it wouldn’t be by much, and Crowley hit that woman with his car. That isn’t the sort of thing you forgive and entirely forget in the span of a few weeks.

“I really should have noticed,” Aziraphale claims for the fifth time, rubbing at his hair. It’s starting to be quite mussed from nervous gestures. “That false Aziraphale’s mistake was the writing, but the more I think on it, the more I realize that you really weren’t acting like you.”

Crowley suddenly sits up and looks full on at the mirror again. “Stop eating the food.”

Aziraphale glances up at him, startled. “Stop what?”

“The food. The water. The wine. All of it. Don’t drink or eat any of it.”

Aziraphale looks as if Crowley just suggested they go live on the moon.*[80] “Why?”

“I just realized that when I was looking at the drain pipe, I hadn’t eaten in several days. We don’t need to eat or drink; we just like to.” Crowley scrubs at his hair and realizes his is now just as mussed as Aziraphale’s, if not utterly worse. “I couldn’t convince Not-You to leave the bookshop for a meal, since you claimed you were busy, and I wasn’t in the mood to go out on my own. So I just didn’t. I’ve only had one meal and a bit of wine since we did the Ritz.”

“You think the food is…what, poisoned?”

“I think maybe it’s a bit more like eating the fairy food under the hill,” Crowley replies. “It’s beautiful and tastes wonderful, but it’s only meant to keep you about, wanting more of the same.”

“Things are so perfect that you don’t notice the imperfections at all.” Aziraphale bites his lip. “I’m glad I skipped out on that terrible scone, then. I still don’t—I’m a bit worried that we’ve become so paranoid that we’re making a mountain out of a child’s molehill.”

“Let’s experiment,” Crowley decides, standing up. He has to change the subject to something more hopeful, or he’s going to start screaming. “The sigil you altered shouldn’t have changed the mirror’s ability to follow me, so let’s see if it does.” He walks out of the bathroom and into the kitchen, picking up his discarded sunglasses before dropping them back down on the counter.

He goes back to the mirror. “What did you see?”

“I saw you in a very cheerless kitchen, picking up your sunglasses before discarding them,” Aziraphale reports, looking surprised and pleased. “It followed you!”

“Good. Now you wander off for a moment. I want to make certain my side works, too.”

Aziraphale nods and vanishes. The mirror immediately switches to a view of Aziraphale going up the stairwell, then coming back down and rushing to return to the mirror. “Well?”

“Climbed the stairs and down them.” Crowley sighs. “All right. Last test. I’m going to get in the Bentley and drive to the bookshop. I’ll go inside and go straight to the mirror you’re using right now. If we bump into each other, then we’re both paranoid nutters who need a vacation. If we don’t…”
“I hope you don’t mind if I pray that you find me,” Aziraphale murmurs. “Because if you don’t…”

Crowley grimaces. “Let’s just…not. Do the praying. I mean, yes, do the praying bit. Maybe She’ll listen to you. Gehenna knows she never seems to listen to me—”

No. That wasn’t quite fair. When Crowley was mostly out of his mind with grief in a pub, she gave him Aziraphale.*[81] Incorporeal, yes, but not dead. That bit of hope was enough for Crowley to pull himself together, and then to literally hold a flaming car together long enough to reach Lower Tadfield’s American air base.

Maybe Aziraphale wasn’t wrong about the difference between the Great Plan and the Ineffable Plan, after all. Not that it makes Crowley any less angry. Getting Crowley to Lower Tadfield served to stop the Apocalypse. It wasn’t something She did for Crowley’s sake alone.

He learned that lesson a long time ago.

Aziraphale doesn’t judge Crowley’s sputtering silence; he only offers Crowley one of his gentle smiles. “I understand, dear.”

Crowley tries not to choke up. Fuck, but he’s not having a good day in the emotional control department. “Twenty minutes.” He thinks about the traffic. “Twenty-five, tops.”

“I won’t move from this spot,” Aziraphale promises.

* * *

Aziraphale isn’t in the back room of the bookshop. Not-Aziraphale left him a note saying he’d stepped out for breakfast and was just down the street at that cute café which just opened, and if Crowley came back at the right time, he was welcome to join him.

Crowley lingers for a moment next to the open journal—its current place marked with a scrap of what looks like a burnt bit of one of Agnes’s prophecies—and the biros. He wants Aziraphale to see the complete lack of quills and ink pots, and the bloody accusatory words in that journal.

He does it because Aziraphale isn’t here. His angel is on the other side of a mirror, somewhere else, out of reach.

Crowley gives in and screams, swearing in languages that died before the rise of the Roman Empire.

[62] He still won’t let them die. He just won’t be bothering with the terror part, given that he currently has Other Things To Worry About. Granted, that can always change.

[63] Mirrors are cheap and expendable.

[64] Much like an angel, God’s gender is subjective. Crowley was fine with saying God or Father until he realized around about 1992 that he was trying not to drown in a sea of misogyny. There are some things even a demon gets tired of, so he decided to switch things up a bit. Aziraphale blinked once regarding the change and then followed suit without a word spoken.

[65] Lightning, however, is an entirely different story. It was also not God’s doing. Crowley got
entirely pissed one evening and wanted to know how lightning rods worked.

[66] Very effectively, it turns out.

[67] Not that the M25 needs the help.

[68] Sometimes getting used to that lag also meant giving Aziraphale the occasional nudge about how not switching up his wardrobe right now might get him burnt at the stake, but the angel always appreciated the advice. Discorporation is unpleasant. Discorporation by fire is very unpleasant.

[69] Crowley suspects Intervention, but honestly wouldn’t know which side to blame.

[70] “What are you doing with that book?” “Stealing it.” “Carry on, then.” Sometimes it was rather easy to get things done in Hell.

[71] Prime numbers have fascinated Crowley since prime numbers were invented, around about time the universe was invented. They are, much like himself, distinctly themselves…and much like humans, there are a lot of prime numbers who are distinctly themselves.

[72] It was less a demotion and more the recognition on all sides that demons have the strongest inclination for self-preservation.

[73] Aleister Crowley ruined everything, in Crowley’s opinion. Or at least the bastard finished the ruination of his name.

[74] Crowley is Gaelic for “Descendent of the Hard Hero” or “Descendant of the Hardy Warrior.” Crowley himself has no bloody idea how the Gaeils got that idea into their heads.

[75] Entirely human invention. It certainly outdid Googling yourself.

[76] He really tried. He tried so hard to beat Google’s proclaimed twenty minutes at peak hours. Even in the middle of the night, he can’t exactly drive his car through the buildings that are in the way to hit the also-claimed five minute mark.

[77] He is not taking chances with the actual Anti-Christ, even if the Anti-Christ in question seems, by and large, to be quite the decent bloke of a kid. Aziraphale, similarly affected, has been doing his best to not present humans with blatantly obvious miracles.

[78] He’d been all right with Adam’s idea of everyone mostly-forgetting the inconvenience of the Not-Apocalypse until Above and Below decided to stick their noses into things again.

[79] This event is unique (and very fitting) to the recent “Good Omens” mini-series. Please watch that amazing work of satirical art.

[80] He wouldn’t. Alpha Centauri is much nicer.

[81] I mean if you’re facing an Apocalypse alone, rip-roaring drunk, then talking (or yelling) at your Creator isn’t really that out-of-place.
“Demons don’t handle fear very well.”

“And yet you are handling your fear of me quite well.”

Not as many fun footnotes in this chapter. The characters were too busy Happening. Also, song is from Barns Courtney, that wonderful English bastard.

See the Notes at the End for a content warning.

“So…captured, do you think?” Crowley asks the bathroom mirror when he gets back to the flat. Frustration is familiar to him, but despondency…yeah, he had enough of that feeling when Aziraphale’s bookshop burned on Not-Apocalypse Day. He didn’t want it back.

Aziraphale nods, looking far more concerned now that he’s seen the other bookshop and its damning —hah!—evidence. “Captured, or we stumbled onto some other sort of trap. Perhaps if we narrow down a potential timeframe, we’ll know more.”

“After the Apocalypse.” Crowley hops up onto the countertop to sit closer to the mirror.

“Captured would make sense, if they feared what an angel immune to hellfire and a demon immune to holy water might get up to,” Aziraphale agrees with a faint nod. “If you can’t defeat them, tuck them some place out of the way.”

“They tucked us both out of the way six thousand years ago,” Crowley says bitterly. “Above and Below don’t even bloody come to Earth that often. We were already out of their way!”

“Yes, on the same planet as the Anti-Christ who refused to be the Anti-Christ,” Aziraphale points out.

“Fuck your immaculate logic.” Crowley sighs and thumps his head against the mirror. He wants to go home, but home isn’t this flat. It’s not Heaven, nor Hell, or even the bookshop.

Home is Aziraphale.

Bollocks, what a miserable time to have that particular revelation.*[82]

“Crowley.” Aziraphale waits until Crowley looks at him. Aziraphale gives him an encouraging smile. “We’re not about to give up. They gave me a copy of the bookshop before it burnt, you know, and I suspect you have the same thing.”
“Maybe.” Crowley hasn’t checked every shelf, not yet, but when he took a quick wander about the shop while Not-Aziraphale was absent, it did seem more like the old place.

“Crowley, that means that whatever this is, or whoever put us here? They left us with practically every book we’ll ever need to figure out how to get out,” Aziraphale emphasizes. “We can fix this.”

Crowley rubs eyes that are beginning to feel like sandpaper. Maybe it’s because he’s a serpent, and that’s why his body likes sleep so much. Or perhaps he’s just spoiled. “I—” His voice cracks with exhaustion in the middle of the first syllable. He never did get that week of sleep he wanted, what with paranoia and a kidnapping, and then staying at the bookshop with Aziraphale, and now… whatever this is. “I need to sssleep for a bit, angel. I can’t…I’m done in.”

“You haven’t really slept since the world nearly ended.” Aziraphale makes a shooing motion with his hands. “Go on. Go off and rest. I’ll keep an ear out for you while you sleep using the mirror, just in case. In the meantime, I’m going to get started on my research. Perhaps by morning, I’ll have more for us to go on.”

Crowley glances at his watch. “Angel, it is morning.”

Aziraphale looks around and glances behind him. “Oh! Well. So it is. This evening, then?”

Crowley nods. “Something like that. Or the next morning. I’m…”

He freezes before he can stand up. The idea of sleep is suddenly terrifying. “What if I forget? What if whatever isss going on bloody whammiesss you in your ssssleep, and I wake up and I don’t remember a thing about drainsss and doppelgangersss that need to die?”

Aziraphale raises an eyebrow. “Crowley. You turned your bathroom mirror into a permanent spirit window.”

“Oh. Right. That’sss an excellent point.” Crowley gets up and turns away, ready to brave the short hall and drop down onto his beloved bed. “Be careful, all right? If the other me sshowsss up, act… normal, I sssuppose. Give him a challenge the pre-Adam me would have jumped at. You know what sssort of nonsssensse I like.”

“I do, yes. Sleep well, Crowley.”

Crowley gives Aziraphale a half-hearted wave and trudges out of the bathroom. He spares a moment of hellish gratitude for his bedroom’s blackout curtains before dropping facedown into bed fully dressed. He falls asleep just after he snaps his fingers to turn off the lights.

* * * * *

It’s the first time he’s had a chance to be in his own bed since the aversion of the Apocalypse, and also the aversion of being boiled away in holy water. He sleeps.

He dreams.

He regrets that immediately.

“I don’t understand!” he heard himself shouting. It sounded like his voice was coming from far
away. Something was holding his arms up and back, making his chest hurt, making it hard to breathe. His wings were restrained as if by magic; he could feel no touch, but they wouldn’t move. “Why are you doing this?”

An angel stopped in front of him. He didn’t know the angel’s face, but yes—yes, he did. The angel merely had a new face, one twisted in anger.

Rage.

“Why are you angry?” he whispered. Before, he was confused. Now, he was afraid.

“Because you betrayed us!” the angel with the new face roared. A lock of sleek black hair fell forward to mar the perfect line of dark brows and eyes.

“But—I didn’t! I did nothing!”

“Oh?” The angry angel pointed to another angel standing a few paces away. She had brown hair, dark eyes, a beautiful face, and appeared to be female.

No. Not female. The shape was female, but the eyes were male. Gender didn’t mean much to angels, but the new shape was…well, it was very different from his old one.

“What happened?” he gasped.

She/he glared at him. “You happened, traitor! You bit me!”

“I—” He had been a serpent. The fields were easier to crawl through that way, so that he could continue his hunt in safety without being struck down. “You meant to crush my skull beneath your boot!” he protested as the memory of shining silver coming down upon him returned.

“You were attacking me!” the female-male angel shouted in fury. “You proved so by biting me. I needed a new corporation afterwards, and this—” Male-Female angel gestured to their own body. “This was all that was left.”

“But…” That wasn’t how it worked. It was easy to create new bodies. Have they not needed to do so already, thanks to the Morningstar’s war?

“The first of us wears the body of my friend!” the angry angel yelled. “And my friend’s soul is destroyed, gone forever!”

He gasped again, feeling the words like a physical pain. “That isn’t possible.”

“It is, because it happened, and therefore it exists!” The angry angel paced back and forth in front of him. “The others are all gone. All gone now, cast down from our home. The only one left…is you.”

“I don’t understand.” He didn’t, but he was beginning to. He saw wings snapping, angels falling. Black wings. Burning wings. Screams of agony.

No. No, please. Please, Father. Don’t let them do this to me.

“You are a traitor of Heaven, and a traitor to the love of our Father,” the angry one said. His own words seemed to calm him. “You will be cast down. You will fall to Gehenna, and there you will remain with your brethren.”
Cast from Heaven. All right. Perhaps while he was in Gehenna, he could help those whose wings had burned. No angel should have lost their wings in such a way.

Then the angry one marched forward and took his wing in his grasp. The next moment was pain.

He screamed, vision whiting out, feeling as if he couldn’t breathe. His wing was afire, but no flames consumed it. Oh, Father, it burned.

Then the next bone was snapped, and he screamed again.

The angry one was methodical. He broke each of the major bones of his wings, one at a time. Each break of bone was echoed by the shattering of his heart.


His left wing was not merely broken, but crippled. He wouldn’t be able to fly. He will fall.

“WHY?” he shouted again, shaking with pain and terror. “WHY DO YOU DO THIS TO ME?”

The angry angel captured his face in both hands. His touch reflected remembered love. “Because Heaven will have vengeance on those who have betrayed Her.”

The phalanx of his right wing snapped next, both bones grinding together. He didn’t have enough breath left to scream.

He was still so very frightened, but beneath that, there was now something new. It grew in the darkness overtaking his heart.

Rage bloomed with the slow unfurling of a delicate flower.

He glared at the one who had been his dear friend. He had no eyes for the one who lost his body. Only the wing-breaker mattered, the one who thought nothing of pain and everything of revenge.

“No more,” he whispered. Then he was the serpent, and he was free.

Crowley jolted awake, heart pounding in his chest. His face was wet. His clothes were stuck to him, plastered with sweat. He was still whispering denial under his breath, sadness and rage, so much hate —

Someone pounded on the door to his flat. Crowley took a breath and let his head fall forward. “Go away.”

The pounding resumed. Crowley opened his eyes, scrubbed at his face, and decided that angry neighbors were probably a good distraction from something he did his best never to remember. It will be hard to bury that again, especially after standing in Heaven two days ago, encased in a bloody pillar of flame, but he could do it. He had always succeeded before.

Crowley magicked himself clean, dry, and hopefully a bit less sleep-rumpled. “I’m coming!” he yelled in irritation when his midnight guest pounded on the door for a third time. “Hold your bloody horses!”

Maybe the building was on fire. There was a cheerful thought.

Maybe it was Aziraphale.

Crowley ran the rest of the way through his flat, brushing past the plants that quivered at his touch,
and threw back the bolts on the door. “Zira—”

It wasn’t Aziraphale. It was someone he would much rather never see again.

Crowley stepped back. Frustration welled up in him, twisted with anger and something quite like despair. “Michael.”

“Crowley,” he replied in his smooth voice. One would think, after six thousand years, that Michael might have preferred a return to something a bit more like his original body, the one captured by so many religious paintings, but he seemed to have grown fond of this corporation. Figures.

Crowley glanced down long enough to see the sword in Michael’s hand. “We passed your stupid tests. Don’t you lot have anything better to do than to keep poking us with sticks?”

“Funny thing, that. There was meant to be a war on, but someone went and cancelled Armageddon. Quite the thing,” Michael said blandly.

Crowley nodded. “Yeah. Quite a thing.”

He was so tired. Six thousand years was a long time to run.

“Just get this over with.”

Michael cocked one eyebrow in surprise. “You’re not going to attempt escape?”

“Where the fuck would I go?”

“Hell?” Michael suggested.

Crowley snorted out a bitter laugh. “Oh, you’re a special one, aren’t you? Do you really think they would welcome me back down there?”

“You are a demon.”

“Tub of holy water ring a bell?” Crowley retorted sarcastically. “Demons don’t handle fear very well. I’d be dead inside an hour.”

Michael’s expression was completely unreadable. “And yet you are handling your fear of me quite well.”

“I’m a really good liar. Lots of practice since that whole Falling bit.”

Michael nodded. “Take him.”

Two angels behind Michael, lurking in the darkness and hidden from sight until called upon, were the ones to march into Crowley’s flat. He considered fighting them off. He considered turning serpent and gliding away.

He even, briefly, entertained the idea of biting them and leaving the mess for some other idiot to clean up.

But…but he was so fucking tired.

They wrestled him to the ground. Metal encircled his wrists that made him feel ill. Then the angels held him in place, pinning him down, as if a minor demon with good PR had the strength to throw off two cherubs. Idiots.
Michael was still speaking. “Yes, it’s done. Retrieve him at once.”

Crowley’s head shot up. “No. No, don’t you dare. You leave him alone!”

Michael closed his mobile and shook his head. “I’m afraid I cannot do that, Crowley. The Principality Aziraphale will be collected.”

Crowley lurched forward, dragging two startled cherubs with him. “Michael, no! Leave Aziraphale be!” he shouted. “He’s done nothing to you—nothing! You’ve no right to take your sort of vengeance out on him!”

“My sort of vengeance?” Michael repeated, as calm as if the only thing at stake was the state of the weather.

Crowley gasped for breath. His wings were screaming with a pain that had never stopped burning. “I—remember—how—your sort—of vengeance—is used against—the innocent.”

Michael sighed and waved his hand. “Take him down.” Crowley felt a sharp blow to the back of his head, and then nothing.

* * * *

This time when Crowley bolts awake, he flings himself out of his bed, shifts into serpent in midair, and lands in an undignified heap before he crawls under the bed as fast as his scales will carry him. He huddles there in a tight ball, tongue flicking in and out, tasting the air, listening for angels and intruders and…

And…

“Wassssss it actually a dream thissssss time?” he wonders aloud.

Oi, that was far too sibilant. He’s out of practice enunciating as a snake.

He can’t smell or taste anyone in the air. He feels no vibrations beneath his coils.

There is an awful lot of dust getting into his eyes, though. His housekeeper is so sacked.

Crowley crawls out from beneath the bed nearly an hour later and lifts his head to test the air again. It’s clean in the apartment. He smells only himself.

No hint of disorporated, melted demon, either.

“Great.” Crowley sighs and crawls out of his bedroom, out to the kitchen. He rears up again and gives the sink a longing look. Nightmares make him thirsty, but he can’t forget what he told Aziraphale—don’t eat the food. Don’t drink the water. Don’t give the bastards an inch, or they’ll take a bloody—

Take.

Crowley drops down to the floor in surprise, then bolts at speed back to the bathroom. “Azzziraphhhale!”
“Goodness, I haven’t heard you slur my name that badly since we got soused during the sacking of Rome!” Aziraphale appears in the bathroom mirror a moment later, eyes widening in surprise. “In a mood, are we?”

Crowley thinks about it and decides he’s had enough of paranoid snake time. He shifts back to discover that his clothes started to dry. Now they’re not soaked, but itchy, damp, and rumpled. His hair is plastered to his face in thick clumps.

Ugh. He reeks. Sweat might have been a biologically necessary invention, but it’s still gross.

“Do you think showering counts as drinking the water if you don’t drink it?” Crowley asks at the same moment as Aziraphale gasps, “Dear heavens, Crowley, what happened?”

“Wait, let me answer your question first.” Aziraphale takes a brief step back and considers it. “Probably not, but why take chances? Best to just miracle it away.”

“Says the man who hates to waste a miracle,” Crowley mutters, but he doesn’t care. Below would just suspect he was up to mischief, and that suits him fine. He cleans himself up, hoping his hair looks as it should. “I know what happened, angel. I—wait.”

Crowley opens one of the lavatory drawers and pulls out a fairly large mirror with a good, sturdy handle. He acquired it to make certain the back of his hair was doing exactly what he wanted it to be doing, and it’s perfect for what he needs now. He only needs another mirror—ah. No idea why he has a tiny compact mirror in his drawer, not unless it’s something left over from the eyeliner phase, but it’ll do.*

Crowley turns around so Aziraphale can see the back of his head. He holds up the smaller mirror in front of his face, the larger mirror behind him, and lines up the angles until he can see the back of his neck. There is something…right there.

He drops the small mirror and lifts the short hairs on the back of his neck. “What do you see?”

“An incredibly well-developed bruise.” Aziraphale sounds outraged. “Someone hit you?”

Crowley puts the mirror down and turns around while nodding. “Yeah.”

“How? What do you remember?”

“I keep telling you that sleep is useful for more than just stretching out in a bed, angel,” Crowley replies. He puts the larger mirror down and keeps his hands low and out of sight. They should stop shaking soon, and his angel has enough to worry about right now. “I dreamed it. I dreamed a lot, actually. But I know what happened, and when.”

Aziraphale holds up one finger, turning away from the mirror, and comes back with an antique fountain pen and notebook—not a journal, thank Hell. “What, who, and when?”

“It happened two days after we swapped. You remember: we did the Ritz, puttered about London, gloried in the fact that the world didn’t end, and didn’t bother going home until the day afterward. I went to bed that evening intent upon getting that week of sleep. Instead, I had an absolutely lovely nightmare I don’t want to discuss, and then woke to someone pounding on the door. Thought at first that maybe it was a cranky neighbor. Then I panicked and thought it was you.” Crowley tries not to growl, but it emerges as angry hissing, instead. “I opened the door, and there was Michael.”

“Michael!” Aziraphale is wearing a fierce frown as he copies down the relevant information. “What did he want?”
“Me. Us.” Crowley slumps back down on the commode lid. It’s as good a seat as any. “They came for me first, and...I was so tired, angel. I should have fought them, and I didn’t. Then I heard that they were going after you. Bit too late to fight back at that point, but I begged Michael to leave you alone.” Crowley tries to smile. “I guess he didn’t listen.”

“No. It appears he didn’t. Wait there a moment, all right?” After Crowley nods, Aziraphale goes back to the stairs. Crowley watches as the mirror shifts to follow his angel. Aziraphale’s bathroom is quite cluttered compared to his bathroom’s sleek lines. It takes a few minutes to find what he’s looking for, which Aziraphale holds up in triumph.

“Great bollocks, angel, is that mirror from the bloody eighteenth century?” Crowley mutters, unheard by Aziraphale. There is certainly enough silver gilt and twisted roses involved in crafting that handheld mirror to be very French, and possibly worth a minor fortune.*

“I had an idea,” Aziraphale announces when he returns to his side of the mirror. “I realized it when I saw you had your own smaller mirror. We need to make another set, something portable.”

Crowley’s brow furrows. “Why?”

“Because,” Aziraphale says, as if it should be obvious, “if we can travel while talking to each other, we can test the limits of these simulations, or whatever they are.”

“Oh.” Crowley glances down at his handheld mirror, then back up at the number of sigils that surround his much larger bathroom mirror. “I hope you can write very small, then, because it’s going to take some careful work to make all of those sigils fit.”

“Find a waterproof pen with an ultra-fine tip,” Aziraphale suggests. “My shop is in Soho, Crowley. There must be an art supply store around here somewhere. The sigils don’t have to be thick; they only have to be nice and accurate.”

“Fuck that book,”* Crowley mumbles. “All right. I’ll look into it. I should probably check in with Not-You, anyway, before the whatsis begins to think something is wrong.”

“I should do the same, probably. Even if it’s going to be quite odd to do so.”

Crowley breathes out the last of his remembered panic and looks to Aziraphale, surprised by the amount of anger burning in his angel’s pale blue eyes. “Now what’s wrong?”

“It’s just—I’ve been reading. Researching.” Aziraphale puts the silver mirror down on his table and starts pacing back and forth in front of the mirror. “I originally dismissed the notion, but given who you said came to fetch us, I’m afraid I know exactly where we are.”

Crowley watches Aziraphale pace before the frustration is too much to bear. “Satan’s sake, angel! Where are we?”

Aziraphale’s lips thin to a tight, unhappy line. “We’re in Purgatory.”

Crowley stares at him. Takes a moment to rub lingering dust from his eyes. Stares some more.

“Aziraphale. There is no such thing as Purgatory.”

“No, there used to be no such thing as Purgatory,” *Aziraphale replies, starting to pace again. His hands are fluttering, a sign that Aziraphale is dealing with his own frustration. “When the first souls began to arrive, everyone who hadn’t been condemned to Hell was welcomed into the City, but then there were...problems.”
“Problems?” Crowley certainly hadn’t heard anything of the sort. Once souls make it into the City, they’re safe from the machinations of Hell. Crowley prefers it that way. He can’t be ordered to tempt or corrupt someone who is entirely unavailable.

Aziraphale looks discomfited. “Keep in mind that this was kept rather hush. I didn’t even find out about it until the 1600s. When human minds first came up with the idea of Purgatory, the Angel of Death appeared before the seraphim and the archangels, and they asked if Purgatory could be made.”

Crowley grimaces. If Death thought Purgatory was a good idea, then problems might have been putting it mildly. “Why?”

“Death had discovered an unexpected difficulty. There were times when a soul’s goodness and darkness was so perfectly balanced that Death didn’t know where they should go. Death believed that the fairest, most just thing to do would be to take the soul to the gates before the City, so they could petition the guard for permission to enter Heaven. Usually, this was the perfect solution. Sometimes, however…”

“The balance tipped.” Crowley knew of many demons in Hell whose favorite pastime was figuring out how to tip the balance in those sorts of souls. Much like Hastur and his long-term plotting regarding a priest, they thought of it as an art.

“Yes, exactly.” Aziraphale wraps his hands together so he’s no longer flapping them about. “Death still brought those balanced souls to Heaven, but they were not taken to the gates. Instead, they were placed into Purgatory. Purgatory is made from individual chambers, each perfectly capable of replicating the favorable aspects of a soul’s life. The souls were then watched to see if the balance of their light would tip towards Heaven, or if they would bring such sin upon themselves that it was easy to see that they were really meant for Hell. Those that succeeded in overcoming the balance of their darkness were sent into the City, to dwell with the other souls, and perhaps find their loved ones. Those that didn’t, they were, er…”

Crowley feels a surge of cold anger. “They’re made to Fall.”

“Yes. After all, what do you do with a soul that you’re not happy with who still earned their way into Heaven? Throw them into a box designed to constantly test them and see how well they handle eternity, that’s how!”

Crowley is startled by his angel’s anger. “Aziraphale?”

“It’s wrong!” Aziraphale hisses, looking dangerously close to furious tears. “If a soul has made it to Heaven, they deserve to see the City. They deserve to dwell with the other souls that She has welcomed here. If they act up, well, there are courts within the City for that. There is justice that can be meted out, and life in the City continues. Purgatory shouldn’t exist.”

“Maybe they stopped using it,” Crowley suggests. It hasn’t been a popular idea in Earth theology for a few centuries now. Well, unless you were Catholic. Or nursing a guilt fetish. Usually it was both, but there were odd exceptions to every rule. *[88]*

Aziraphale glares at him. “Given that they’ve put us into Purgatory, Crowley, I rather doubt it.”

“Yeah. Good point.” Crowley blinks his itchy, irritated eyes and then miraculous dust out. He’d rather wash his face, but that isn’t an option. Not until they know more. “So where are we, then? Where is Purgatory?”

“Not the Home Office construct. It’s not in the City, either,” Aziraphale answers. “Do you remember
the fields that lay upon either side of the road that leads from the gates to the City?”

Crowley has a brief flash of violet-touched greenery before it’s gone again. “Sort of. Bit like Elysium?”

Aziraphale’s smile breaks through his anger. He looks exceptionally pleased that Crowley remembered such a minor detail. “Yes, exactly. It’s not quite what the Greeks had in mind, but they had the correct idea. The building that houses the constructs for Purgatory was built on the eastern side of the road as you walk towards the City. It isn’t visible from the main road, and the path tends to be hidden by the grass so those walking from the gates to the City won’t stumble over it by accident. However, since we would be leaving Purgatory, we’ll find the path back to the road easily.”

“Of course.” Crowley looks down at his hands. He’s still bloody shaking, and it’s annoying. “We’re in Heaven, then.”

“Yes, I do believe we’ve established that.”

“No, Zira—I’m in Heaven,” Crowley says.

Aziraphale’s frown returns, a vaguely puzzled air to it. “Yes. That’s still established; you are most certainly in Heaven.”

“I’m a demon, angel!” Crowley shouts, wincing when the words echo off black stone tile and rip right into his sensitive ears. “What happens to bloody demons in Heaven?”

“Oh.” Aziraphale’s mouth is a shocked open circle, one barely outmatched by his stunned, wide-eyed stare. “Holy ground.”

“Holy ground, holy water, holy bloody air!” Crowley yells. “Michael fucking well sentenced me to a slow death! HE DID IT AGAIN, DAMN HIM!”

Crowley drops down onto the floor and buries his face in his hands. He hadn’t meant to say that. He hadn’t meant to think it.

Michael hadn’t broken his wings. He’d merely stood by and watched it happen.

Crowley can still feel bones cracking under the other’s hands. The other he should recognize. He should—

Gabriel. That was Gabriel, when the body he wore was new.

Hate flares up along with the memory of his own voice, crying out that single, damning question: *WHY?*

“CROWLEY!”

Crowley gasps and flings himself backwards, trying to avoid whatever shouted at him. He bashes his head against the stone tile and lies there, stunned.

*Yeah, really should’ve switched to bamboo flooring last year.*

“Anthony Crowley, you sit up right this instant so I can see that you’re all right!”

Aziraphale. “Hold on,” Crowley manages. He grabs hold of the nearest cabinet door and all but wrenches it off its hinges, using it to pull himself up so he’s sitting on the floor instead of sprawling
on it. “See me now?”

“No.” Aziraphale sounds relieved. “I’m standing on a stepladder to do it, but I can see you. What happened?”

“I’m in Heaven, angel,” Crowley murmurs, lifting his hand to touch the back of his head. His fingers encounter sticky wet blood. He runs his hand over the rising lump until it subsides, heals the cut, and gets rid of the blood. “I had the second-worst day of my life here, and I keep thinking about it. I don’t want to think about it.”

“Crowley,” Aziraphale whispers. “If that was your second-worst day, then by God, what was the worst?”

Crowley gets to his feet. “Obvious, isn’t it? Day of the Apocalypse. The day I thought I’d lost you.”

Aziraphale’s cheeks turn a rather dark shade of pink. “Oh.”

Crowley rolls his eyes. “Let’s just get the fuck out of here, all right?”

Aziraphale blinks to ridiculous, rapid excess. “Yes, of course.”

[82] Or potentially it’s the best time, since Aziraphale is elsewhere and Crowley can ignore a sudden case of Awkward.

[83] Blackout curtains were Crowley’s idea and, like many other ideas, he will never feel a moment’s guilt over it.

[84] He didn’t mean to start the Goth phase, but he claimed it and was proud, regardless. The music was excellent, and loads of humans were wearing black while wandering about, moping aloud about misery, sadness, death, and the unfairness of life and God. Even Azrael was reimagined in a rather cute, petite form that Crowley thought Death would be pleased by. That the trend still hasn’t really ended is a nice bonus.

[85] Or at least a small fortune.
https://i.etsystatic.com/13364867/d/il/2df904/1808499756/il_340x270.1808499756_d33f.jpg?version=1

[86] There is a prophecy in the second volume of the Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch, which regards this very statement. Unfortunately for an angel and a demon trapped in Purgatory, Anathema and Newt burnt the sequel to ash. It’s probably for the best.

[87] Some people just aren’t happy until everyone is miserable.

[88] Methodists.

[89] Heaven had to create another field of violets within the city and direct traffic just to keep the road from being clogged up with souls, during that particular period of history.


[91] Crowley and Aziraphale mutually agreed on the invention of being environmentally conscious. They have to live on this planet, after all. Granted, they went about inventing this concept in entirely different ways. Hippies and tree-huggers, for example, are entirely Crowley’s fault. He refuses to
apologize. Aziraphale put a bit more work into scientists, stars with popularity sway, and government agencies. Both are also willing to admit that they’ve had an equal success rate, which is to say: not very much.

Chapter End Notes

Basically, torture. It's not necessarily bloody, explicit torture, but it still sucks balls.
Alternate Methods of Transportation

Chapter Summary

"And I'm faded away, you know, I used to be on fire-" (Thanks a lot, Halsey.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Crowley invented swearing.

He didn’t intend to do so, of course. It wasn’t even a blip of concern in his mind during the first years of his life, however long that happened to be.^[21]

He first started having niggling thoughts about More Words when the war in Heaven began. Existing vocabulary was very good at expressing all the emotions one needed, but that didn’t mean there was enough emphasis involved.

War in Heaven definitely required Emphasis.

When Gabriel decided to take his wrath^[22] out on him, the idea of needing More Words grew. Unfortunately, he was a bit too busy with screaming and horror to think of any.

After he escaped them by sudden shift to serpent, he slithered through the City in blind terror. The light was too bright in his eyes in a way it had never been before, so the blindness was almost literal.

He heard shouting behind him. Even though he was exhausted, even though he could still feel his wings screaming out their agony, he didn’t stop.

The field of violets was easier to crawl through than continuing to stick to the road that connected the city to the gate. The violets and grass were forgiving on a serpent’s belly.

The gate was no issue at all. As an angel, anyone could open it, but that attracted attention. The serpent did what he always did and squeezed through the gaps, racing off towards the edge of Heaven before the rather disheveled and shell-shocked^[23] gate keepers could register that anything had gotten past them. He’d done that often enough in the past that he knew of the best way to escape, unnoticed, to the very edge.

He liked watching Creation. There were stars being born in nebula that would cradle them as they grew to shine brightly in the heavens, joining their sister stars to become the map for the entire universe. Earth-watching, though—that was his favorite.

Their Father had made the Earth just recently, and though all were allowed to visit, the serpent was content to bask on the edge of Heaven, lying in the brilliant sunlight, and watch everything going on below. There were rivers and streams, lakes and great oceans. The land was green and brown, low valleys and high mountains. Storms made rain and lightning and wind that blotted out the light and changed the shape of the earth below. The sun would peek over the horizon and illuminate the darkness, and after twelve hours or so it would sink below again as darkness crept forward to have its turn.
Other angels said the moonlight turned night on Earth into something silvery blue and quite like the familiarity of the ethereal. To the serpent’s eyes, it looked nearly the same as it did during the day, but he didn’t argue with the beautiful part.

There were also the first of what their Father said were his Humans wandering about. They climbed trees. They experimented with walking. They hit each other with sticks, which the serpent found distressing. They petted each other as friends and hugged each other in love. He didn’t yet understand what their Father was ultimately going to do with the vaguely sort of angel-looking furry Humans, but it was fascinating to watch.*[95]*[96]

This time, though, when the serpent peered over the edge, he couldn’t see the Earth at all. He knew what waited.

Gehenna. The place where his brethren had been cast down. He’d seen them falling with broken wings. He’d seen wings burst into flame.

He was still terrified, but if he stayed in Heaven, Gabriel was probably going to kill him. Or worse, finish breaking his other wing and then punt him unceremoniously over the side. If the serpent was going to leave, he’d rather be doing the job himself.

“Oh, ssssshit,” he hissed, and slid forward.

Cosmic free-fall as a snake? Worst idea he’d ever had.*[97]

He panicked, twisting about in the air, before realizing that there was no help for it. He was going to need to shift back. He needed his one sort-of-working wing to slow his descent, or hitting the ground in whatever Gehenna was would be disastrous.

The moment he changed back, the wind grabbed his left wing and twisted every broken bone into a brand new shape.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!”*[98]

He flung out his right wing. Instead of falling straight down, he was falling in a spiral. He thought, maybe, that he was now falling a bit slower.

Lies. He wasn’t really thinking at all. He was still busy screaming.

“FUCK! DAMN! FUCKING HELL! SHIT! BUGGER! BOLLOCKS! SHIT’S SAKE, FUCK THIS, FUCK A DUCK! GABRIEL, YOU COMPLETE TWAT! PRICKS, THE LOT OF YOU! FUUUUUUUUUUUCK—”*[99]

It wasn’t exactly a very imaginative list of new words for necessary Emphasis, but when you’re attempting to turn falling at the speed of light into more of a controlled crash dive, your mind is most certainly on other things. Like not dying.

Definitely on missing the pool of boiling sulfur.

“I HATE SULFUR!” he howled, but boiling sulfur was softer than rock. It was slightly less forgiving than lava. He certainly had no interest in trying out one of those columns of fire shooting up from the ground, since he didn’t yet know what they were.*[100]

Boiling sulfur it would be. At least it was pretty. He was rather fond of blue.

For those who are unaware, sulfur boils at 444.6 Celsius, or, for the uncivilized, 823.3 degrees
Fahrenheit. Typically, boiling sulfur is the same shade of yellow that would later become infamously associated with Satan.

This, however, was not merely boiling sulfur. Sulfur is blue when it is not only boiling, but also on fire.

He realized this exactly three seconds too late to avoid falling into a boiling and burning pit of sulfur.

“Oh, FUCK ME.”

And that, ladies and gentlebeings, is how one saunters vaguely downwards.

Crowley is busy destroying his kitchen. It isn’t like he’ll need it any time in the near future, and it isn’t like it’s really his kitchen, either. It’s merely a very good copy, so he doesn’t feel bad about ripping it apart.

Destroying minimalist kitchens is harder than it sounds. The cabinets are wood, and he’s a demon, so smashing those up isn’t so difficult. Glass breaks easily—not that he has much of it, living alone and all, but he always kept at least two sets of everything, just in case.*[101]

He used to have granite countertops before he upgraded to concrete the moment it became fashionable. Concrete is a bit less porous, and he rather liked the idea of using concrete for a table instead of a floor. He has plenty of natural stone beneath his feet. Why not add a bit of something human-crafted that reminded him of one of the few things he’d liked about Rome?* [102]

He has to miracle a sledgehammer into existence to take out the concrete. Much as he should have upgraded to bamboo flooring in the bath, he should perhaps have kept on the granite in the kitchen.

Crowley is standing in a very dusty kitchen, panting for breath, when he finally recognizes that he is hearing noise. It’s familiar noise, so he goes in that direction.

He stares at the handheld mirror and its new outline of cramped silver sigils on the black plastic frame for far too long before recalling what it’s for. Then he picks it up and meets Aziraphale’s worried gaze. “What?” he rasps.

“Crowley! Are you all right?”

Crowley stares at the mirror for too long without speaking. There is concrete dust in his eyes, which is far more irritating than a bit of dust from under the bed. “Sure. You know me. Right as rain.”

Aziraphale huffs out a frustrated sigh. “Crowley. Please be honest with me.”

Crowley thinks about it for a moment before he takes the mirror into what used to be a very dark kitchen, a modern and sleek work of art. He pans the mirror around the room before turning it to face him again.

Aziraphale looks a bit startled. “Good heavens. What happened?”

“Redecorating,” Crowley says offhandedly.*[103] He looks down at the sledgehammer he’s still holding and drops it on the floor, where it cracks one of the stone tiles in half.
“Redecorat—” Aziraphale bites off his words and gives Crowley another worried look. “I’m not so sure I’d consider it an improvement, dear.”

“Not like I’m using it right now,” Crowley replies. He steps out of the kitchen, debris crunching under his feet. “What were we doing today, again?”

“Ah. Yes.” Aziraphale straightens his bow tie and quietly agrees to change the subject. Crowley loves his idiot tartan-wearing best friend just a bit more for that.*[104] “Now that both handheld mirrors are working, we should test the limits of each Purgatory. You’ve the car, still, I imagine?”

“Yeah.” Crowley scowls. “Idiots thought it was partly built out of plastic. I had to fix it. They put plastic in my baby, angel.”

“I’m sure you’ve gotten rid of that horrible offence so she’s more like she should be,” Aziraphale says soothingly, and then pauses. “What else did they get wrong?”

“There is no bloody Queen in my tape collection!” Crowley’s scowl deepens. “It’s like some idiot angel—no offence—”

“Absolutely none taken,” Aziraphale murmurs.

“—who didn’t know a bloody thing about me, or even bother asking one of their allies in Hell, glanced at this year’s Top Forty hit list and just shoved a bunch of tapes onto the seat!”

Aziraphale quirks an eyebrow. “I know I don’t keep up with modern changes as much as you do, but aren’t cassettes, well, outdated?”

“They are.” He has to keep miracling his to stay pristine. “Someone knew just enough to understand that I had a cassette deck in the Bentley. Then they went out, turned modern CDs into cassettes, and thought I’d be too daft to notice. Demons are supposed to be stupid, after all,” Crowley says bitterly.

“Dear, you are not stupid. Stop that,” Aziraphale chastises him. Crowley would growl if anyone else chastised him, but Aziraphale never says such things to be demeaning. He wants Crowley to be better. As if a demon could be better.*[105]

“What did they choose? I have to admit, I’m curious. I haven’t driven anywhere with Not-Crowley, so I don’t know if it’s a replicated mistake.”

“Oh.” Crowley snaps his fingers and removes the dust from his eyes, hair, and clothing. Then he pulls out the little unaltered pocket mirror and makes certain his hair is standing up properly. “Panic! At the Disco, which I think I might be fond of. Katy Perry, who I’m not going to be listening to. No idea who Ed Sheeran, Adele, One Republic, Shawn Mendes, or Halsey are. There might be a few more, but that was as far as I got before giving up and trying one out just for the distraction.”

“Oh! I’ve heard of Adele,” Aziraphale says in delight. “Wonderful singing voice, she has. I saw it on the telly when I was passing through a shop one day.”

“Angelic?” Crowley asks, ready to toss the tape from his car on sheer principle.

“Oh, not at all. Very, very human,” Aziraphale reassures him. “I don’t know a thing about the others, but if someone merely selected music at random, there is a good chance they’re interesting rather than poorly coded messages.”

Crowley snorts. “Maybe. The Panic! album was labeled Pray for the Wicked, but the songs are definitely not the sort Heaven would approve of.”*[106]
“There, you see?” Aziraphale smiles. “Now, then. I’m going to take the train out to Cardiff. If I get that far, I’m then going to attempt to board an aeroplane. If it takes off, then it’s a very expansive sort of cell. If not, then we’ll at least have more information than we did yesterday.”

“Right. Suppose I’ll go north, then.” Crowley thinks about the journey. “What do you think—Scotland, or Northern Ireland?”

Aziraphale chuckles. “Crowley, you had far too much fun in Northern Ireland the last time you went.”

“What? What? Stirring up insurrection is my job!” Crowley protests. “Not that I had to work very hard at it, mind. They were already well on their way to telling England to bloody well piss off before I got there.”

“Didn’t you mention that Hell actually considered demoting you for leaving the area too soon?”

Crowley raises both eyebrows. “Operative word being tried, angel. Not Northern Ireland, then. Inverness, I suppose. That will take me to the northeast coast, and their airport is international. If they let me hop a flight to France, I suppose we can just…keep going?”

“Might be an idea, yes.” Aziraphale lifts his head and looks off at something Crowley can’t see in the smaller mirror. “I’ll have the mirror with me. If you reach Inverness before I make it to Cardiff, let me know. I’ll do the same in reverse. If you get on a plane…”

“I know, angel. That’s why you had us make the mirrors. I’ll keep talking to you.” Crowley doesn’t particularly care if anyone thinks him a nutter for talking to a mirror. There are worse bits of lunacy on this planet. Besides, Aziraphale is all but certain that everyone, even their bloody doppelgangers, are simulacrums. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be Purgatory. The whole point of Purgatory was to keep a potentially Hell-bound soul from hurting anyone.

Crowley tucks the mirror away into an enlarged, miracled-mirror-safe pocket inside his jacket, turns around, and glances at the cloud of dust in the kitchen. He sighs, gets rid of the dust, and leaves the rest alone. If he wants to destroy it again later, that’s easy enough to arrange. For now, he’s off to Inverness.

He removes Panic! At the Disco from the Blaupunkt and shoves in the Adele tape with the entirely unimaginative title of 25. Aziraphale’s suggestions are not to be taken lightly.

Four minutes later, he nearly rolls down the window to throw the fucking tape away. Fuck that song. Fuck that song right down to its well-vocalized roots! Hello from the other side, indeed.

“Send My Love” does not improve things. “I Miss You” is sound to ignore as he navigates his way out of north London. By the time the tape hits “When We Were Young” Crowley gives up, snatches the tape out of the Blaupunkt, and tosses it into the backseat. That is definitely more to Aziraphale’s taste than his. Also, bless these fucking feelings. He doesn’t want or need them right now.

Ed Sheeran’s tape has a division symbol on it for a title. Crowley hisses in annoyance under his breath and shoves the tape into place.

“I was born inside a small town,

I lost that state of mind
Learned to sing inside the Lord’s house

But I stopped at the age of nine

I forget when I get awards now, the wave I had to ride

The paving stones I played upon, that kept me on the grind

So blame it on the pain that blessed me with the life

Friends and family filled with envy, when they should be filled with pride

And when the world’s against me, is when I really come alive

And every day that Satan tempts me, I try to take it in my stride.”

Crowley ejects the tape, breaks it in half, and tosses it into the backseat to join Adele.

One Republic is Oh, My My. It can’t possibly be any worse than the first two.

He listens to the first song with his jaw hanging open, not certain if he’s depressed or furious. Fuck it, there is no reason at all he can’t be both.*[110]

He keeps listening as he cuts around the A14 to the M1. English roads are a disaster, but at least he’s not responsible for these. Also, the next two songs after the first one aren’t that awful. The title track is even a bit mindful of Queen…or perhaps disco. “Dream” isn’t so bad, either.

Then comes “Choke.” Crowley has his finger on the eject button when he hears Aziraphale’s slightly muted voice ask, “Why on Earth did they go with angelic choirs?”

Crowley snorts, retrieves the mirror with the hand not on the steering wheel, and sticks the mirror to the passenger seat with a bit of magic that will keep it from sliding around or being damaged. “No idea, angel. You’ve been listening in?”

“I’d forgotten how entirely dull it is to sit on a train,” Aziraphale replies. “Who have we been listening to for the last three tracks?”

“That would be One Republic. Not sure yet if I want them dead or not.”

“They do have quite the varied sound, yes.”

The next song is called “A.I.,” which Crowley has hopes for. It even has a nice beat to it.

Then the band spends the entire song singing about being in love. Fucking bastards.

“I’m starting to think the albums were deliberate choices in torture, after all,” Crowley growls.

“Did I miss something before this?” Aziraphale asks curiously.

“I broke Ed Sheeran in half.”

“Oh, dear.”

Crowley finds himself biting back a smile. “If Not-Me has the same Adele album in the Bentley, you should try it. It’s definitely your sort of music.”
“Not so much yours?”

“Heaven, do I bloody well miss Queen right now. Velvet Underground. *Anyone* else.” Crowley gives up on One Republic, tosses it into the backseat, and picks up Halsey. He likes the title, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom*, at once.

“Oh! Shakespeare!” Aziraphale exclaims in delight as the first track plays, revealing that this Halsey person is quoting from Romeo and Juliet. That’s more like it: illicit love that makes everyone, including the ones in love, completely sodding miserable.*[111]

Crowley adjusts his sunglasses as the light shifts around about Leicester. Halsey is definitely off to a promising start. He converses with Aziraphale through “100 Letters” and then nearly steers off the bloody roadway in the midst of “Eyes Closed.”

“But you’ve been replaced, I’m face to face with someone new,” Aziraphale quotes. He sounds unhappy. “Perhaps you’re right to be suspicious regarding the music.”

Crowley gnashes his teeth together, wanting fangs and something to bite. He’s not going to bite the car, though, even if it’s not *his* car.

Thank awfulness that the next few songs are less bloody prodding. He likes some of them, though he can tell when Aziraphale doesn’t.

His eyes burn all the way through “Sorry.” At this rate, Halsey is going to join in Ed Sheeran’s fate. She makes up for it a bit by turning creepy for the new track, and then with “Lie.”

“If you claim not to like this song, I shall call you a liar,” Aziraphale says of “Don’t Play.”

Crowley grins. “Nah, that one’s fine.”

“Angel on Fire” destroys his mood entirely.

“*And I’m faded away, you know, I used to be on fire*

*And I’m faded away, you know, I used to be on fire*

*I’m standing in the ashes of who I used to be*

*And I’m faded away, you know, I used to be on fire—*

That’s the last bit of Halsey he can stand for now. He puts Halsey on the passenger seat and glares down at the pile of plastic cassettes while the Bentley plows forward, terrifying simulacrum drivers into veering off the road to get out of his way. He doesn’t trust the Shawn Mendes cassette, even though he doesn’t know who the Heaven that is.

“Who is Avicii?” Crowley wonders aloud. The album is named *Tim*. Better than a division symbol, he supposes.

“No idea. Try them anyway,” Aziraphale suggests. He didn’t protest at all when Crowley ripped Halsey out of the Blaupunkt, but if anyone would understand why, it’s his angel.

Crowley turns the cassette case over in his hands first. “Oh. I think he’s dead.”*[112]
“And Freddie Mercury isn’t?”* [113]

“Details.” Crowley shrugs and plays the cassette.

“Oh, my,” Aziraphale mutters when the first track plays.

“Think of it as revenge, angel,” Crowley retorts, turning his attention back to driving for a while. Then he pointedly ignores the second track, knowing Aziraphale would like it.* [114] He doesn’t.

He doesn’t like it at all. He’s cringing under the weight of burning memory.

The third song makes his face burn for another reason entirely.* [115]

“Oh, for Satan’s sake,” he mutters as the next track decides to make things worse. But Aziraphale is humming along, and now Crowley is stuck dealing with a pleased angel in a mirror while feeling entirely exposed. Please, please let the next song be a bit less this.

His request is most certainly not answered. “Fuuuuuuuuuck,” Crowley moans under his breath, and drives faster. Also, he has discovered a new hatred for steel drums.

The Bentley does an excellent job of continuing to drive without his direct control. He’s a bit busy being distracted by the next track, a completely evil song titled “Hold the Line.”

“Crossbows and arrows, the smoke in the shadows
You’ll lose your mind standing on the battle line
Starting to choke on your heart in your throat
And it feels like you just can’t remember how to fight

We’ll crack before we shatter
We can’t fall apart, oh, oh

We don’t get to die young
Trouble keeping our heads sometimes
We just have to push on
We don’t get to give up this life
All the breath in your lungs
It’s stronger than the tears in your eyes
It’s do or die, but we’re alive
And while we’re here, hold the line.”
Crowley has the utterly stupid idea of broaching a topic that’s been verboten for as long as they’ve known each other. “Did you fight?” he asks, his voice cracking.


Crowley tightens his hands on the wheel and only eases off the accelerator when he can feel the car start to mechanically protest. He drove his Bentley through hellfire. This simulated copy is bloody soft. “The War. The First War. The first Everything.”

“Oh. I thought we weren’t going to…discuss that. Ever.”

“Changed my mind.” He keeps having fucking flashbacks about it, anyway.

Aziraphale is quiet for a while, but that’s just fine. Crowley flips the tape in the meantime, more out of habit than any desire to see what else a dead man has to say. Besides, he needs a moment to decide if he wants to deal with Leeds, or avoid it entirely.

Nah, he’ll take the M18 over to the A1(M). The journey west across on the A66 later should help him bloody well calm down. Not as much fun since they doubled the carriageway through the section that kept killing easily distracted drivers, but it’s a familiar place to go.

Then he is out of things to do except wait for Aziraphale’s response, and to think. He’s been trying to avoid any thoughts that aren’t related to Getting Out.

Crowley never thought he’d be in Heaven ever again. Embarrassment definitely makes celestial idiots do really stupid things, like granting one of Crowley’s fondest wishes—well, except for that slow, terrible death part.

Not that he’s going to let that happen. The plan remains: get the fuck out of Purgatory before the holy atmosphere kills him. Crowley might spend a few seconds basking in the sun that shines down on a rather Elysium-like field before they run for their lives, though.

Of course, there are other problems with the plan, aside from their lack of ideas on how to escape Purgatory. Crowley knows how he can get through the gate—done it before—but Aziraphale has never been very good at shape-changing. Miracles? Certainly. Differing forms? Crowley had to take charge of that particular exchange while they were human-shaped.

If Aziraphale tries to escape through the gate by any other means, the guard will notice. That doesn’t even bring in the problem of getting through the Home Office construct that guards Heaven’s main gate, which holds the only safe means to return to Earth. Aziraphale isn’t certain how any of it can be managed, either. He hasn’t been on this side of the gate in centuries, but Aziraphale is convinced that everything except the escalator is set up to directly route anyone going over the side of Heaven directly to Hell. Crowley would (probably) be fine with that trip, but Aziraphale would not be.

His angel refuses to give up on their escape, of course, but they’ll need an ace up their sleeve. Maybe a missile in a front pocket, too.

“Sorry about the delay. I needed to change trains,” Aziraphale says sometime later. Crowley sort of blanked out on how much time passed, so he grunts something that sounds accepting. He starts fishing around in the seat for something he hasn’t tried yet and comes up with Barns Courtney.

Never heard of you, either, Crowley thinks, but shoves the cassette into the Blaupunkt.
Courtney is a *distinct* improvement. Thank God.*[120]

“Oh, that one is interesting,” Aziraphale says of the music. “You, er, asked me a question earlier.”

“Yes.”

“You’ll think me a coward if I answer you.”

Crowley rolls his eyes. “Angel, I can’t even recall what I was doing on the battlefield aside from the fact that I was there. I’m the last person you should be looking to for judgment.”

“Were you armed?”


Aziraphale sounds scandalized. “What in God’s Name did you do to Michael?”

“He tried to step on me! I defended myself! I don’t even—I don’t—”

No. That involves things he can’t talk about yet, mostly because he still doesn’t know half of what he’d be trying to say.

“I didn’t bloody well end his existence,” Crowley settles for grumbling. “Just that particular corporation of his.”

“Obviously,” Aziraphale agrees in a mild voice. Crowley wonders if he’s thinking of a bathtub full of holy water.

Crowley shakes his head. “Archangels are very good at holding grudges.”

“I noticed. Crowley, I…I didn’t fight in the battle. I was supposed to, but I didn’t.”

Crowley glances in the direction of the mirror, even though Aziraphale isn’t in the car. With the mirror turned towards the roadway, his angel can’t see him, either. “Weren’t you a cherub at the time? Flaming sword and all that?”

“Yes, but they were our family. I didn’t want to kill family,” Aziraphale says. “So, I—I stood guard. I kept the fire, the blood, and all of that other nonsense away from the Library.”

Crowley has known Aziraphale for a very long time. Sometimes he takes advantage of that, but that doesn’t necessarily mean he always *likes* doing so. He is a demon with odd scruples, though most of those scruples are reserved for Aziraphale. “You had to kill someone anyway, didn’t you?”

“One of the Fallen saw an angel with white wings and a sword. Of course I was attacked.” Aziraphale sighs. “I’ve always thanked our Father that I didn’t know them. I thought I knew everyone in the old days, but we’d been doing quite a bit of multiplying of our own since our creation. I didn’t know them. I still didn’t want them to die, but holy fire…and they were Fallen already…”

“Their choice, angel,” Crowley whispers. “You weren’t after them. They came after you, ignored a flaming sword—that’s not your fault.”

“It earned me a *commendation.*” Aziraphale sounds terribly bitter. “I was praised for guarding the halls of knowledge, for dispatching a Fallen one who tried to taint it. That’s how I ended up guarding Eden’s Eastern Gate.”
“You did an excellent job,” Crowley says.

Aziraphale makes a derisive sound. “Of course I did.”

Crowley disagrees. “Angel, those two idiot humans would have died the first night they left the Garden if you hadn’t given away the sword.” He was teasing Aziraphale a bit in those days, saying it would be funny if Crowley did the right thing and Aziraphale did the wrong thing, but Crowley knows the truth of it.

Aziraphale’s gift of the sword might have given humanity the means to learn of war, but at its core, war is nothing more than survival. Without conflict and the resolve it creates, humanity would never have made it out of the bloody Stone Age.

The part that still angers Crowley is that Above punished Aziraphale for accidentally spreading an idea that Heaven already excelled at. The hypocrisy burns like blue sulfur.

“Oh, I know, even if Above didn’t see it that way.” Aziraphale is fretting again. Of course, it’s not every day you get to reclaim a lost sword only to have to give it back to a bloody postman just afterwards. “Demoted to a Principality and left to wander the Earth. Lucky me.”

*Lucky me, actually,* Crowley thinks, but doesn’t say that. “I don’t think you’re a coward, angel. Never have.”

“Thank you, Crowley—oh, here’s my stop. I’m off to try my luck at Cardiff International. I’ll let you know how it goes!”

* * * * *

It doesn’t go. Neither of them go anywhere.

Oh, the planes board and take off, simulacrums of people entering planes and exiting them. It’s just that every single flight Crowley tries to book mysteriously fails to depart. Mechanical breakdown.*[121] The pilots suddenly coming down ill without replacements.*[122] Wing falling off the plane.*[123] Inclement weather.*[124] Actual locusts.*[125] Also, an explosion.*[126] Crowley spends a full day trying various flights to destinations outside of Britain and goes absolutely nowhere.

Aziraphale reports the same, sounding a bit baffled by the sudden onset of constant aviation disasters. At this juncture, Crowley is waiting for a blimp to blow up just to round things out. “Perhaps they thought that since we tend not to leave England, we wouldn’t be interested in leaving the UK?”

Crowley stares out at the exploded, burning plane he was supposed to be boarding fifteen minutes ago. “Or maybe Purgatory has limits.”

“I do like that idea better.”

Crowley is in full agreement. Limitations can be pushed. Stretched.

Broken.

“I’ll go terrify Northern Ireland for a bit*[127] if you want to give a go at departing from London.”
In the handheld mirror, Aziraphale nods. “All right. If it doesn’t work, I’ll try taking a domestic flight. I want to see if it’s the idea of international travel or the idea of flying that Purgatory takes issue with.”

“Right. Keep in touch.” Crowley tucks the mirror back into his jacket, dumps a handful of unused boarding passes on the nearest chair, and walks away from the throng crowding around the gate. Even simulated humans love to gawk at disaster. Aeroplanes do tend to burn in rather satisfying ways. Below kept congratulating him for Flight 548 until Crowley started biting anyone who mentioned it.*[128][129]

Before Crowley leaves the airport, he walks into the gift shop to find a small selection of CDs and available digital downloads at a kiosk. He purchases several Queen albums, a collection of Beethoven’s symphonies, a few Stones albums, two different Panic! albums, a single album by a woman called Pink, and all the available Johnny Cash. He downloads every bit of it onto his mobile phone and then corrupts the gift shop’s interior computer so no one can purchase Ed Sheeran, One Republic, or Katy Perry.*[130]

Tasteless heavenly bastards.

[92] Time being relative, after all. One of Her days could have been an eon in the grand scheme of things before the cosmic clock of ineffability was put into motion, so in truth, none of those dwelling in Heaven in those days really know (or are particularly concerned) with how old they actually are.

[93] Wrath wasn’t yet one of the seven Deadly Sins. Granted, God built Gabriel to have a temper. It’s just that nothing had happened yet to teach anyone that tempers needed temperament.

[94] The invention of war was also the invention of shell-shock, or PTSD. Unfortunately, no one had given much thought yet to inventing therapy.

[95] It’s less that evolution was ignored so much as God went through a trial-and-error phase before figuring it out and speeding along to the final form and, in typical mad scientist fashion, couldn’t be bothered to dispose of the test subjects afterwards.

[96] The less said about the dinosaur fossils, the better.

[97] No, it was merely the worst idea he’d had so far. He is about to have plenty of opportunities to have further worst ideas.

[98] It didn’t yet have any particular meaning, but oh, did it feel wonderful to say. Scream. Whichever.

[99] There were a lot of new words that needed inventing, and it was imperative that they be invented right then and there.

[100] He didn’t know it yet, but the columns of hellfire would have been kinder to land on. He was Fallen now, even if he hadn’t intended on it. Hellfire likes the Fallen.

[101] Aziraphale never visited. Not once. It should have made Crowley angry, but it just made him sad. Being sad, now, that made him angry. He would just cope with it by screaming at the plants that weren’t his.

[102] Besides the oysters.
Technically, this is true. By Hell’s standards, he has created a masterpiece.

Demons are capable of loving and experiencing love. They just usually don’t know how, and when it does happen, they have no idea what to do about it. Neither do angels. Or humans, for that matter.

Crowley readily and completely missed the moment during the Averted Apocalypse when he proved it was entirely possible, and not even all that difficult.

Not every angel in Heaven is as stuffy as those who tend to work the upper echelons of Home Office. The problem is that they also tend to be of lower rank and importance, and thus keep their near-blasphemous good taste to themselves.

The last straw was 21st November 1920. Crowley was just wandering around, enjoying the feel of chaos in the air, when the local British forces decided to lose their minds and unload on civilians. Two dead children was Crowley’s limit. Adults he’s never minded—old enough to make up their own minds and all that—but killing children has bothered him since the day killing was invented.

He is a very poor excuse for a demon.

Iron Chef America

It would be nice if someone had remembered that the soul in question could also be hurt, but that requires forethought, and certain beings are very bad at that.

“Let’s Hurt Tonight” is a song he would approve of in other circumstances. Songs that invoke depression make his job easier.

Aziraphale wanted Hamlet to succeed. Crowley might have hung about long enough to wax bitter poetic to William Shakespeare about love being the fastest path to destruction that’s ever existed. Strangely enough, Crowley didn’t really have to say much for Shakespeare to be convinced.

RIP, Tim.

Some things you just can’t miracle away.

“Heaven.” Aziraphale’s delight in it has nothing to do with the title.

Contrary to certain doctrine, angels aren’t sexless. Genderless, certainly, but sex is not beyond them. (See: the Nephilim and one certain tale of Catherine the Great.

Aziraphale quite liked that part of their arrangement, even before it was an Arrangement.

It’s a good old Roman road that reminds Crowley of many Roman attempts at conquering the northern Picts and Britons. Both groups had a very good habit of celebrating their victories of keeping the Romans out, or of temporarily defeating the Britons. Crowley didn’t favor one side over the other during that affair; either outcome meant he had a great deal of fun.

Just because he wanted to see it again doesn’t mean he wants to stay there. He was not wrong about how dull it can be. Heaven has the best view, but Hell has the best music.

Given some of the musicians trapped in Hell, Crowley often wonders if God has impossible standards. It would explain pretty much all of existence.
He doesn’t think Aziraphale would handle being a snake very well.

Not that either of them ever really answer, but at this point, Crowley is desperate. At his usual driving speeds it still takes him about seven hours to get to Inverness. He’d turn off the music, but the silence is worse.

Crowley is almost certain those were actual gremlins he saw darting around outside.

The Bubonic Plague? Really?

That one was funny. Unexpected, but funny.

Since when does Scotland have tornadoes?

That one is not funny.

Crowley soon learns that he might have posed in far too many pictures during the Troubles.

Crowley was on that particular flight, intent on jaunting off to cause mischief in a country that hadn’t seen any lately. That crash was not his doing. He couldn’t have miracled anyone to safety even if he wanted to (kids, Satan, the kids); he was busy having flashbacks about Falling. Not his best day.

Heysel Stadium, however, was an easy job. Footie fans are terrifying. Even that went further than he’d intended. Just—he said three words. Like he said: terrifying.

Even if this were the real world, he’s pretty sure Adam would forgive him this particular bit of “mucking.”

Chapter End Notes

For those who know what Gehenna was/is supposed to be, have patience. Explanation(s) are forthcoming.
Gehenna

Chapter Summary

Crowley was the man in black before Johnny Cash sang about it. The reasons are even sort of similar, even if you have to look at the lyrics all but sideways to see how.

It’s near dawn the next day when Crowley stumbles back into his flat. He glances at his Pixel mobile, notices the sinking battery, and plugs it in for the first time since he purchased it two years ago.* [131] Unimaginative and tasteless heavenly bastards. He had to bloody well buy petrol for the Bentley today. He’s only purchased petrol once during the entire time he’s owned that car.* [132]

He checks the flat out of well-trained habit, but doesn’t find any changes or unwanted guests. The plants still tremble with fear of the demonic—but not Crowley in particular—when he comes near them. Ligur’s stain is still missing from his office carpet.

Crowley goes back to the living room and swaps the cords on the phone so it’s now attached to the MP3 player attached to the updated sound system. Slower charge time, but it’ll do the job. He queues up Johnny Cash, finds “Man in Black” and flops down onto the sofa to listen.

“Well, you wonder why I always dress in black,
Why you never see bright colors on my back,
And why does my appearance seem to have a somber tone.
Well, there’s a reason for the things that I have on.”

“Crowley! Are you back?”

Crowley pulls the handheld mirror out of his jacket instead of trying to traipse off to the bathroom. “Here, angel.”

Aziraphale’s face turns up a moment later. “I checked the larger mirror first, just in case.”

“How’d it go?”

“It didn’t. I couldn’t board a domestic flight.” Aziraphale bites his lip. “I couldn’t fly on my own, either.”

That penetrates Crowley’s irritating fatigue. Driving all over bloody Britain takes it out of a body, even a demonic one. “You couldn’t fly?”

Aziraphale nods in distress. “Crowley, I couldn’t even manifest my wings!”

Oh. Well. That’s probably bad.
“Can you?” Aziraphale asks.

“Nope. The water let me wade into the ocean without a hitch, but I got thrown back by waves so often I might’ve sicked up.”[133] Crowley sits back down on the sofa. “There is only one thing we haven’t tried in regards to leaving Britain.”

“Above and Below.” Aziraphale chews on his thumbnail for a moment. His curly blond hair looks even more frazzled than usual. “Do you think it would work?”

“If they wanted to keep us from figuring out this nonsense, blocking the gates would be a truly stupid way to go about it.”

Aziraphale tilts his head. “A valid point, yes.”

“Man in Black” gives way to “Folsom Prison Blues.” Crowley glares accusingly at his stereo before deciding to just ignore it.[134] “I need to sleep again, angel. Then I’ll make a go of seeing if the escalators are working for a trip Downstairs.” There are other books Below that neither of them have up here. If they let him in, Crowley can probably slither his way to Hell’s disastrous library without being seen.

“Did you notice that they gave us things pre-reset after the Apocalypse That Wasn’t?”

“Yes and no,” Aziraphale counters. “Not-You recalls it, if I ask him, including the Ritz. Otherwise… well, no one from Above has seen my bookshop since Adam restored it, so they might not have relied on the updated lists. Or the Library wouldn’t let them in; it can be quite particular. I do know that a suited ninny tried to visit before our respective capture, but I changed the warding on the doors. The shop wouldn’t let them in.”

Crowley lifts his head. “You’ve banned angels from the bookshop?”

“No, not banned angels, per se,” Aziraphale explains with a faint smile. “It’s just a ward to keep out anyone who isn’t here to visit with entirely good intentions.”

“Well, that keeps me out, then.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, dear,” Aziraphale tuts. “Exceptions exist.”

Crowley scowls. “Fine. Then how the Heaven did they even get to you?”

Aziraphale pauses, lifts one finger, and then lowers it again. “Bugger. I’m not certain. I was going to
“Give sleep a try. If it jogged your memory, maybe it will do the same to mine.”*

“You have to let it,” Crowley warns him. “If you go to sleep expecting nothing, then nothing is exactly what you’ll get.”*

Aziraphale, fortunately, looks to be taking his advice seriously. “Get some rest. Perhaps we’ll have more answers by morn—er, evening.”

“Evening works.” If Crowley is going Below, the time of day won’t matter. It does seem to be less rough a trip if he does it at night, though.

He nearly leaves the mirror on the couch, thinks better of it, and carries it with him into the bedroom. He puts it on the nightstand, giving the mirror a good firm nudge so it won’t fall and shatter if he flails about in his sleep.*

Crowley debates between pajamas or nudity before deciding on the pajamas, just in case someone rings the buzzer during the day.* He refuses to sleep fully clothed tonight. He has silk sheets for a reason, and he is going to enjoy sliding between them, pulling the covers over his head, and hiding from bloody well everything.

Then he lifts his head back out, tongue flicking.* He left the stereo on, and Johnny is still singing along, but this time he’s a lot older than he’d been for the Man in Black album.

“The needle tears a hole
The old familiar sting
Try to kill it all away
But I remember everything.”

Crowley decisively shoves his head back under the covers and curls up in a sulking pile of coils. He fucking well does not remember everything. Things would probably be worse if he did.*

Stupid music, he thinks, drifting off to sleep after the bed warms up around him. Stupid coincidences.*

Crawling his way out of a burning pool of boiling sulfur was no fun at all. If he’d thought his wing hurt before, now it was so much worse.

He stank of sulfur. It felt as if he was choking on it.

Worse, he was on fire.*

“Fuck!” he yelped, and quickly doused the flames before it got any worse. Then he healed the burns on his skin while gasping out panic.
This was Gehenna. This was the Abyss.

*Oh, Father, I don’t want to be here!*

He was in the midst of trying to repair his burnt hair when he heard others approach. He looked up, hoping to see friendly faces.

He was rather bitterly disappointed.

“Saw you crawl your way out of that fiery pit,” one of the Fallen said. She was no longer beautiful. Her wings remained pristine and black, but there was something wrong with her face. Something was attached to her bronze skin. It looked like it might be alive.

“You’re a regular crawly one, aren’t you?” another of the Fallen said. His wings were gone, burnt to ash during his Fall. Boils and Sores marred his skin.

The third Fallen had shock-white hair and pitch-black eyes the same color as his mauled wings. No other angel had eyes like that.*[144] “Think we’ll call you Crawley.” The four of them tittered like it was the ultimate joke, taking away someone’s name and trying to foist them off with another.

The fourth one’s wings were gone, too. Her lips were also missing, revealing teeth that had turned to needles. “What do you say, Crawley? We’ve been establishing a bit of a hierarchy, just like the arrogant bastards Above.”

“What do you want?” he asked.

The four Fallen glanced at each other. “Easy pickings,” Boils and Sores said.

“Just one more fool to grind beneath my heel,” agreed Needle-Teeth.

They advanced upon him. Fingers lengthened into claws. Toenails became razors. Black-Eyes pulled a set of twisted, warped daggers.

“I don’t want to fight you.” *Please don’t make me fight you.*

“Too bad, so sad!” Face-Growth shouted with glee. She swung her arm, a sword appearing in it.

He gasped and staggered back, staring at the slice in his skin that ran from wrist to elbow. “Why?” he whispered.

*You betrayed us!*

*The first of us wears the body of my best friend! And my friend’s soul is destroyed, gone forever!*

*The others are all gone. All gone now. The only one left…is you.*

*You will be cast from Heaven. You will fall to Gehenna, and there you will remain with your brethren.*

Each break of bone was echoed by the shattering of his heart.

“No,” Crawley hissed, and once again he was the serpent. “No, you will not! Not again!”

His fangs sank into Face-Growth’s leg. He’d used almost no venom at all upon Michael. This time, he didn’t hold back. She looked surprised when Death came and swept her away with the sweep of a single, invisible wing.*[145]
Crawley turned and leapt for Boils and Sores. Talons scored his scales, but Crawley bit down on the arm presented to him. Boils and Sores fell, twitching, to the pitted, lifeless earth.

No more venom. Dry bites would hurt the enemy, but they wouldn’t kill anything human-sized.

He wanted permanent results.

Crawley shifted again, grasped Face-Growth’s sword with his hand, and plunged it into the belly of Needle-Teeth. “You will not hurt me!” he shouted. “None of you will ever hurt me again!”

He yanked the sword away from Needle-Teeth and left her to fall. Then he turned to the one with darkness for eyes, taking a step forward.

Dark Eyes took a prudent look at his very dead companions and bowed his head. “You win this round, Crawley.”

“I will win every round,” Crawley retorted, rage still painting the darkness of Gehenna in shades of blood. “No matter what you do, no matter when, no matter how! You will never sssucceed, Asssssatur!”

“You have named me,” Assatur lifted his chin. “Thank you.” Then he turned and walked away.[146]

“Fuck you,” Crawley muttered. He nearly dropped the sword, and then thought better of it. If all of Gehenna was like this,[147] he dared not leave it behind.

He didn’t even like swords. Fangs had always been better weapons. Fangs, and…

And…

Crawley had no idea how long he sat there. Behind him, gates were constructed. The whispers of the Fallen came to his ears. Crawley kept his back turned away. He had no interest in more gates, no interest in whispers.

Gates couldn’t stop him, anyway.

“Dear—I mean—what are you doing here?” a shocked voice asked.

“I wasss cassst out,” Crawley replied bitterly. “Where elssse would I be?”

“That’zz—what izz—I never thought you would join uzz, but your wingzzz are azz black azz the void between the zztarzz.”

Crawley glanced over at the dragging wreck of his left wing. It was stark black.

Were they black when Gabriel broke his bones? Is that why there was such rage in his brother angel’s eyes?

If they were…if so…then he understood, and he hated it. For them, the blood spilt in Heaven would never be cleansed.

“Pleassse go away.”

“I will not.” The speaker came forward. The burning fires illuminated their face.

“Ba’al Zǝvûv.” He’d known that Ba’al pledged themselves to the Morningstar, but seeing them here
was still a shock. Ba'al was not deformed like the other Fallen. Their wings were still a beautiful, shining black. It was almost reassuring.

“Let me help you, Z—”

“NO!” he shouted, leaping to his feet. Lightning-pain bolted into his back from jostling his wing, but he ignored it. “No. Never call me by that name again. They called me Crawley, so that’s who I shall be!”

Ba’al looked down at the three Fallen bodies, their essences swept away by Death, and nodded. “Very well. I can’t say it’s not amusing.”

“They thought it was funny, too,” Crawley snarled.

“And when word of this moment spread, they will never think so again.” Ba’al lifted their hands to show that they held no weapons, that their fingers were not claws. “My friend, your wing.”

“Gabriel broke it.”

Ba’al lurched as if struck. “But he—that he would—” Then their expression hardened. “Of course he would. What are we to those who still dwell Above? Villains. We are nothing to them!”

Crawley nodded. That had been made perfectly clear to him. They were nothing to Heaven.

Why? he whispered in his thoughts, and then crushed the voice. There would never be an answer.

His heart burned in time with his wings. Heaven would have time to discover regret, and Crawley would help them to learn the lesson.

Ba’al approached again. “They will not be easily healed, and you will need them. Let me help you.”

Crawley eyed the Fallen one in distrust. “Why?”

Ba’al sighed. “Because now, Crawly, all we have are each other.”

“Then yes. Do it. Please.”

Ba’al’s hands were gentle, but it was still agony for every bone to be straightened before they were healed, one painful section at a time. What Crawley hated was that this was not worse than when they were broken. Then, each snap of bone was accompanied by betrayal and heartbreak.

There were now worse things to fear than a bit of broken bone.

“Thizz wazz a work of vengeanzze,” Ba’al muttered as they worked. “Why izz he not here with uzz?”

“Asssk God.”

“I have azzked God many thingzz of late, Crawley. God choozzezz not to anzzwer me.”

Crawley looked up at Ba’al. There was still enough of Above left in his heart to feel pity. “I’m sorry.”

“Azz am I.”
Ba’al was the one to lift him up, to guide Crawley through the new gates meant to guard Gehenna. As the gates closed behind him, Crawley realized he was wrong.

The gates were not meant to keep anyone out. The gates were meant to keep others within.

“Why do we lock ourselvess in?”

“Not uzz,” Ba’al answered. “The Morningzztar hazz declared our purpozze, Crawley. We will tempt thozze whom our Father still lovezz. We will claim them. They will join uzz.”

“Oh.” Crawley liked that idea. He liked it quite a bit.

They had been cast out, left to suffer in darkness. Why should they suffer alone?

Lucifer spread the tale of Crawley’s torture across the whole of Gehenna, stirring up further rage. Crawley turned into a serpent and hid in the darkest corner he could find.

If serpents could cry, he would turn this chasm into a flood.

*          *          *          *

Crowley wakes up to a voice yelling his name. “Crowley! Anthony J. Crowley! Answer me this instant!”

“Holdss onss,” Crowley slurs, popping his head out from beneath the duvet. He feels sluggish.

No, he feels ill.

He peers down into the mirror on the table without bothering to shift back. “What iss it?”

“You slept for nearly twenty-four hours, that’s what!” Aziraphale retorts. His face is pinched with worry.

Crowley feels a stab of guilt. “Sssorry. Wait.” He returns to the bed, concentrates, and ends up properly angel-shaped again. Or human-shaped. God-shaped. He’s never really been certain which one is the most accurate.

He picks up the mirror, rubbing at his eyes. They feel dry and irritated again. He misses the gentle clarity of water. “Did I miss anything?”

“Panic. Mine, to be specific.” Aziraphale blows out a long breath. “I wasn’t in the bookshop when they came. That’s how.”

It takes Crowley a moment to realize what Aziraphale means. “It was late when Michael came for me, angel. Where the Heaven were you?”

“I was off at a diner.” Aziraphale looks defensive. “I got peckish!”

Crowley rests his face in one hand. “The last time you got peckish, someone nearly took your head off!”*[149]

“Yes, well. Lesson learned twice over now, I suppose. I imagine if it hadn’t been that night, it would
have been some other moment after I set foot from the shop,” Aziraphale responds. “I woke up eager to tell you, but I waited until sunset. Then…well, you wouldn’t wake up.”

“Oh.” Crowley wants to care about that a bit more, he really does, but he still feels awful.

Ba’al had not been altered when they first met again, but the demon Beelzebub would never heal Crowley’s wings if they were to find Crowley in that condition again. Not unless they thought there was something to gain from it. Beelzebub is now most certainly a reflection of Hell.

*What happened to us?* Crowley wonders, and then frowns.

*What happened to me?*

Of them all, Crowley is the least affected by Hell. He has no odd growths, no rotten teeth or flesh, no mutations. He can turn his hands to claws, but he has a natural affinity for shifting his form, so he considers that bit to be normal. His eyes might always have been like this.*[150]

*I stayed here. I stayed on Earth. If Hell poisons the Fallen, and Heaven preserves the Host, then maybe Earth makes you human. Sort of.*

“Crowley?”

“Who was I?” Crowley asks his angel in the mirror. “Before. Who?”

Aziraphale’s expression softens with regret. “I don’t know, Crowley. I’ve never known that. We didn’t meet until that spot of trouble in Eden.”

“Are you sure?”

Aziraphale smiles. “You’re quite unmistakable, Crowley. You must remember that even as a cherub, I wasn’t exactly the most important angel in Heaven. I wrote books because I enjoyed it and carried a sword because I was ordered to do so. Whoever you once were, we weren’t walking in the same circles. Anyway, does it even matter?”

Crowley flops back down on his bed, hoping to ease the pounding that’s starting up in his head. It feels a great deal like caffeine withdrawal.

That’s all he needs right now. A prison, caffeine withdrawal, *and* terrible flashbacks.*[151]

“Crowley?” Aziraphale prods gently.

“I’m starting to suspect that it might, angel, but right now, that won’t get us anywhere. Did you find anything?”

“Yes, but it’s not useful. Not yet, anyway.” Aziraphale’s image vanishes from the mirror; Crowley hears the sounds of books thumping down on wood. Since his angel has turned away to read, Crowley drops the mirror on the bed so he can rest his arm over his eyes. Miracling away the sensation of sand in his eyes helps a bit, but not much.

“I found what I could on Purgatory in human writings, which says all the usual things,” Aziraphale continues. “Most Catholics still consider it the intermediate state after death, meant for the purification of the soul before entry into Heaven. There is also some argument over whether or not Purgatory is Gehenna—”

“It’ssss not!” Crowley hisses, and then winces. “Sorry.”
“Quite all right. Then there are the fringe groups who believe Purgatory is the precursor to eternal suffering, which rather belabors the point, I think.”*[152]

“If Purgatory is like you said…if it’s about the balance or even the purification of the soul…” Crowley struggles to form a coherent sentence. He wants a coffee. He’d take a bloody cup of abominable tea. “Angel, you’re literally an angel. The balance of who you are is most certainly in Heaven’s favor!”

“Yes, well. Someone obviously doesn’t think so,” Aziraphale huffs. “I’m not saying I disagree with you, and I do appreciate your reassurance that I’m still me. I think we’re in two Purgatory simulations, or cells, that are only meant to open if someone on the outside says they can.”

“Or you would have been freed at once.” Crowley sighs. “Looks like we’re back to breaking out on our own.”

“I’m afraid so. Crowley?”

Crowley moves his hands so that he can view his own ceiling. A few of the paint strokes are out of place. “What?”

“Why don’t you remember your name?”

Crowley shrugs without moving. “I just don’t, angel. Never have.” The closest he’d gotten was that dream. That it began with a Z-sound. Crowley couldn’t even begin to stab a guess at a former identity with just one sound. A lot of angels had names that began that way, and Hell’s bureaucracy has never been much concerned with tracking who Fell so long as the Fallen did their job.

“Is that normal? For everyone Below, I mean.”

“For names? Personalities?” Crowley thinks about who Ba’al had once been. “Probably. There are a lot of demons downstairs who don’t remember who they once were. I think they forget on purpose, or else they risk regret, you know? Most everyone has different names. They don’t look the same. They’re not—they don’t resemble us any longer, Zira. If you meet a demon, you tend to know exactly what you’re looking at.”

“You don’t, though. Look like a demon, I mean,” Aziraphale says. “Except for the black wings, you’re entirely normal.”

“Stayed up here too much, I think. I can’t even recall enough to know if the snake came before or after the Fall. I just remember…” Crowley’s eyes slip closed. “I just remember when Gabriel broke my wings.”

“When he WHAT?”

Crowley turns over and buries his nose in a pillow. “He broke the left wing, one bone at a time, and Michael watched, and then I ran before he could finish the job on the other wing. Crawled. Fled.”

“Crowley? You don’t sound right.”

“Going back to sssleep now, angel,” Crowley mumbles. “Have fun hunting for Horcruxesss.”

Aziraphale sounds exasperated. “I told you that you read those books too many times!”

“Sss’nice bookssss.”*[153] Crowley can hear his stereo, still at it with Johnny Cash. He forgot to turn it off before bed.
“Crowley. Crowley!” Aziraphale shouts, but then he is far away and gone, replaced by Johnny Cash’s roughed-up deep voice.

“Got a long line of heartache, I carry it well
The list of lives I’ve broken reach from here to hell
Bad luck wind been blowin’ at my back
I pray you don’t look at me
I pray I don’t look back

I was born in the soul of misery
Never had me a name
They just gave me a number
When I was young.”

“Thirteen.” He hasn’t heard that one in a while.

Crowley’s last conscious thought is that maybe he should be paying more attention to the songs that turn up on his radio, after all.*

[131] Google went evil without any prodding or opportunity needed. Crowley, curious, went along for the ride.

[132] He’d still have the James Bond decals, but they quickly fell out of fashion.

[133] There is no “might” to this equation. He even tried swimming as a serpent. Serpents do not like vomiting.

[134] He’s a demon. He knows none of these songs are coincidences. Crowley doesn’t have to like it. Or acknowledge it.

[135] By and large, angels do not sleep. Why put safeguards on something outside your realm of experience?

[136] Even with the unwanted flashbacks, dreams are still worth it. It’s like having a transmutable bloody playground.

[137] He learned his lesson the day he woke up and discovered that he was still in bed, except the bed was perched on its side. At least gravity hadn’t bothered to disturb him with that inconvenient falling bit.

[138] Not that his neighbors have shown much interest in bothering Crowley, but Heaven probably
didn’t know how to replicate them. His upstairs flat neighbor used to be an assassin for the KGB. The old woman below him worked as a very high-class prostitute, so he’ll take her up on the invitation to visit just for the stories. Even if her tea is abominable.

[139] He didn’t even know humans could do some of the things she’s reminisced over.

[140] The pajamas were not pointless. Not like they’re going anywhere.

[141] If truths depend greatly on certain points of view, Crowley is happy to report: Fuck you.

[142] In this particular instance, less a coincidence and more a warning system.

[143] Thus negating any potential healing properties of sulfur.

[144] Well, perhaps Death had eyes like that, but if so, they were keeping that to themself.

[145] Angels can hear Death. They just can’t see Them without certain circumstances being in effect, like dying. Death is usually fine with this arrangement.

[146] Hastur has hated Crowley from the beginning. He isn’t quite certain why any longer, but he’s certain there has to be a very good reason for it—aside from his being a demon, anyway.

[147] Actually, it just gets worse. It is Hell, after all.

[148] Once upon a time, the Fallen thought they would believe that forever.

[149] Aziraphale is still of the opinion that the crepes were worth it.

[150] (Most) serpents aren’t evil. They just are.

[151] When they escape, he is going to miracle Starbucks into having better coffee. Then he is going to drink all of it. The local baristas don’t mind when the bony ginger turns up; he always tips well, even if he spends most of the time hissing at them. He’s still more civilized than most of their customers.

[152] Some people really aren’t happy unless everyone else is miserable.

[153] The main character talked to snakes. Crowley was thrilled until suddenly five books later, snakes were evil again. He’s not allowed to attend conventions where the author might be in attendance because Aziraphale has to keep stopping Crowley from cursing her.

[154] Somewhere, someone is screaming in frustration.
Aziraphale is desperately worried, but that is often his default state of being.*[155] He’s just not used to being desperately worried about Crowley, who’s been the one to save Aziraphale from mishap far more often than Aziraphale has needed to save him.

Crowley is often a bit more lethargic in winter, but it’s only two days until the first day of autumn. It’s too warm for that sort of lazing about, and it’s definitely not the kind of behavior Crowley is given to exhibit when there is a rather dire problem to solve.*[156]

The atmosphere of Heaven has to be getting to him. It’s the only explanation Aziraphale has for why Crowley is rather steadily falling apart.

Oh, he hopes that isn’t literal. That is not a thought that Aziraphale wants to entertain.

“Well, there’s nothing for it, I guess.” Aziraphale stands up, straightens his jumper, and fetches his coat. He’d love to have a cup of tea, but until he understands more about how Purgatory works, it’s not worth the risk.

He nearly takes the silver mirror with him before caution and good sense catch up. Aziraphale thinks over the problem and then beams when he comes up with a solution. He writes out two copies of the same note, letting Crowley know his time of departure, that he’ll be back at the mirror again in a bit, something to do, back soonest. He tapes each note over both mirrors, realizes that they’ll likely appear backwards to Crowley, and then shrugs. Crowley is intelligent enough to figure out mirror-writing.*[157]

Then he goes out into the bookshop, where Not-Crowley is lounging with his feet up on a shelf, reading a book. Not one of Aziraphale’s, he notices, but some new pulp novel. “What do you have there?”

“It’s called Feed. Zombie apocalypse sort of thing set to a blogging theme.*[158] I think it’s a trilogy, but I wanted to test-drive the first one,” Not-Crowley answers, closing the book and looking up. “Heading out, angel?”

Aziraphale tries not to flinch. He hates hearing that word from what he knows isn’t the real Crowley. It just sounds so…so…artificial. “Actually, I was wondering if you’d mind giving me a lift to the escalators.”

“Oh. Due for a trip upstairs?”

Aziraphale goes with his instincts. “Gabriel was rather insistent, I’m afraid.”

Not-Crowley nods and tosses the book aside in a way that makes Aziraphale want to scold him. “Course. I’ve got nothing better to do. I might even go downstairs while I’m at it.”

The trip to the building housing the escalators that go Above and Below is absolutely unnerving, and
it isn’t because Not-Crowley is driving too fast. He is, in fact, driving normally. He’s using the proper lanes, not cutting anyone off, not taking corners on two wheels, and paying attention to pedestrians.* [159] Aziraphale finds himself coping with the mad thought that he’d much prefer it if Crowley would jolly well speed things up a bit.

Panic! At the Disco seems to be in this replicated Bentley as well. It’s not the sort of song that gives Aziraphale any comfort. He hopes this isn’t what Crowley had in mind when he said the band was not that bad.* [160]

“You couldn’t escape it

_Drink of Paradise_

_They told you_

_Put your blood on ice_

_You’re not gonna make it._”

Aziraphale tries not to let on how much he’s desperately trying to escape from the false Bentley, which smells like vinyl, chemically-dyed leather, and plastic. It’s horrific. He is also trying not to reveal how much he’d rather stay away from Not-Crowley, but it’s just a simulacrum. He can…he can _cope_.

“I’ll see you in a bit,” Aziraphale says before heading up. Then he pauses. “If I take too long, don’t bother waiting about. I’ll take the bus back to Soho.”

Not-Crowley shrugs. “I’ve got nowhere else to be.”

“Right, yes.” Aziraphale turns around and rides the escalator up, feeling the shift from Earth to ethereal to Heavenly plane as he rises. It’s always been an intriguing sensation, but now it turns his stomach.

They can’t leave Britain, but his particular Purgatory allows entry into a simulated Heaven. It’s nice to see the thought proven correct. Now Aziraphale will find out exactly how far that travel will extend, and what restrictions apply.

He discovers the first one immediately. His wings, however they’ve been bound, remain that way. Bother.

Aziraphale steps off the escalator, straightens his bowtie, pulls the wrinkles from his coat, and then strides forward as if he has every right to be here—which he absolutely does. He is an angel, even if his brethren recently tried to use hellfire to be rid of him.

Aziraphale is glad he doesn’t know what room that nonsense took place in. He’d be tempted to look, and then he’d think about it too much, and imagine it, and then several dozen stiff drinks would be a necessity.

He passes by Uriel and Sandalphon, who both, to Aziraphale’s relief, ignore him. He’s almost made it to the moving walkway that will speed him along directly to the gates when he hears a familiar voice.
It takes quite a bit of effort to have a smile on his face when he turns around. “Hello, Gabriel.”

“I thought it was you!” Gabriel smiles at him like a terrifying executive who has taken every bit of advice about corporate expressionism and joviality to heart,*[161] which is far more terrifying than the days when the archangel ran around with a flaming sword to smite everything even slightly disagreeable. “How are things down on Earth?”

“Oh, well. You know. The usual,” Aziraphale says with a faint, strangled chuckle.

*I just remember when Gabriel broke my wings.*

Aziraphale is contending with the very unhappy realization that he’s never wanted to strangle an archangel before. Oh, this is not good. “Actually, I was on my way to the Library. The debate over Purgatory between the Catholics and Protestants looks like it might be picking up again.”

“Really?” Gabriel looks genuinely surprised. “I thought they settled that matter ages ago.”

“Well, they did, but there is always one odd duck out there who likes to stir up trouble!” Aziraphale thinks it’s a minor miracle that he’s still smiling. “So many of the original works regarding the matter on Earth are either lost, destroyed, or locked up in the Vatican. The last time I miracled my way into the Vatican’s vaults, you told me never to do it again.”*[162]

“It does tend to make them a bit upset.” Gabriel’s too-white CEO smile seems unending. “Well, be off to the Library, then. Zaphkiel will certainly be glad to see you.”

“Grateful to try to put me to work, you mean.” Aziraphale waves and smiles like one of the simulacrum’s he’s stuck living with. “I’ll be along, then. Pleasure to see you, as always.”

“And you too, my friend!” Gabriel turns away, striding off to intercept Rizophale. Aziraphale shakes his head at that. He doesn’t think he’s seen Rizophale out and about in at least three hundred years.

Gabriel didn’t bring up the failed Apocalypse, or the failed hellfire execution attempt. Aziraphale lets the walkway carry him along to the gates while he ponders that. Crowley said it was the same in his Purgatory simulation; unless he mentioned it directly, no one discussed the Apocalypse That Wasn’t.

Well. If no one here is going to mention the hellfire, then Aziraphale won’t do so, either.

Hadriel and Sabrael are standing to either side of the great gates. “Hello!” Aziraphale greets them cheerfully, thinking he’s doing quite the job of pretending he hasn’t noticed a thing wrong with his surroundings. “Hadriel, aren’t you normally at a different gate?”

Hadriel shrugs, looking frustrated and bored. “They wanted to shake things up a bit, I suppose, make certain we’d be prepared to guard any gate we’re stationed at.”

Aziraphale nodded his understanding. That, at least, was something he remembers Uriel and Sandalphon discussing before the start of the Apocalypse.

Sabrael yawns in apparent agreement regarding the dullness of things. “I just spent two weeks guarding one of the inner circles. It’s nice to be back out here in the sunshine.”

Aziraphale smiles again when the gates don’t open. “I’m so sorry. Where are my manners? I am the Principality Aziraphale, Guardian of the Eastern Gate, come to visit the Library, and possibly the Librarian Zaphkiel, as well.”

Sabrael bows. “Thank you for announcing yourself, Principality Aziraphale.” She touches the gates,
which swing open on silent hinges. “You may now enter Paradise.”

“Paradise is the Library, my dear,” Aziraphale dares the old joke. He’s relieved when Sabrael smirks a bit. “Thank you for allowing my entrance.”

“Bring back wine, would you?” Hadriel asks plaintively. “This is such a dull position.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Aziraphale has taken three steps forward when Hadriel’s words catch up to him, accompanied by a rather specific—if drunken—memory of discussing such things with Crowley.

*No wine in Heaven. No more Châteauneuf-du-Pape.*

He retreats back to the gate, where Sabrael and Hadriel give him matching odd looks. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude, but…you asked for wine?”

Hadriel winces. “Er, don’t mention that to anyone. If you don’t find it, I mean. Sometimes it’s rather easy to find, but other times…”

Aziraphale blinks at them. Sabrael avoids his gaze. “I suppose I have been absent for a long time, then. I didn’t realize we’d started importing such things.”

“Not…officially,” Hadriel says. “If you take my meaning.”

“We thought that you, living down there and all, would be the sort to understand,” Sabrael mumbles under her breath.

“Well, yes. Yes, actually, I do understand.” Aziraphale’s thoughts are racing. Is this because this is his Purgatory, and Purgatory, wanting to keep him happy, decided wine should start making illicit appearances in Heaven? Or was this something already happening, something lower angels, like the guardians of the gates, have been keeping hush for fear that Home Office might notice?

“I’ll keep an eye out for wine, but I must admit I’ve never seen much wine in the Library.”

Hadriel and Sabrael look relieved. “Thanks for that, then. We knew you’d understand, you going native and all,” Hadriel says.

Aziraphale finds himself quoting a certain serpent, knowing Crowley would approve: “It’s not all that bad, once you get used to it.”

*          *          *          *

The road leading from the gates of Heaven* is paved in gold. Not because gold has value in Heaven, but because of the aesthetics. Several South American kingdoms had believed similarly in gold’s usefulness. It was malleable, held its own warm glow, and it was pretty, but why on Earth would anyone want to die for it?

Human souls still struggling to get past the greed of Earth learned quickly enough not to try to pry up the gold from the ground. It wasn’t worth the effort. Literally.

Aziraphale is paying attention, or he might not have noticed. Normally, if he has the opportunity to
wander past the Home Office construct, pass through the gates, and enter Heaven, he can feel it. It’s like a soothing change over his skin, warmth and welcome, a sensation that always brings him a sense of peace deep in his soul.

When he passed through the gates and stepped onto the road, there was no change at all. The sense of the peace of Heaven had already been with him, because he is already there.

_Is that why I didn’t notice_? he wonders, waving with polite enthusiasm at angels he knows, ones he does not have to interact with back at Home Office. _Was it because I was already so comfortable that nothing could possibly be wrong?_ If so, then he is doubly thankful to Crowley. Without the demon’s keen eye and deep paranoia, there is no telling how long they would have been trapped here.

They still don’t know how long they’ll be trapped, but Aziraphale presumes active escape attempts will certainly shorten their imprisonment.

Aziraphale glances around before wading off through the field of violets, hands tucked behind his back. He wants to spread out his wings and enjoy the sunlight of Heaven, but they are just as stuck beyond his reach here as they were on simulated Earth and simulated Home Office. Despite that, it’s still a lovely walk; there is an intensity of brightness in Heaven that London gave up on near the beginning of its existence as a land mass.*[165] The faint scent of greenery and violets, untouched by any hint of human pollution, is a delicate perfume in his nose.

There is no building in the field, no construction of any sort. No path, either.

Aziraphale regards the place where he knows the building of plain white stone to be. He has only seen it the once, but his memory is excellent. Just to be certain, he does a full circle of the field: east to north, north to west, west to south near the gate, and back to the east again.

Purgatory isn’t here because they don’t wish him to think upon its existence.

He sighs in frustration. It’s far too late for that.

At least when Aziraphale steps into the City, he doesn’t need to concern himself with hiding his wings. He never does so to remain inconspicuous, but because souls, especially the newly arrived, absolutely flock to anyone with wings. They have so many questions, so many requests. Though he feels compelled to help, that is most certainly not his job. Aziraphale is a guardian of knowledge, a protector of nations. He is not a bloody Heavenly GPS.*[166]

Aziraphale takes several shortcuts through portals that work for the angelic—and for a few enterprising humans who’ve figured out the system—until he is standing before the Library. It always gives him a pang to be here in front of the great doors. The stain of the Fallen is always there in his eyes, even if the blood was cleansed from the stone millennia ago.

He wants to avoid Zaphkiel, and this time, he doesn’t need to make up any sort of excuse. The angel is off with a group of souls in a harmless part of the Library, teaching them how to use the knowledge awaiting them. At least all the Caretakers had agreed from the beginning that the knowledge they collected was to be shared. That which was truly dangerous was restricted, but could still be viewed by a soul…with proper permission and guardianship, of course.

The seventh corridor on the eastern side of the Library has a seventh door that looks just like any other. Aziraphale presses his hand to the wood, feeling it warm beneath his palm as it recognizes another Guardian. Then it opens for him, letting Aziraphale into yet another corridor. He counts the corridors as he passes until he comes to the seventh junction. He turns east again, finds another
seventh door, and regards it.

“Oh, it has been a while, hasn’t it?” Aziraphale murmurs to himself. The means of entry come back to him; he miracles forth a lovely fountain pen and signs his name directly onto the wood. The ink sinks into the wood, glowing as it traces the angelic letters of his name.

With a gentle click, the door unlocks. Aziraphale is glad that is the last door he needs to open. Zaphkiel would need to be with him to open the next door, and then there would be questions that Aziraphale doesn’t want to answer.

This part of the library is quiet, but not hushed. There is a sense of murmuring words, of humming power that lurks in every corner, emanating from every book.*[167]

This is where the records of angelic creation are kept. If Above was doing its usual slipshod job in regards to minute details, every single thing he needs to know about the construction of Purgatory is still waiting for him in this room. After all, he was never supposed to notice the difficulty in the first place.

*          *          *          *

“Oh, bugger.”

*          *          *          *

Getting out of Heaven with a sackful of books has always been ridiculously easy. Angels never assume that another angel would steal; they reserve their suspicion for the souls.

If this were a simulation that was keeping the failed Apocalypse and the hellfire event in mind, Aziraphale knows he would be stopped at the gates, but it wasn’t. More fool them, then.

Besides, he always brings the books back. Eventually.*[168]

He doesn’t even have to worry about returning them this time. They’re simulated books!*[169]

Aziraphale checks his watch, which does a fairly good job of continuing to keep proper time in Heaven. He’s been gone for nearly thirteen hours. He hopes Crowley is feeling a bit more like himself when Aziraphale returns to their linked mirrors.

Crowley got the watch for Aziraphale after timepieces were invented that had enough complexity to keep track of time in multiple places, though it’s beyond Aziraphale how the watch continues to work on another plane of existence. Of course, Crowley, understanding that Aziraphale is quite fond of the classics, gave him not a wristwatch, but a gold pocket watch.

It was the first Christmas gift Crowley ever gave him that wasn’t a proffered wine bottle. An entirely unexpected one.

“Happy Christmas, angel. Let’s go get drunk.”
“Wait! You didn’t let me thank you for the gift. I didn’t even—”

“Less talking, more drinking. I want to be plastered. Hammered. Soused. Pissed. Inebriated beyond my ability to form sentences.”

Aziraphale, sensing that quite a bit more was going on than the random deliverance of an unexpected gift, decided to let it go. “Very well, but I’m buying. It will be my gift to you.”

“Grand.”

Aziraphale bites his lip as he rides the escalator down to Earth. That had been December 2008. Given the watch’s engravings, Aziraphale knew that part of the gift must have been inspired by the terrible events in Mumbai. Aziraphale didn’t think for once that Crowley had anything to do with it, of course; that sort of widespread destruction isn’t the way Crowley operates.* Mumbai was too obvious, too messy. Crowley has always claimed that it’s never as much fun if the humans are too dead to realize the sort of evil they’d gotten up to after being granted the opportunity to act upon it.

Aziraphale often wonders about the intent behind the Sanskrit engravings on the back, two statements which encircled the watch: *You are what you believe in. You become that which you believe you can become.*

The words are from the Bhagavad Gita, of course. The inner engraving are from the Atharva Veda: *Do not be led by others; awaken your own mind; amass your own experience; and decide for yourself your own path.*

At the time, Aziraphale thought Crowley had been trying to tempt Aziraphale into further questioning his angelic role. The Antichrist had been born 21st August of that same year, and much of their talks revolved around preventing the Great Plan from coming to pass.

Aziraphale had, indeed, decided his own path—helping his traditional adversary prevent the Apocalypse. But the rest…he’s starting to wonder if the engravings are not merely advice and persuasion, but some sort of confession that Crowley feels he can offer to no one else.

Not-Crowley is still waiting for him where the escalators rejoin with Earth. He looks like he hasn’t moved from that spot.*

Aziraphale tries on a smile that feels more like a grimace. “How was it downstairs?”

“Dull, and considering it’s a pit of demons, that’s an accomplishment,” Not-Crowley replies. “How was it upstairs?”

“Oh, I had an excellent time in the Library.” Heaven had been paying attention to the right details at entirely the wrong times. Everything Aziraphale needed was right where it should have been.

Not-Crowley immediately scoffs, turns away, and offers him a ride back to the bookshop. Aziraphale’s Crowley would have asked what sort of book-theft he’d gotten up to, was it anything safe to handle, and was any of it worth reading? All his grumbling about how he doesn’t read, and yet Crowley will still read anything Aziraphale hands him.*

Aziraphale doesn’t need to sigh, much as he wants to, so he resists the impulse on the too-sedate ride back to Soho. Not-Crowley switches out cassettes and puts in the one by Halsey, which immediately begins to play “Angel on Fire.”
“I used to be a darling starlet like a centerpiece
Had the whole world wrapped around my ring
I flew too closely to the sun that's setting in the east
And now I'm melting from my wings.”

He shifts in discomfort as the song continues. “Could you change that, please?” Aziraphale asks, trying to keep his voice sounding normal.

“What, don’t like it?” Not-Crowley shrugs and ejects the cassette. “That’s all right, then. We’re almost there.”

“Right.” Aziraphale waits until the Bentley comes to a rolling stop, resists the urge to scream at Not-Crowley to please drive like a maniac again, and instead gets out of the car with his sackful of angelic books. “Crowley.”

“Yeah?”

Aziraphale gives him a stern smile. “Go water your plants.”

Not-Crowley mock-salutes him. “Oh, a command from on high. Can’t ignore that one, can I? Want me to bring dinner over later?”

“I plan to spend the next three days with my nose in a book,” Aziraphale replies, not certain if he’s lying or not. “After that, perhaps.”

“Course. Give me a ring when you’re up to it. See you later, angel.”

Aziraphale manages to keep his expression from twitching until after the Bentley rounds the corner and disappears from sight. “Stop calling me that!” he mutters, and returns to his shop. Then he locks the door, wards it against everyone shy of God Herself, and goes into the back room. “Crowley—oh, dear.”

There is a scribbled note on the wall-mounted mirror next to the one Aziraphale left behind. Of course, the letters are backwards, since it’s taped into place on Crowley’s side, but it’s not difficult to make out Crowley’s rather disastrous blend of Elizabethan/Modern Art Deco handwriting.

Zira,

Got your note. Given how long it’s been, I imagine the trip was a success.

How bloody stupid can these people be?

Going to attempt the same in the opposite direction. At worst, maybe I’ll feel a bit less like death. See you soon.

BTW,*[173] if I don’t come back?

Don’t come after me!
Aziraphale breathes out in relief when he notices that Crowley wrote the date and time on the note. He’d left a bit before the witching hour early that morning, and has only been gone for a few hours.

Then he feels a terrible amount of guilt. Crowley warned him away from Hell, but Aziraphale didn’t think to warn him away from Heaven. Is he so used to Crowley turning up to save him that he just… expects it?

If that’s the case, then he is a terrible friend.

Aziraphale finally lets out that well-earned sigh and turns his attention back to the books he plundered. He already has a fairly good idea of how difficult it will be to get out of here, but there is no harm in continuing his research while Crowley is gone.

The first thing he does before cracking open books again is to firmly establish the timeline of events they’re certain of. He doesn’t think any of them will forget, now that he has pertinent information, but better safe than, well, er, whammed again.[174] Besides, as he writes things down, he quickly discovers they didn’t have it quite right.

- Adam Young’s 11th birthday was Wednesday, 21st August 2019 of this year.[175]
- The Averted Apocalypse took place on Saturday, 24th August, about half-past 5 o’clock in the afternoon.[176]
- Adam had done quite the decent job of resetting the world back to pre-Apocalypse standards overnight, so that on Sunday, 25th August, things had seemed almost completely back to normal.[177]
- Not that such a feeling of the world being proper again had stopped Crowley and Aziraphale from switching places…while on the bus home to London, of all things.[178]
- Aziraphale has clear memories of exploring his bookshop after their failed executions, which had been mostly back to rights, just as Crowley reminded him. The differences had been the lack of hell-books, a new and intriguing plethora of first-edition children’s books…and also the absolute lack of heavenly texts.[179]
- Heaven and Hell kidnapped them for their respective executions via hellfire and holy water around noon on the 25th. Those executions, thanks to Agnes Nutter’s kind warning, had not gone to plan.[180]
- After midnight on the 27th, Michael had gone to fetch Crowley. Aziraphale recalls being accosted before dawn of that same day.[181]

Aziraphale glances down at his watch again, checking the date. Unless there is some sort of frozen time issue or time dilation field within Purgatory, it’s truly 20th September. They both spent over three weeks blissfully unaware of Heaven’s shenanigans. Everything they thought they’d done since 27th August never happened.

Crowley was right about the food, too. The longer Aziraphale goes without eating or drinking anything in Purgatory, the clearer his thoughts become.

“Bugger,” Aziraphale repeats, and opens the first book he decided needed to be stolen. He’d miracled forth a number of soft, book-harmless feathers to mark pages while reading its contents in the Library. Now he can take the time to write proper notes.
Incriminating, damning notes. It just isn’t Aziraphale that they’re damning.

[155] It is quite fortunate that angels are not prone to ulcers.

[156] Heavy drinking, burning cars, and tyre irons are a bit more like it.

[157] Crowley invented mirror-writing while drinking with Aziraphale. The angel was too far gone to translate the “new” letters and tried to smash a bottle over his head in retaliation. Crowley being Crowley, of course, thought this was hilarious. Aziraphale being Aziraphale, of course, was completely horrified that he tried to hurt anyone while soused, even a demon.

[158] All hail Mira Grant, who is also known by another truly excellent name.

[159] Before the actual Apocalypse, Aziraphale used to say that if Crowley ever drove like a civilized demon, it would obviously be a sign of the End Times. The joke stopped being funny when the End Times actually started happening.

[160] It really wasn’t.

[161] Aziraphale tried to blame Crowley for the spreading idea of executive platforms, networking, working lunches, Hollywood levels of bleached smiles, and entirely false comradery. Crowley retorted that some things were too evil even for a demon to mess about with.

[162] He did it again anyway. It was his book, after all, and the Vatican stole it first. Aziraphale was merely retrieving misplaced property.

[163] These particular vineyards exist because Pope John XXII wanted to get joyfully sloshed.

[164] There are other gates, but these are the gates. They are not pearly in the slightest, nor is Saint Peter employed there.

[165] The invading Romans wanted what the Britons had, so the Britons gave them London. The Romans, the Britons rightly figured, were very odd barbarians, but if London made them happy, it was a small price to pay. They didn’t use it for much, anyway.

[166] Crowley has rather stridently suggested that Aziraphale should never, ever give directions when someone asks, as it usually turns into a catastrophe. Aziraphale refuses to accept fault for that. He just remembers London the way it used to be before a certain fire, is all.

[167] Aziraphale is still trying to convince his bookshop to replicate this feeling of Home, but the bookshop remains rather stubbornly human in its construction.

[168] Eventually is a loose definition of time and is therefore up to his own interpretation.

[169] Which are, to his relief, accurate. He should know; he wrote one of the books he’s in the midst of borrowing.

[170] Carmine Zuigiber, otherwise known as Scarlett, otherwise known as War, might have been able to tell them who was responsible for Mumbai. Fortunately, she is not currently available for comment.

[171] He probably didn’t.

[172] Handing him Sense & Sensibility was such an awful mistake.
Crowley didn’t come up with any of the modern internet slang, or any previous abbreviations and known shortcuts that were popularized by letter-writing when letter-writing began. Rather upset at missing something obvious, he instead created animated emoticons. Those, now—*those* are properly evil.

He really would like to know the origin of that word, but isn’t certain it’s worth finding out. Its meaning, at least, is perfectly clear.

Author’s random note: I use the re-dating of the mini-series because why not? While Adam’s birthday is never specifically dated in either the novel or the mini-series, using the novel, the Apocalypse was averted as summer was ending, before school resumed. Given that Adam’s birthday took place on a Wednesday in August, six days before the End of the World, it therefore makes sense that the Averted Apocalypse most likely occurred on the second-to-last Saturday of August in 2019.

Anathema tells Newt that the world will end in 4.25 hours in Episode 4, when the clock reads 1:15.

No one is quite sure what to do about the new rain forests yet, or about the new populated continent in the ocean. Humans have decided it just seems wisest to leave both alone until they politely go away. Both are preferable to the random aliens, anyway, who thankfully Went Away.

They’d considered doing so just after Lucifer’s rather abrupt departure, but Adam would have noticed, and the poor boy had quite enough on his mind at the time.

Adam really meant it when he said he’d prefer both sides to stop mucking about with humanity, so Aziraphale took that lack of books as the not-so-subtle reminder it was intended as. Granted, he’s almost ready to join Crowley in gluing coins to the sidewalk. Not-Helping with a simple application of angelic power is a very difficult habit to break. Aziraphale makes a note upon his notes that he and Crowley both need to find things to do with their time to satisfy ancient urges that won’t break the new paradigm.

Agnes would have further words for them of great importance, but alas: burnt second book.

It wasn’t Michael, and apparently they were taking no chances with an angel who could (supposedly) withstand hellfire. Someone snuck up behind him and knocked him one over the head. He strongly suspects they used a tyre iron—because it was convenient, not because they had a decent understanding of irony.
Crowley wants to resort to literal crawling by the time the escalator from Downstairs deposits him back on Earth again. It is not, however, easy to crawl with a book, so he settles for hissing and grumbling his way back to the Bentley. He ignores the Blaupunkt and pulls up a Queen album on his mobile, setting the randomizer to have a go.

“I want to break free
I want to break free
I want to break free from your lies
You're so self-satisfied I don’t need you
I've got to break free
God knows, God knows I want to break free.”**[182]

Crowley scowls. “Yes, yes, I get the bloody point already!” He ignores the road long enough to skip to the next randomized track. That does not improve things.

“There's no time for us
There's no place for us
What is this thing that builds our dreams
Yet slips away from us?”**[183]

“For SATAN’S SAKE!” Crowley turns off Queen. Now he’s angry at Freddie Mercury, who, in this instance, most certainly didn’t do anything to deserve it.


Crowley quickly realizes that Beethoven in a relatively calm mood doesn’t fit with driving through London traffic.*[184] He tries the Rolling Stones.
“Pleased to meet you

Hope you guess my name!”

Crowley is smoking a bit in fury when he stabs the mobile for another random selection.

“I was sick and tired, fed up with this
And decided to take a drive downtown
It was so very quiet and peaceful
There was nobody, not a soul around
I laid myself out, I was so tired
And I started to dream
In the morning the parking tickets were just
Like a flag stuck on my window screen.”

“I hate you,” Crowley mutters. He takes his hand off the wheel, letting the Bentley terrify the simulacrum as he turns the randomizer off and pulls up a Panic! At the Disco album. *Too Weird to Live, Too Weird to Die!* can’t be that bad.

“This is gospel for the fallen ones
Locked away in permanent slumber
Assembling their philosophies
From pieces of broken memories.”

Crowley stares at his mobile before deciding that maybe this song might be useful. He’s still completely, entirely enraged about these stupid nudges, but what the Heaven can it hurt to find out what the rest of ”This is Gospel” is like? Besides, being enraged makes him feel much more like himself.

“The gnashing teeth and criminal tongues conspire against the odds
But they haven't seen the best of us yet
If you love me let me go
If you love me let me go

’Cause these words are knives that often leave scars

The fear of falling apart

And truth be told, I never was yours

The fear, the fear of falling apart.”

Crowley isn’t angry any longer. Now he’s a lot closer to terrified.

He turns the music off and drives back to Mayfield without really seeing anything in front of him. He hopes Aziraphale has news with fewer terrible implications.

When he gets into his flat, he bolts the door. The ward he uses to keep everyone out is quite the piece of work. It wouldn’t keep God away, but what would She be bothering him for, anyway?

Then he goes straight back to the bathroom and rips both notes away, clearing the view for the wall-mounted vanity and the handheld mirror. “Aziraphale!”

Aziraphale pops up almost at once. Crowley does not like the look of disturbed thoughtfulness on his face. “Oh, thank heavens you’re back. How did it go?”

Crowley shrugs. “Below was just like it always is, which was bloody disturbing.*[188] Makes me wonder how many times Above and Below have been conspiring of late, even before the Averted Apocalypse.”

“While normally I would be fine with the idea of our respective sides learning to get over themselves, it doesn’t seem to be for good purposes,” Aziraphale agrees.*[189] “They’re still terrible at little details, by the way, though the building housing Purgatory was conspicuously absent from the field.”

“Sure they didn’t just relocate it?”

Aziraphale thinks about that for a moment. “I don’t think so. I believe the books regarding Purgatory in the Library would have mentioned such, given that they replicated all the information.”

“They remembered to hide a building, but forgot to get rid of all the books.” Crowley can’t say he’s surprised. If they’d gotten it right, Above would have destroyed their track record for missing the obvious. “Is any of it useful?”

“Yes…” Aziraphale looks as if he’d rather discuss the weather on Alpha Centauri.*[190] “Several, in fact. I have an entire tome devoted to the idea and to Purgatory’s creation, which involved quite a bit of unexpected trial and error. I have another book that is a record of every soul who has been subjected to Purgatory so far. To my complete lack of surprise, our names are not anywhere on the list.”*[191]

“Course not. That might’ve upset someone,” Crowley drawls, shrugging out of his jacket and tossing it behind him. Inside his flat, he’s too warm. Outside his flat, in mid-September, he’s too bloody cold. He is a demon who is largely immune to any and all vast shifts in temperature,*[192] so this back-and-forth is really starting to irritate him.

“And I have a third book that discusses the full mechanics of how Purgatory works, including the
means by which one is released from Purgatory. What do you have?” Aziraphale asks, too quickly for Crowley to request details. That means those details probably suck arse.

Crowley holds up his own hellish theft. “I knew I wouldn’t find any books on Purgatory in Hell, not with all of us being unaware of its existence. Looked anyway, of course, but nada. Instead, I nicked the only book Below has that deals in the theory or execution of Heavenly traps—specifically, breaking out of them.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Aziraphale says, pleased. “But…just the one?”

“Most Heavenly traps are holy fire or holy water, angel. Those have simple solutions: run away.”

“Hmm. Yes.” Aziraphale glances down at what must be a book he’s holding, but Crowley knows his angel is thinking about a Fallen idiot who attacked a cherub with a flaming sword.*[193] “Had the chance to look at it yet, or were you concerned with avoiding notice?”

“I didn’t want to linger and find out, but avoiding notice didn’t seem to be a problem, really. Was it the same for you?”

Aziraphale nods without looking up. “Everyone acted like the Averted Apocalypse never happened. Gabriel was his usual self, and by that I mean I sort of want to strangle him.”

Crowley feels a very uncomfortable jolt of alarm. “Oh—no, don’t even think that. Don’t you go wandering off on that path. The closer you are to pure divinity, the easier it will be to get you the Heaven out of Purgatory.”

“I wouldn’t have any idea how close I still am to pure divinity, Crowley.”

Crowley snorts out a laugh and then has to then box up unbecoming, entirely undemonic hysterical giggling. “Zira, your wings were stark white when we stopped the bloody Apocalypse. You also picked up a Heaven-forged sword, one corrupted by six thousand years of the human idea of war. Not only could you wield it, that sword lit up with holy flame as if it never stopped burning.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Aziraphale’s thoughtful look has eased down from slightly panicked concern and back towards bookish philosophy. “I wonder what would have happened if you’d picked it up before I thought to do so.”

“Burnt hands, most likely. Still a demon, angel,” Crowley reminds him. “I’m going to get some reading done and find out if I stole anything useful. You?”

“I’ll be doing the same, yes. I’d like to finish my reading before I discuss any of it.”

Crowley narrows his eyes. “You’ve found something already.”*[194]

“I’m a bit busy hoping that I haven’t,” Aziraphale replies tartly. “I’m not going anywhere. The moment I’m certain, I’ll tell you.”

“Sure.” It wasn’t that Crowley disbelieved Aziraphale so much as he knew his angel was already certain of his results. What Aziraphale was most likely looking for now was a way out of whatever problem he’d uncovered.

He doesn’t have high hopes for a solution. Crowley has lost enough corporations over the millennia to know what dying feels like, and dying is definitely a thing that is happening to him right now. Granted, his previous deaths were usually rather sudden, unexpected, and annoying affairs,*[195] but even when death is happening in slow motion, that sense of molecular breakdown is easy to
recognize. He judges the state of this corporation and decides he probably has two or three days left, at most.

Bloody idiots. Bloody sodding buggering fucking bastards!

Crowley gives vague thought to destroying his kitchen again, but that might speed up the dying process. Instead, he goes back to the living room, plugs his mobile in to charge,*[196] and then pulls out the Barns Courtney tape he took from the Bentley. His stereo has updated itself pretty much on Crowley’s whim over the decades, so not only can it still play gramophone records, but also every speed of vinyl ever produced, 8-tracks*[197], cassettes, standard CDs, MP3 CDs, and anything digital. The only thing he never felt the need to upgrade was the cassette-based ansaphone, which made for an excellent place to put Hastur during the Averted Apocalypse.

He’s halfway through the book—it’s a short book—when he lifts his head, takes a quick trip to the PC, and Googles the lyrics for Barns Courtney’s “Fire.” It’s an excellent song, but the words definitely have his attention.

“Lonely shadows following me
Lonely ghosts come a-calling
Lonely voices talking to me
Now I’m gone, now I’m gone, now I’m gone
And my mother told me son let it be
Sold my soul to the calling
Sold my soul to a sweet melody
Now I’m gone, now I’m gone, now I’m gone.”

“For Satan’s sake, I get the bloody point!” Bloody hell, why couldn’t Whoever this is try to get his attention with movies? He likes movies. They also tend to change the films when Someone talks to him through them so it doesn’t ruin the scene he’s watching, which always goes back to normal afterwards. This method of communication—if it is that—is all but ruining music for him, and music is his third favorite thing on Earth.*[198]

Crowley goes back to reading the hell-book. At least that should only have blessed fucking messages that he expects to find.

He flips to the next page in the book and feels his eyebrows fly up to join his hair’s glorious heights. That is a very complicated bit of magical casting, no matter what sort of being you happen to be.

It may also be the very thing that will get them out of this mess.

* * * * *
Aziraphale stopped looking for escape methods from Purgatory the moment he realized that there was no answer in the books that didn’t involve earning your way out. As Crowley said—and Aziraphale believes him—if that was still an active truth, Aziraphale would already be sitting on his bum in a strange building somewhere in Heaven, confused and trying to figure out what in God’s Name had just happened.

Purgatory, as Aziraphale already knew, is meant for souls in perfect balance between goodness and evil. It was designed to test them, to see which way they would tip. Crowley’s soul is most certainly not in balance. He is a demon, and by his very nature, that means he is Aziraphale’s polar opposite. The black wings do sort of give it away.

But, Aziraphale thinks, chewing on the end of his favorite quill,*[199] Crowley isn’t exactly your typical demon. He said so himself. Demons who spend too much time in Hell are changed by it. Given how Crowley spoke of things, Aziraphale suspects that the mutations and physical alterations are a reflection of the Fallen forgetting their former divinity—that they are forgetting anything of goodness.

Crowley is not a good person. He will be the first to stand atop the nearest car bonnet and shout it for everyone to hear.*[200] He is not ashamed to be a bad person, either.

Crowley, however, is not evil. Before the Arrangement, Aziraphale had already been capable of admitting that to himself. Crowley didn’t go out of his way to harm humans deliberately. Oh, he did his job, and he excelled at it—Aziraphale can dislike something and still appreciate the technique, much like a Bosch painting*[201]—but Crowley’s methods are all twined about the concept of humanity’s free will.

For a demon, he also has a very odd, hard line that he will not cross: he doesn’t kill children. He is, in fact, the first to be horrified by the very idea.*[202]

Aziraphale, ashamedly, still tends to think the worst of Crowley, and by now he should really know better. Crowley turned all of those paintball guns at the former-convent-turned-business-training retreat into real guns, but Crowley didn’t tell the humans to shoot each other. He didn’t even make a vague suggestion about it. The humans chose that for themselves, even after discovering that their relatively harmless paintballs had become deadly lead and gunpowder.

Crowley didn’t even let anyone die, and Aziraphale isn’t certain he would have been so magnanimous about it. If they had the free will to kill each other, Aziraphale often reasoned, they had the free will to deal with the consequences.*[203]

The mistake he’s long been making, Aziraphale realizes, is that he always assumes the best of human souls. The souls who made those terrible mistakes would go to the City, and there they would learn to think better of themselves, deal with the consequences of their actions, and become better spiritual beings. Of course, that isn’t how it works. Those spirits most often go directly to Hell, and Hell isn’t big on repentance. Hell is far more concerned with making certain souls suffer those same mistakes for eternity.

So: polar opposite is not exactly true. Balanced is also not true, not by Heaven’s rather overly particular standards. After all, not every musician in the history of music could possibly have been evil enough for Hell.*[204][205] The odds are so far out of scale as to be completely improbable.

There have been billions of souls who’ve lived and died since existence began. After all, Earth is not alone, even if Earth was (or is) their Creator’s pet project. Yet…and yet…the City always seems a bit sparse.
If the majority of souls go to Hell regardless of their choices, then why offer Heavenly redemption in the first place? Was it even Death who came up with the idea of creating a real Purgatory, or was that merely the story that Aziraphale’s superiors spread in order to soothe any ruffled feathers?

How big is Purgatory, anyway? Who in God’s Name decides where souls go when they die?

Why do his fellow angels have such terrible taste in music?

“Crowley!”

Aziraphale picks up the handheld silver vanity and waits patiently for a response. He sees motion from the larger mirror out of the corner of his eye before Crowley realizes Aziraphale’s location and picks up the handheld mirror. “What is it, angel?”

He feels himself warming at the endearment. It’s quite different when the word is coming from the real Crowley. “I had a question—well, I have many questions, but just the one for now. You mentioned Gehenna when I mentioned praying to Her. It’s the first time I think I’ve ever heard you use the word outside of theological discussion.”

Crowley looks guarded. “Yeah?”

“And you had a rather vociferous response regarding Purgatory and Gehenna not being the same place,” Aziraphale continues. “I suppose I was wondering why that was. Why you were so certain, I mean.”

Crowley stares at him, unblinking, for almost five minutes. Aziraphale merely waits. If he decided not to answer, or didn’t want to answer, Crowley would have ditched the mirror at once.

“I think for Gehenna to still be a true place, another must have been created,” Crowley finally says. “In the old days, there was no Hell. There was only Gehenna. It made for a convenient pit when the Fallen were being cast out of Heaven. They certainly weren’t going to cast us down to Earth.”

“Oh.” Aziraphale finds himself swallowing. “I’m sorry. I had no idea. I suppose I thought Hell had been created by the strength of the War, or by Lucifer afterwards.”

“Lucifer isn’t a creator. No demon is. That’s part of losing your divinity, angel.”

Now he simply feels awful at the flat, unhappy sound of Crowley’s voice. “I’m sorry.”

Crowley gives him an odd look. “What for? Any way, the old Gehenna didn’t remain Gehenna for very long. It was rather promptly turned into what it is now.”

“Sorry, I suppose I have a second question in light of that response,” Aziraphale says. “What was Gehenna turned into, Crowley? What was its intended purpose, I mean.”

That earns him another unblinking stare. “Revenge, angel. It was built for revenge. Excuse me; I need to finish looking up a bit of infernal wisdom.”

“WAIT!”

Crowley comes back to the mirror at once, startled. “What? What is it?”

Aziraphale forces himself to calm down. “I know why you’ve been so tired. I know why you haven’t felt quite right.”

“Oh.” Crowley squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, pinches the bridge of his nose, and then nods.
“I take it that there’s more to it than just being in Heaven.”

“Quite a bit, I’m afraid.” Aziraphale wriggles his shoulders into feeling less tense. It would work better if he could shake out his wings, but those remain restrained. “Purgatory, as you know, is meant to tip souls out of balance…”

Crowley growls. “Aziraphale.”

“Right! Yes. Sorry.” Aziraphale frowns for a moment. “Nothing is happening to me because there is nothing out of balance, though I’m certain those who tried to execute me would vociferously disagree.”

“Too bad for them,” Crowley hisses irritably.

“Yes. Well. Your soul—and don’t get offended at me for saying it—is not the polar opposite of mine,” Aziraphale says. “I wouldn’t call yours balanced, but as far as Purgatory’s programming is concerned, it is certainly fair game.”

“Oh, for Hea—for Sa—for fuck’s sake.” Crowley plasters his hand to his face. “It’s trying to work on me, isn’t it? It’s bloody well doing its job of tempting me in both directions.”

“Given that you’re most decidedly not in balance, I’d say it’s trying to tempt you in one direction only.”

“That’s worse.” Crowley scowls. “You can’t bloody well redeem the unredeemable! Not only is this stupid Purgatory box going to slowly poison me to death, it’s going to attempt to drive me mad at the same time because some daft angel forgot to turn off the programming for their prison!”

“Or…perhaps they were feeling experimental.” Aziraphale feels ill at the thought. “If Purgatory could fix a demon, or at least dispatch one, then…”

“The Heavenly Cold War would continue, but with a weapon that Below has no idea exists.” Crowley’s tongue darts out to touch one of his human-looking incisors.*[206] “That’s worse than Purgatory existing in the first place, angel.”

Aziraphale tries not to be surprised by that statement and fails. “I didn’t think you were rooting for Hell any longer.”

“Oh, not particularly. I am, however, not fond of things that violate dear ol’ Mum’s granted free will,” Crowley retorts. “Agree With Us or Cease To Exist? That’s not free will, angel. That’s fascism with a good bit of brainwashing mixed in. Heaven wouldn’t need to arrange another war. They’d win without lifting a finger.”

“I’m really not fond of the fascism part, but good triumphing over evil—wouldn’t that be a good thing?” Aziraphale asks. “Don’t laugh. I’m serious. I really…I don’t know the answer to that question.”

Crowley seems grimly amused by that. “And you’d trust my answer on that?”

Aziraphale doesn’t hesitate. “Yes. Absolutely.”*[207]

Crowley prods at his teeth again with his tongue. “North Korea.”

“Pardon?”
“North Korea, angel. Think about what it’s like over there right now, and then compare that to the idea of Heaven ‘winning’ the war with their little secret weapon. Then you’ll have your answer.”

Aziraphale is often a fool, but he isn’t slow. “Oh,” he whispers.

All those demons, converted but forever marked by who they’d once been. All those fallen souls, always considered tainted next to those who’d risen to Heaven without ever catching a glimpse of Hell. There are hierarchal ranks in Heaven, but those two groups would most likely remain at the bottom for eternity. They would be lesser. They would be unwanted. They might not even be let through the gates.

Crowley’s smile is too angry to be any sort of smile at all. “Exactly.”

“I—we have to destroy Purgatory, Crowley.”

“What?”

“I’m serious!” Aziraphale exclaims, horrified, distressed, and contemplating the idea of sicking up the contents of an entirely empty digestive tract. “We can’t let this be, Crowley! You’re absolutely correct. I knew Purgatory was wrong, but this is worse! It goes against everything Heaven is supposed to stand for. It goes against the point of Temptation, the Sacrifice of the Lamb,*[208] Redemption—everything!”


Aziraphale tries to think of a useful plan. It’s not his strong suit, but he’ll give it a go. “Getting rid of the books detailing everything regarding Purgatory’s existence from the Library, perhaps. I’m not certain how we’d go about doing that from in here, but it’s an idea.”

Crowley swaps from unnerved to visibly horrified. “You can’t—you’re a fucking guardian of knowledge, angel!”

“And I’m also a guardian of the nations of humanity! In fact, a Principality is meant to be that first, but we had to wait a bit for humanity to be invented!” Aziraphale picks up his quill just to have something to do with his hands. “That wouldn’t be enough, though, would it?”

“Nope.”

“Right.” Aziraphale sighs. “I suppose we would have to tell someone.”

“Who?” Crowley’s expression is still doing rather interesting things that are quickly becoming unfathomable.

“I don’t know! God, perhaps!”

“Good luck with that, then.”

Aziraphale turns the quill over in his hands. No, his last attempt at trying to speak to the Almighty had not worked out very well.*[209] “If Hell were informed, would that make a difference, or would it merely kick-start another go at Armageddon?”

“Can’t have Armageddon without a willing Antichrist, the Four Horsemen, and a battleground,” Crowley responds absently. “No. It would sure as Heaven piss everyone off, though.”*[210]

“Enough to get rid or Purgatory? Or perhaps,” Aziraphale says, seized by an idea, “it would be
enough awareness for the rest of Heaven to become aware of Purgatory’s existence, and its true purpose!

“I think you’re underestimating the average angel’s ability to care about what becomes of a demon, or a damned soul,” Crowley murmurs. “Can I ask you something?” he asks before Aziraphale protests that not all of the Heavenly host is as hard-headed as Gabriel, Michael, Uriel, and Sandalphon, among others. There are far more regular run-of-the-mill angels like Aziraphale than there are archangels or seraphim.

That sounds like you’re plotting another war, Aziraphale thinks, and his heart sinks like a stone. No, not that.

But if it’s a war for the right reasons, is it wrong?*  

Oh, God. He still doesn’t know. He trusts in Her, and he should also trust in his fellow angels, but his brethren recently tried to execute him without trial via the rather permanent means of hellfire.

“Go ahead and ask,” Aziraphale says faintly.

“Define sacrifice for me, would you? I don’t mean the dictionary definition,” Crowley continues, quirking an eyebrow when Aziraphale gives him a baffled look. “I want to know what Above would consider to be a proper sacrifice.”

“Oh. Well. That’s easy enough,” Aziraphale says, and then frowns. “No, easy isn’t the right term. It’s rather terrible, actually. Anyone can make a sacrifice, but what makes that sort of thing divine is when it’s the willing sacrifice of a soul who seeks redemption.”

“Redemption.” Crowley looks as if someone just invited him to attend a Catholic Mass. “Define that one again, too?”

“Well, if we ignore Earth’s religious standard, then redemption has many meanings aside from the classics,” Aziraphale tells him. “It could mean deliverance, a rescue from a terrible situation. Atoning for a mistake. Paying off a debt, or paying off a debt with a pledge rather than any physical goods. That sort of thing.”

“Atoning for a mistake,” Crowley repeats. “Yeah. Don’t need redemption for that, do you?”

Aziraphale has the odd feeling they’re now having two very different conversations. “Not necessarily, no. Why, what is it?”

“I need to go check something. Probably water the plants).*  

[182] “I Want to Break Free”  
[183] “Who Wants to Live Forever?”  
[184] Gentle harmony does not soothe the savage beast when other fucking drivers and lunatic pedestrians are involved.  
[185] “Sympathy for the Devil”
“Get Off of My Cloud”

Apparently, no one in Heaven noticed that he melted Ligur. That was so very awkward. Also, it made Crowley want to melt him again, the annoying bastard.

He may or may not be thinking of being accosted in a dark alley by four angels. (Hint: yes, he is.)

Which is quite pleasant, by the way, as long as you’re not a creature dependent on an Earth-like atmosphere.

The list itself was, however, distressingly long. It also makes no mention of anyone leaving Purgatory, but Aziraphale is trying very hard not to dwell on that right now.

Including bubbling pools of molten rock.

Discovering that had immediately explained why Aziraphale had gone to some (very) strenuous lengths to avoid killing anything or anyone the entire time they’ve known each other, which included a potential Antichrist.

Aziraphale is very good at obfuscating angels who aren’t really paying much attention in the first place. Crowley has always paid attention.

There never really has been anything quite like the Peloponnesian War. The Spartans had been such fun to hang out with. And drink with. Aziraphale still sulked a bit about Athens’ loss when the subject came up. Like it’s Crowley’s fault that his angel chose the philosophers over the complete nutters who breathed, ate, and lived battle from cradle to grave.

One of Crowley’s new goals after escaping Purgatory is investing in mobile battery life research, because this is ridiculous.

While almost everything was ported over to cassette or pressed to vinyl, some changes just never made the cut to new formats. “Gold Dust Woman” on 8-track is the superior recording. Rod Stewart released a song called “What Made Milwaukee Famous” that existed nowhere else until it was recently digitally rescued. Several different Pink Floyd tracks were longer, more experimental. Loud Reed’s Berlin. Michael Nesmith’s Loose Salute. It’s quite the list. (It is also a bit more work to keep 8-tracks in pristine condition, God (sorry) knows why.)

Aziraphale, Movies, Music. In fourth place: everything else.

That quill will never be the same. Fortunately, it’s not his quill.

Aziraphale should know by now not to try to challenge Crowley to do odd things, because Crowley thinks these things are perfectly acceptable. Even when sober.

That man had issues. See: “The Garden of Earthly Delights”

Aziraphale always tried to content himself with the knowledge that children, the innocent, would obviously go to Heaven. Crowley always countered that children, the innocent, deserved to bloody well live their lives first. That part of the conversation was usually when Aziraphale would pull out a pot or bottle of something strong and alcoholic, because it was the only counter-argument he had.
This also ignores the fact that society as a whole has been rather lax at remembering to teach the basic concepts of right and wrong, much less the more morally complex ideas of killing, murder (not the same thing), and maybe doing that whole looking-after-each-other bit. Aziraphale is, admittedly, a bit spoiled.

Though a few did make some rather terrible deals with beings that should have been avoided. However, both Crowley and Aziraphale are correct on the Problem of Musicians in Heaven, namely the lack thereof.

Unless you count Edward Elgar and Franz Liszt. Most people don’t.

They’re just a bit sharper than most humans are comfortable with.

Aziraphale would trust the demon who tried to save the world over an angel who wanted to destroy it any day, anytime, anywhere.

Crowley has doubts about this particular event. Aziraphale does not, and that makes it worse.

Bloody Metatron. What happened to the days when asking for the Almighty really meant something?

Which Crowley finds to be an appealing thought on general principle.

In six thousand years, Aziraphale hasn’t been able to work this through, but he really has tried. Crowley, however, is very specific about the rights and wrongs of war, even if he’s encouraging humans to start one. “If you’re defending yourself and your home from someone trying to take either from you, it’s right. If you’re defending someone else’s life and home from someone trying to take it from them, it’s right. Everything else is varying shades of Wrong.” “But—how can you be so certain? I mean, the War In Heaven—” “Was about politics, angel. Different ideas about policy. That’s all it was ever about.”

To be fair, he really does water them. The plants that were created and programmed to be terrified of a demon are becoming rather confused about their lack of mistreatment.
A Lie We Tell Ourselves

Chapter Summary

Sacrifice and sacrificial were synonymous with sacred and profane. One you choose.
The other is chosen for you. Messily.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Crowley returns to the living room. The book and its diagram—the first part of that complicated mess, anyway—are lying on the floor, staring up at him in accusation.

“Well. That just made you make perfect sense,” Crowley says to the book. The book responds with a faint angry flutter of parchment. “It’s not your fault you were incomplete.” He gives it a brief pat. “Above just had the cheat sheet, that’s all.”

Crowley sits down on the floor next to the book, staring at the large flat telly’s black screen. The diagram he’s found, the spell, will do exactly what he needs. What made no sense were the instructions on how to power it. The book had given him only one word: Sacrifice.

There are a lot of ways to commit a sacrifice, both in terms of Heaven and Hell, and even quite a bit in-between. Without specifics, Crowley had been cursing the book’s dead demonic author for a steady half-hour before Aziraphale called for his attention.

In one of the book’s only bits of plainly spoken instruction, it stated that the foremost way to break a trap of heavenly design was by death. Normally, that just means a good old-fashioned discorporation, a trip to Hell, and a literally hellish amount of red tape and paperwork to get a new corporation put together. It takes even longer if you intend your new incorporation to look exactly like your previous one. In the early days, Crowley memorized every single necessary line. He is fond of who he is, thank you.*[213]

Crowley rather doubts the Purgatory trap would allow his soul to escape down to Hell for a new corporation.

A sacrifice, especially the sort of sacrifice Aziraphale spoke of? Those tend to be permanent, anyway.

His other current difficulty is that the spell’s generated power will break only one trap. Not two. Only one. Even if Crowley could find someone in this Purgatory simulation who is real, and who could be convinced to be a willing sacrifice, one of them would still be trapped.

“Look, I know you’re an evil book, but you wouldn’t happen to have an appendix? Glossary of terms?”

The book’s pages flutter. Crowley doesn’t talk to heavenly or diabolical books nearly as often as Aziraphale, but he’s been around enough to pick up a bit of the lingo. That wasn’t a Yes, but it wasn’t quite a No, either. “All right. Show me this book’s best definition of sacrifice.”

The book flips to an image of a human shape hanging upside down from a tree, a thick stake driven
through one foot to pin them in place. Their mouth is open in soundless torment as blood slowly pools onto the ground from one thousand shallow cuts. Reminds him a bit of Francisco de Goya’s Black Paintings.*[214]

“Never mind.” That wasn’t a sacrifice. That was sacrificial. Not the same thing. Sacrifice and sacrificial were synonymous with sacred and profane. One you choose. The other is chosen for you. Messily.

“All right. Don’t get bogged down in the details, not yet,” Crowley mutters to himself. He wanders back to the bathroom and asks Aziraphale if he has any carbon paper.

“What? Why?”

Crowley stares at his angel, whose curly hair is standing up nearly upright on one side. Aziraphale is so often the epitome of Distracted Scholar, but with far better bathing habits and literal magic in his pockets. “Mirror-writing, angel. If I write sigils onto this surface, you can trace them with the carbon, flip the paper over, and then on your side, they’ll be correct.”

Aziraphale brightens. “You’ve found something?”

“Maybe. Before I say it’s certain, we should both translate it.” Much like mirror magic, this is not the sort of thing he wants to get wrong.

“How are you going to write it on your side?” Aziraphale asks, already digging around for potential carbon paper. Crowley suspects he’ll have to miracle it up, or go purchase it to make certain the paper will do what they need. No one has really needed carbon paper for anything in quite a while unless you’re out getting tattoos.*[215] “Wouldn’t that interfere with the existing magic?”

“No.” Probably not, anyway.*[216] “I’ll get a black marker that rinses away in a spritz of water.*[217] Then I can just write it directly onto the mirror, let you copy it, wipe it clean, and draw the next one.”

“Excellent.” Aziraphale gives up on searching his desk. “Bother. I’m off to a shop to fetch some. I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll be about.” Crowley wanders back through his flat, miracles up a pen and a notebook, and flops down on his sofa.

Then he writes down every song he’s heard since the drain pipe revelation. If this really is a message, and not merely rude prodding, it should be overwhelmingly obvious.

*Listen to yourself,* Crowley thinks derisively. *You already know exactly what needs to be done. You’re just afraid to do it.*

What he needs is a way to break the power limit on that spell. He needs to turn one broken trap into two. That’s really what he’s looking for, and if there’s an answer, it won’t be in the hell-book.

“Are you talking to me?” Crowley asks while using his mobile to look up song lyrics. He scribbles down anything that looks even remotely relevant. “I’ve never stopped talking to you, but I really don’t see someone in Heaven feeding me bloody clues through the music in my car. No one in Hell really, either. We’re not big on saving each other.”

Crowley ignores an unwanted sense of ill-timed depression. For just a little while, during the first days in Gehenna, they had still been the ragtag, soul-hurt remains of a family. As Ba’al said; all they had were each other.
When he was finally told to go upstairs and cause some trouble, Crawley had left gratefully, and in a hurry. The idea of brother/sisterhood that had held them together was swiftly falling apart. Ba’al had already become Beelzebub. Crawley had bitten two more demons for trying to kill him.

Everything Below had fueled the serpent’s anger. *Look what we have become*, he’d thought. The rage warmed him when Gehenna chilled him to the bone.

Crowley glances down at the notebook and its long list of rather specific hints. “If you’re ignoring me for calling you out on the Great Plan,*[218] then that’s really too bad, ’cause I’m not sorry for saying it.”

No one answers him. Crowley expected that.

“If that’s really you, then please. Please let this work. You know why I’m asking. Please.”

Crowley spends a couple of hours drawing sigils on his mirror, erasing them, and repeating the process. When that’s done, Aziraphale has an entire collection of symbols to investigate.

“A fair number of these have to do with boosting power,” Aziraphale says as he studies them. There are carbon-copied runes on the floor, on the desk, on the table, and pinned to the walls. “Yet more of them are about directing that power in specific ways. Some of them I can’t be certain of, given the corruption of the old tongues, but…in essence, I think you’ve uncovered a channeling spell. The only other thing you would need is what you’re directing the spell towards. Or who, I suppose.”

“Is it a channeling spell capable of breaking the walls of a heavenly trap?”

Aziraphale turns in a slow circle as he takes in all of the sigils again. “Yes, possibly. One would need to know the arrangement they’re meant to be in, of course, and direct the power appropriately. It would have to be a very strong source of power, though. Phenomenal.”

Crowley smirks. “*Phenomenal cosmic power, itty bitty living space.*”

“What was that?”

“Never mind, angel. Quoting a movie. You’d probably like it.”

“Oh! You’ll have to show it to me someday, then,” Aziraphale says.

*Oh, bugger, angel. I really would like to.* “It’s called *Aladdin.* Very Disney corruption of the *Thousand and One Nights* stories.” Crowley hesitates. “That American bloke, Robin Williams, he voiced the genie.”

“Oh, I did rather like him. He was a bit mad, but he seemed very kind.” Aziraphale looks briefly saddened. “Is it blasphemy if I think the suicide restrictions regarding entry into Heaven are wrong, Crowley?”

“I’d be a bit more concerned with how the restrictions got there, myself,” Crowley mutters. He has his suspicions about them, and they’re not aimed at Her. For once.*[219]

“Yes. Good point,” Aziraphale says, and lapses into unhappy silence.

“Zira?” Crowley won’t admit it, but seeing misery on his angel’s face is worse than angelic depression. Aziraphale shouldn’t *be* miserable. It’s like someone just violated a fundamental law of the universe. That always makes him irrationally angry, but anger doesn’t fix misery.*[220]
“The executions. I’ve been calling them that. Executions without trial.” Aziraphale looks up from the entirely blue piece of carbon paper he’s been fiddling with. Smudges of transferred blue-violet ink are all over his fingers. “I’ve been lying to myself. I mean—angels have killed other angels. We’ve killed demons, but to defend ourselves. To defend others. We’ve even done it to defend humans. The column of hellfire you told me about, though…that wasn’t to defend anyone. Please be honest with me: that was murder, wasn’t it?”

Crowley’s eyes feel too dry again, and so does his throat. The difference between them is that Crowley expected that sort of betrayal from Hell. Betrayal is one of Hell’s fiery standards, just another cog in the wheel of how that disaster functions. Discovering later from Aziraphale that they were going to permanently end Crowley’s existence with a bathtub full of holy water wasn’t a surprise. Annoying, frustrating, and frightening in the sense of needing dry pants, but not really a surprise.

Aziraphale, though—he wouldn’t have expected betrayal. It’s not the way Heaven is supposed to operate. Heaven has courts, and High Courts. If Aziraphale helping to avert the Apocalypse had truly been a bad thing, he should have been shuffled off to the Highest Court in Heaven for a trial before everyone. That was how it worked in the old days. Everyone had their say, including the one being Accused. Even bloody Lucifer had a trial for stirring up unrest, though that had broken apart in a stalemate.

Crowley doesn’t want to answer the question, but Aziraphale asked him for the truth. “Yeah, angel. No trial. No real wrong done, not by you. That would have been murder.”

“Oh.” Aziraphale nods. “I…I thought it might be. I just didn’t want to think about it. Dwell upon it.” He shakes himself. “Well. I know Gabriel was there, but who else was willing to go along with breaking Her commandment regarding murder?”

“Sandalphon.” Aziraphale doesn’t look surprised by that. “And Uriel.”

“Uriel!” Aziraphale stares at Crowley. “I know she accosted me in London, but—you’re certain?”

“Absolutely. It was only the three of them,” Crowley says. “Oh, well, and the imp who brought the hellfire upstairs. Surprised it didn’t burn a hole in that holy ceiling, to be honest.” Then he grins. “Holey ceiling.”

Aziraphale’s lip twitches. “Don’t start, you old serpent. Is there anything else I should know?”

“Gabriel may have wet his shorts when you didn’t die in the fire, if he’s capable of that sort of base act.”

Crowley had also seen Gabriel’s violet eyes flash with cheerful hatred. Angels aren’t supposed to hate. What in Satan’s sake is going on with that?

“Sandalphon might as well have been made of wood, which means he hasn’t really changed much,” Crowley adds. “Uriel, now—she looked a bit fearful. Asked what you were after I maybe breathed a bit of hellfire in their direction.”

“You didn’t!” Aziraphale starts chuckling while trying to press his curled hand to his mouth. “You never told me that. That’s ever so much better than the rubber duck!”

“Nah. S’like no one expecting the Spanish Inquisition, that rubber duck. It was brilliant.” Crowley smiles. “Any other fun details regarding Michael during your trip downstairs?”

“Well…” Aziraphale taps one ink-smudged finger against his lips. “Michael escorted me back to the
exit after collecting the holy water from the tub. He didn’t say anything, but he kept looking at me. I wonder now if it wasn’t just the shock of finding a surviving demon that kept prompting those odd looks.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said Michael had a sword when he came to collect you, Crowley.” Aziraphale gives him a wry look. “Michael the archangel. With a sword. It isn’t difficult for an archangel to wield holy fire. Why didn’t he just kill you?”

“I—er—” Crowley frowns. “All right, that’s a good point. They could have given holy fire a go instead of tossing me in here.”

“They didn’t try holy fire on myself, either, which would have been the most sensible reaction after hellfire’s failure. To me, that suggests two things,” Aziraphale says. “Either they didn’t believe holy fire would work to permanently dispatch you—which implies they didn’t intend on any sort of slow execution, by the way—”

Crowley growls something impolite about that.

“—or perhaps Michael had something else in mind for both of us,” Aziraphale suggests.

“What else? What else could they possibly have in mind aside from getting us out of the way?”

Aziraphale’s bright-eyed intensity lowers a few notches. “Well, I hadn’t quite gotten that far. It was only a thought.”

“No, no—don’t worry about it.” Crowley glances at the hell-book, which is just beyond the mirror’s range of view.

It has to be a very old book. For some ancient demon to be writing about sacrificial magic, they would have been capable of remembering their divinity. Perhaps not much of it, given how many of the sigils had already been converted to what would eventually become ritualistic High Hellspeech, but just enough. The book hadn’t even shelved with anything considered important. Crowley doubts the spell has ever been used.

No demon would sacrifice themselves to free another. Not even if it was Lucifer himself.

“I need to go poke something with a stick, angel. Back in a while.”

* * * * *

Crowley leaves both mirrors, and the unaltered little compact, safely shut up inside the bathroom. Then he gets to work.

The carpet in the living room is the easy part. Crowley gets rid of it by snapping his fingers. The sofa and television earn the same fate. He gives the stereo a forlorn look and then relocates it to the office and the dubious safety of his desk. The furniture and carpet are dead easy to replace, but that stereo has been with him for quite a while now. He can’t even bear to dispatch a bloody simulated copy.

The padding beneath the carpet is quite thick and expensive, the real source of what makes plush
carpet so decadently luxuriant. Away it goes, and then swiftly afterward it’s followed by an opaque layer of carpet dust and whatnot that collected beneath the pad on the concrete foundation. He had no idea that happened with carpets, even if the hoovering was done on the regular.*[223]

Crowley nudges the concrete with his toes. Modern stuff, nothing up to the old Roman standards of longevity. He still isn’t going to enjoy this part. Nothing for it, though.

He gets down on his hands and knees, conjures up a chisel and a hammer with a rubber end to it so he doesn’t have to listen to metal striking metal on infuriating repeat. The first chip of concrete goes flying off to land in his demolished kitchen.

That’s the trouble with these sorts of spells—you can’t just magic the sigils and lines into existence. You’ve got to fuel their creation with real effort. If you skip that step, the spell might still work, but the result is wet fireworks. He needs a big bang, not a bloody cosmic fart.

It isn’t just the bathroom he should have considered re-flooring. Bamboo flooring throughout the flat would be grand right now. Bamboo is easier to carve your way through than blasted concrete, even if it’s shoddy concrete.

He references the diagrams in the book several times before he gets annoyed with flipping pages back and forth, rips them out—the book whimpers at him—and arranges them on the floor so he can see the entire spell at once. Better.

Crowley is a determined, stubborn bastard. You don’t survive for six thousand years as a minor demon*[224] without having willful tenacity as an integral trait. He doesn’t stop chiseling away at his floor until he’s replicated the whole of the spell. Then he spends long minutes tracing every line and sigil while frowning. Every conduit is attached to every sigil, so power can easily flow and fill the carved channels. Every part of it will burn.

He wanders into the office, notices he’s leaving tracks on the carpet, and cleans off the concrete dust and crumbs sticking to his skin and clothing. Then he picks up the printout he’d made before his last chat with Aziraphale, the lyrics for “This is Gospel.”

“This is gospel for the fallen ones

Locked away in permanent slumber.”

Purgatory. Given how many other blatant messages about entrapment he’s received by bloody songs, Crowley strongly suspects that the prisons are literal; that no one put into Purgatory is ever meant to make it out. It’s not just Aziraphale and Crowley who are trapped.

“Assembling their philosophies

From pieces of broken memories.”

Hell and its demons. That one is rather obvious, thanks.
“The gnashing teeth and criminal tongues conspire against the odds

But they haven’t seen the best of us yet

If you love me let me go.”

Crowley scowls. Fuck you, too.

“This is gospel for the vagabonds,

Ne’er-do-wells, insufferable bastards

Confessing their apostasies*[225]”

That’s the real trick, isn’t it? Confessing to an apostasy. Choosing to stand against the Apocalypse wasn’t enough. This sort of sacrifice requires more than vested self-interest.

Fuck a rubber duck.

“Don’t try to sleep through the end of the world

Bury me alive

’Cause I won’t give up without a fight.”

He hadn’t. He didn’t. He won’t.

*   *   *   *

“Aziraphale?”

Aziraphale glances up and then rubs his eyes. Sometimes he has the very bad habit of adopting Crowley’s trait of not blinking very much, but this corporation’s eyes weren’t really designed for that. He checks the handheld mirror first, but sees nothing except what he suspects is one of Crowley’s dark walls.

Crowley is standing in front of the wall mirror on his side, looking into the bookshop with an expression on his face that puts Aziraphale on edge. That isn’t mischief or frustration, but fear.

“What is it, dear?” Aziraphale asks, surprised when Crowley flinches. “Oh, come on. Whatever you’ve found, it can’t be that bad.”
Crowley’s brow furrows. “It’s not what I’ve found. Well—not really. It’s related to that. I just…I don’t want to talk about it. I never wanted to talk about it.”

Aziraphale shakes his head and takes off his spectacles. “Anthony J. Crowley, I have literally seen you at your worst. Whatever you have to say can’t be all that bad.”

“No,” Crowley whispers. His eyes are wide, shining gold, the vertical pupil enlarged to make up for the perpetual gloom of Crowley’s bathroom. “No, you really haven’t.”

The feeling of walking a knife’s edge is growing stronger. “Say whatever you like, Crowley. I’ve known you for so long that I can think of nothing that would cause me to ever turn my back on you.”

That jolts Crowley into something approaching his typical scowl. “Alpha Centauri.”

“That was you asking me to leave with you, Crowley,” Aziraphale reminds him dryly. “I didn’t turn away. I just…couldn’t agree to it.”

Their confrontation that last Friday before the Apocalypse, when they met at the bandstand—that, Aziraphale regrets. Ever so much. He said terrible things—things he realized he has never rightly apologized for.*[226]

Crowley tilts his head back and forth. “Tomayto, Tomahto.”

Aziraphale smiles. “Come on, then. Out with it.”

“Do you remember asking me what Hell was built for?”

“I do,” Aziraphale replies. “You said it was created for revenge.”

“Yeah.” Crowley’s eyes flicker off to peer behind him; Aziraphale is almost certain that Crowley isn’t really seeing him any longer, nor the bookshop, either. “When I crawled my way out of burning, boiling sulfur, four of the Fallen ones were waiting to greet me. Greetings in Gehenna had already become hellish. They mocked me. Decided they would call me Crawley.”

Aziraphale covers his mouth with one hand in dismayed horror. No wonder Crowley had been so eager to change his name, why it had been such an easy thing for him to do.*[227]

“I was burning, angel. One good wing, one broken wing, and a heart full of hatred. I’d never hated anyone before that day. I think I still hate him, Zira, and not even because of what he did to me. I hate Gabriel because I don’t know why.”

“Crowley,” Aziraphale whispers. This isn’t a confession he ever expected to hear. In point of fact, he doesn’t think he ever wanted to hear it at all.*[228]

“I don’t think I’d killed anyone before, either, but when those Fallen angels came for me…I killed them. I killed them, and I still don’t regret it. They were going to hurt me, and I was already burning. I decided no one was ever going to hurt me again. Hastur only backed away when Death claimed the other three. Well, that, and I’d just named him. Returning the favor, I suppose.”

“Then why does Hastur treat you the way he does?” Aziraphale dares to ask.

“I really don’t think he remembers that part,” Crowley says absently. “Early days, angel. A lot changed after that.”

“Yes. I suppose it did.”
Crowley doesn’t seem to have heard him. “Go up and make some trouble, they said. So I did. I found Her newest creations. I found the newest things She’d made and loved, and oh, how I hated them!” The words emerge as a wrathful cry. “I hated what they’d done to me, and I hated Her for never answering, and revenge—oh, the idea that we could have revenge! If I could never go home again, if God never spoke to me again, then at least I could take away what She loved most!”

“Humanity,” Aziraphale murmurs, wondering at the odd feel of his chest cracking open. “Adam and Eve.”

“Yesssssss!” Crowley hisses, a hint of fangs flashing in the gloom of the mirror.

Aziraphale has never been afraid of Crowley, not as he properly should have been. This Crowley, however—Aziraphale might have feared this demon, had they ever before met.

“But then…” Crowley’s hatred crumbles away to nothing before Aziraphale’s eyes. “But then beautiful Eve took a bite of that fucking apple. I looked into her eyes as she cried her first tears. I watched her heart break, Zira.

“That’s when I knew…that’s when I knew that I deserved it. That I deserved to Fall with the others. It didn’t matter what had come before. I took her innocence, and I ground it into dust. I did to her the very same thing that had been done to me!

“For that, I belonged with the Fallen. I belonged in Hell.”

“Oh, Crowley.” Aziraphale gets out a handkerchief and dabs at his eyes. “You didn’t need to tell me that, dear.”

Crowley’s voice picks up a rasp, as if there is a hand gripping his throat. “Yes, angel. I really did have to tell you.” He lifts his arms, hefting a sledgehammer in both hands. “And it’s also why I’m doing this.”

Aziraphale drops the handkerchief in alarm. “Crowley! What on earth—”

“We’re not on Earth anymore, angel. That’s the problem.”

“But—Crowley!”

“Shut up and listen to me.” Crowley sounds utterly reasonable, but that isn’t what stills Aziraphale’s protests.

Crowley’s reptilian gold eyes are leaking equally golden tears.

“I’m listening,” Aziraphale says faintly.

“I don’t want you to doubt any of it. I want you to know that you’re my friend.” Crowley swallows. “I don’t know if it’s always been true, but for over six thousand years, you’ve been the best friend a fucking demon could ever have. I lo—I lo—bollocks.”

Aziraphale’s smile has to be wobbling as much as his trembling hands. “Oh, the trouble with the L-word.”

Crowley smiles back at him. “Yeah. I don’t know if it’s the romantic, messy sort or not, but…Satan help me, I do. And that’s why I’m saving you.”

Aziraphale feels himself pale. “But—Crowley! You can’t!”
“Oh, shut up,” Crowley retorts, sounding much more like his usual self. “I can do whatever I want. I can only save one, and I’m saving you. I want you to live with that, all right? You have to. Someone with a brain in their head has to look after all those stupid humans and that kid in Lower Tadfield.”

“Crowley.” His throat is so tight that it hurts to speak. He thinks maybe his heart is breaking, too. “Please, whatever it is, whatever solution you’ve found! We can do it together!”

Crowley briefly wipes his eyes with his sleeve before raising the sledgehammer again. “No, we can’t. But there are a lot of people you can save, angel. I think we’re in a building full of souls who are a lot more important than mine. Save them, Aziraphale. Help them break free.”*

Then he lifts the hammer.

“CROWLEY!” Aziraphale shouts—just as the hammer strikes the mirror. It turns into a spiderweb of cracks. The image of Crowley vanishes.

Then Aziraphale’s large, centuries-old mirror shatters.* Shards of polished silver rain down onto the bookshop’s old wooden floor.

“Oh, God—!” Aziraphale leaps for the silver vanity, but it’s too late. The handheld mirror’s surface is a web of cracks that won’t even reflect bits of his own face any longer.

Aziraphale drops the mirror. A few pieces of silver glass pop out of the frame, littering the ground like raindrops reflecting the moonlight. He falls to his knees next to them.

He can’t think. He can’t breathe. His heart is twisted in his chest, a lump of molten pain.

“Crowley,” he gasps. “What have you done?”

[213] Demons who’ve argued this point with Crowley have afterwards found themselves cursed with the worst streak of good luck imaginable. In Hell, this is not a good thing.

[214] “Saturn Eating His Children.” Just…that’s really all anyone needs to know.

[215] He has two. No, he won’t tell anyone what they are. Or show them off. He also made the tattoo artist forget they’d ever drawn them. Some things are just personal, okay?

[216] No. Granted, it’s really not advisable, either.

[217] He is still entirely bitter at Hastur for wreaking that plant mister. Bastard.

[218] He still stands by his declaration: “Great pustulent mangled bollocks to the Great blasted Plan!”

[219] Belief created by an institution is one thing, but overriding God is something else entirely.

[220] Learned that one the hard way, too. Feelings are so bloody difficult.

[221] “Thou Shalt Not Kill” can be easily, willfully misinterpreted. The original phrasing, “You Shall Not Murder,” is unavoidably specific, which is why Murder conveniently became Kill in an uncomfortably large number of Abrahamic religious sects.

[222] Also, the very first public riot.

[223] In concept, it’s rather like socks that disappear in the wash.
Especially one long engaged in the habit of lying to his Superiors

Apostasy: the abandonment of a previous belief, direction, or loyalty; refusing to continue to obey.

There is no guilt flavored quite like the guilt of hurting someone else, who then turns around and apologizes to you for everything that went wrong.

If names were that easy to discard, Aziraphale wouldn’t have been using variations of his own name everywhere he went for six thousand years.

Look, there is a reason why priests, especially confession-hearing priests, tend to drink. A lot. This is not a trait limited to the Irish clergy.

No, he really couldn’t resist.

When Aziraphale sees it again, he’ll remember that Crowley bought him that mirror when Aziraphale first opened the bookshop. Aziraphale protested that he needed no such thing. Crowley rolled his eyes and told Aziraphale that a room needed a good mirror. Made the place look bigger. Also, he was pioneering what would eventually become a décor necessity just for the hell of it, and could the angel just work with him a bit, here?

Chapter End Notes

Make sure you've scrolled ALL the way up to the top to read the chapter from the beginning. Something went *seriously* wonky with the original Tumblr link and it started the chapter off in the freaking middle. It's fixed now (with a brand-new posting) but...yeah. Annoying.
Chapter Summary

Free will was the building stone of Creation, and thus a building stone of Existence.

Chapter Notes

See Notes at the End for a spoilery Trigger Warning. (It's not as bad as you might think.)

Crowley leaves the sledgehammer on the bathroom floor and goes back to his carved concrete masterpiece. He regards it for a moment, considers the placement of the overlapping circles, and finds the best place to stand within the spell. Except for that bit of recent mirror magic, he hasn’t done anything like this in centuries.

Of course, he’s literally never done anything like this. Never will again, either.

The sigils and circles of ritual fell out of fashion a long time ago, but he really lost his taste for it when some arrogant bastard, attempting to summon the spirit of Aleister Crowley, left off with the dead man’s first name and summoned the demon Crowley instead. Crowley hadn’t even realized the name-thieving bastard was dead until that night.*[231]

One of the problems with literal bloody sacrifice*[232] is that you not only have to die, you’ve got to make enough of a mess to power the fucking spell. If you also happen to be a demon, it has to be quick and significant damage, too—otherwise he’ll just heal, and then he has to gather up the nerve to try this a second time.

He doesn’t have the nerve to do this twice. He’s barely holding it together just for the one go.

Crowley conjures up one of the only weapons he can think of that will be enough to obliterate this corporation’s ability to stay alive. He hasn’t seen a dragon-sized blunderbuss*[233] in centuries, but it sure put a large enough hole in his backside the last time someone shot him with one of the blessed things. The large bore of the barrel makes for a wide spread of deadly iron, which is even more effective at close range.*[234]

He fishes his mobile from his pocket and queues up Queen’s Greatest Hits, which has haunted the Bentley practically since its release in 1981. He listened to this bloody album on his way to see the world end. He wants to hear a bit of it once more before he never hears anything again.

“I clothed myself in your glory and your love

How I loved you
How I cried
The years of care and loyalty
Were nothing but a sham it seems
The years belie we lived a lie
I’ll love you ’til I die.”

Crowley rests the wide barrel of the dragon on his chest, directly over his heart. That feels proper—actually, it feels terrible. That means he’s definitely on the right track. It’s just that this particular track has a train speeding toward him, and his feet are glued to the bloody rails.

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“Save me, save me, save me!
I can’t face this life alone.
Save me, save me, save me!
I’m naked and I’m far from home.”

Atonement without redemption. He’s fine with that, really.

“How I cried
The years of care and loyalty
Were nothing but a sham it seems
The years belie we lived a lie
I’ll love you ’til I die.”

Aziraphale stares down at the broken vanity mirror. The pieces and details are blurred together, indistinguishable. He reaches out on instinct and finds the discarded handkerchief. He shakes out any potential bits of glass before he uses it to dry his eyes.

He still has time. He doesn’t have the exact specifications of what Crowley plans to do, but he has the runes. He has Crowley’s odd questions regarding redemption—atonement, specifically—and sacrifice. With that information, he knows where to search.

He flings himself to his feet and bolts for the rear of the bookshop, a dusty corner where his few unwanted customers do not often go. They’re looking for rare books, and while angelic texts are quite rare, they’re not the sort of thing to catch a discerning bibliophile’s eye.*[235]

Some of those sigils that Crowley had Aziraphale copy and translate hadn’t yet been corrupted by Hell. They’re some of the original letters from when angels began to form the first alphabet, sacred symbols that hold a great deal of power.

Aziraphale rips a book from the shelf with none of his usual care, his eyes speeding over pages for those now-familiar runes. No. He drops that one and pulls the next one forth, flipping past every
illustration as quickly as he can take in the relevant information.

He is racing a ticking clock that he can’t even see.

He picks up the third book and pauses one-third of the way through. Those are the sigils—no, that isn’t all of them. Crowley gave him far more to translate through the mirror. It’s close, though, he thinks. So very close.

Aziraphale traces the lines of the blended triangles, pentagrams, and heptagrams. It is definitely a spell designed before the War, before Below claimed the five points of a star as theirs—which Aziraphale still finds to be entirely ridiculous. That isn’t how magic works, but belief fuels so much of what humans do that it ultimately didn’t matter.

“Preservation,” Aziraphale murmurs, frowning. He reads the sigils again, and for once in his life, he is confounded. This isn’t what Crowley is using, he’s sure of it, but his instincts tell him it’s related. He just doesn’t know what this spell is meant to do—

There is no warning at all. This isn’t like watching the Earth split open to welcome the end.

In one moment, Aziraphale’s world exists. In the next moment, it does not.

There is no light. There is darkness.

Then there is the feel of someone gently slapping him in the face. “—wake up! God bless you, you fool, wake up right this instant!”

He cracks his eyes open, trying to figure out where he is. Lying on a cold floor; yes, it’s definitely that. Staring up at an unfathomable ceiling; that is also certain. Then he spends an uncomfortable moment wondering who he is, but spying the face above him quickly answers that question, and reminds him of several others.

Aziraphale tries to scoot back in alarm and fails miserably. “Uriel,” he croaks.

Uriel looks oddly relieved for someone who tried to kill him less than a month ago. “Yes, it’s me. Thank our Father that you’re all right.”

“You—what—but—you assaulted me! You tried to murder me!” Aziraphale squawks in disoriented outrage.

Uriel lowers her head. “I am sorry, Principality Aziraphale. Please forgive me my trespass against you. It was most egregious, and most foolish, and not what you deserved at all.”

Aziraphale eyes her, trying to comprehend her words as strength begins to trickle back into his limbs. Angels are capable of lying—he is certainly proof enough of that—but he believes her. Uriel’s apology is sincere. “Fine. Tell me what the devil is going on here, and I will consider the sanctity of your apology.”

“That is fair.” Uriel gently helps him to a seated position, made awkward by his wings. Aziraphale ruffles them and then feels intense relief. He has them back. He has—

Aziraphale tries to jump to his feet in an abrupt return of terror. “Crowley!”

“What about him?” Uriel asks in puzzlement. “He should be safe enough—”

“You don’t understand!” Aziraphale shouts, gaining his feet to look around. Then his heart stutters in
his angelic chest.

There are tiny little constructs, mathematically perfect boxes, as far as he can see in a room that seems to have no end. They’ve all been stitched together against a fabric of created reality.

There are thousands of them. Millions. “Oh, dear God.”

“This is Purgatory, Aziraphale,” Uriel says.

Aziraphale glares at her. “I figured that out days ago, thank you very much.” He just—even with the record book and its damning lists—he was not expecting Purgatory to be so massive.

“How did you get out?” Uriel asks, taking a gentle grip on his arm when Aziraphale wobbles rather unsteadily on his feet. “It should not have been possible for you to do so. It’s not yet safe for you to be out of confinement!”

“Safe? What—no, never mind.” Aziraphale places that all aside to deal with later. “Crowley broke me out of Purgatory’s confinement. I don’t know the exact spell he used, but it required a great deal of power.” He swallows hard, that cracked-chest feeling returning in earnest. “A sacrifice fueled by atonement.”

He knows what his freedom has to mean, but this is Purgatory. These are simulated conditions. Maybe, just maybe…

Uriel stares at him in obvious shock. “But—that—he is a demon! That shouldn’t be possible.”

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t possible.” Oh, God.

Then Uriel does something Aziraphale would have considered previously unthinkable. She grieves with him. “I am sorry, Aziraphale. If what you say is true, then…he has gone into Azrael’s care.”

“No,” Aziraphale whispers. No. Crowley can’t be dead. He’s a demon. Escaping from ridiculous situations is one of the things he does, like it’s just another magician’s trick. “No. Please.”

“I am so sorry—”

The explosion sends them both tumbling to the unyielding stone floor. Aziraphale finds himself startled and witless for the second time in less than five minutes. “What on Earth—!”

“In the Name of our Father.” Uriel grasps Aziraphale’s arm and pulls him away from the web of interconnected Purgatory cells.

The cells are burning. There is no heat to the fire that consumes them, but they burn nonetheless.

“What’s going on?” Aziraphale asks, but Uriel doesn’t answer. She doesn’t know.

Aziraphale grits his teeth as a high-pitched sound assaults his ears. It isn’t pain. It isn’t piercing. It simply is, and it will not be denied.

The sound blots out everything else. Aziraphale can feel Uriel’s hand, but he can’t hear his breath, or the beat of own his heart. There is only overwhelming sound, which gains strength as the fire spreads. Souls are beginning to drop from the prisons that ensnared them. Aziraphale can see evidence of so many different eras of life on earth. So many different sorts of beings.

Aziraphale turns to share his stunned amazement with Uriel. He has only heard that sound once before, but it is unforgettable. Unmistakable.
It’s the voice of Creation. They are listening to the ineffable voice of God.

Contrary to long-held belief, hellfire was not created to destroy angels. It wasn’t even a deliberate act of creation. Hellfire was a side-effect, one caused by cramming a vast number of injured and very angry celestial beings into the same dark hole in the ground. Expecting nothing to happen in that sort of situation is like expecting something nicknamed “diaper fruit” to be delicious.*[236]

On the opposite end of the scale, holy fire was not created to destroy demons. Holy fire exists because that is what the fire of Creation happens to be. That fire, otherwise known in many circles as God, may have foreseen Their effect on angels who Fell, but at that point, it was a bit late to unmake Themselves. That would have caused another slew of problems, and making Existence in the first place was an exhausting process. You do it the one time, give it a rest for a few eons, and then maybe consider plotting out the next version of Existence.

Not that you actually start on that project, not right away. The current version of Existence has to wrap things up first, and that takes as long as it needs to take.*[237]

Someone asked Them once if They had a Plan for Existence. Of course They said, “Yes,” as it sounded a bit more preferable to, “Sorry, I sneezed.”*[238]

This has had many terrible and unintended consequences ever since.*[239] God definitely should have thought that one out and invented the idea of humility before the idea of infallibility.*[240]

Free will, of course, was already in effect. It was the building stone of Creation, and thus a building stone of Existence.

Free will leads to belief. Belief leads to fear. Fear leads to temptation.*[241] Temptation, of course, loops right back around to fear and belief, which is why holy fire and holy water destroy the Fallen.

They believe it can; they believe it has to. God was angry; God cast them out. If God was angry, and God cast them out, then God’s blessing and God’s fire would turn them to ash if they dared to reach for it again.

It’s an excellent bit of logic. It is also untrue. For some reason, it’s very easy for both the mortal and the divine to forget that, before anything else, God is Love.

The only thing stronger than the love of God is a sacrifice made in love for the grace of another.

The dragon does exactly what Crowley intended. It puts a very large, irreparable hole in his chest. His is perfectly aware when the entirety of his heart is vaporized by high-velocity metal and gunpowder.

Blood runs from the hole in his chest and the messy exit wound in his back. It soaks his shirt, his
trousers, and stains the floor. Runners of blood hurry to fill the waiting riverbeds of carved sigils and circles.

This corporation is now most definitely dying.

Crowley doesn’t need to breathe to speak, though without a beating heart, he isn’t going to live for much longer. “Well. That wasn’t so bad.”

It’s never really been all that terrible to die. The paperwork was always the worst. It’s just that this is the very last time, and he sort of wants to savor it. Besides, he doesn’t remember enough of Heaven to know how Azrael will greet a dead demon.

*Hello, Brother.*

Crowley frowns. That is most certainly not the angel of Death. No sweeping wings, no over-the-top drama, and also, the spell isn’t quite done filling up with blood. “Who the Heaven are you?”

*I didn’t think you would remember me, though once you knew me well.*

“Oh—” Crowley abruptly hits his knees as his body registers pain and blood loss. Bollocks. “Better speak fast, mystery wanker. This corporation is done for.”

Crowley feels warmth on his shoulders, like two hands have reached out to steady him. *I’m so very sorry. This was the only way.*

His eyes start burning again. “Aziraphale doesn’t deserve to be locked away like this. Not him. As long as this frees him, then I’m happy.”*[242]

*You do not deserve this either, Brother. Not any of the souls imprisoned in this place deserve such a fate.*

“Imprisssioned?” His blood has almost finished traveling its way through all of the carved lines of the spell.

Crowley is vaguely impressed. You never really stop to think about how much liquid is in five liters until it’s making a mess everywhere.*[243]

*Purgatory was never meant to be. Not only was it not created by our Father, it was easily warped.*

Crowley snorts. “Doesss that have anything to do with whatever the fuck isss wrong with Gabriel?”

*I think Gabriel just needs therapy,* the voice says wryly.

Crowley is starting to think that this voice—this man’s voice—is familiar, which is bloody odd. He’s never heard this man speak in his entire life.

*In this life? Oh, yes. The voice sounds sad. But you’ve never heard me speak while you’ve had this name.*

Before. This is something that came before the war in Heaven.

Crowley swallows as dizziness begins to chase his thoughts. He is about to run out of blood, but he made his choice. He refuses to regret it. “What do you want?”

*Right now, I want what you want. The sacrifice of one is not enough, but the sacrifice of two, especially a sacrifice made in love? That is the sort of power that creates worlds.*
“Gonna translate that?”

*I want your friend to live. I want Purgatory to be destroyed. I would also like to be myself again, but at this point, that’s just a pleasant bonus.* The warmth on Crowley’s shoulders increases until it feels like a physical touch. *Are you up for a bit of mischief, Brother?*

Crowley still has no bloody idea what’s going on, but the question makes him smile. “Mate, I was born ready for mischief.”

He doesn’t hear the other’s laughter, but he can feel it. *Made ready, more like.*

When the spell Crowley carved into the concrete lights up with an ethereal glow, there is no more pain. Instead, everything turns to radiance.

Rather noisy radiance, at that.

*   *   *   *

“What do we do?” Uriel asks as they edge their way back to the building’s open doorway. The scent of violets assaults Aziraphale’s nose. He glances behind him and discovers that the building for Purgatory is exactly where he expected to find it—in the Elysium Fields, to the east of the main road that connects heaven’s gates to the City.

“You’re asking me?” Aziraphale shoots back in disbelief. Then he stumbles to a halt, turning back to face Purgatory.

Souls. There are souls everywhere: confused, crying, shouting, or simply wandering about in shock.

Bugger!

Aziraphale strengthens his voice and begins to shout in the Unified Tongue, the one understood by all of humanity until the fall of the Tower of Babel. *EVERYONE! THIS WAY, PLEASE!*

Uriel catches on at once and mimics him. “ALL OF YOU! PLEASE EXIT THIS BUILDING!”

“Yes, PLEASE!” Aziraphale adds. “YOUR AFTERLIFE IS IN THIS DIRECTION!”

“But—weren’t we just living our life after death?” a bloke in quite the dated powdered wig utters in French. Aziraphale thinks that might be Louis XIV of France, which is a fascinating find all on its own. Crowley was certain that the Sun King was one of Hell’s victories.

Crowley. Aziraphale’s throat goes painfully tight.

No. He can’t dwell. Not right now. Not yet!

“You WERE IN THE BETWEEN PLACE. I MEAN, YOU WERE IN PURGATORY!” Uriel calls, and many heads begin to nod as if this is the most sensible idea ever.

*Bloody Church influence,* Aziraphale thinks irritably, waving souls through the open doors. “Oh, this will never do, Uriel! It’s not nearly big enough to accommodate them all.”

“I agree.” Uriel reaches out, as if grasping something in her hands, and pulls at the stone of the
doorway until it’s a far larger egress. It’s so much easier for the multitude of newly freed souls to escape the destruction of Purgatory.

“Where the devil is Jerahmeel when you bloody well need him?” Aziraphale mutters. The younger archangel is the one who is meant to be watching after souls who find their way into the field beyond the gates, and there is certainly a great deal of traffic to be directed!

“Just keep convincing them to move along!” Uriel orders, and continues shouting instructions at the freed souls.

Aziraphale gives up and resumes doing the same. Not everyone is responding to the Unified Tongue. While Uriel continues to use that, Aziraphale begins sorting through all of the languages of Earth. There are a great deal of them, but hearing familiar sounds seems to make many hesitant souls trust that escaping the burning building (and the accompanying piercing shriek) is most certainly in their best interest.

Crowley asked him to save these souls. If Crowley is—if he really is gone, if he isn’t lingering in this disaster somewhere—then Aziraphale owes it to his dearest friend to do as Crowley asked. “PLEASE! COME THIS WAY! LEAVE THIS PLACE!”

It’s the only distraction Aziraphale has from what is quickly becoming terrible, unfathomable grief. He wipes at his eyes, sniffs back tears he doesn’t have time to indulge in, and sets to work.

*          *          *          *

There is a truth to human existence that the demon Crowley recognized almost at once when his time on Earth began. The worst of human tragedies are most often caused not by evil intentions, or good intentions, or any intentions at all. They are caused by mistakes.

Examples of this can be seen in many events that appear entirely harmless until they are suddenly quite the opposite. The extinguished cigarette in the rubbish bin that still has a hidden core of heat. Forgetting to look right (or left) at the turn signal before pulling out in front of a rather unexpected lorry. Cortez bringing disease-carrying pigs along with him on his tour of North America.*[247] AOL-Time Warner. Cleopatra asking for a basket of ash to wear the traditional mask of grief, and instead receiving a basket of asp.*[248] The Hindenburg explosion. Napoleon’s invasion of Russia.*[249] The Imperial system of Measurement. The Exxon-Valdez having an unfortunate collision with the Prince William Sound. Twelve million people losing phone service in the USA in 1991 due to a single programming typo.*[250] Jaws 3-D.

Crowley was capable of recognizing this truth because he had already experienced a first-hand example. The first unintended mistake also led to Creation’s very first unintended death.

“It was an accident,” Gabriel said, and the others believed him. Even the Crowley-who-had-been, whose wings lost their shine when their brother died, knew that Gabriel spoke the truth.

It was an accident, but it was a death that would chill the blood of everyone in Heaven, angel and Fallen alike. They recognized, on some deep, celestial level, that this was never meant to happen. Some irrevocable harm had just been done to the whole of creation.

None of them knew exactly how correct they were. That death would set off a chain reaction that would rend the very fabric of existence asunder with a celestial war that ended the whole of
Creation…unless two very specific things were to occur.

God could not simply nudge things back into alignment, not without breaking the Rules that They had set for Themself. The questions had to be asked, and the answers, the conditions, had to be accepted.

Doubt in Heaven grew as the war raged on. It was no longer about who raised a sword, or who fought, or the battles won and lost. Black wings were enough to convict an angel of treason. Blackened wings were an assurance that they were most certainly Fallen—and the Fallen were the enemy.

The Crowley-who-was lost the color from his wings, but not from anger. Not by betraying any tenant of Heaven. He did not join with Lucifer and the Fallen. He only continued to do as his Creator had bid him. He carried no staff, not as his fallen brother had. He refused to take sides. Both angel and Fallen felt the briefest touch of hand or scale, and their wounds were stitched, their bones healed, their weary souls strengthened. If they stood up and resumed fighting, that was not for the Crowley-who-was to judge.*[251]

In his grief, he didn’t notice that his refusal to judge the Fallen was being twisted. It became easier to believe that he not only conspired with the enemy, but he had become the enemy already.*[252]

“He will turn on us,” Gabriel said of the Crowley-who-had-been, and the others did not believe him. Not yet, anyway.

“No matter the color of his wings, our brother still does as he always has,” Raguel said. Her hair changed to reflect the sudden birth of a new star.

“He helps those who have fallen on the battlefield, no matter who they fight for,” Uriel agreed.

“Just as—” Saraquel bowed his beautiful head. The only thing the Crowley-who-was had asked of them was to spare him one pain: never speak their lost brother’s name.*[253]

If cooler heads had prevailed—if there had, indeed, been any cooler heads left in Heaven at all—many things might never have come to pass. Gabriel’s guilt and grief would not have forged itself into a terrible wrath. An innocent would not have been condemned to Fall.

Of course, if Crowley had never Fallen, he would never have met a certain Principality on Earth in a certain Garden. No Arrangement would have existed between an angel and a demon who were very bad at being enemies. Crowley would not have been on Earth when the Antichrist was born. Aziraphale would have given in to the archangels’ demands for war. Things would have turned out very, very differently, and Existence would have ended in quite the premature fashion.

It’s all quite ineffable, really.*[254]

* * * *

Elysium is filled to capacity with souls. Aziraphale had given a go of trying to keep count of the souls who’d flocked through Purgatory’s widened doors, but gave it up for a bad job about three seconds later. He would need to look that sort of thing up in the Library, provided the Library herself didn’t lose count in the chaos, also.*[255]
Jerahmeel finally turns up, as does Camael, Jophiel, Cassiel, Barachiel, and Saraquel, who looks around at the milling, confused throngs of souls and shouts, “GOOD GOD, WHO BROKE THE EARTH?”

“Well…it’s a fair question, given the circumstances,” Aziraphale says to Uriel, who seems torn between mad laughter and burying her face in her hands.

Aziraphale doesn’t feel like laughing. He doesn’t feel like chuckling or smiling, nor is he putting much thought into the continuance of his existence once the current crisis is resolved.

For six thousand years, his existence has revolved around the presence of the demon Crowley in his life. Crowley has been a constant, a thorn in his side that never held a sting, a questioning voice daring to utter all the blasphemous thoughts that Aziraphale feared to say. Crowley performed miracles on Aziraphale’s behalf just to make both their lives easier, even though, had anyone from Below caught wind of their Arrangement, those miracles would have gotten Crowley not merely killed, but destroyed.

Crowley is his adversary, his immortal enemy, Aziraphale’s reason to continue his life on Earth. His dearest friend.

How is one supposed to soldier on without their dearest friend?

“What in heaven’s name is going on here?”

Aziraphale turns around at the sound of Gabriel’s too-jovial voice. He has arrived from Home Office, with Sandalphon just behind him.

Gabriel and Aziraphale’s eyes meet in the same moment. Gabriel comes to a sudden halt right in front of him. “Oh, dear heavens, it’s the fire-breathing traitor. Get—”

Aziraphale doesn’t hear the rest of what Gabriel says, because Gabriel is now on the ground, holding his bleeding nose, and Aziraphale’s hand hurts quite a bit.

“Oh—ouch!” Aziraphale shakes out his right hand, trying to figure out if he just broke his fingers. He hasn’t actually needed to hit anyone in a long time. “Oh, my. I didn’t…”

No, he can’t say he didn’t mean that. Aziraphale meant that very much.

Uriel puts her hand on Aziraphale’s arm. “Peace, brother. I will allow no harm to come to you.”

Aziraphale gives her a shocked look. “No harm—the man has a flaming sword, Uriel!”

“Oh, that might have been recently misplaced,” Uriel murmurs with a secretive smile.

“What the hell is going on here?” the Metatron asks, looking around in dour-faced shock as he strides onto the field. “Where did all of these bloody souls come from?”

They don’t know, Aziraphale realizes. Purgatory was not some elaborate scheme of every chief angel in the hierarchy. This is something…

Oh, dear. This is probably something worse.

As if on cue, the building that housed the Purgatory cells lets out an angry rumble. Aziraphale turns around just in time to watch the white stone structure crumble into a rather large pile of broken brick, mortar, and dust.
“Who did that?” Gabriel yells. He’s standing again, and he remembered to heal his nose, but has forgotten to rid himself of the blood that now stains his chin, shirt, and jacket. “Who destroyed the work of God?”

“Work of God, my arse.” Aziraphale seeks out the speaker and finds Raguel in the crowd, looking rather bemused by the entire affair.

“How. Maybe that’ll be a proper answer, then,” Camael says, pointing at the destroyed building.

It is no longer a broken, dusty pile. Instead, a column of light burns where Purgatory had stood, so bright that Aziraphale has to resist the urge to turn away. Then he loses sight of it entirely as the radiance overcomes even an angel’s resistance to holy fire.

“Oh. Oh, shit,” he hears Sandalphon mutter.

Aziraphale blinks spots from his eyes. Then he stares in blank amazement.

The white stone of Purgatory has been reshaped and rebuilt. Instead of a building, it is now a rather nice Grecian orator’s platform, with perfect Ionic columns and curving stairs on both sides leading to the top. Any of the ancient philosophers would have been pleased to speak from atop that stately platform.

Standing upon the wide platform are three figures. Michael is on the left, wearing his armor and looking rather pleased with himself. In the center is the figure of a woman with gentle waves of curling brown hair that falls to her waist. Then she is an old woman with hair the color of steel. Then a child. Then an old man. The old man becomes a teenager that faintly resembles Adam Young. Then a girl. Then she is a grown woman again.

Standing next to the ever-changing one is—

“Crowley?” Aziraphale breathes, and then quickly realizes that it can’t be Crowley. For starters, Crowley would probably set London on fire* if someone tried to make him wear his hair in the old angelical style of long, perfect curls. For another, this man is milk-pale, something Crowley only achieves if he avoids all contact with the sun for a year or three.

Crowley’s wings are also not gold. He does not have ice-blue eyes. He gave up on black robes the exact moment it was fashionably acceptable to do so. He also, to Aziraphale’s knowledge, never bore a carved black staff with a serpent twined about it. This particular caduceus only has one serpent carved into place instead of the mirrored two, and it lacks wings, but the wings had been an added bit of Greek nonsense, anyway.

Not-Crowley turns his head and glances down at the ever-changing figure next to him. “You might want to pick something and stick with it.” He even sounds like Crowley, which is completely distressing. “This lot isn’t really used to that anymore, you know.”

“Oh, very well.” The ever-changing one settles on being a female with curling black hair, green eyes, and olive skin. Instead of a gown, she’s wearing a white singlet, a multitude of sparkling bracelets, and denims that look a bit threadbare. She neglected to bother with shoes. “Better?”

“It’s an interesting choice,” Michael comments, raising an eyebrow at the muttering that breaks out.

Aziraphale realizes, in a rather abrupt fashion, that the woman standing next to Michael is...his Creator. “Oh, dear,” he squeaks.*

“Oh, thank you, God,” Uriel says. Aziraphale glances at her and is surprised to find tears in her eyes.
He is about to remind Uriel that it hasn’t really been *that* long since their Creator turned up when she whispers, “Raphael.”

Aziraphale looks back at the very Crowley-like ginger angel for a moment. It’s the staff, really. He’s seen it before, and often. It’s a famous symbol on Earth, most often associated with hospitals and healing.


He is a scholar, a guardian of knowledge, so of course Aziraphale remembers that the Archangel Raphael, sixth of the First Seven and God’s chosen healer, died in the war between angel and Fallen. By choosing to guard the Library rather than dare the battlefield, Aziraphale hadn’t witnessed the event. (To his regret, he never even *met* the archangel before his untimely death.) Otherwise, all Aziraphale knew was that Raphael had not been defeated or slaughtered, but killed in a terrible accident, a complete tragedy.

The name is picked up by the other angels who stand among the mass of confused souls. “Raphael,” they repeat, their voices full of reference.

Someone British, dressed like Soho never exited the 1970s, looks awed. “Raphael? Like that angel bloke in all the paintings? That’s rad, man!”

Gabriel, on the contrary, looks thoroughly horrified. “Raphael?”

Without intending to, Gabriel’s harsh whisper sends a wave of sound through the crowd. One after another, souls and angels alike repeat the archangel’s name.

* * * *

Names have power. Celestial beings know this very well, which is why they are careful not to call upon the Name of God directly. It isn’t that God would mind so much as the angels in question fear they would abruptly find themselves the center of God’s undivided attention, and that bit of mead with lunch might not have been the best idea.

Once upon a time, an angel suffering under the weight of grief asked the others not to say the name of their fallen brother. The angels, still in shock, had agreed. When the Fallen heard about the request, they decided upon the same course of action. Even though they were learning to hate, they had respected Raphael, who never once treated them as lesser.

Names have power. If you stop speaking a name, that power is lessened. Eventually, the name will be forgotten. Oh, it might turn up again here and there, but it takes work to keep that sort of memory alive. Someone has to remember them. Mention them. Tell a story. Or accidentally impersonate a dead archangel. Whichever.

To bring a name back to life, all it takes is for that name to be heard. The more times it is said, the greater its strength, and the greater the memory that accompanies it.

On Earth, theology scholars lift their heads, consumed by what had before only been passing interest in The Book of Tobit. One enterprising soul runs for his safe, retrieving from it one of the only known surviving illuminated manuscripts devoted solely to the Book of Tobit. The enterprising monk who created it, in a moment of what he called divine inspiration, had painted the archangel
Raphael with brilliant red hair.

The Judaic argument over the canonical potential of the Book of Tobit and its inclusion in the Torah suddenly becomes far more intense. The debate regarding the ability of chickens to lactate will be remembered as a calm, rational discussion of anatomy in comparison.*[262]

In the Vatican, the current Pope halts mid-prayer in confusion. Instead of an encouragement towards charity, he suddenly finds himself struggling to remember why the Book of Tobit was declared deuterocanonical. Much of the flock, alas, tends not to read the deuterocanonical texts, and the Book of Tobit passes along lessons of great importance.

At least fifty different artists suddenly pick up their tools, possessed by the need to create works dedicated to an archangel whose existence has always been considered rather questionable outside of Catholic and Orthodox circles. There is no doubt in their minds that Raphael’s hair is meant to be red. The difficulty, they later discover, is what to do about Raphael’s wings. They just don’t want to be white, nor the traditional gold, and several great works of art may remain forever unfinished out of sheer artistic frustration.*[263]

Protestants the world over become very interested in deuterocanonical books. Then, in an even worse development for church leaders, they start prodding at the apocrypha in hopes of finding out more. The Church of England enters into a state of minor panic instead of its usual state of placid guilt.

In areas throughout the world, nurses and physicians, healers of all sorts, pause for a moment before the staff and serpents engraved on the walls of the hospitals they work in. They know what the caduceus is, of course, it’s just…they’ve never really stopped to just look at it, you know?*[264]

In museums, people slow their steps and pause before displays they would otherwise have ignored. There are examples of the wingless caduceus on display in many parts of the world. It was the spread of an idea that refused to die, carried by a man who had no bloody idea why he kept making staffs with two serpents on them.

Well, he was a serpent, and carrying a staff was trendy. Crowley decided to keep at it until the Greeks had to go and ruin everything by adding wings.

* * * * *

Michael glances around and purses his lips. “Father, before things get out of hand, perhaps something should be done regarding these souls?”

“Oh, yes. That is an excellent point.” God makes a sweet little shooing motion with her hands. The field is abruptly clear of everyone except the angelic. “There. Into the City they go. Jerahmeel, if you go inside, there will be others waiting to help you sort everyone out.”

Jerahmeel looks relieved. “Thank you. I’ll see to it at once.”

Aziraphale is a bit relieved by the lack of people—he never was one for crowds—and simultaneously bitterly disappointed. It’s easy to see everyone now.

Crowley isn’t here. He’s—
“HE shouldn’t be here!” Gabriel shouts, pointing at Raphael with one shaking finger. Aziraphale is so startled by Gabriel’s shout that he forgets how much he’d like to punch Gabriel for a second time.

“That’s not a very nice thing to say to the man you accidentally killed with a flaming sword,” Raphael replies in lazy amusement.

Aziraphale tries not to grind his teeth. He might hit a returned archangel next just for his continued insistence on sounding like Aziraphale’s dead best friend.

“I told you he needed therapy,” Raphael continues, apparently speaking to the air. He ruffles his golden wings, which, Aziraphale realizes, are not an archangel’s typically pure gold. The tip of every feather looks as if they’ve all been dipped in black ink. The effect is…certainly different.

Then the serpent coiled about the staff lifts its head, revealing that it wasn’t a carved part of the staff at all. “And I didn’t disssagree with you, Brother.”

Aziraphale makes a choked sound. That—that—

His knees are ridiculously weak and trembling. He feels so much relief that it’s nauseating.

Crowley. Aziraphale would know that irritable hiss anywhere. Crowley’s alive.

Apparently, Gabriel recognizes him, too. “That—THAT IS A DEMON!” Several angels examine the serpent in fascination or concern, but no one moves to do anything about it. Aziraphale understands their hesitation: even if that’s truly a demon, well, God is standing right there.

The serpent turns his head to glare at Gabriel. “And whosse fault isss that, you great bollocksssing, ssslimy bassstard?”

Gabriel pats at his coat pockets briefly and frowns. “Where is my sword? No matter. YOU WILL BE BURNT OUT OF EXISTENCE—”

“Gabriel.”

God’s voice is quiet, but it rolls over the violet-laden field like the gentlest tsunami.

“Er.” Gabriel belatedly realizes what the others recognized a few minutes ago. “Uh. Father.” He straightens his shoulders, then his tie. “So you’ve returned!”

God smiles. “Who says that I ever left?”

“But—” Gabriel looks so flabbergasted that Aziraphale feels a moment of pity. “But you never answered me. I spoke to you, and you never answered!”

“Oh, dear Gabriel. Of course I answered you,” God replies. There is faint displeasure in her eyes that feels like a fierce brand of rebuke, and Aziraphale isn’t even the one on the receiving end. “You just became so accustomed to flash, to the easy path of hearing my words directly. I sent you an answer for every question you asked, but you refused to see them. Unfortunately, that can be said about quite a number of you.”

Beside him, Uriel hangs her head in shame. Aziraphale, who stopped feeling guilty about the flaming sword incident around about when he had to sign it back over to a postman, decides that, for once, he is not going to act like he is ashamed of his existence.

Crowley is right. Aziraphale didn’t do anything wrong.
Oh, that felt wonderful to think!

God then looks directly at him. Aziraphale’s eyes widen as he tries not to retreat to the dubious safety of Nowhere In Creation Is Safe.

Then she looks to the serpent and smiles. “Zaherael. Please.”

“Oi, not that!” Crowley hisses. “No one’sss called me that in over sssix thoussand bloody yearsss!”

“Indulge me, dear one.”

“Zaherael,” Aziraphale mutters under his breath. The name is vaguely familiar, but it was rarely spoken of. It was never treated as if it was of the slightest importance.

Goodness, no wonder Crowley couldn’t remember his name.

The serpent, after a great deal of grumbling and swearing, slithers down to the ground. A moment later, Crowley is standing on the opposite side of the caduceus, his left hand gripping it just below Raphael’s right hand. “Happy now, Mum?” asks Crowley at his most sarcastic.

“Quite happy, yes,” God replies. Michael rolls his eyes.

Aziraphale stares at them. The first angels in creation had been seven in number, later to be known as the first archangels when God began creating all different sorts of angels. He just didn’t know—the seventh archangel’s name wasn’t written down. Not anywhere. The books discussing the First Seven are rather sparse on the subject. It was most often implied that, much like Raphael, the seventh was lost to the war in Heaven.*[265]

It was certainly never mentioned that the Sixth and the Seventh were bloody twins!

Raphael and Crowley are the same height. Their hair is the same color; their features are similarly angled, their bodies built from slender lines and bony joints. Their noses share the qualities of a hawk’s beak, though Raphael’s seems a bit less pronounced. The hands gripping the staff shared between them are exactly the same but for the sun-burnished bit of color to Crowley’s skin.

Aziraphale finds himself breathing a quiet sigh of relief. Beyond the superficial details, Crowley is very much still himself. He’s dressed not in a copy of Raphael’s black robes, but in his most recently preferred style of clinging black denims, shirt, and jacket. His hair is short and spiked, just as Aziraphale had last seen it. His eyes are still brilliant gold, with the slitted pupils of the serpent. They’re not blue at all, not like his, er…brother.

Then Aziraphale’s mouth falls open. It isn’t the fact that Crowley’s left wing is so mangled it looks as if the poor thing has been mauled, or Crowley suffered a truly awful crash-landing. It’s far worse than that.

Crowley’s wings aren’t black.

[231] That Summoning really broke up the monotony of the 1950s and the bloody annoyance of Rationing, though. He had a great deal of fun refusing to do anything that utter wanker Anton LaVay asked of him.

[232] Aside from the very inconvenient Dying part.
At least it wasn’t a bundled blunderbuss.

Piracy was a lot of fun. Except for that “getting shot” part.

A bit of magical distraction doesn’t hurt, either.

Durian Fruit is the Platypus of the Plant Kingdom.

Time is relative, after all.

That spot on Jupiter is never going to come off at this rate.

Definitely went too far with the dinosaur joke.

Also, inventing lying was not the best idea They have ever had.

Okay, so the Star Wars Prequels are essentially Biblical scripture, but that tends to happen a lot.

It’s really odd to realize that he means it. Drama is grand and all, but he means it. Weird.

Spill the contents of two 2-liter bottles on your kitchen floor. Then spill another full 2-liter just for the bonus content. Congratulations; now you know what sorts of supplies you’ll need, and how much of them, to clean up a body’s worth of blood if your interest should happen to swing towards that particular sin. By the way, the answer is: a lot.

Entirely correct.

Not what he expected. Crowley blames the proximity of Heaven.

If the humans of Shinar hadn’t decided to be arrogant about it, there would have been no need for Aziraphale to structurally destabilize the Tower to ensure its fall. Crowley thought that this was the most hilarious idea Heaven had yet produced, and helped Aziraphale with the work. After all, it was mischief of the sort Hell would approve of, even if it wasn’t Hell’s idea.

Which doesn’t even yet account for the disease-bearing people.

The Queen had a bit of a lisp, and a new serving girl, who was born and raised in Rome, was thinking about the wrong tradition entirely.

A lesson that Germany then proved it had not learned during World War II.

Crowley thought of the incident as diabolical inspiration.

He judged them for being stupid fools who were making his job that much harder, but yelling at them to stop bleeding all over the place wasn’t much of a deterrent.

Oppenheimer was not the first to utter the words, “Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds.” Neither was Krishna in the Bhagavad-Gita. The words were first spoken in Heaven, and the Archangel Michael was never the same afterwards.

This, too, was a mistake born of intentions that were neither good nor bad. No one meant for their fallen brother to be forgotten, but names held a power they did not yet fully understand. When their brother’s name ceased to be spoken in Heaven, it was, with one brief exception, forgotten by the whole of Creation.
Too great or extreme to be expressed in mere words, like trying to describe the Ice Capades to someone who has never left the sheltering warmth of the Sahara Desert.

Closest the Library has ever come to losing a bit of data. Still quite far from the actual event, though.

Again.

Aziraphale hopes that God isn’t too angry about his punching Gabriel in the face, because Aziraphale is not the least bit sorry.

Even though time is relative, it can still be said to have been quite a while.

The very first of its kind.

Mostly because God prefers wine.

Around 695 BC, Aziraphale and Crowley met in a tavern, where Aziraphale discovered that Crowley was already completely, astoundingly drunk. Crowley said that Aziraphale owed him one for Tobit, and it’d better be something grand, but maybe after he’s sober again in a few weeks. Aziraphale was very confused by that, but assumed Crowley needed to do something miraculous for some reason, and thus needed a cover story so Below wouldn’t find out about it. It made Aziraphale’s later reading of the Book of Tobit very, very confusing.

Logic and the Jewish Food Mafia mix like oil and water, but they do their best. Bucking thousands of years of tradition in regards to meat, dairy, and the illustrious pareve is difficult, okay?

Leonardo da Vinci had a fairly good grasp of his archangels, and he couldn’t get it right, either. He asked his good friend Crowley for advice. Crowley suggested maybe Leonardo should go back to painting women, as it was probably less stressful.

The image of the caduceus is first recorded as turning up in a certain region of Mesopotamia during a certain time period in which forty days and forty nights of rain were about to fall. A certain book also exchanged hands, though Noah had no idea what he’d been given until he unwrapped it from its secure bindings a few days later.

Which is exactly what happened. Sort of.

Chapter End Notes

Trigger warning: Suicide *attempt*. I really did mean it when I didn't toggle the option for Major Character Death.
Playing Dice with the Universe

Chapter Summary

"Soon you will learn that the heart can be a fickle creature."

Chapter Notes

In which questions are answered and God decides that next time, They'll be leaving the dice alone and sticking with poker.

In the beginning, God Created. That was what God did. They made a new thing, pondered it, and then made another new thing. Sometimes these new things were related; sometimes they were not.*[266]

God never wanted servants.*[267] Existence was already a lonely place, and being set above others would be lonelier still.

First, They created Michael. Except for the lack of being made up of the fire of Creation, Michael was much like Themself. Even the Hebrews figured that part out. Michael’s hair was the gold of a yellow star, his skin shone with the radiance of new copper, and his eyes were ever-burning fires. His wings were as golden as his hair.

God nodded rather decisively. The first seven would all have golden wings, to remind everyone of the beauty of the stars They had created.

Creation needed a protector, especially if God was going to be busying Themselves with making new things all the time. They charged the first angel with being the Guardian of Existence. Michael was the first defender of their new Creation. They gave Michael a sword, but a defender should know justice in order to know who to defend. God gave Michael that burden, and Their first angel understood the meaning of its weight.

Next, God crafted Gabriel, whose eyes were the blue-violet of the nebula that birthed the newest stars. The angel’s hair was of the darkness, and his skin was the ivory of reflected light. God was rather fond of creation’s beauty, and saw no reason it could not be reflected by the new lives They made.

If Michael was a protector of creation, and the most to resemble God, then Gabriel would be the man*[268] of God, a different reflection of Themself. However, God was a being with a temper. If Gabriel were to be that different, deeper reflection, then the second angel must be capable of feeling the wrath of God. When the others came, when the angels were many in number, Gabriel would lead them with a sword that flamed with the fire of creation, easily capable of pushing back any encroaching evil with necessary ferocity.

God created Uriel, and made her to be Gabriel’s opposite—gentle of temper, and female to male. Gender, God decided, would definitely not remain so limited, but with these two, it would be a
relationship of yin and yang.*[269] Uriel’s skin was crafted from the darkness between the stars. Her hair was a sandy brown, mindful of Their newest creation of life-giving soil. Molten rock glowed in Uriel’s eyes, burning with the reflected fire of God.

They thought about this angel and decided that if Gabriel would charge forth and destroy, then Uriel would share in Their ability to create. Uriel’s ties to creation, to the earth that supported the life that would soon exist, would be strong. Not only could Uriel feel God’s love, but she would be able to share Their grace. God gave Uriel a blooming rose upon a thorny stem, and confessed the true nature of its potency only to her.

Next there was Saraquel, a pristine beauty in every physical sense. He was a blond and blue-eyed Renaissance angel before the Renaissance existed,*[270] sculpted in perfection that would never fade. Saraquel would be the one to appear the most human of them all but for the wings upon his back, fair and bright with the shining gold of the stars.

To Saraquel, God gave Their sense of righteous power, the idea of ruling over others. God didn’t want it, anyway. To counter that desire to rule, God charged Saraquel with protecting all the mortal beings, living and dead, who would soon come to populate Their creation. Of course, with that desire to rule and protect, Saraquel might have a bit of trouble resisting the urge to fall in love with everyone who met his fancy, but God decided that problem would most likely sort itself out without too much trouble. God then gave Saraquel a crown woven of fire and life, so that the angel might always feel the weight of his responsibility.

Then They made Raguel, with skin the color of the olives that would one day signify the peace between God and Creation. Her hair was starlight, the reflected radiance of the cosmos; her eyes were the quiet, burning blue of the new dwarf stars that formed as the universe aged and changed.

God knew that conflict would come. Conflict was chaos, and chaos was part of what had allowed Existence to come to be. Raguel was charged with keeping an eye on the other angels, most who were yet to be, to ensure their behavior was fitting to their existence. Raguel felt the charge of her duties keenly, but she was still the first of the angels to offer God the gift of her friendship. In return, God named her the angel of justice and harmony, vengeance and redemption. They gave Raguel a set of scales, the means to more easily see and interpret the weight of another’s soul.

For the last two of the very first Seven, God had a new idea. If there could be binary stars, twins who rotated around each other in the heavens, why could there not be twin beings?

It was a very exciting thought. God was thrilled by all of Their creation, but so much had been planned already. This was a New Thing, and Their own work had granted them divine inspiration.

God did not draw the last two forth from the ether individually, as They had the first five angels. They made them together.

They emerged from the ether entwined, rather mindful of the way serpents would one day twine themselves about the branches of great trees. To both of them, she gave hair the color of embers that have burnt low, but which still held all the strength and potential of rebirth. Their skin was the perfection of the first milk mammals would one day produce, and like milk, would be capable of taking on color as it was influenced by life and light. Their eyes became the ice reflecting a blue winter’s sky. Fire and Water, Summer and Winter; Spring and Autumn, Life and Death—together, they would bear God’s gift of healing, and thus would carry a healer’s awareness of the full breadth of a living being’s existing potential.

Then God hesitated. If They made these two as twins in every respect, these angels would never be individuals, and that, They knew, would be a terrible mistake. To never be anything except what
another wished would be to destroy free will, and the destruction of free will would destroy Existence.

Time to change tactics.

God named the first twin Raphael, who would heal in God’s name. He would be the first to repair the wounds of the cosmos, to heal the heavens, to rend tears and slices that would spill the blood of life upon the earth. To aid him, God granted him not a sword, but a graceful black staff carved with the names of Creation, formed from Their own divine will.* [271] Raphael would carry it always, and it would strengthen him, balance him, so that he found no one below his notice.

The second twin, Zaherael, would bear God’s command as well, but not in the same way as his brother. There were other ways to heal another, and many of them had nothing to do with blood. Zaherael would guard over children, relieving them of the hurts inflicted by others who were drowning under the weight of their own guilt. Other angels might watch over Their creations on the Earth-that-would-be, but Zaherael would be the one to watch over them. Zaherael would be the one to heal their wounds and soothe their doubts regarding God’s little experiment and its odd population. The Earth-that-would-be would be his dominion to safeguard, as Heaven would be Raphael’s.

Raphael was made never to judge. Zaherael was made to grant judgment to those who could not make judgements for themselves. Both were divine ideas, and both were equally difficult. God didn’t necessarily want to give Zaherael that part of Themself. They already understood how cruel it was to be forced to judge another. To make up for it, They gave Zaherael the means to easily escape the shape of an angel, so that he might rest when his soul grew weary. Then, after a thought, God granted the same gift to Raphael. They were twins, after all, and in this, they would be alike.

God stood them both side by side in the heavens before Themself, and paused. They were not displeased with what They had done, per se. They could not really be displeased with anything They created, for all of it was unique and beautiful, but something was not quite right.

Every angel’s wings so far had been gold, like the molten cores of stars, but on these two, the color did not fit. They had believed that all of the first Seven would bear such wings, but now the notion jangled, like angry voices out of tune. Not that, then.

Well, They were going to be making angel wings a different color with the next batch. They had no reason not to shake things up a bit beforehand.

God gathered up carbon dust from the nearest star. The twins, sensing their Creator’s intent, turned their backs and spread the molten gold of their new wings. God blew the dust onto the twins’ wings, with no particular result in mind, and watched to see how the chaos of creation would mark them.

Raphael’s wings remained mostly gold. The dust turned his wingtips stark black, and one perfectly round bit of black carbon landed on the upper bone of his left cheek. God decided the mark did not mar perfection.* [272]

Zaherael’s wings seemed to collect the dust as if it had been meant for him alone. They turned dark, but it was not darkness of the void. The edges of each blackened feather were outlined in glittering bronze, and every tip revealed the true gold hidden beneath.

Both twins looked quite pleased by the result. “You are my light,” Zaherael said to Raphael.

“And you are my darkness,” Raphael replied.
“You’ve got a spot on your face.”

Raphael lifted his hand, golden-tipped nails touching the perfect spot of black. “You have a mark, also.”

“What?” Zaherael then tried to look at his own face, but their eyes hadn’t been designed to work in such fashion. “What is it? Where? What’s it look like?”

Raphael peered at the small, twisting loops of layered infinity that had dusted itself into place on his twin’s right cheek. “It looks like a secret.”


God smiled with them, but They also mourned. They had also once been fond of secrets, too, back when Existence was new.

No longer. They held so many secrets that could never be told to another.

Secrets, God knew, had the power to shatter souls.

*          *          *          *

Gabriel never intended for his sword and its bright flame to slaughter anyone except those who threatened Heaven. It was his blade to control, forged by God, and indeed, should never have done anything but what he asked of it.

Angels, however, are not perfect. Even an angel can fall prey to an accident caused by nothing more ill-intentioned than a minor twist of fate.*[273]

He was raising his sword, its light blazing, to kill a Fallen angel. Perhaps it was Samael, who was rising in the Fallen ranks to become a true danger to Heaven. Perhaps it was another, lesser angel with wings turned to blackened ash. Right now it didn’t matter; they were an enemy of Heaven.

But this was a battlefield, and already the dead lay beneath their feet.

Gabriel had no choice but to step upon the body of a felled angel, expecting the firm support of the armor that still sheltered a lifeless limb. What he did not, could not know, was the fact that the angel’s armor had been weakened an hour before, when it was struck by a mace.

Under Gabriel’s weight, the armor cracked and buckled.

Gabriel fell, twisting sideways in sudden fright as the earth moved beneath his feet. He caught sight of his enemy’s startled eyes as they leapt away from his flaming sword.

God’s holy fire was bright and ruthless. The sword was divine, held in the hand of the named righteous man of God.

The sword and its blazing fire found a home in the chest of an archangel who was casting a web of healing magic upon another. The angel being healed succumbed to her wounds as the magic holding her together faded away.

The healer, Raphael, lifted stunned blue eyes to his elder brother…and died.
“No,” Gabriel whispered, but that was nothing compared to the scream of agony ripped from the mouth of the black serpent wrapped around Raphael’s staff. Zaherael erupted into place where the serpent had been, tossed away Gabriel’s flaming sword as if it was worthless tin, and gathered his fallen brother in his arms.

The battle was halting. Weapons were lowered to the ground. Angel and Fallen all turned to watch the impossible unfold.

Zaherael was not as well-known as his brother, preferring to spend his time wrapped around the divine staff that helped to strengthen their healing magic. It was Raphael who the others knew best.

Raphael, who would not abandon Heaven, but would heal anyone in need. The color of their wings did not matter; Raphael gave his compassion to all. It was the gift and role God had given him, Raphael proclaimed, and not even a war in Heaven would stop him from carrying out his duty.

The battlefield was silent and still. A very odd thought came to Gabriel’s mind: this was what it must be like in the tombs of the dead.

The only sound was of Zaherael’s grief. Gabriel made himself listen to that nightmarish keening, feeling it echo in his celestial bones.

He had done this. He had not meant to, but it could not be undone. Holy fire did not merely kill celestial bodies. It destroyed souls.

Then Gabriel watched in numb horror as the gold markings upon Zaherael’s dark wings came loose. The wind took the gold from his feathers and sent it swirling away in clouds of glittering dust.

No. No, this was ever so much worse. This was almost too much to bear.

He had killed his dear brother, and with that death, he had also caused the youngest of his beloved brothers to Fall.*[274]

* * * *

Zaherael begged God to bring his brother back to life. They were merely corporations, after all. The war had seen to it that many of their angelic souls had needed to be granted new bodies to dwell within. Just like every living thing in creation, angels had immortal souls and mortal bodies.*[275]

God knelt over the still body of fallen Raphael, and Their heart was a heavy weight. “This is not merely a wound of the shell, Zaherael. This is a wound of the spirit.” That there is enough of Raphael for God to find at all is, well, a miracle.*[276]

Zaherael was not foolish. He was mischievous, and prone to laughing at exactly the wrong moment, but never a fool. “Because we were sharing of ourselves to heal another.”

God gave Their child a sad smile. “Yes. You lost a part of yourself to Gabriel’s blade, as well. Your recovery will take time. Raphael’s recovery will take even longer still. He will need a place to rest in safety until his soul is stable enough to reside in another corporation.”

Zaherael never hesitated. “What must be done to safeguard him?”
"The safest place for Raphael to rest is within the heart of one who loves him."

"Then I'll do it. Let it be that way. Immediately."

God saw the hope in Zaherael’s eyes and bowed Their head. Then They reached out to touch Zaherael’s shoulder in blessing and comfort. "Dear one…it will not be what you think, this sheltering."

"What do you mean?"

"You will carry your brother in your heart, but you will not know he is there. You will not know he still lives within you until his healing is complete. Even then…even then, it will take an act of great sacrifice to return him to us."

Zaherael’s black wings lowered as his grief returned anew. Then he lifted his head. "How long will it take, Mother?"

God felt a tear slip from Their eye. "You are the only one to call me such, you know. The others call me by my Name, or they call me Father. Creator. God."

"Gender is meaningless."

"I could decide upon a gender, if I truly wanted to!" God retorted, feeling a bit heartened by the old game.

Zaherael’s smile was very sad. "Of course, Mother."

He was right. They wouldn’t do so. Gender limitations were boring. Why be one thing when They could be All things?

God owed Their loyal one the truth, even if it hurt him. "Time is so very harsh. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t invented it, but without that perception, Creation would never see anything but the Chaos. The beauty would always be hidden from our sight."

Zaherael bit his lip. "It'll be a very long time, then."

"Yes. You will be without him for many years, dear one, and…and you will forget him."

The archangel sprang to his feet. "What—but—no! I can’t! I won’t!" he gasped. "You can’t make me!"

"Of course not. I would never make you do anything. I can only ask." God waited until Zaherael slowly sank down next to Them again. "I cannot tell you why you forget, but I promise you will remember him again when it is time. Forgetting Raphael is one of the prices to be paid so he can be returned to us."

"Another price?" Zaherael asked. "What sort of price?"

_Oh, dear one. If I could take this burden from you, I would, but it is not mine to bear._ "I cannot tell you of other prices. I can only give you advice."

Zaherael bowed his head. "I'm listening."

"You will carry your brother in your heart," God said, "but soon you will learn that the heart can be a fickle creature. If you allow darkness and bitterness to consume your heart, so too will darkness consume your brother. He will die, and when he does, so will you also."
“I won't let that happen.”

God sighed. That would have to be enough. They held up Raphael’s fractured essence in both hands, cupping everything he was in Their palms. With a gentle breath, They blew Raphael’s fractured spirit across a tiny, ethereal gap. Zaherael gasped and wept when he felt his brother pass into his heart.

“It is done.”

“Thank you.” Zaherael picked up the black staff borne by his fallen brother, running his fingers along its beautiful carvings. “You’re right. I know he’s there because you placed him in my heart, but I can't feel him.”

“I am sorry.”

Zaherael only nodded. “You granted him Grace, Mother. You shouldn't apologize for that. I must… if Raphael can't be here, then someone has to act in his place. His strength was greater than mine—”

“Not greater. Merely different,” God reminded him, letting Their words be sharp with rebuke.

Zaherael nodded. “Different. Thank you, Mother. Thank you for saving him.”

God waited until Zaherael walked away, his head still bowed in grief. “I am not the one who will save him, dear one. It will be a very long road, but at the end of it, your brother will live because of you.”

* * * * *

Convincing Michael was the worst pain. Michael would not forget. Michael would always feel the sting of guilt, the burn of regret.

“You’re asking me to betray him,” Michael whispered, his beautiful fiery eyes wide and horrified.

“I am asking you to safeguard Creation, as I have always asked you to do.”

Michael drew in a deep breath. “Does that change the nature of betrayal, Father?”

God closed Their eyes. “You know that it does not.”

“Then why?” Michael cried. “There must be another way!”

“I gave all of creation free will, first one,” God said. “Before I made the first living beings, I breathed the idea of freedom across the whole of time and space. If I intervene, if I change what is to come, it will not be by another’s free will. I will have violated one of the most fundamental rules of Creation, and all will crumble into dust.”

“What if—what if I do nothing?” Michael asked.

God bowed Their head. “Then the same thing will happen. It will merely take longer. A mistake has changed the way this Existence is meant to be, Michael.”

Michael’s expression darkened. “Gabriel.”
“I will not punish him for something he never intended,” God said, narrowing Their eyes in warning. There would come a day when Gabriel would make further mistakes that will not be due to chance, but birthed of his own free will. Those mistakes would have to be dealt with, but that time was not now.

“You say Creation will end. But you also say that Creation is meant to end. Why does it matter when Existence ceases, Father?”

God patted him on his armored shoulder, proud of Michael for thinking to ask such an important question. “It is about energy, and it is about entropy.”

Michael’s expression twisted up in bafflement. He was Their dear one, a reminder of the first stars in the heavens, but he had never preferred the scholarly pursuits. “I don’t understand.”

“Creation began with the release of all the energy in the realms of Beyond. That energy is finite.” God pressed Their hands together. “I used that energy to make Existence, atoms, and all the building blocks of life, all of the matter it creates. That energy can never be created or destroyed. It merely changes forms. Therefore, the same amount of energy that began Existence will end it.”

Michael slowly nodded. “Yes. I understand. What of entropy?”

“Entropy is the idea behind that limited energy. If no new energy can be created, then that energy is always at the right place, existing at the right time, for the conditions of Existence to continue,” God said. “Once Creation began, that pattern, the way energy would flow from Beginning to End, was set into motion. It will end Existence when all is where it should be, and from the energy created by the end of that Existence, I can then form the next Existence to take its place.”

Michael began to look horrified again. “If Existence is halted before this entropy has its way, then…”

“There will not be enough energy for me to bring about the next Existence,” God confirmed with a slight smile. “I am also tied to the whims of entropy, Michael. If Existence ends prematurely, all will end, and nothing will arise to take its place. Not even me.”

Michael paced back and forth at the edge of Heaven, unaware of their view of the stars, unconcerned with the planet not so far away, which had just decided that being composed solely of ocean was a bit dull. “Will he ever know, Father? Will I ever be able to look my brother in the face, and tell him of my sorrow, and beg his forgiveness?”

“If all goes well, then you will meet again.”

Michael turned to face Them, shocked. “You do not know?”

“It all depends on free will, first one,” God reminded him. “Yours. His. The free will of others. All I know for certain is that this is the most likely course to prevent the premature end of Existence.” They hesitated, torn. “I am so very sorry. When I asked you to be the guardian of Creation, I didn’t…some things are beyond even my Sight, Michael. I did not know.”

“I know, Father.” Michael sighed before nodding. “I will do it. I will not like it, but…but it will be done. For the sake of your creation.”

“For the sake of all who ever were, and all who will ever be,” God murmured, “Thank you.”
The worst of it, Gabriel knew, was that Pronoia’s death was his fault. He hadn’t killed her, of course. He would sooner cut off his own wings than hurt his dearest friend…but that did not change what had been done.

Gabriel saw her for the first time shortly after her creation, as dark-haired as he, olive-skinned, with eyes that were a new shape, oval instead of round. Her eyes were brown, and reflected sunlight and moonlight in equal measure. Her wings were a stark, radiant white, as bright as the birth of a new star. She was not an archangel, but something new: a cherub, the far-seeing ones. When she spread her four wings, all could behold the many eyes upon her feathers.*[278]

Deep in his heart, Gabriel knew at once that he loved her. He probably loved her as much as he loved his Father. Perhaps—perhaps even more. That, of course, was a traitorous sort of thought. He could love no one more than he could love their Father. Instead of admitting that he wished to be with her always, and in that new way, their bodies aligned and no robes in the way, Gabriel said nothing. He made certain Pronoia knew that he considered her dear to his heart, and that, in all other things aside from his duties to their Father, he was utterly devoted to her.

Pronoia, who was far more aware of Gabriel’s love than she let on, smiled and said she felt similarly devoted. If he would not admit to his love, then at least that new thing with the removal of robes and aligned bodies was certainly something to try out. It led to the birth of their daughter, Gamaliel, the first archangel to bear white feathers instead of gold.

Gabriel watched his daughter grow, and spent his days with Pronoia, and was entirely content. It was a very strange feeling for someone who had been made to bear God’s anger when needed, but he…he liked it. Savored it.

Then discontent grew in Heaven. Dissent turned into war. Gabriel and Pronoia agreed that Gamaliel would remain hidden in the City. There was fighting in the streets, but there were still sanctuaries within the City’s walls. She would be safe, and grow to become an angel that gave no thought to passing along gifts to any who asked.*[279]

They were not winning against those angels whose wings turned black, but they were not losing, either. It was a stalemate, and Gabriel chafed at the very idea. How was he to lead his brethren to victory if he couldn’t gain the upper hand?

Then the armor of a fallen brother broke beneath his foot. Gabriel fell, and his younger brother Raphael died for his mistake. Worse was that no one blamed Gabriel for his death.

“Why do they not blame me?” he asked God. “I have done a terrible, unforgivable thing!”

“They do not blame you because there is no fault. It was not of your will.”

Gabriel tried to be heartened by his Father’s words. Truly, he did, but his eyes kept straying to Zaherael’s blackened wings, and he wondered. Zaherael did as he always had, though not in the secret ways he’d once preferred. He healed those who needed it, but doubt was beginning to find shelter in Gabriel’s heart. If those with blackened wings were Fallen, then soon…soon, Zaherael would change.

He could not bear to kill another of the Seven, even if the youngest of them was Fallen. If or when the time came, Gabriel would choose another fate for him.
Samael, one of the greatest of their Fallen enemies, had borne witness to Raphael’s death. He saw what holy fire had done to one of the greatest of the archangels, and an idea grew in his heart like disease-bearing mold.

The sword Samael used to kill Pronoia was forged of holy fire, stolen from the armory by an angel whose feathers did not start to wither until the theft was done. Samael made certain Gabriel witnessed her murder, wanting Gabriel’s heart to be as twisted as his own.

Unlike Gabriel’s accidental strike, Samael’s was deliberate. The fire of God burned the life out of Pronoia’s body. It burned her soul out of existence.

Zaherael tried, over and over again, to call her back. To heal her body. To retrieve the irretrievable. Uriel had to pull him away at last, her heart heavy with grief.

Gabriel tried not to blame his brother. His heart grieved, and his wrath against the Fallen grew with every soul that was destroyed by Samael’s stolen sword. Even Lucifer seemed disturbed by Samael’s glee in destruction, and tried to restrain him.

It proved enough of a distraction that victory began to edge closer. Then it came to Heaven at speed as they were able to dispatch the enemy over the edge of Heaven, letting them fall into the abyss that was Gehenna. Some of those with blackened wings made the leap for themselves, in no mood to be dragged to their fate in chains.

Samael was not taken over the edge in chains. He escaped notice until opportunity gave him the means to kill the first angel who would bear the name Bariel, one of Pronoia and Gabriel’s dearest friends aside from each other. Gabriel swung his sword, forged by their Father, and shattered Samael’s stolen blade. The evil one didn’t linger; he fled to the edge of Heaven and jumped, cackling, into the abyss. Gabriel heard his laughter long after he was gone.

Then Gabriel heard a cry from the battlefield, and Michael’s golden body dropped to the ground. His spirit came to Gabriel, and he was quick to tell Gabriel what had befallen him.

Guilt, grief, burning anger, suspicion, treachery, loss—it all came together to form a terrible wrath.

“Michael.” His voice was soft. “Bariel is gone, but her corporation can be healed. Take her body. There is nothing else.”

“But—” Michael looked stunned. “That is Bariel, Gabriel. I cannot—”

“You must,” Gabriel said, implacable. Immovable. “You are needed. The war is not yet finished. Then…then there is one more task I will perform that you will oversee.”

“Anything,” the first one promised, feeling his friend’s terrible grief.

It was a vow Michael would quickly come to regret. He had imagined many things that might cause Zaherael to truly Fall, but not what was to come.

*          *          *          *

In the year 3004 BC, in a land called Mesopotamia, it has been raining steadily for four days and four nights. With the dawn of the fifth day, the water has risen to flow above Aziraphale’s knees. A
strong current often tugs at his feet.

It has finally become rather obvious to the humans around him that something is going terribly wrong. Their fields are flooded out, the crops washed away. Houses built from clay-fired brick or mud-daubed wood are beginning to come apart. The currents of water have also begun to steal away with the people, and Aziraphale knows that they will not be coming back. The Ark built by Noah and his family slowly begins to rise in the water, but its door is firmly shut.

Aziraphale went along with it, just as he was supposed to. As he told Crawley: he doesn’t make policy decisions. He just…witnesses the results.

He had no idea it would be this horrible. How is this right? How will killing all these humans make anything better?

“Oi, there, you two. Where’s your Mum and Dad?”

Aziraphale turns around. The flash of rare black cloth* catches his eye and leads him directly to Crawley. The demon is perched upon the thatched roof of a hut, soaked to the skin, his wings outspread without a care in the world that anyone might see them. The hut has yet to crumble, but Aziraphale can see that the process has already started. In another few minutes, the two children sheltering upon its roof will be swept away.

The girl, two years of age, only hiccups in a continuing string of sobs. The boy, perhaps six, raises a shaking hand and points south, where the developing currents tend to send whatever they capture.

“Oh.” Crawley shakes out his wings, sending droplets of water flying. “Come here, you two. I’m sorry I can’t help the rest of your family, but you lot can’t stay here. Come on.”

Aziraphale watches, his jaw hanging open, as the demon gathers up the children. “CRAWLEY! What on Earth are you doing?”

Crawley stands up, a child in each arm, and glares at Aziraphale. “I’m thwarting God!” he shouts, and there is no mistaking the fury in his voice. “It’s my job, angel! Now FUCK OFF!”

Then Crawley launches himself into the air. The children shriek and cling tightly to him, but after they realize they’re not falling, begin to stare around at the water with shock-wide eyes.

“I—but—” Aziraphale follows their flight until he can’t see wings anymore. East. Crawley is going east.

What is to the east?

Aziraphale draws in a sharp breath. The Himā-laya, a long chain of new mountains that tops a large, fascinating peninsula populated by humans who have some rather amusing—and rather enlightened—ideas about the nature of God and Creation. Aziraphale has no idea if that peninsula is to be flooded, but the mountains are some of the tallest in the world.

“Oh, God, please help me!”

Aziraphale squeezes his eyes shut. He can’t stand here and not acknowledge that plea. He’s not built to ignore such things.

A woman, the waters swirling around her thighs, is struggling to make her way to higher ground. There will not be higher ground for long, but still, she is trying.
In her arms is an infant swaddled in linen, which is dyed the gentle blue of a summer sky.

“PLEASE!” the woman shouts, her eyes upon the sky. “PLEASE, GOD! SHE IS AN INNOCENT! SHE HAS DONE NOTHING, NOT TO ANYONE!

“PLEASE SPARE MY DAUGHTER!”

Oh…oh, bother.

Aziraphale steels himself. He is about to disobey a rather specific Heavenly edict. He hasn’t done that since the incident with the sword, though technically God never told him not to give the sword away.

This is something very, very different. These people were declared unsalvageable.

How can an infant be unsalvageable?

“Crawley, this is your fault,” Aziraphale mutters in utter distress, and sloshes his way forward. Then, thinking on it, he releases his wings from their ethereal confinement. They immediately become as soaked as he is, but water never kept him from being capable of flight. “Excuse me.”

The woman, the mother, turns around and braces herself against the water’s strong flow. “Yes? Who is—” Her eyes widen. Aziraphale half-expects fear, and then his heart simply goes to pieces when she gazes upon him in purest hope.

“I, er, heard you.” Aziraphale tries not to wince. “I can’t, uh, I can’t carry you both. But you, uhm…”

She thrusts the swaddled infant at him. “I care not for what happens to me. Please. Save my daughter. I beg you. I will do anything you ask.”

Aziraphale takes the baby with careful hands. He hasn’t held a lot of children, angelic or human. “Is she, er, how do I—”

The baby’s mother looks bewildered. Then she reaches out and gently rearranges Aziraphale’s arms. His left elbow is now supporting the baby’s head, and his right arm is wrapped securely around her. “She is Micaiah, like the great angel,” the mother says. “Thank you.”

I am going to be in such trouble, Aziraphale thinks, but then he looks down at the baby in his arms, her eyes just beginning to turn from dark infant blue to a rather gentle golden brown.

Well. Sometimes it’s good to be in trouble for the right sort of reasons, Aziraphale decides. “I can save her from this, but anything afterwards is up to her.”

The baby’s mother smiles even as tears flow from her eyes. “That is the way it is for all of us, is it not?” Then she steps back, slips in the roughening current, and is swept away. Aziraphale does not hear her cry out. Not once.

He didn’t even ask for her name.

“Oh, dear.” Aziraphale launches himself before the water climbs any higher. The baby lets out a startled gurgle before trying to look around in complete fascination.

“Micaiah,” Aziraphale says, and without much thought, turns to the east. “I believe you are going to need siblings.”
When he reaches the mountains, which are still green with the grass and weed of summer, Crawley is standing on a rocky outcropping. His wings are still outspread, as if he is basking in the sun like the serpent he really is. The girl and boy he rescued are dry and smiling, running around in circles as they play one of the games from their lost home.

Aziraphale lands just behind Crawley and coughs. “Uh. Hello. Again.”

Crawley turns around, fury already beginning to tighten his angled features, before he realizes what Aziraphale is holding. “Is… is that…?”

Aziraphale shrugs and tries not to jostle the baby, who has been quite well-behaved for the entire flight. “Someone… asked. My way. You know.”

“Right.” Crawley reaches out and curls one long finger around her dusky cheek. “What’s her name?”

“Micaiah.”

“Oh, as if Michael doesn’t have enough of a bloody God complex,” Crawley says, but he’s smiling at the baby and looking entirely undemonic. “You’re a good person, angel.”

“Oh, I’m probably in a great deal of trouble, actually,” Aziraphale protests.

“Eh. Worth it.” Crawley gestures over his shoulder. “This is Rahaab, the girl. The boy is Avram.”

As if summoned, the older children come running. “A baby!” Avram exclaims. “Let me hold her!”

“Baby!” his younger sister echoes with a sweet, fond smile.

Aziraphale, at Crawley’s encouraging nod, hands Micaiah off to Avram. The boy cradles the baby as if he’s been holding children all his life. He goes to sit down in the grass with his sister and their new, er…younger sister. The moment the children are distracted, Crawley shocks Aziraphale by hugging him.

Crawley has never embraced him before. Not ever.

Actually, no one has ever hugged Aziraphale. It’s rather odd, but…sort of pleasing, too.

Aziraphale doesn’t move. He is aware of the fact that Crawley smells faintly of serpent, of wool that has been wet and dried improperly far too many times in recent days, and of intriguing warmth.

He is also aware of the fact that his soaking wet robes are making Crawley quite damp.

Before he knows what else to do, Crawley releases him. “Thanks, angel,” he says, a rather forced tone to his voice, before he wanders off to join the children.

“Uh…you’re…you’re welcome,” Aziraphale manages. He should probably not have hugged a demon. Or have been hugged by one.

He really should have hugged Crawley in response. It’s only polite, after all.
Durian fruit and Platypi are not supposed to be related but you can see it if you squint.

That is not working out so well, but They didn’t start that nonsense.

Relatively speaking, anyway. God hadn’t put much thought into gender yet, and eventually the angels decided upon that sort of thing—or its lack—for themselves.

Which did not exist until that very moment.

He was quite the divine artistic inspiration. Literally. Saraquel doesn’t regret his brief modeling career in the slightest.

And also, the first joke about gripping the holy pole.

And the beauty mark was born.

Fate is a nicer name for Chaos than Chaos. It sounds less fraught.

Gabriel would not realize it for a very long time, but the mere act of an angel’s wings changing color does not denote that one has turned away from Heaven. Had he asked God in those days, They might have told him…or they might have not.

With everyone picking up swords and whatnot, it would be so easy for many to misinterpret the true meaning of an angel’s blackened wings. The darkness of the void was a reflection of sadness, of feeling that they were adrift and alone in the cosmos. It was a reflection of a soul in pain.

Mostly mortal, anyway. They don’t necessarily need to breathe or eat, and temperatures aren’t really a concern, but their bodies can still die. As the song by Maroon 5 goes: Nothing lasts forever.

It might even be the very first miracle. God does rather like the idea of miraculous wonders, RE: The Engraved Hourglass Nebula, as well as cosmic pranks, RE: Halley’s Comet.

It might not be finite, but God hasn’t yet quite figured out how to expand upon that niggling thought just yet.

The idea of eyes upon feathers would later be reflected in the creation of peacocks, who want everyone to think that their many eyes work just like a cherub’s. They do not. To distract themselves from this bitter truth, peacocks climb trees in order to see which of them can make the worst noises in the entire history of horrific noises.

It is not Gamaliel’s fault that some people are bad at knowing what they want, or how to ask for it.

Much as white was so often a complete horror to keep clean (miracles, so many miracles), black was a very difficult color for ancient dyes to achieve. The closest they would come for centuries would be a mix of indigo and amla in Asia, which still wasn’t the true, solid black Crowley strolled around in.
If I Could Start Again

Chapter Summary

"If I could start again
A million miles away
I will keep myself
I would find a way."

Johnny Cash, "Hurt" 2002

Chapter Notes

*sneaks in a chapter under the radar so will not be falling asleep over tea editing in the morning*

In a place between time, where souls wait to return or pass on to the next phase of existence, two brothers were wrapped up in each other’s arms. One’s hair was long, curled locks of red perfection. The other’s red hair was short and spiked upwards in defiance of gravity—and defiance of most things, really. One’s eyes were the reflected blue of an icy winter sky. The other’s eyes were as gold as the wings granted to the First Seven Archangels of Heaven.

That is how God found them, and Their heart sang in grief, in joy, and in vast relief. “Raphael.” They hesitated, thinking it might be wiser to start with what was familiar. “Crowley.”

The brothers looked up, though Zaherael-Crowley’s serpent’s eyes widened a bit when he saw Them. “Er…hello?”

“Hello, dear one. It has been a very long time.”

“Riiiiight.” Zaherael-Crowley looked at Raphael, and, not seeming to know what to do with being faced with a twin to himself, turned his attention back to God. “So, I’m assuming Not Dead, given that you’re not Azrael. Probably. Definitely not the last version I saw, at least.”

“No, I am not Azrael.” God smiled. In a place the twins could not see, Azrael was treating themselves to an intense sigh of relief at not having to reap these two particular souls.*[281]

“In case you were wondering, I did hear every word you spoke to me.” Zaherael-Crowley had spoken to Them often, as if They had never left his side, even as he believed he was beyond Their grace forever.

He had only asked for something once. Just once. God didn’t need to do more than nudge Aziraphale’s direction in flight to be certain Crowley’s prayer was answered, and that wasn’t mucking about with free will at all. That was merely aerodynamics.*[282]

Zaherael-Crowley seemed bewildered by that. “Good?”
“I thought so,” Raphael offered. Zaherael-Crowley looked at his brother in continued bafflement.


“Your vocabulary over the centuries has become very entertaining,” God said. “The two of you made quite a mess of Purgatory. I’m very proud of you.”

“My brother found an excellent idea,” Raphael says just as Zaherael-Crowley croaks out, “Wait, what? What the bloody hell is going on here, anyway?”

“Oh, yes! How silly of me. I’m forgetting something important.” God walked to them, though there was no ground to walk upon. They bent down in front of Zaherael-Crowley, whose tongue flicked briefly out of his mouth in serpentine nervousness. “There is one last bit of healing to be done before you truly understand all that was, all that is, and perhaps even a smidge of what may be.”

Zaherael-Crowley looked to Raphael, who smiled and gripped his brother’s hand. “That’s our Father, Brother. If He were intent upon erasing you, I doubt there would be a pep talk first.”

“Right. Sure.” Crowley-Zaherael visibly braced himself. “Go ahead then, I guess.”

God reached out and touched the looping infinity symbol on his right cheek, the one that for eons had been mistaken for the sigil of a serpent. “Welcome home, Zaherael.”

* * *

Louis XIV, Sun King of the Kingdom of France, had just been freed from a place he thought had been his very own Court. He then escaped a strange, burning building, and found himself standing in a field of violets with countless others. Some of their clothing was…peasant-like.

Then the woman on the rather Roman-looking stage waved her hand, and Louis found himself within the walls of a great and endless city. He had felt nothing. It had to be magic.

Real magic.

Witchcraft, Louis thought wildly. Witchcraft is real.*

Louis the Sun King immediately abandoned his curious perusal of the golden streets, rushing off to find the nearest church. He had a vast number of sins to confess, and he had to do so right away, before God noticed Louis was probably not where he belonged.

* * *

Aziraphale stares at the Grecian platform and the four who stand upon it. He desperately wants to go to them. He wants to prod at Crowley’s bony shoulder and reassure himself that his friend really is standing there, alive, and…redeemed? Aziraphale has no idea if that’s what is meant by the color of Crowley’s wings. They certainly aren’t gold, but they are not black.
Is there such a thing as partial redemption? In the grand scheme of things, does it really even matter?

Aziraphale becomes so wrapped up in impossible theological debate in his own head that he doesn’t realize someone is now yelling his name. “AZIRAPHALE!”

He glances up to find that Crowley is staring at him, pointing at Aziraphale with one accusatory finger. “Crowley?”

“WHY THE BLOODY HELL ARE YOU STANDING ALL THE WAY OVER THERE?” Crowley shouts. “GET OVER HERE!”

Aziraphale freezes. He wants to, he dearly does, but his feet have just rooted themselves firmly to the earth.

“Oh, come on!” Crowley gestures at his mangled left wing. “I’LL COME TO YOU IF YOU DON’T, ZIRA! IT’LL HURT, BUT I’LL DO IT, AND I WILL MAKE YOU FEEL SO BLOODY GUILTY, YOU UTTER—”

Aziraphale reached his limit somewhere around the time the end of the world didn’t occur. Then they were kidnapped, and he was—fortunately—subjected to holy water via bathtub instead of hellfire. Then he and Crowley had a lovely meal, wandered about London, and were promptly kidnapped again. Aziraphale was locked into a cell in Purgatory with only a bad copy of Crowley for company. Then Crowley, dear Crowley, completely stupid, foolish Crowley, had tried to sacrifice his existence just for Aziraphale’s freedom.

Needless to say, the line to be crossed was quite a ways behind him. Aziraphale bursts into completely undignified sobbing.

“ZIRA!”

Aziraphale is vaguely aware of unexpected mutters, along with a few shouts and quite a bit of angelically unbecoming swearing. Then he is wrapped in Crowley’s long, boney arms, the scent of sleek reptile and warmth strong in Aziraphale’s nose. Underneath that is a hint of Crowley’s favored cologne…and for some reason, concrete dust.

“Crowley?”

“Who else were you expecting, a bloody aardvark?” Crowley responds in a choked voice.

“Oh—I—” Unfortunately, that only makes him cry harder.*[284]

“Oh, angel,” Crowley gasps. “I’m so sorry.”

“But your wings!” Aziraphale protests with a tearful, burbling cry. “You said—you said it would hurt—”

“Bugger my wings. Not like they haven’t been hurting for six thousand years already.” Crowley tightens his grip around Aziraphale as if he’s in serpent form, trying to seek out all of the best spots to bask in an angel’s warmth.

“But I—but you—” Aziraphale gathers himself up and then starts slapping at every part of Crowley he can reach. “YOU UTTER IDIOT! YOU CAN’T JUST—YOU CAN’T—”

Crowley lets out a shaky breath. “Can’t what, angel?”
Aziraphale draws in a deep, sniffling breath and wonders if there is a handkerchief anywhere nearby. “You can’t just leave me like that,” he whispers. “You can’t just leave me behind.”

Crowley leans back and grasps Aziraphale’s face with both hands. It’s still very startling to see gold tears leak from Crowley’s eyes. Until the stupid mirror incident, Aziraphale has never seen Crowley shed a single tear. He didn’t even know a demon was capable of crying.*

“I won’t, then. Not ever again,” Crowley promises. “I swear it. If it’s my decision to make, then I won’t leave you. I mean, I’ll take a wander every so often, but not to, you know, leave—leave—”

Aziraphale swallows, cringing a little at the horrid taste of snot. “What if it’s not your decision to make?”

Crowley shrugs. “Then fuck ’em. I’ll stay with you anyway.”

Aziraphale lets out another choked sob and clings to Crowley, who doesn’t seem to mind in the slightest. “Do—do you think we could maybe avoid life-or-death situations for at least a few days? I could really do with a cup of tea.”

Crowley laughs. He laughs, and it isn’t the mad cackle of a pleased demon, or his faint huffs of derisive humor. This is true pleasure, a sound Aziraphale has only ever heard Crowley make when he’s completely, soddenly pissed.*

“Is that a yes? I’d rather like it if it was a yes.”

“I bloody well hope so,” Crowley leans back and searches around in his jacket pockets until he draws out a handkerchief. “Knew I still had one somewhere.”

Aziraphale frowns at the white silk. “This is mine.”

“Yep.”

“Why did you have my handkerchief?” Aziraphale asks, uncertain why he feels so odd about it. If the embroidery is anything to go by, it’s at least a century old.

“For moments like these, maybe,” Crowley says, and then he grins. “Or maybe because it was yours.”

“Oh.” Aziraphale dabs at his eyes and his ridiculously streaming, messy nose. “Oh.”

Crowley gives Aziraphale a hand up from the ground, where they apparently landed in a mess of limbs in front of part of the angelic host and God Themself. Aziraphale promptly flushes in embarrassment.

He doesn’t really see any judgement, though. The current predominant angelic expression seems to be confusion, except for Michael and Raphael, who both look as if they know far too much about everything. God, by contrast, is busy bird-watching—which is odd, because Heaven doesn’t have any birds.*

“Now. Give me a tick, angel. There’s something I need to do.” Crowley squares his shoulders and then squints his eyes shut. Aziraphale watches, uncomprehending, until Crowley opens his eyes again.

They’re not reptilian gold any longer. Crowley’s eyes are the same color blue as his twin, the pupils round and black.
It's very odd.

The angels fall silent as they watch Crowley walk over to Gabriel. Aziraphale cringes in horrified sympathy as Crowley’s left wing drags along behind him, so broken that Crowley can’t even lift it from the ground.

Gabriel doesn’t move, but he is narrow-eyed in suspicion, his lips a thin, angry line. “What do you want?”

Crowley raises an eyebrow, uncowed by Gabriel’s posturing. “What I want is for you to look at what you did to me. I want you to look, and see, and understand, and then I want to hear you say it. I think maybe the others need to hear you say it, too.”

Gabriel tries to scoff, but there isn’t any strength in the sound. After a few seconds, Gabriel begins to appear visibly distressed. Then he looks at Crowley’s wings, blackened bronze with the feathery golden tips of an archangel.

“The color was gone,” Gabriel rasps. “They were black. So very black.”

“I am Raphael’s darkness,” Crowley says, his voice carrying across the field, “and Raphael is my light. You might’ve taken that light from me, but golden wings? That’s only skin-deep. Feather deep, if you like. You didn’t see what lurked in my heart. You didn’t even fucking look!”

Crowley abruptly leans forward until his and Gabriel’s noses are almost touching. He isn’t hissing any longer; he’s shouting. “Look at it! Look at what you did to me! Look at what was wrought by your own wrath, and recognize that the only reason you did not Fall with me was because of Her Grace!”

Gabriel lifts his hands, and Aziraphale’s wings flare out in angry instinct. He is quite ready to tackle an archangel to the ground if Gabriel so much as thinks of hurting Crowley again.*

As if in the grips of a fearful fever, Gabriel touches the bent, horrid angles of shattered humerus, the strongest bone of an angel’s wing. Then his fingers drift to radius, and to ulna. Then radiale, and ulnare. The metacarpus. The phalanxes.

Aziraphale knows even that touch must hurt so very much, but Crowley shows no sign of it. He merely watches Gabriel. When he speaks again, he doesn’t sound angry any longer. “She was already gone, Gabriel. Pronoia was gone, and she wasn’t coming back. I swear to you that I tried—”

“Brother,” Gabriel unexpectedly rasps. “I am—I’m sorry. Please. Please forgive me for what I have done to you.”

Aziraphale stares at Gabriel, gobsmacked. He wonders if being unexpectedly hit in the head with a shovel would be more surprising than what just happened.

Crowley’s right wing flicks, as if ridding itself of imaginary dust. “Course I do. Forgive you, I mean. I’ll do that as soon as you fix this mess you’ve made.”

Gabriel regards him, tears of regret carving grooves down his face as they drip from his violet eyes. “Mess?”

“Oh, you know which mess I mean.” Crowley rolls his eyes. “The bit of nonsense you built and named Purgatory. The edges of Heaven dropping off into the abyss of Hell instead of the views of creation She meant them to be. That monstrosity you call Home Office. Those bloody fucking
Gabriel’s jaw is hanging open. Aziraphale can’t say that he isn’t pleased by the sight. “But—the gates!” Gabriel stutters. “They were built to keep out the enemy, to keep out the Fallen!”

Crowley rolls his neck and then glances over his shoulder at Raphael, Michael, and their Creator. “Yeah, ’bout that. First off, gates don’t do you much good if you’re going about inviting demonic imps into that bloody horror of a Home Office. Second: for some reason you got it into your head to model that bloody building after an office building on Earth. Trust me, as someone who had a hand in that design? Those buildings were meant to create the most unpleasant working environments on the entire bloody planet. Fosters depression, nervousness, greed, stress, discomfort, hatred, and that’s not even talking about the shit air quality—bad, bad, choice, that. Third: has this enemy bothered to come up here and rattle sabers at the gates in the last, oh, six thousand years or so?”

Gabriel looks as if he’d rather eat a sackful of durian fruit than admit to the truth. “No.”

“See?” Crowley looks pleased with his logic, which means he looks like a smug, smarmy bastard. “Pointless things, those gates. We’re meant to be welcoming souls into the City, remember? Not stashing them off in little boxes when they don’t meet ideals for behavior that are, frankly, ludicrous. Also, having just spent three weeks in one of those fucking boxes? That was no fun at all, so no, absolutely not. Those things will never exist again.”

“But Crow—but Zaherael!” Gabriel looks desperate. “You stopped the war! There was meant to be a war!”

“Pfft. No, there wasn’t.” Crowley retorts. “You just wanted a war, and it would have been a complete fucking disaster.”

“I didn’t wait through six thousand years of healing to get a body again only to discover all of Existence was ended, God included, because you wanted to restart a bloody pissing contest!” Raphael yells.

Gabriel sounds a bit overwhelmed. “But—that was what was supposed to happen. Not the lack of God, I mean, but—”

“No, brother.” Michael steps forward, a look of deep regret carving his features. “It was never meant to happen that way.”

Sandalphon goes slack-jawed. “But—but you—you supported us!”

Michael briefly bows his head. “Brothers: at any point during our preparations did you hear me say I would actually lift my sword if Armageddon began?”

Aziraphale raises both eyebrows. Michael hadn’t attacked him, unlike the others. Michael only told Aziraphale to choose a side. He had never actually specified which side.


“But you poured holy water in Hell to get rid of that bloody demon!” Sandalphon cries.

Michael smiles. It’s not a very friendly smile. “Funny how that worked out, isn’t it?”

Crowley slaps Gabriel on the shoulder hard enough to make Gabriel stagger. “Off to work with you.” He glares at Sandalphon, who rushes backwards and nearly trips over his own feet in order to get away. Then Crowley rejoins Aziraphale, which soothes Aziraphale’s rattled nerves. “So, where
Aziraphale opens his mouth. He could say so many things. He could tell Crowley of how his heart shattered in time with the shattering of the mirrors in Purgatory. Aziraphale could tell him that Crowley was his best friend, too, and that it was a truth that would never change.

He could tell Crowley that he loves him.

Instead, his eyes drop down to take in Crowley’s mangled wing. “I think six thousand years is long enough,” Aziraphale murmurs. “Don’t you?”

Crowley twists his head to glance down at his left wing, which is gently reflecting sunlight along the bronzed edges of his dark feathers. “Yeah, probably. Odd that it broke again in the same places, but I suppose that’s because of where it was healed in the first place.”

Aziraphale refuses to shed any more tears right now. He is a dignified Principality, and he does not need to sob his way across the whole of Elysium. “Because it was healed in Hell.”

“Gehenna, but…eh, it was already close enough. Cursed healing, I suppose—” Crowley breaks off, a shocked expression spreading across his face. “Zira. I—I’m not a demon anymore, am I?”

Aziraphale stares at him in disbelief. “I would have thought that part was already quite obvious!”

“I can’t not be a demon!” Crowley yelps. “Six thousand years! It’s who I bloody well am! I have no fucking interest in sitting up here, plucking a harp, bored out of my fucking skull!”

“We still don’t use harps!” Aziraphale says, rather desperately.

“And Hell doesn’t use pitchforks! It was the bloody analogy, all right?” Crowley shoves both hands into his hair. “Oh, fuck. Fuck! What the Heaven do I do?”

“First off, could you perhaps put your eyes back to the way they usually are? It’s really strange to see you with blue eyes,” Aziraphale decides to suggest. “Especially with the, er, pupils.”

Crowley blinks a few times, and his eyes promptly return to reptilian gold. The vertical pupil is a nearly invisible line in the bright sunlight of Heaven. “Okay. Right. That was starting to get to me, anyway. Round pupils. Bloody useless, those are. Now what?”

A very familiar hand comes down on Crowley’s right shoulder. “And now, my idiot brother is going to come with me, sit down, and let me heal six-thousand-year-old cursed injuries, that’s what!” Raphael barks. “Honestly, it’s like you want to suffer!”

Crowley gives his twin a blank look. “Well, yeah. That’s kind of the point.”

Raphael rolls his eyes and sighs in resignation. “You bloody idiot.” He grabs Crowley’s right arm and pulls him along. “Let’s go. Right now. No more of this shit. You have better things to do than wallow around in pain.”

“But—I—OW! FUCK!” Crowley shouts as his left wing is caught by the violets, which try to pull back on his dark feathers. “THAT HURTS!”

“Whinge, whinge,” Raphael offers cheerfully. “I’ll bring him back to you in a bit!”

Aziraphale tentatively waves his hand in acknowledgement. He isn’t certain if Raphael meant that for him, or if it was just…a general sort of announcement.
Then Aziraphale frowns and kicks at a violet. Oh, *bugger!* He was never any good at Feelings, anyway!

* * * * *

“Oi, and what’s with all the musicians from Earth being sent Hell? That is completely statistically improbable!”

* * * * *

Barachiel straightens their suit jacket, a rather nice one, they believe. Heaven has never really mastered much in the way of fashion beyond office chic, but they’ve seen some rather *nice* blouses and sport coats. Or were they button-downs and ladies’ jackets?

Not that it really mattered to them. As long as it looked stylish.

The gates of Hell are as gloomy as ever. “I am the Archangel Barachiel, here to see Dagon, Lord of the Files and Prince of Hell’s Great Bureaucracy.”

The imp staring down at them from the bars in the gate sneers. “The Lord Dagon doesn’t have time for the likes of you.”

Barachiel smiles. “You must be new. Dagon will not be pleased if you stall his beloved paperwork with your ignorance.”

The imp’s smile vanishes. A moment later, the gates creak open. “Watch yourself,” the imp warns them, looking around nervously. “I refuse to be responsible for an archangel gettin’ themselves destroyed because they couldn’t keep their noses out of Hell.”

“Do not worry yourself. When I am on this sort of business, I have safe passage,” Barachiel says. Of course, they’ve long understood what “safe passage” really means in Hell. They could be attacked at any moment, and it would only cease if Barachiel successfully defended themselves, or if one of the higher lords or dukes noticed and intervened.

Barachiel prefers the former. The lords and dukes would insist that Barachiel owed them a *favor*.

The archangel knows all the shortcuts, more than the new imp, and is announced in Dagon’s cramped, dark, smelly office in short order. “Hello, Dagana.”

Dagon glances up from his never-ending piles of paperwork. Lucifer might rule, and Samael might inspire terror, but the worst threat a demon can face is Dagon telling them they have forms to fill out. In triplicate. “Bārki’ēl. I did not realize it was that time of year.”

“This is a special occasion. You’ll like it. You might even smile,” Barachiel says. Dagon glowers at them.

Barachiel takes great pleasure in retrieving the scroll from their inner jacket pocket and handing it over. “A list of names,” they say. “Ones that have been…misfiled.”
Dagon scowls, hissing as he breaks the Heavenly seal and burning the end of his thumb. Then he unrolls the scroll, muttering to himself. “Yes, yes, I see—wait. What the Heaven is this, Barachiel?”

Barachiel smiles. “Yes?”

Dagon lets the scroll snap shut and then shakes it at Barachiel. “These names—we’ve been contesting some of them for bloody years, trying to tell you lot that they were in the wrong fucking afterlife! And now, now you bring me a list, like I can just snap my ruddy fingers and send them all straight up to you?”

“Well. You can’t,” Barachiel says in a mild voice. “That will take someone a bit higher up. But it is to be done.”

Dagon sighs and drops the scroll onto the uppermost pile of work on his desk. “For Satan’s sake, Barachiel. What changed? Why now?”

“Oh, there were a couple of things,” Barachiel replies, and decides mentioning Purgatory is probably not the best idea. “God has returned.”

Dagon snorts. “God never left. They’re just deaf.”

“I mean God has returned in what seems to be a more intentionally consistent presence,” Barachiel explains. “Rather dramatically, too. Said there was never supposed to be a war for Armageddon.”

Dagon, in the midst of sipping congealed coffee, proceeds to snort it from his nose. “NO ARMAGEDDON?”

“No. Apparently not.” Barachiel is still not certain how they feel about a lack of war, but they are very fond of the lack of dying.

“Hmmph. Fine. Upstairs is going to be upset about that, but…” Dagon shakes his head. “Not my job.”

“And…” Barachiel relishes this news a bit more than the first. “The last two of the First Seven have returned.”

Dagon scowls. “What the shit are you on about? You and Cassiel are the last of the Seven!”

“No, Cassiel and I were replacements for the last of the Seven when they were lost in the war,” Barachiel corrects. They’re rather glad the two have returned; they aren’t the healing sort of angel. Also, job pressure. Not to their taste. “Raphael. And…” Barachiel frowns. “Bother. I can never remember the other one’s name. The twins. The bloody healers,” they add when Dagon still looks uncomprehending.

Dagon whistles. “Oh. Them. Yeah, I think I remember…a bit of that. We’ve definitely heard more about Raphael today than anyone has in centuries.” The demon picks up the scroll again and studies it curiously. “Heaven really means it. They’re claiming these souls proper, the way they should have in the first place. The suicides from illness, the musicians who didn’t make deals with demons, the wealthy whose only sin was being wealthy, not because they hoarded it, others like that…it’s going to be all of them?”

Barachiel nods. “Yes.”

“Huh. I’ll be damned,” Dagon mutters, slinging the congealed coffee, cup and all, behind him.
“How is that working out for you, then?” Barachiel asks curiously.

Dagon shrugs. “It’s not so bad, once you get used to it.”

*          *          *          *

Aziraphale is wringing his hands again as he paces around the field of violets. It’s a habit he would dearly love to break, but he is that sort of angel, he supposes.

Gabriel is wandering along the edge of Heaven, peering over the side with a rather shell-shocked expression on his face. God, in her olive-skinned female form, is at his side, speaking to him in a voice too low to be heard. Aziraphale presumes that they are fixing the abyss problem, but hasn’t yet gone to see it for himself.

Uriel and Michael are standing with their heads bent together, near the Grecian platform that God built from the remains of Purgatory. He has no idea what they’re doing, but turns away quickly when Uriel reaches out, touches Michael’s chin, and pulls him in for a kiss.

No, no, that is not his concern. He didn’t need that fluttery feeling in his chest, either.

Raguel and Saraquel both returned to the City in order to help Jerahmeel deal with the sudden influx of souls. Most of the other angels who came out to witness the end of Purgatory joined them. Aziraphale doesn’t envy any of them the task they’re taking on. It’s hard enough when a natural disaster brings hundreds of distraught souls directly to the gates. Now they have to watch over, guide, judge, and direct millions of souls who, until Purgatory was destroyed, already believed themselves to be in Heaven. It will take quite a bit of getting used to.

Aziraphale is also glad that the City will be a bit less empty. It was built to be endless, to shelter however many souls it needed to house. It was made to be a place of freedom, where souls and angels could come and go as they pleased.

He desperately hopes it will be again. He never liked having to announce himself at locked and barred gates just to enter his own home.

He hasn’t seen Sandalphon since Crowley glared the other angel into submission. Sandalphon had been rather creepy the last time Aziraphale encountered him, right before the Averted Apocalypse. He also hasn’t quite forgiven Sandalphon for that, so as long as Sandalphon stays far away from Aziraphale, he will be quite pleased with the arrangement.

For lack of anything better to do, Aziraphale re-crosses the field of violets and the silvery-golden road that leads to the City. He’d very much like a closer examination of the Grecian orator’s platform. It’s been a long time since he’s seen one in pristine condition, and he can’t resist the urge to glimpse resurrected ancient history.*[292]

He finds the Metatron already standing there, studying the white stone with his usual dour, default expression. Aziraphale can’t recall ever seeing the man smile, as if the act of joy might make the Metatron ill. “Er, hello.”

“How, Principality Aziraphale.”

Aziraphale scoffs a bit. “Oh, there is no need to be that formal. Er, is there?”
The Metatron considers the question. “No. I suppose there is not.” Then he falls silent, his eyes tracking the stairs, the perfection of the rectangular pedestal, and the grace of the Ionic columns with their perfect capitals.

“Excuse me for asking, but…are you all right?”

“Oh, yes,” the Metatron replies.

Aziraphale is about to leave it at that when he remembers that he is dealing with an angel who tends to be rather literal. “Let me try that again. Is there anything the matter?”

“Yes,” the Metatron admits. “There is.”

“Well, then I’m all ears,” Aziraphale says. He bites back a sigh at the Metatron’s look of incomprehension. “I mean that I am willing to listen. If you’d like to discuss it, that is.”

“Oh.” The Metatron seems to be chewing at his own lip in thought. “I was named the scribe of God. I was to be the writer of all of God’s words, and record everything said by God in Heaven…but I didn’t. I couldn’t have been.”

Aziraphale is now very, very curious. Curiosity is an excellent distraction from fretting over everything else. “Why do you say that?”

“I should have known a place such as Purgatory existed in Heaven. No,” the Metatron corrects himself. “I knew that Purgatory existed. I did not know that it had become a never-ending prison. It was not a torment for those souls within, but that does not change the nature of being imprisoned.”

“No,” Aziraphale agrees quietly. “It really rather doesn’t.”

“I was assured that Purgatory was the work of God. I had not heard from Them in a while. I could still reach Them, if I wished, but instead I trusted in the words of others. It seemed…easier, I suppose. Even I find it unnerving sometimes to speak with the Almighty.” The Metatron scowls. “A prison,” he repeats. “That is not the work of God. Not even Hell is a prison, and They could have made it so after the last of the Fallen were cast into the abyss.”

“But that would…well, I know angels and demons don’t seem to realize it much of the time, but that would violate free will. She did give it to all of us.” Aziraphale has spent many centuries struggling with that one. Crowley pointed out time and time again that he was a demon, most certainly of formerly angelic stock, and he was making his own decisions on the regular without a bit of difficulty.

“Hmm. They did, yes.”

Aziraphale waits a moment. “Out of curiosity, did I speak to you, or was it an answering service?”

The Metatron’s lips turn up in what might be a smile. “On which occasion?”

“The day of the Averted Apocalypse,” Aziraphale replies. “You, er, left the doorway open.”

“I believe that was actually one of my interns. It was a very busy day,” the Metatron muses. “They did tell me afterwards that the Principality Aziraphale stationed on Earth had tried to contact me, saying you were rather desperate to speak directly to God. I chastised them for not telling me sooner, but by the time I knew…by then, I understood why you wished to speak with our Creator.”

Aziraphale looks at him in mild surprise. “You did?”
“Yes. The boy. Adam Young,” the Metatron says. “He who was born the Antichrist, and yet chose to be human, instead. His logic regarding Armageddon was impeccable. Ineffable, as you and the demon Crowley—er, Archangel Zaherael—pointed out at the time. Also…” If anything, the Metatron’s expression becomes even more dreary than before. Aziraphale didn’t think that was possible. “Adam reminded me of when I was Enoch. Of when I was human.”

“Oh!” Aziraphale smiles. “I do believe I’d forgotten all about that. It was quite the to-do at the time.”

The Metatron nods. “No one has called me Enoch in thousands of years. I think I might try it out again. I could stand to be reminded of where I came from. Going along so willingly with a plan to destroy the planet of my birth was not very human of me at all.”

“It wasn’t very angelic of you, either,” Aziraphale dares. He still isn’t certain—aside from Gabriel—what the general view in Heaven is of the Averted Apocalypse, and this is an excellent way to begin finding out.

The Metatron eyes Aziraphale in quiet acknowledgement. “That is true. It was not.”

Aziraphale decides that a bit more prodding probably won’t hurt. Much. “Er, Sandalphon. He was human once, too.”

“Yes. He was. I believe Sandalphon has forgotten he was once Elijah.”

“What does he think of all this?” Aziraphale asks. “This lack of Armageddon, I mean.”

The Metatron doesn’t speak for several minutes. Aziraphale realizes, rather abruptly, that the Voice of God is feeling hesitant. “I think Sandalphon is going to Fall,” the Metatron whispers, and Aziraphale’s blood runs cold. No angel has Fallen since the last day of war in Heaven. “I hope that he does not. I hope that our Creator’s presence here today will pull him back from the brink, but…of late, he finds cruelty far too easily.”

Aziraphale winces. “He did, er, hit me. Rather hard. He was quite cheerful about it, too.” It had been like dealing with a cinematographic mafia villain instead of an angel.

“There is a balance to the cosmos, though it is not one we can see, nor is it necessarily made of perfection,” the Metatron says quietly. “Zaherael is returned to us, so Sandalphon may turn away.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but…Sandalphon may well fit right in Below. It’s a rather unpleasant place—first-hand experience speaking, there—but he seems to have come to like being…er, unpleasant.”

The Metatron nods again. “Thus, my fear.”

“Being a demon doesn’t mean he is ended. It just…makes things more difficult,” Aziraphale says. “I’m still speaking from experience, by the way.”

“I believe I will seek him out.” The Metatron turns and slowly reaches out with his gnarled old hand. Aziraphale accepts it in a nervous grip, only then realizing the Metatron is shaking his hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Principality Aziraphale. My name is Enoch.”

“Enoch,” Aziraphale repeats, trying for a smile that isn’t completely bewildered. “Then it is a pleasure to meet you, as well. No need for formality, Enoch; I am merely Aziraphale.”
Azrael loves both of their older brothers, but the twins were also complete pains in their backside. They would like for the threat of Armageddon to be a few eons behind them before they have to worry about dealing with these particular troublemakers again.

All Crowley wanted was his best friend back. Aerodynamics for the win.

It’s long been rumored that while Louis XIV was pious in public, in private he was intrigued by the Occult. He most certainly harbored La Voisin, Catherine Monvoisin, a regular presence at Court and one of the most acclaimed occultists of that era. Also, one of the most murderous.

The bit about the Aardvark remained Quite The Thing between them for several centuries after that business in Rome. It was a reminder of the very first time they’d met and spent time together for reasons that were entirely their own.

Being a demon isn’t the real trouble. A demon’s only lack in the business of crying is in having a reason to do so.

Which means it has happened exactly twice. The first time came before the Flood. (Crowley getting drunk after the Flood was no laughing matter; it made Aziraphale wonder if demons could die from alcohol poisoning.) The second time was somewhere in northern Europe, in an area that would eventually be France, when Crowley nicked an entire wagonload of yet-to-be-sanctified Papal wine and gave it all to Aziraphale. Aziraphale was entirely scandalized, but not scandalized enough to pass on the chance to drink some of the best wine ever produced.

God will realize later that inviting the pigeons might have been a mistake.

Aziraphale is entirely unaware of the fact that both Raphael and God look rather approving of this.

He also doesn’t notice that he has both sets of wings back, the mark of the cherubim. Nor would he really care if he did notice.

God never actually took them away in the first place. Belief has power, after all.

Or whatever passed for the office equivalent at the time.

Aziraphale had rather liked Socrates, who’d been rather vocal about questioning whether or not might made right. It got him into trouble, of course. Aziraphale was planning to substitute the poison hemlock for wine, but Socrates, just to make an obstinate point of philosophical order, drank it all in seconds to rile up the judges.
Sacred and Profane

Chapter Summary

Two Ineffable Idiots once again demonstrate their communication skills. Most of this is perfectly fine.

Aziraphale watches as the Metatron trudges away, shoulders bent with an old man’s gait. He looks to be heading for the rising structure of Home Office that lies beyond the gates…which are standing open. Those currently guarding the open gates look very confused. Aziraphale sympathizes with them. He’s still entirely bewildered, too.

“Oi, you!”

Aziraphale squeaks in alarm when a long, bony arm is slung about his shoulders. “Bu—oh,” he says in mild disappointment when he finds blue eyes looking at him instead of gold. “Er. Hello?”

“You are a jumpy one, aren’t you?” Raphael says, steering them both towards the City.

“You startled me!” Aziraphale protests. He’s just noticed that there is a perfectly symmetrical spot of solid black on the archangel’s left cheekbone. That helps break up the… the similarities a bit more.

“Sorry ’bout that. I just thought you’d be a bit calmer if you saw to it that my brother was still in one piece.”

Aziraphale swallows. “Is he? In one piece, I mean.”

“Of course he is! Honestly, some people have no faith in my ability to do my job.”

Aziraphale stares at him.

Raphael tilts his head. “Which part of it is bothering you the most?”

“Oh. Well.” Aziraphale tries to grapple with his careening thoughts. “I think I can get used to your appearance, especially if you keep your hair like that. I think I’ll adjust to the voice as well. Really!” he insists, when Raphael gives him a doubtful look. “It’s—it’s your accent, really. You speak exactly the way Crowley does!”

“Oh, that.” Raphael doesn’t seem surprised. “We’ve always sounded the same, but we didn’t really speak the same way, not even in the old days. I was all right with the bit of pomp and nonsense that comes with being one of the Seven, and Zaherael was all for hiding in plain sight, wanting very much to avoid being noticed.”

“Was he shy?” Aziraphale asks in astonishment. He can’t imagine Crowley being any such thing.

“Nah. He just didn’t have the patience for it. Unless you were one of the Seven, or worked with us regularly, no one really knew Zaherael existed—well, everyone knew there were Seven of us,” Raphael corrects himself. “They just didn’t know the seventh was usually right there, listening in and being a bit smug about it.”
“That…does sound like Crowley,” Aziraphale admits.

“Exactly.” Raphael conjures his staff from thin air and carries it along in his free hand. There is a sense of divine power to the serpentless caduceus that is unmistakable, but it’s a peaceful feeling, not wrathful at all. “What you should really keep in mind about my brother is that, aside from some justifiable fucking anger, being Fallen didn’t really change him much at all.”

Aziraphale swallows and nods. “I did experience that, yes. I didn’t trust him, which is my failing, but he was a demon, and he…” Oh, this is so hard to discuss, even now. “The Great Flood that erased civilization in the Mesopotamian region. The idea that God would kill everyone, even the children, and that it was Heaven’s idea—that horrified Crowley.”*

The archangel nods. “I was vaguely aware of that. There would be moments when I was closer to his thoughts, and my brother was closer to me. Rare, but it happened. The question everyone tends to ask is, of course, ‘What did we do to deserve this? What did they do to deserve it?’”

“I’ve been struggling with that for thousands of years,” Aziraphale says. “And I don’t…I don’t know why. I don’t have an answer.”

“Father always liked it when people questioned Him, but He couldn’t answer them if they asked the wrong questions,” Raphael says. “Look at it a different way. What if it had nothing to do with punishment at all?”

“I—” Aziraphale breaks off, fretfully biting at his lip. He doesn’t know what to say to that. It’s always been spoken of as a punishment, that Flood, especially by Home Office.*[294] If it wasn’t meant to be that at all, then why?

Raphael takes them through the City’s open gates, and then makes an immediate west turn at the first junction of the golden roads. “Accents, then,” he says, distracting Aziraphale from his bewildered thoughts. “I only have some bits of memory from Earth, so there isn’t yet a lot rattling around in my head that didn’t come from Before. I wasn’t really a fully conscious entity again until…well. Yeah, let’s not discuss that right now. I still find it distressing, and you’re already distressed enough for three people.”

Aziraphale sniffs indignantly. “And I am very good at it, thank you.”

“Mm. What about Scottish? My brother could pull that off fairly well.”

“Oh, good God, no,” Aziraphale vetoes at once. One of the last times Crowley pulled Edinburgh Scots out of his back pocket in its full, gloriously Gaelic form, they’d both been rather drunk. Aziraphale has had to choke back inappropriate laughter whenever the accent has popped up since then, mostly because Crowley wouldn’t stop reciting wildly implausible naughty stories.

“Not Scottish. Irish, you think?”

“If you wish to visit Ireland and be shot, perhaps,” Aziraphale replies. “Crowley, er, made a number of people really unhappy among the Irish not so long ago. Maybe something that’s…well, a bit more neutral. And perhaps more fully enunciated?”

“Neutral. Well, that definitely leaves out Yorkshire.” Raphael considers it. “American?”

Aziraphale snorts. “If you visit London using one of their accents, you’ll face the label of Yank Tourist wherever you go, usually with unwanted results.”*[295]

“Not that, then,” Raphael agrees. “Maybe Surrey or sommat.”
“Do you even know what a Surrey accent sounds like?”


“Er, sort of. Just don’t go West Country,” Aziraphale says. “Not Norfolk, either. I don’t think they would be quite fitting.”* [296]

“Noted. Relax, by the way. It’s like trying to escort a wooden plank.”

“Well, I’m so very sorry!” Aziraphale retorts. “It isn’t every day that I am imprisoned by my fellow angels in a magic prison, my best friend tries to sacrifice his existence, a dead archangel turns up, and then God Herself turns up. Purgatory is destroyed by some sort of sacrificial spell, I thought my best friend was dead, and now I’m being led about by that same formerly deceased archangel!” He draws in a steadying breath. “Oh, and I punched Gabriel, but that part wasn’t the least bit distressing.”

Raphael, in the midst of pinning Aziraphale with a rather mystified expression, starts laughing instead. “Oh, believe me. Gabriel earned that glorious right hook.” He shakes his head. “Therapy. That man needs so much bloody therapy.”

“How is it—well, you—I’m not really certain where, exactly, it is that you came from,” Aziraphale admits, finally giving in to prurient curiosity. “How is it you know so much of what Crowley does, even if you don’t know all of it?”

*Why do you sound exactly like him?*

“Oh, I picked up a lot by osmosis, considering I was literally residing in his heart,” Raphael answers. “I wasn’t necessarily consciously aware of much, though, not until my brother—no, wait, we’re still not discussing that bit right now.”

“Could you perhaps explain that other part a bit more detail, then?” Aziraphale requests, fascinated. “How is it possible for another being to reside…well, how is that possible?”

“In a bit. This part first.” Raphael lets go of Aziraphale’s shoulders, to his relief. It isn’t that he doesn’t like the archangel* [297] so much as Aziraphale is very uncomfortable being manhandled about by strangers, even if they are exceptionally familiar strangers.

When they come to a door, it’s one that Aziraphale realizes he has never seen before. He’s quite familiar with the City, but it holds so many secrets that it would take eons to sort them all—and then the City would already have grown and changed to accommodate more secrets.

Raphael taps the head of his carved staff, which is lacking in serpents and wings, against the wood. The door opens at once, creaking on hinges that sound as if they’ve not been budged for a very long time.* [298]

Aziraphale looks around as they step into a massive, mostly empty space. Their footsteps should echo terribly, given the sheer amount of stone, but instead their steps are soft, as if they’re walking across a carpeted floor. A gorgeous stained-glass window sits high in the far wall, waiting to catch the glow of the sun in the west…which is an unfortunate position, as the sun in Heaven never sets. The colorful glass is definitely not the sort of thing one usually finds in an angel’s abode in the City. Everything tends to be a rather relentless white.

In the stained glass is an artistic rendering, a diagram, of seven objects. They’re arranged in a circle and pointing towards the fiery center: glowing sword, thorny white rose, silver scales, golden crown, dark staff, black serpent, and flaming sword. The flaming sword is separated from the glowing sword.
by a delicate piecing-together of a gold-winged, androgynous angel.

“What is this place?” Aziraphale asks. His voice is clear and audible, but like his steps, it refuses to echo.

Raphael is also looking at the stained glass window, a wistful expression on his face. “You’re standing in the very first hospital in all of creation. Well, first infirmary, first hospice, whatever term you like. It exists because of the war in Heaven.”

Aziraphale nods as he takes in the hospital beds, or at least the few beds which seem to have been left behind, perhaps in deference to an archangel who was no longer among them. All but one of them is empty. The beds are mindful of the cots used in infirmaries during World War I. White sheets are wrapped around squared mattresses, and the frames are built from useful, anti-bacterial copper. There is a wooden table next to each bed, and a few of those tables still have rolls of white linen or bottles of odd tinctures resting on them.

“My brother and I were present for many battles, doing what we could, but it was chaos in those days. A day might bring one battle; another day might bring five at once. My brother and I plotted and came up with the idea of a central room, this hospital, so that the injured could be brought to us. On the heels of that idea immediately came the idea of nurses and assistants, because we literally couldn’t keep up with it all.”

Aziraphale tries his best not to imagine the horrors this hospital must have seen. An angel can heal themselves rather well without assistance unless the wounds are grievous. It’s rather difficult to heal a stab wound if you’ve already lost too much blood to concentrate.*

“My domain hasn’t been needed since that war ended. I’m glad for it, really. If we ever need it again, that means things have gone to complete shit.”

Aziraphale nods, but his attention has been firmly ensnared by the infirmary’s sole patient. He approaches Crowley’s bed slowly, not wanting to wake and startle him.*

Crowley is lying on his stomach, face turned sideways on a rather thin pillow. His wings are spread out, drooping down so that the gold-tipped feathers are brushing along the stone floor. Aziraphale is vastly relieved to see that Crowley’s left wing is now mended, looking as if it had never been broken into terrible pieces.

“Oh, what is that on his back?” Aziraphale asks as he notices something resting on Crowley’s jacket. It looks just like the cut rose from the stained glass window. The slightly unfurled bud is the same radiant white of many an angel’s wing, his own included.

Raphael gives the thorny rose a rather complicated, uninterpretable glance. “Leave it. It’s Uriel’s.” He shoves one hand through his hair and sighs. “At least it isn’t Raguel’s scales.”

Aziraphale knows nothing about Uriel carrying a rose, but the intent of Raguel’s scales has always been quite clear. He much prefers the mystery rose to the implications of the archangel’s scales for measuring souls.

He lifts his hand and reaches out, letting his fingers brush along the fragile alula feathers of Crowley’s right wing. “It looks like it should be dust that comes off on my fingers, like a butterfly’s wing,” he murmurs.

“It was carbon dust.” Aziraphale glances over to find that Raphael is also staring down at his brother’s spread wings. The color of his eyes has gone odd, mindful of the ethereal glow. “Father
took carbon dust from the heart of a star and dusted our wings. Mine only picked up a bit of it, but Zaherael’s wings soaked up darkness like it had all been meant for him.”

Aziraphale frowns, peers closer, and realizes that Crowley’s serpentine mark is still in place on his right cheek. “I thought the serpent mark was demonic,” he says, and Raphael makes a choked sound of amusement. “Then, well…I suppose that came from the carbon dust, as well?”

Raphael’s mouth quirks up in a brief smile.* “It wasn’t seen as a serpent, not at first, but a serpent quickly became a popular symbol for expressing the idea of infinity.”

“Like the ouroboros.” Aziraphale could see that happening quite easily, especially with a black serpent roaming about Heaven, giving everyone ideas.

Aziraphale is also desperately relieved; the more Raphael speaks, the less he sounds like he’s imitating Crowley. His words are beginning to flow into smooth, completed sentences without Crowley’s twitchy choppiness, though his terminology is still quite British.

Raphael leans against his staff in a pose that seems long-practiced. “You asked me about how one can dwell in another’s heart. Easily. It’s called love.”

Aziraphale flushes. “Yes, there is that, of course. I was thinking more in terms of physics—er, metaphysics, really.”

“Mm. We are already creatures made to be free of the burden of most physical limitations,” Raphael says. “If you’re dealing with a spirit discorporated to the point of being mere pieces of a soul, then it’s really not hard to make room in your heart for them, especially if you love them already.”

Aziraphale nods, pondering that. It makes him wonder if having part of an angel inside Crowley’s heart is what made him…rather unique, as far as demons are concerned.

“No, absolutely not,” Raphael interrupts his thoughts. “Yes, it was as plain as the eyes upon your face. Free will, Principality. That isn’t to be ignored.”

“I suppose not, then.” It’s actually somewhat of a relief. He likes Crowley the way he is. “Did Crowley tell you that he was afraid of what it meant to no longer be a demon?”

Raphael is vastly amused by that. “He did mention it, yes. I asked why who he’d been then made any difference to who he is now. Zaherael sputtered indignantly because he couldn’t answer the question.”

“Apart from his, er, wings,” Aziraphale says. “And, uh…the bit about redemption.”

“Redemption?” Raphael gives him a wry look. “Why would my brother need such a thing?”

Aziraphale is starting to be reminded of psychologists on Earth who are actually competent in their field. He has the distinct sense that he’s wandering into a baited trap. “Because he was a demon?”

Raphael shakes his head. “My brother did not choose to Fall from Her grace, not at first. The choice was made for him. It was a terrible violation of his trust in another, and of the free will our Father granted to us all. He did not Fall in any true sense of the word until he gave in to the rage that another had poured into him.”

Aziraphale’s fingers flutter in nervousness. “You mean Eden.”

The pain of that confession is going to linger in Aziraphale’s heart for a very long time. Not because
he doesn’t forgive Crowley, but because Crowley carried that burden for so long.

“My brother broke Eve’s heart, but Zaherael was still himself enough to recognize that spreading that rage, repeating the devastation that was wrought onto him, was very, very wrong. He never did anything like it ever again.” Raphael pauses, as if in thought. “Zaherael was very specific, you know. He asked you about redemption, but he seized onto exactly what he needed.”

Aziraphale shifts his wings against rather unwanted discomfort. “Atonement. A confession of wrongdoing, but not a plea for redemption.”

Atoning for a mistake. Yeah. Don’t need redemption for that, do you?

Not necessarily, no.

Raphael nods. “My brother never lost God’s grace, not truly. A loss of divinity isn’t the same thing. They flee from Him, but if they reached out, they would find that He is still there, waiting for them.

“Zaherael’s faith in everything he had ever known was taken from him, Aziraphale. My brother had to relearn how to trust in others. He needed to question, to prod, to press, to choose to defy the bars of the cage Hell would place him in. The famously Averted Apocalypse allowed him to recognize that he was capable of selflessness, even as he desperately tried to ignore that revelation. Zaherael also needed to recognize and remember that he was capable of loving another—and most importantly, that love wasn’t a bloody failing.”

That makes Aziraphale’s cracked-chest feeling return with a vengeance. Crowley had tried so hard to tell him he loved him, but in the end, it hadn’t mattered. Aziraphale knew it, anyway. “It, er, seems like you’re giving away quite a number of Crowley’s secrets. Secrets that Crowley might prefer to keep to himself.”

Raphael folds up his golden wings until they’re hidden by the ether. Then he drops down to sit on the empty bed nearest Crowley. Aziraphale dithers for a moment before sitting on the bed on Crowley’s opposite side. The scent of it is briefly overwhelming, reminding Aziraphale of so many rooms of healing he’s visited that smelled of antiseptics and fresh linens.

“Secrets,” Raphael says gravely, “have the power to shatter souls.”

Aziraphale flinches. “If you mean myself, then—”

“No.” Raphael looks quite sad. “I mean Gabriel.”

He tells Aziraphale a story he claims to know only because God recently told it to him. He speaks of Pronoia, the woman Gabriel considered dearest to his heart, but feared to name as his wife. He tells Aziraphale of Bariel’s loss, and of Michael’s need for a new corporation. His recitation is terse as he explains the means by which Gabriel drove all of the Fallen from Heaven…all but one. The last was Gabriel’s youngest brother, not truly Fallen, but viewed by an archangel who saw everything through the lens of wrath.

“That…” Aziraphale is torn between sympathy and anger. He knows how much it pained him to think he’d lost Crowley. The idea of losing someone who was a spouse in all but name seems unbearable, but what was done afterward is completely awful. He finally settles on a fairly neutral response. “That does explain some of Gabriel’s rather un-angelic behavior.”

“Some things are never meant to be secret,” Raphael agrees with a faint shrug. “But Gabriel kept the secret of his love from the one who should have been his wife. He didn’t speak of how much it grieved him that he had killed a friend rather than a foe. He told no one of the pain Pronoia’s murder
caused him. He kept silent in regards to Michael, who would ever after wear Bariel’s face, a sight that always felt like blades to his heart. Then he hid his guilt, because that was not Michael’s fault or wrongdoing. He never spoke of his rage, or of his growing shame, regarding the torment he’d inflicted upon Zaherael in his zeal to cleanse Heaven of evil.

“Gabriel shared with only one other his growing discomfort with the width and breadth of our Father’s idea of who was worthy of Heaven.”

“Sandalphon,” Aziraphale says. It’s not a guess; it’s far too obvious.

“Sandalphon,” Raphael repeats in agreement. “He was easily convinced. After all, the Fallen had seemed worthy of Heaven at first, too, and look at how that turned out?

“Slowly, one word at a time, Gabriel poisoned the minds of other certain other angels in regards to what was right and just, the very same way he had poisoned his own heart. Gabriel kept secrets, and over the course of six thousand years, they shattered his spirit.”

Aziraphale frowns. “You pity him.”

“Don’t you?” Raphael counters, and Aziraphale had to agree that he did.*[302]

“You don’t blame him at all for causing your, er, very long-term temporary death?”

Raphael shakes his head. “No. What happened to me was truly an accident in every sense of the word.”

“And…what Gabriel did to Crowley?” Aziraphale asks.

A flash of pure anger flashes in the archangel’s blue eyes, shocking enough that Aziraphale leans back in alarm. “That…that will be much harder to forgive,” Raphael admits. “I will, because I understand him, but I just spent a great deal of effort healing broken bones that were never truly repaired, so I’m still angry.”

“But…” Aziraphale’s brow furrows. “I saw his wings intact. I saw Crowley use them to fly on several occasions.”

“They were held together with demonic power, and to be fair even to the Fallen, whoever did the work did the best they could. Zaherael’s wings were healed, yet not healed at all. Gabriel didn’t intend for his wrath to be a curse, but it was, and cursed wounds are always harder to deal with.” Raphael glances at his brother. “His wings would always have burned from the pain of that betrayal. Flying would have been agony.”

“Noise,” Crowley suddenly groans. “Why is there so much bloody fucking noise?”

“Because you were sleeping like the dead,” Raphael replies dryly. “To be fair, you were dead for a few minutes, so I suppose it was justified.”

Aziraphale stares at Raphael in open-mouthed distress. “You can’t just bloody well say things like that!” he declares, pressing his hand to his chest when he feels that awful ache again.

“You’re talking like a wanker again, Brother,” Crowley mumbles into his pillow. “Knew it wouldn’t take long. 'Lo, Zira.”

Aziraphale grips his hands so they don’t start trying to flutter in ridiculous fashion again. “Hello, Crowley.”
“Oh, bloody thank you for that,” Crowley says, his wings flexing and fluttering as he starts to truly wake up.

Aziraphale is surprised to hear that. “Thank me for what?”

“Calling me by my name.” Crowley replies, lifting his head. Then he freezes in place, his gold eyes wide. “What the hell is on my back?”

“It’s a rose,” Aziraphale offers.

“It’s Uriel’s rose,” Raphael clarifies.

Crowley immediately drops back down onto the bed and clings to the copper-railed sides. “Is she going to be along any time soon to collect it?”

“I’ve no idea, Brother,” Raphael says.

“What is the problem?” Aziraphale asks, baffled. “With the rose, I mean.”

“It’s…uh…oh, fuck, it’s really been a while since I’ve thought about that.” Crowley carefully lifts his arm so he can use it to prop up his head a bit. “It’s sort of a, uh…well.”

Raphael snorts at Crowley’s prevaricating. “Sanctification. It’s a blessing. A divine blessing.”

“It’sss like having Mum ssstaring directly at your back!” Crowley hisses in agitation. “It’sss bloody well uncomfortable!”

“Can’t we just move it?” Aziraphale suggests.

“Oi, no!” Crowley gives Aziraphale a horrified look. “That bloody rose holds the power of creation. It’d be like mucking about with Raguel’s scales!”

“Oh, I suppose I see—scales.” Aziraphale breaks off, blinking several times, before he stands up and stares at the stained-glass window. “Scales. Swords. Crown. Creation. It’s Armageddon in reverse.”

Crowley twitches his wings and then turns his head so he can look at the window. “What are you on about now?”

“Seven symbols.” Aziraphale feels the stirrings of scholarly delight. “They had to get the idea from somewhere, didn’t they? The idea of Armageddon, the end times.”

Crowley makes a thoughtful sound. “Hmm, yeah. That’s a thing, isn’t it?”

Aziraphale glances over at Raphael. The archangel looks to be developing the urge to smite someone. “I don’t—I don’t have these memories. What do you mean?”

“Famine carried silver scales,” Aziraphale explains. “Pollution wore a crown. War carried a sword.”

“Doesn’t really fit, the rest of it,” Crowley observes.

“Don’t be daft,” Aziraphale retorts. “It fits perfectly. The serpent was there because you were literally there. A rose of divine creation—Adam was capable of unmaking the world, yes, but he was just as capable of remaking it. The first sword was the one held by War. When she was discorporated, I picked it up, and it became the flaming sword!”

“The staff is a divine tool of balance,” Raphael whispers. “How did it come into play?”
“Everyone facing off over the end of the world, ready for the scales to tip one way or another,” Crowley says. “I froze time…”

“And both of us told Adam to choose. An angel and a demon took a boy by the hand, and let him choose the balance—but it wasn’t Adam who was really responsible for that,” Aziraphale realizes. “It was everyone who’d come before us. Newt and Anathema. Adam’s family. Adam’s friends, who loved him enough to stand up to three of the most terrifying aspects of human creation.

“Everyone who loved that child provided the grace of a balanced heart.”

“I did not want my gifts to be so corrupted,” God says, and Aziraphale tries not to jump out of his own angelic skin.

He turns around to find God standing behind them. Her hair is now white, rather mindful of Khaleesi with that Grecian gown and sandaled feet. Her eyes are what mark Her as different—the reflected blackness of space dotted by bright pinpoints of stars.

Aziraphale tries valiantly not to squeak. “Er, hello.” One should not be terrified of their Creator, but he is. He always has been.

“Please tell Uriel to get this thing off me!” Crowley yells.

God tilts Her head and smirks at Crowley. “Why?”

Crowley groans and thumps his face back down onto the pillow. Whatever he says into the fabric is probably sacrilegious.*

Raphael stands and bows his head. “Father.”

“Raphael.” God looks up at the stained-glass window. “I’ve always thought this window to be beautiful, especially when the setting sun made it glow like the gold of your wings.”

Aziraphale, terrified as he is, can’t let that pass by unnoted. “But…the sun doesn’t set in Heaven. The light never changes.”

“Certain beings became rather paranoid about the potential carried by darkness.” God sounds a bit testy. “They forgot that without Darkness, there can be no Light.” Then the sun of Heaven, which has held itself perfectly still for six millennia, drops far enough into the west to light up the window.

Aziraphale gasps in delight, fear momentarily forgotten. The sun-brightened glass is beautiful, and the center of it—the fire that is meant to represent God—has become a warm, soothing glow. Each of the seven symbols brighten in their places. Even the dark staff and black serpent take on a richness of color that, in the serpent’s case especially, really should not be possible.

“Better,” God says, dusting off Her hands. “The sun and the moon will return to behaving as they should…though I might have slipped in an extra moon. Further light at night may soothe a bit of the fear that still lingers from the war.”*

“He’s right, isn’t he?” Raphael suddenly asks Her. “Aziraphale is correct about the symbols being corrupted for the bloody end of existence.”

“These seven symbols were the first tools of Creation aside from Myself. Symbols of life. Their opposites would then be the antithesis of creation, and thus tools of destruction,” God replies. “However, when their opposites were made, they erred. Only four of the symbols were chosen to become corrupted tools of destruction. One was considered to be corrupted already, and thus
unavailable, and the remaining two were considered inconsequential. Those three symbols, untainted by the idea of the antithesis, would give a small group of people, and a young boy, everything that was needed to prevent the destruction of Existence.” God smiles. “Of course Aziraphale is correct. I did create him to be intelligent, after all.”*

Aziraphale flushes from his neck all the way up to his hair. “Er. Yes. Thank you, uhm—who is they?”

God doesn’t answer right away. Her starlit eyes linger on the window. “I hope you do not let the idea of corruption cause you to think that this window should be changed, Raphael.”

“Hadn’t planned on it,” Raphael says, but he still looks uneasy.

God nods. “They were four in number. Michael only did as I had asked of him, though he did not know the whole of the reason why, and kept watch over his brothers. Uriel’s heart is heavy for doing what she thought was right, and discovering too late that it was not right at all. Gabriel is weighed down by so much pain that he struggles to find regret, but he can feel it, and eventually, his heart will be mended. Sandalphon does not regret at all.” Then Her shoulders slump. “Sandalphon has departed Heaven.”

“Oh, good—Lord.” Aziraphale’s eye twitches when She looks at him. “Sorry. Habit.”

“Fallen?” Raphael asks casually, as if he isn’t the slightest bit concerned.

“Not yet. Soon. He will forget Sandalphon, and Elijah, and he will become Typhaon.”

Aziraphale feels a rather uncomfortable chill at her words. The Metatron had only just spoken to him of the balance in the cosmos. Heaven had regained Crowley, and Hell would gain a new form of an ancient Greek serpentine monster, one with the bad habit of challenging the ruler of creation. Of course, the challenging had already come to pass, and Sandalphon seems to be choosing Tartarus over Mount Olympus.

Crowley’s wings lift as he tries to bristle without dislodging Uriel’s rose. “Hell deserves what they’re getting.”

God makes a tsking sound. “Do you still find hate so easily, Zaherael?”

“Demon for six thousand years!” Crowley snaps. “It’s well-established habit. Besides, you’re the one who just said Sandalphon had no regret, and he—he—”

“Sandalphon would have destroyed one dear to you,” God says quietly.

Crowley clenches his jaw, bows his head, and nods.

“Zaherael,” God murmurs. “I made you to judge those who could not find judgment for themselves, but in this particular instance? I ask that you let it be. Sandalphon will find his own fate, but it should not be by your hand.”

Crowley’s wings lower in visible disappointment. “Fine. But if the bastard comes after me, I’m not above tossing another bucket of holy water at another bloody demon!”*

Aziraphale jerks in surprise. “Wait. That’s what you used it for?”

Crowley glares at him. “Of course that’s what I bloody well used it for! What did you think I wanted holy water for, a fucking party favor?”
"Well, you never said, and—"

Crowley’s jaw falls open. “Six thousand years. Six thousand years of survival, dealing with every arsehole in Hell, and you think I wanted holy water as a bloody suicide champagne? Are you joking? Are you just—absolutely—that—that—”

“What else was I meant to think! And you did just try to suicide while in Purgatory!” Aziraphale shouts back, incensed. “AND APPARENTLY, YOU SUCCEEDED!”

Crowley leaps to his feet, not noticing that Uriel’s rose remains firmly in place. “OF COURSE I DID! I WAS DYING ANYWAY, AND YOU DIDN’T DESERVE TO BE THERE! IF IT SAVED YOU, I’D DO IT! AND I WOULD FUCKING WELL DO IT AGAIN, YOU DAFT FUCKING BASTARD!”

Aziraphale wrings his hands together. “But I don’t want you to!”

Crowley stares at him, brow furrowed in anger, eyes twitching. Then he lets out a faint huff of air and storms out of the infirmary.

Aziraphale flicks a bit of static electricity off his coat. That was a rather literal storming.*[309]

“Well…” Aziraphale cannot think of any polite word to express his current dismay. “Fuck.”

Raphael covers his face with his hands. “How on Earth are the two of you saying the same words, and yet still speaking two entirely different bloody languages?”

God smiles. “Well, they have spent six thousand years practicing the art of being deliberately obtuse. For survival reasons, of course.”

“Nrrrggh,” Raphael says through his hands.

“What should I do?” Aziraphale asks helplessly. He’s still not entirely certain what just happened, aside from the fact that something most assuredly went sideways.

“Talk to him. Maybe with a bloody translator,” Raphael suggests.

Even God flinches when a rather fierce bolt of lightning strikes the ground outside, causing the stone to rumble beneath their feet. “Waiting a few minutes might not be amiss,” she adds.

“Translator, yes.” Aziraphale swallows. “Yes, good. What did I say that was so wrong?”

“My brother just offered to do anything for you, including dying, and you told him to knock off with it,” Raphael says, a great deal of Crowley’s vocal patterns back in his voice. “Not a very nice way to treat that sort of declared dedication.”

“But I don’t want him to die for me!” Aziraphale protests, horrified. “I want him to—”

Oh.

“I want him to live for me,” Aziraphale whispers.

Raphael rolls his eyes up at the ceiling. “Then for fuck’s sake, please go tell him that!”

“Uh—yes! Excellent notion.” Aziraphale pauses. “And where in the entirety of this City would you suggest I look?”

“Look in tall places where you might normally find a brooding gargoyle. You’ll be on the right
As Aziraphale hurries out of the room, Raphael turns to God. “Six thousand years, and no improvement at all. Tell me, did you have to create my brother to fall in love with people who are just as oblivious as he is?”

God smiles. “You think that trait is his alone, Raphael? Really?”

Raphael’s cheeks burn with the fire of a rather sudden recollection. “Oh, shut up.”

During his centuries of reading, Aziraphale discovered that many cultures across the Earth had stories of unceasing rain that drowned many, wiping out their way of life so that they had to start again. Realizing that it had been a global cleansing was worse than standing witness to the flood in Mesopotamia.

It wasn’t yet a horror of an office building, but Home Office existed. There has been a construct of a building, which provided the only means to secure ascension to Heaven, since the violence ended and the Cold War between Heaven and Hell began. It was never the most pleasant place, but becoming an office building certain made it worse.

Not all of the tourists from the USA were bad. Far from it; most of them were quite decent. However, the completely awful ones had created a bit of a complex in London’s citizenry. Hearing a flat American accent outside of a telly broadcast—or worse, a very emphatic American accent—activates the part of a Londoner’s brain that spends all of its time figuring out if fighting or bloody hiding from the tourists is the better option. The shopkeepers and assistants, unfortunately, often don’t have either option. Aziraphale has a rune set carved into the bookshop’s doorway designed specifically to keep the uncivilized version of Americans out.

Aziraphale also knows that both accents tend to drive Crowley completely starkers for reasons known only to Crowley.

He is reserving judgment, but so far, so good.

Six thousand twenty-two years, in fact.

Not his favorite discorporation, and the paperwork afterwards! Simply dreadful, and all because he’d been tasked by Heaven to track down the Baron Gilles de Rais, who had betrayed Heaven’s chosen champion, Jeanne d’Arc. Crowley had been with him, because Crowley hated de Rais—due to the Baron’s habit of murdering children, Aziraphale now realizes. Crowley apologized with a great deal of stolen wine when Aziraphale finally returned to Earth, still upset because he’d had no idea that de Rais was waiting for them with a broadsword capable of skewering a man with terrifying ease. Also, a trap built from a guillotine blade. Crowley had, unfortunately, also been a bit too busy with dying to prevent Aziraphale’s corporation from suffering the same fate. At least de
Rais was already dead by the time they both returned. Neither of them took credit for the man’s unlaughted execution.

A policy of “Bite first, ask questions afterwards” has served Crowley well in the survival department.

Aziraphale finds the expression rather mindful of the Mona Lisa’s enigmatic smile, which is where Leonardo took out his frustration regarding the Problem of Raphael’s Wings. Crowley loves the original sketch because of that smile, though he always thought it was nothing more than fond remembrance of an artistic madman.

He still does not regret breaking Gabriel’s nose.

Aziraphale issued the ultimate threat. Crowley panicked. It worked out fairly well.

Crowley adores those books, which he claims are full of humans being very human, what with all of the infighting, betrayal, and indiscriminate slaughter. Aziraphale would rather the books exit his shop immediately.

Absolutely it was, but God has an established sense of humor.

If Heaven had an ocean, it would be very confused right now.

They also created Aziraphel to be a terrible liar with a good heart, a philosopher, and someone who understands that you don’t have to lift a sword to fight back. They might have overdone it on the flustered nervousness, but They think it’s very cute.

The worst part of the Afterlife, the demon Ligur had already discovered, was that no one in Hell missed him at all. Hastur, that bastard, had already forgotten his name. He’d want revenge, but retirement was much nicer than he expected. For someone who no longer technically existed as a corporeal anything, Ligur was starting to think Crowley had done him a favor.

Heaven is startled as it suffers its first thunderstorm and accompanying downpour in six thousand years. Everyone later agrees that it broke up the weather’s monotony quite nicely.
Aziraphale collects himself at the next city junction, and then quickly hides his wings before anyone notices them. He’s in a bit of a rush, and there are many other angels currently managing the task of soul-sorting.

If this were Earth, and he’d just done something foolish and needed to apologize to Crowley, what does he normally do?

He dismisses the first idea immediately. Wine miracled forth in Heaven*[310] is rather potent, and he would like Crowley to be sober—

No, actually, the idea of being utterly soused for this sort of conversation is most appealing, but probably a bad idea.

Aziraphale frowns and then lifts his head. He is in Heaven, with proper access to the Library, and Raphael recently presented him with a very interesting question. Yes. That might do the trick.

Aziraphale snaps his fingers and transports himself to the Library. He doesn’t do that often, even though this is the only plane of existence that allows for such easy travel between places.*[311] He is well aware that he is not in the most pristine physical condition, and does his best to walk wherever he can, but he’s in a hurry.

He stops in the Library’s grand foyer, holding up one finger. “Theology, theology,” he mutters, nudging a bit of magic into the request. Sometimes that section likes to move itself about. “Ah.” He turns west and enters into a long corridor, walks to the first junction, turns south, and then opens the first door. “You can’t hide from me, you lot.”

The books on the shelves flutter a bit in greeting. There are literally millions of them, filling a room that simply grows and changes when necessary to house further theological texts. Good Lord, he would really like to teach his bookshop to do the same, but Earth has certain limitations that are best left alone. Or at least, they’re certainly best left alone by a mere Principality.

That is the other slight difficulty. There are millions of texts, and Heaven’s Library doesn’t exactly believe in card catalogues.*[312]

“Pardon me. I’m looking for…hmm.” Aziraphale taps his lips with one finger. “I need the oldest known version of the Book of Genesis. Mind you, I specified the oldest known version of the story, not the oldest transcription!”

On a shelf about a third of the way across the room, something rattles. A scroll with golden endcaps pop about an inch forward on the shelf, revealing its hiding place. “Ah, excellent. Thank you.”

Aziraphale retrieves the scroll, noting with pleasure that the magic to keep everything within the Library in pristine condition seems to be doing its job perfectly well. This is excellent, flexible parchment, which he still has a fondness for. The difficulty with old parchment on Earth is that it
eventually crumbles into pieces.*

He seeks out a table, which is easily done, as there is no one else currently in the room. They’re most likely busying themselves with observing the ongoing thunderstorm outside. It’s quite nice, but Earth has accustomed him to the normalcy of shifting weather patterns.*

There is available sheets of paper, meant for many of the students who drift through the Library’s public rooms, but he miracles up a very good quill (and after a moment’s thought, one of Earth’s spill-proof containers of ink*) instead of using one of the golden calligraphy pens or a bit of graphite. Terrible idea, that. It’s dusty and causes fingerprints on paper. Much better for drawing—well, some of the theology texts have wonderful pictures. An artist might have left the graphite behind.

The first thing Aziraphale does is copy out, from memory, the whole of Genesis Chapter Six. This is the version from Earth, the story that Home Office approved of for biblical teachings and printings. He tends to stick with the Judaic text, as the King James Bible*, and every translation based upon it, is a complete disaster that usually sends him into a sputtering rage...or into a drunken stupor.

Then he unrolls the scroll, which is polite enough to remain open as he his eyes dart down to find the sixth book, which in this scroll is actually the seventh. He’d forgotten how much of the history of the Nephilim has been removed from Earth’s history, or displaced into other sources, ones usually considered to be apocrypha.* The first section of the relevant chapter in this book, therefore, doesn’t speak of the Nephilim at all. This is the very beginning of the story of the Flood.

Immediate differences jump out at him. This is going to be easier than he suspected. Or...it will be quite worse.

Verse one: “God saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth...” is meant to read, “God saw how great was man’s magic on Earth...” Aziraphale notes that down, thinking absently on how wicked came from the Old English, and didn’t originally have a whit to do with defining any sort of evil at all.

“...And how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time.” Aziraphale shakes his head. In the old days, evil was not a term for morality, but a word, a concept, for magic that wasn’t very nice. “Shoddy work,” he murmurs as he jots down the original text from the scroll: “...and how the nature of every plan was nothing but unskilled sorcery.”

Aziraphale stares at the translation and rubs at his eyes. “That...can’t be right. Can it?”

“And the Lord regretted that He had made Man on Earth, and His heart was saddened.” That’s Home Office’s translation, which is so close to correct it would be so blasted easy to miss certain key words. Regret, heart, sadness—the old forms change the meaning. Regret and repent were once the same word exactly, and while they both mean “to feel regret,” the complete definition is “to feel regret for one’s mistakes as produces an amendment of life.” Amendment means betterment. Improvement.*

“And God, repentant of Their mistakes, wanted to improve upon the Man They had made on Earth, and Their love was made sorrowful...” Aziraphale trails off, feeling a very similar sorrow as well. “Oh, dear.”

The next line is not much different until one includes the proper definition of regret. “God said, ‘I will blot out from the Earth both Man and Beast, Creeping Things, and Birds of the Sky, for I can repent of this in no other way.’” No other way but a great and terrible Flood. No other way but to literally cull most mammalian, arachnid, arthropod, reptilian, and avian life on Earth. Aziraphale
considers gnawing on his quill in frustration, as he has yet to figure out what, exactly, God was trying to be rid of. It must have been something dire. God has a temper, yes, but God is love before anything else, and not easily prone to flushing Her creations down the loo just because of a bad day at work.

“Noah was a righteous man”—Aziraphale snorts at that before he can finish reading the Earth-approved verse. Noah had done as God bid, yes. He sheltered his family and saved the creatures of Mesopotamia so that they might repopulate the region…and the moment the task was done and the waters receded, Noah decided to become, as Crowley (then Crawley) so eloquently put it, a complete prick. Righteousness did not yet have anything to do with moral fortitude; the righteous were the wise, which meant nothing more than the fact that Noah was an educated man. After all, it would take an educated man, learned in maths and construction, to build an ark capable of being a traveling zoo.

Using the words “blot out” was just an excuse to shoehorn in a trendy phrase.

“The Earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness.” Aziraphale sighs. Corrupt was not a word for evil, it meant unhealthy. Lawlessness did not specify evil, either, but spoke of a lack of any sort of law. “When God saw how corrupt the Earth was, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on Earth”—He pauses mid-translation as something occurs to him.

“Oh,” he breathes. “I see. I get it now!”

Then: “Those rotten, terrible angels!” Aziraphale exclaims in complete outrage. “That could have bloody well killed me, and they never said a single word about it!”

Crowley is in a foul mood. If demons could be said to be excellent lurkers, then he is grand champion at sulking…though he often pairs the activity with lurking, just to keep up appearances.

“No not that I have to worry about that anymore, do I?” Crowley mutters, tossing another pebble from the rooftop. A moment later, there is a disgruntled, “Ouch!” from someone passing by on the road below.

They’re tiny pebbles, anyway. Crowley is fine with being a nuisance, but he doesn’t actually want to hurt anyone. Besides, his brother would hand him his arse.

Crowley scowls and tosses another pebble from the roof. That’s the thing; he has a brother. A twin. Who is definitely better at this angel game than he could ever be—

“Oh!”

Oh. That was a rather familiar exclamation.

He senses his arrival, followed by a rather abrupt lack of rain falling down on him. He looks up to see the white feathers of an angel’s wing sheltering his head.

Crowley turns his head, twisting around in a way that has driven Earth’s famous contortionists to fits of rage. Aziraphale is behind him, steadily getting very wet but looking rather excited. “Hah! Found
That memory is so close to the forefront of Crowley’s thoughts right now. The angel’s eyes were such a familiar color of blue that it was almost hypnotizing, like memories echoing beneath the surface of Crawley’s mind with no means to climb to the top. Still, that had been an angel, and Crawley was a demon. He knew what angels did to demons. Angels were cold, unfeeling, terrible creatures—

Then that blue-eyed angel had looked at the humans, with their newfound knowledge of good and evil granted far too soon…and he’d handed over a divine flaming sword. The angel didn’t want the humans to be hurt when they left the safety of the Garden. The angel had defended the humans, now dubbed traitors of the Almighty, with a minor bit of defiance against God.

Crawley the demon had immediately decided that finding out this angel’s name was worth the risk, and somehow, amazingly, it had been. Crawley still wasn’t certain what to make of that “rain” business and didn’t want to take chances, but without even being asked, the Guardian of the Eastern Gate had lifted his wing and sheltered the serpent from the storm.[323]

Aziraphale is still worth it.

“Where’s your coat?” Crowley asks.

Aziraphale’s smile falters as he pats himself down and realizes that he’s wearing only his favorite threadbare velvet waistcoat, shirt, and trousers. “Oh, bother. I must have left it in the Library. Listen, I came to find you because I have something to show you!”

Oh. Right. Time for a peace offering. They’re both really bad at apologies, so this works very well. At least that part of how they operate hasn’t changed. “What is it?”

“We have to go to the Library!” Aziraphale insists, coming forward to tug Crowley up from the ground. “It’ll get wet if I bring it out here, and I can’t have Zaphkiel upset at me, especially as I think he recalls certain texts that were in my possession. They actually belonged to the Library, but Adam might have, er, misplaced them. And where on Earth is your jacket, Crowley?”

Crowley feels his shoulders loosen a bit. Aziraphale is still calling him by his name, and it sounds wonderful. “I left it somewhere downstairs,” he says, gesturing vaguely towards the ground. “Couldn’t find Uriel, and I wasn’t about to wander around the entire City with her rose stuck to me. Maybe when I get my jacket back, she’ll have collected the bloody thing.”

“Is it really so difficult to deal with Uriel’s rose?” Aziraphale asks, tutting as he snaps his fingers and dries all the rain from Crowley’s clothes. Then he miracles up an umbrella, which is completely unnecessary…but an umbrella might confuse the locals, and Crowley is all for that.

“It’s not just the feeling that God is right behind you. You know that sensation when God is looking down on you from Above with a big spotlight to make certain She has your attention?”

Aziraphale blushes. “Ah. Yes. I’m quite familiar with that.”*[324]

“Having that rose about is like being under that spotlight all the bloody time.”

“So it isn’t just the intensity of the gaze.” Aziraphale nods with his lips pressed together. “Good point. Uriel can, er, keep her rose to herself.”

“She didn’t need to leave it that way, anyway,” Crowley growls. “She just wanted to be a cheeky.”
“I cannot imagine why,” Aziraphale replies. He is definitely trying not to smile.

“You seem remarkably fine with Uriel, given that the last conversation we had about it, I mentioned she’d tried to murder you.”

Aziraphale nods. “But she regrets it to the point of granting me quite the formal apology, and Michael seems to have been playing sides, and oh, yes, those two are, apparently, a…what do you call it? Oh, yes. An item.”

Crowley raises both eyebrows. “Uriel and Michael. As a couple.” He thinks about it. “That’s just weird.”*

He was right about the umbrella. Everywhere they go, angels *stare* at it as if they’ve brought forth one of the most demonic devices ever known. Others give the umbrella a considering look and immediately copy the design. Of course, the predominant color among the new umbrellas is white. By some miracle, Aziraphale’s is camel-colored and *not tartan*.

They’re most of the way to the Library. Maybe. It’s been a while, and Crowley remembers cheating and just short-cutting his way there if he needed to invade that sacred space. Regardless, they round the last corner and come face-to-face with Michael and Uriel. They’re keeping the rain off their heads by simple expedience of refusing to allow it to touch them.

Crowley stomps hard on his immediate urge to leap back. Six thousand years of memory is a lot more prevalent right now than anything from Before. “Uh, hi.”

“Why, hello!” Aziraphale sounds far more cheerful, but Crowley can hear the undertone of nervousness beneath.

“Principality Aziraphale,” Michael greets them. “Archangel Zaherael.”

“Oi—no—just—” Crowley holds up one hand. “Just *no*, Michael. No. Don’t.”

Both archangels look surprised. “Why not?” Uriel asks. “It is your name.”

“It’s the name She gave me, and as far as I’m concerned, God can use it if she likes,” Crowley says, feeling intensely uncomfortable. He knew he’d have to explain this, but he wasn’t ready to bloody well discuss it yet! “I don’t see Raphael giving it up, and…” Crowley hesitates. “Yeah, there are three people in existence who are allowed to call me Zaherael, if they want. But I chose the name Crowley. I chose it after someone else had taken my name and replaced it with a fucking insult. No one else gets to take my name away from me just because they’d rather remember some shiny bit of tripe that’s ancient bloody history!”

Michael looks confounded. Uriel merely appears thoughtful before she reaches into the ether and retrieves his jacket. “You left this hanging on a torch bracket,” she says in her usual, placid tone. It makes him fiercely miss her first chosen voice. “I thought I might retrieve it for you.”

“It’s not still got a rose stuck to it, has it?”

Uriel smiles. “It does not. Crowley.”

Crowley reaches out and plucks his jacket from her hand. “Oh. Great. Thanks.” He probably should not be hugging it close to his chest like a shield, but *habit*.

Then Michael opens his mouth, and Crowley braces himself on paranoid instinct. “I am sorry,” he says.
Crowley stares at him. “What?”

“I am sorry,” Michael repeats. “I deliberately betrayed my brother’s trust, and I have felt the weight of such guilt ever since—”

“Wait, wait.” Crowley frowns. “Does this have anything to do with existence still being Existence and my brother being alive?”

Michael blinks several times, pursing his lips. “Well, er, yes—”

“Then don’t fucking apologize for that!” Crowley retorts. “Don’t you dare. Not when whatever you think you did wrong led to that.”

“Well, then.” Michael snaps his fingers and disperses his armor before lifting his arms. “Then I will apologize only for the wrongs I have done to you since then, and not for that one specific act of which you are apparently so fond.”

Crowley hesitates. Trap! his instincts scream, but most of his instincts are based on dealing with demons for six thousand years.

Fuck it. Crowley steps forward and lets Michael hug him, even as his heart pounds like he’s trying out one of those human marathons.* [326]

The moment Michael’s arms close around him, Crowley immediately feels better. This is familiar, it really is, even if he’s probably going to spend another few thousand years trying to get used to it again. This is his brother—a wanker, yes, but still his brother.

“I’m not sorry for biting you,” Crowley says.

Michael lets out a brief laugh. “Then I am not sorry for attempting to step on you. Not at all.” Then he steps back and smirks. “I will also not apologize for the kidnappings that were meant to safeguard both yourself and Aziraphale from certain wrathful…opinions.”

Crowley snorts. “Oh. That’s what that nonsense was about?”

“I told Aziraphale that being hidden away in Purgatory was to keep you both safe, but neither Michael nor myself expected such…fiery results,” Uriel says.

Michael nods. “I’m not apologizing for the bathtub of holy water, either.”

“Please, it was worth it for the rubber duck.”

When Crowley returns to his angel’s side, Uriel is regarding Aziraphale in calm curiosity. “Oh! Yes, I did say I would consider your words, didn’t I?” Aziraphale smiles. “And I did. It’s utterly forgiven. Forgotten, even!”* [327]

Uriel nods. “Thank you. We’ll be on our way, gentlemen.”

Crowley lets out a sigh of relief when they pass each other on the street. Then Michael calls for his attention. “Oh, Zah—Crowley?”

Crowley spins around. “Now what?”

Michael raises an eyebrow. “Congratulations on your…relationship.” Then he turns around and walks away, linking arms with Uriel as he does so.
“Relationship? What bloody relationship?” Crowley scowls and spins back around to face Aziraphale again. “Do you know what the hell he’s talking about?”

Aziraphale is bright pink and slightly panicked. “No!” he squeaks. “No, I’ve not the slightest idea!”

Crowley gives him a suspicious look. “Right. Let’s just…Library.”

“Library,” Aziraphale agrees, and falls into step next to Crowley when he starts striding for the doors. “Do you think we should maybe tell them about the swap?” he asks. “The truth about certain rubber ducks and bits of hellfire, I mean.”

“Nah.” Crowley smiles. “Let ’em suffer.”

“Of course.” When they’re underneath the Library’s great veranda, Aziraphale neatly shakes out the umbrella before making it vanish. “Is it all right if I ask you something?”

“Usually is.”

Aziraphale nods in recognition that “usually” implies that “storming off in a dramatic snit” is still an option. Again. “What is it like? Recalling everything from Before, I mean.”

Crowley pauses in the midst of pulling his jacket back on. It still smells a bit like roses. Bloody Uriel. “It’s like…being someone else. Except it isn’t.”

Aziraphale opens the door and gestures for Crowley to precede him. “How do you mean?”

“I…he—I mean, I was…innocent,” Crowley finally decides on. “Naïve. We were all so fucking stupidly innocent, Zira. We felt like nothing bad could ever happen because nothing bad had ever happened before.”

“I’ve…never felt like that,” Aziraphale murmurs. “I was created just after the war began—well, the disagreements, anyway. I have no idea what that would feel like.”

“Zira, you all but embody what that was like,” Crowley counters, and Aziraphale flushes bright pink again.*[328] “I dunno. Tricks were literally just tricks, messing you about. It was never treachery.”

“And now?”

Crowley glances around the Library, watching as several angelic heads pop up to gaze at them in curiosity. “Now it’s like all I know is treachery.”

“Oh. I’m really not sure if this is a good idea, then,” Aziraphale frets.

“Too late now, angel.” Crowley grins. “You got me here, so let’s see what you’ve found that’s so interesting.”

Aziraphale leads the way into the western corridor, which (if Crowley is pulling up the right memories) usually led towards history. He knows he’s right when Aziraphale then chooses a southern door, opening it to reveal a bloody massive room. “Theology,” Aziraphale announces. “Though I believe this room is restricted only to Earth’s particular flavors of theology.”

“Bloody fucking hell,” Crowley observes. “Maybe I should have been paying a bit more attention to things outside the Abrahamic bits.”

“Quite a lot of it is very fascinating, especially in the ability to draw certain parallels,” Aziraphale says in academic pleasure. “But this time I meant to look up something specific to the Abrahamic
“Your brother, Raphael.” Aziraphale looks briefly boggled at saying the words. Crowley thinks he’s in good company. “I mentioned a bit of our history, regarding the Flood, and how I’ve never been able to decide what humanity had done that was so very wrong. Raphael asked if I’d ever posed a different question: *what if it wasn’t a punishment?*

Crowley feels himself go very still, as if the serpent in him has just spotted twitchy prey. “What did you find?”

Aziraphale bustles them over to a table, which has an ancient scroll spread out, revealing Genesis in a script that pre-dates ancient Hebrew. “I’d forgotten how hard that one is on the eyes,” Crowley says.

“Yes, well.” Aziraphale picks up a sheet of paper covered in his beautiful, precise handwriting. “You recall, in the old days, how the Nephilim were respected, honored, and loved.”

Crowley nods. “Course I do, the lucky bastards. Half-human, all the skills of the angelic, and no concerns about being angel or Fallen.”

“Well…” Aziraphale looks distressed again. “They also gave humanity an idea, quite by accident. Of itself, by itself, the idea would have been entirely harmless. They taught humans about magic, Crowley, and humanity began using it. Quite a lot of magic.” Then Aziraphale hands him the paper.

Crowley reads through the translation twice, feeling hot sulfur trying to boil away in his gut. “You’re sure?” he croaks out.

“Oh. Very. Unfortunately.” Aziraphale swallows and gestures at the scroll. “I pulled it right from the oldest source available.”

“We need to go back to the infirmary. Right now.” Crowley reaches out, grabs Aziraphale—who snatches up his coat in a hurry—and teleports them straight to his brother’s domain. “Raphael!”

Raphael nearly falls off the bed he was using as a chair, scattering two books and three scrolls from his lap. “You bastard, I was trying to figure out—what’s wrong?”

“Read this.” Crowley thrusts Aziraphale’s writings of Genesis at his twin, Earth’s Home Office-approved version followed by the original words of God. “Read this, and tell me I’m wrong. Tell me it’s not what I think it is.”

Raphael accepts the sheet of paper, stands up with his brow furrowed, and begins to read aloud.

“*God said, ‘I will expel from the Earth both Man and Beast, Creeping Things, and Birds of the Sky, for I can repent of this in no other way.’*

*The Earth became unhealthy before God; the Earth was filled with chaos.*
When God saw how unhealthy the Earth was, for all flesh had been corrupted in its time on Earth, God said to Noah, “I have resolved to put an end to all flesh, for the Earth is filled with chaos because of them: I am about to put an end to them with the Earth.”

“Well?” Crowley demands when Raphael does nothing more than stare at the paper in stunned silence.

“You’re not wrong,” Raphael whispers. “It would have been like performing a blood transfusion, but giving the recipient the wrong blood type.”

Aziraphale looks baffled. “What?”

“You learn some really odd shit as a demon,” Crowley explains. “Humans and their blood transfusions, for example. You can give O-negative blood to anyone, universal donor sort of thing. But if you give someone with B-negative blood an A-positive transfusion, then, best case scenario, you’ve just made them really ill. Worst case, they’re dead, and you’re in deep shit.”

“Then, it really would have been…” Aziraphale trails off, probably because he would rather not say the words himself.

“The magical equivalent of a sexually transmitted disease? Oh, yeah. Airborne and magic-borne, and it was everywhere the Nephilim were—which you and I both know was literally everywhere,” Crowley says.

Raphael nods. “Humans weren’t drawing on their own magic, not yet—they were too bloody young. They weren’t built for it yet, not in those days. You’d have the odd human pop up with near-divine abilities, but not often.”

“The chaos created by not understanding how magic works, the laws you really do have to keep in mind…” Crowley grimaces. “They’d have burnt themselves out. That unregulated build-up of power would have eventually erased any bit of life from the entirety of the Earth. But you’d already figured that part out, or you wouldn’t have been in such a hurry to show me.”

Aziraphale nods miserably. “I had, yes. Then I was upset for an entirely different reason, because they didn’t tell us!”

“Right. Magically transmitted disease based on the angelic stock.” Crowley tilts his head, rubbing at his teeth with his tongue. “That definitely would have put a damper on continuing to exist.”

“Was there really no other way?” Raphael asks, still looking grieved.

“No, dear one. There wasn’t.”

Crowley turns his head, not surprised to find that God showed up again. It’s a thing that They do. “Nothing at all?” he asks, noting that They’ve stuck with She, for now, but swapped over to blonde waif flowerchild. She has a wreath of daisies in her hair, and is wearing a rather dated fringed leather vest with her denims and sandals.

God shakes Her head. “I wanted there to be. I actually did try several options before…before I realized I had no choice. It was spreading, and there was no stopping it.” She half-smiles. “A flaw in the design.”

“I did wonder about the edict that spelled out how angels were to immediately cease procreating with humans,” Aziraphale says.
“Even Hell got that memo. Took it seriously, too.” Crowley lets loose with an involuntary, full-body shiver as *that sticky memory* surfaces. “Here’s your target, seduce them onto temptation’s path, but never, *ever* breed with them.” He pauses. “What about now? Humans and magic, I mean.”

“Oh, there are quite a number of humans who’ve already figured out that magic is quite useful, and they did so all on their own. That’s the point; it had to come from themselves.” God looks saddened. “All of My children. All of them lost because I overlooked something so very important. I do keep telling people that I’m not infallible, but they never seem to believe Me.”

Aziraphale bites his lip. “I—well, you did the best you could.”

God nods at Aziraphale in gratitude. “And so did you, and so did Zaherael. Without even knowing what was wrong, the two of you gathered up three very rare children, ones who had never felt the touch of the Nephilim’s magic, and carried them to a place where they would grow up in safety. Their survival led to the birth of several rather intriguing and important humans, by the way.”*332 Aziraphale doesn’t bother with pink. He turns bright red. “I thought you might be, er, rather cross about that.”

God smiles. “Why would I ever be cross with you for doing the right thing, Aziraphale? Your heart was in the right place, and you were merciful when I could not be. I would never fault you for that.”

“But—there was that incident with a, er, a certain sword—”

“Aziraphale, I was only saddened that you felt it necessary to *lie* to me about it,” God says.

Before Aziraphale can try to turn himself inside out in a fit of pridefully ashamed terror, Crowley decides he has a question. “What was with that rainbow nonsense afterwards, then?”

“The rainbow?” God gives him a Look, one with all the radiance of the cosmos in it. Crowley shivers again as that feeling of unspecific blessing travels from the tip of his head to the ends of his toes.

“It was a symbol, dear one, one that has become so very important. It means *hope.*”

* * *

“You’re certain you want to do this?” Raphael asks.

Crowley glares at him. “I’ve said yes at least four times by now. Which are you going to believe—four affirmatives, or one negative?”

The corner of Raphael’s lips quirks up in a smile.*333 “Just checking.”

“Someone remind me what we’re doing again?” Aziraphale asks, nervously peering over the edge of Heaven. It’s been set to rights, returned to be the view Crowley can dimly remember from Before. Creation stretches below them, though from this particular vantage point, it’s Earth they can see.*335 It’s not a view of a specific location,*334 but a rather close view of the upper atmosphere that only just hints at the curve of the globe.

“It’s a little game my brother and I used to call Gravity,” Raphael answers. He wore black robes for
several days* before swapping out his wardrobe for something a bit more up to date at Crowley’s insistence: brown leather boots with laces, dark blue denims, a navy blue jacket, and an icy blue button-down shirt that brings out his eyes. No tie; he just unbuttoned the collar and left it open. The effect is rather fetching, Crowley is proud to note, but it’s also driving him mental, because there is something missing.

Crowley himself is still wearing exactly what he’s been fond of for the last ten years. Black is trendy, fuck you very much. He conjured his sunglasses back, too. Just because he can deal with Heavenly brightness again doesn’t mean he wants to walk around partially blind all the time.

“Gravity?” Aziraphale looks even more concerned than before.

“We didn’t call it that because it was a great discovery or anything,” Raphael says.* “It was what we could do with it.”

“We’d stand on the edge of Heaven, arms outstretched, wings tucked in, and let gravity slowly pull us over backwards,” Crowley explains, trying to ignore the fact that his heart is beating too fast. “Freefall.”

Aziraphale passes over concern and stumbles his way into resignation. “How on Earth is freefall a game?”

“The trick to winning the game is to spread your wings and catch yourself just before the ethereal plane becomes the physical plane,” Raphael says. “The winner is the one who waits the longest, makes it to the lowest point—without passing through the barrier, of course. Otherwise, the next person in line wins by default.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about that,” Aziraphale admits. “It’s…I’m not really in the right condition for that sort of flight.”

Crowley lowers his sunglasses and grins at Aziraphale. “What, can’t I tempt you into a bit of fun?”

Aziraphale flushes even as he begins to smile. “Well, you haven’t changed very much, have you?”

“Nah. What would be the fun in that?”

Aziraphale huffs, but he looks pleased. “I’m still not convinced that I want to dive off the edge of Heaven.”

“Oh, I’m not certain I’m up to it, either,” Crowley admits. “I’d just like to stop having nightmares about it. About Falling, I mean.”

Aziraphale surprises Crowley by reaching out to grip his hand. “I’ll lose, of course.”

“You never know.” Raphael turns around to stand on the edge, his currently wingless back facing the very long drop behind them. “It’s all about the timing.”

“Have you room for two more?” Uriel asks as she and Michael approach.

Crowley groans, but Raphael just beckons them over. “Of course there is. You always lose, anyway.”

“I very much do not!” Michael retorts.

“Oh, oh, oh, I thought it might start happening again!” Saraquel comes literally darting towards them,
his crown at a jaunty tilt on his head and his hands clasped together in absolute glee. “It’s been ever so long since we’ve played this game!”

Crowley glares up at the sky. “Oi, does everyone know?”

“We do now,” Raguel replies sweetly. She is dragging a rather perturbed-looking Gabriel along behind her. “If the game is to resume, it should be all of us.”

Gabriel winces. “I am really not…this is probably not a very wise thing to do.”

“You have really got to remove that stick from your arse!” Raguel retorts. “Whether you like it or not,” she adds with a viper-sweet smile. Gabriel pales and stops arguing with her.

Crowley glances at Aziraphale, raising an eyebrow. Well?

Aziraphale smiles, the very rare time when it is an expression composed of nothing but mischief. “Gabriel. If you do not participate, as the Archangel Raguel is so politely suggesting, I won’t bother to break your nose again.” His smile widens. “I will force you to ingest gross matter.”

“Oh, sushi. Terrible threat, that,” Crowley approves, grinning.


“Meaningless endurance.” Michael sounds like he’s grinding his teeth. “I’m going to end up beating you over the head with my sword, I swear to our Creator…”

Crowley shows Aziraphale how to properly place his feet, heels of their shoes (and Saraquel’s bare feet) hanging off over empty space, the front half of their feet still on the solid ground of Heaven. “Right at that perfect midway point,” he says, demonstrating it properly. “Right where you can feel a brief bit of perfect balance before gravity starts to make itself known.”

Aziraphale frowns and mimics him with an angel’s intrinsic feel for their own internal balance.* [338]

“Ah, yes. I see. And then?”

“Relax, and let gravity do the work. On three?”

“On three,” Raphael agrees, sounding as if he’s grinning. “One!”

“Oh, bloody hell. Two!” Uriel shouts.

“Three!” Crowley yells, and then lets gravity take hold. All of the first Seven, along with a rather bewildered Principality, fall from the edge of Heaven together.

It’s not so bad, really. What Crowley remembers first is the feel of the wind rushing past his face, fluttering through the robes he was happily wearing in those days. They weren’t black, not then, but the same stormy blue that Raphael has chosen now.

He hadn’t even realized they’d switched up, but it feels appropriate. It feels exactly right.

Then darkness closes in, choking off his breath. He doesn’t need oxygen, but panic always makes him feel like he has to breathe.

He’s falling. He’s Falling to Gehenna. His wings, his wings are burning—

“CROWLEY!”
Something heavy slams into Crowley. Then his fall is slowed, rather abruptly. It snaps his head back and startles him into opening his eyes.

Not darkness. Light. Sky. He’s still falling, but he’s not Falling.

Crowley lifts his head to find Aziraphale’s arms wrapped around Crowley’s waist, his wings outspread. “Angel?” he croaks, the word torn from his lips by the wind.

“This isn’t Then, Crowley!” Aziraphale gazes at him in panicked concern. “Please come back to Now. For me. Please. Besides, if you don’t, Michael will win, and he’s already insufferable!”

Crowley lets himself gasp a few times, necessary breaths that help him reorient himself. Game. Gravity. All of them—even Gabriel, who is somewhere below and probably trying to remember the definition of the word *fun*.

“Bad time for a flashback,” Crowley agrees, to Aziraphale’s relief. Then he grins, slow and lazy. “Oh, hello, there!”

Aziraphale’s brow furrows. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Crowley raises his arm and points. “One white wing. Two white wings. Three white wings. Four white wings!”

Aziraphale swivels his head around to look, lets out a startled shriek, and immediately retracts his wings. They plummet like a stone, which just makes Crowley laugh.

“It’s not funny!” Aziraphale yelps indignantly as Crowley gathers him closer, pulling Aziraphale up so his angel is resting against his chest.

“They’re gorgeous. Peacocks the world over will be jealous,* especially the albino ones,” Crowley replies.

“I DON’T EVEN REMEMBER HOW TO USE THOSE EYES!”

Crowley laughs again. “It’ll come back to you! It’s like riding a velocipede!”

“I thought you said they were bicycles! Were you joshing me?”

“Never.” Crowley grins. “Well, maybe a little. But not about the bicycles!”

The edge of Heaven’s boundary is getting closer. Crowley can feel it, familiar and (finally) reassuring instead of bloody terrifying.

Aziraphale looks up at him. “There is something I’ve been meaning to say.”

“What, *now*?”

“There is never a good time to trip over your own tongue!” Aziraphale retorts. “What I said to you, about how I didn’t want you to die for me. I didn’t mean it. The way you think I meant it, I mean. Oh, *bugger*!”

Crowley senses the imminent approach of transition between worlds. “Then what the bloody hell *did* you mean?”

“I meant—it’s just—oh, fuck it! I want you to live for me, you idiot!” Aziraphale shouts.
“You… want me to live.” Crowley stares at Aziraphale. “For you. Like, you-you. Specifically just you?”

Aziraphale flushes pink. “Well, when you put it like that, it sounds terribly selfish!”

Crowley grabs hold of Aziraphale’s stupid face and kisses him. Kissing is still odd, and sort of slippery, but thank God, it is not sticky.

Aziraphale gasps, grabbing fisted handfuls of Crowley’s jacket. Then he does Crowley the absolutely glorious favor of kissing him back. Crowley will never mock a bloody romantic cinema kiss again.*[340]

Somewhere along the way, they pass through the barrier. The feel of the air changes, becoming much more of a solid presence.*[341] Much more humid, too.

When the kissing stops, Aziraphale looks dazed. “I think we lost the game.”

Crowley spreads his wings, slowing them down before they’re picked up by some paranoid government’s inconvenient radar, and glories in the fact that it doesn’t hurt at all. “Who cares?”

“I suppose…I suppose we should go back.” Aziraphale spreads his wings, though he keeps darting nervous glances at the two recent additions. Crowley has only seen them once before, when Aziraphale was actively guarding the Eastern Gate instead of just enjoying the view. The eyes really are like those on the feathers of a male albino peacock, but that’s because they’re closed. Open is another story entirely.

“They’re really there. All four of them,” Aziraphale says.

“Yep.” Crowley reluctantly lets go of Aziraphale, all except for his hand. He is keeping a firm grip on that for now. “How’s it feel to be a cherub again?”

“Embarrassing!” Aziraphale bursts out. “And inconvenient! I want— I’d like to stay on Earth, thank you. I want to remain a Principality!”

“Meh.” Crowley spreads his wings wider, letting a cold updraft he’s just found push them upwards. “No reason you can’t be both. No rules against it or anything.”

Aziraphale thinks on it before brightening. “No, there isn’t, is there? Besides, it’s ultimately your decision. The Earth is the dominion of the last of the Seven, after all.”

Crowley chokes mid-flight and nearly starts to fall again. “What?”

“Raphael told me,” Aziraphale continues, beaming. “It’s a healer neutrality sort of thing. Heaven is his dominion, and the Earth is yours!”*[342]

“Wait. No.” Crowley can feel his expression twisting up in confusion. He remembers something about that, but… “What?”

Aziraphale laughs at him and jerks his hand free. “I’ll race you back to Heaven!” he challenges, and then darts upwards.

“You—you—you completely angelic bastard!” Crowley shouts, and chases after him.

*          *          *          *
“So, are you ready to leave—is that your mobile phone?” Aziraphale asks.

“Mm,” Crowley acknowledges, giving his mobile a bit of a wiggle. “Didn’t see why I couldn’t just miracle it up here.”

“That’s a very good point.” Aziraphale sits down on the bench next to him and leans over until he can see the screen. “Heaven has Wi-Fi?”

“Yeah. Really good signal, too.”

Aziraphale frowns and then gives him a firm elbow to the ribs. Crowley hisses out a surprised breath. “Are you— are you stealing Heaven’s Wi-Fi? You utter serpent!”

“Oi! They didn’t put a password lock on it or anything!” Crowley protests. “That makes it public, and that’s fair game.”

Aziraphale sniffs and then gives up on it. “What are you doing, then?”

“Well, first I was double-checking the date.” Crowley sighs. “It’s the thirtieth. Tomorrow is the first day of October. My plants haven’t seen water for over a month.”

“They can be healed, if they’re not already…you know,” Aziraphale says. “Or perhaps you might want to adopt out the current batch and start fresh with plants that aren’t terrified of you.”

“Well,” Crowley isn’t certain how he feels about changing up his plant-care routine. Terror gave him excellent, verdant results. “Found something interesting, though. You remember that Avicii bloke whose tape ended up in my car? Well, not my car, but you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I recall. He was the musician you said had died before that particular album was released.”

“I found one of his earlier albums, and…well, it’s maybe not your type of music, but it…” Crowley makes a frustrated noise and queues up the song. “Just listen, okay?”

“Feeling my way through the darkness

Guided by a beating heart

I can’t tell where the journey will end,

But I know where to start.

They tell me I’m too young to understand

They say I’m caught up in a dream

Well life will pass me by if I don’t open up my eyes

Well that’s fine by me.

So wake me up when it’s all over
When I’m wiser and I’m older

All this time I was finding myself

And I didn’t know I was lost.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Aziraphale settles against Crowley and rests his hand on Crowley’s thigh. Crowley tries not to twitch when Aziraphale finds a ticklish spot. “It might be the sort of music I could grow to like. Times are changing, after all.”

Crowley wraps his left arm around Aziraphale’s shoulders and smiles. “Yeah. Suppose they are.”

Then movement catches his eye, and Crowley looks to his right. There are three rather self-satisfied birds waddling along towards the nearest water fountain. “Since when does Heaven have ducks?”

[310] An idea so frowned upon that he has done it exactly once, in secret, miracled away the evidence, and then (regrettfully) sobered up before he encountered anyone else.

[311] It’s entirely possible on Earth. It’s just ridiculously exhausting, and therefore to be avoided whenever possible.

[312] Aziraphale tried so hard to convince Zaphkiel that it was a good idea to introduce, as souls would have a much easier time learning the Library’s ways if given a familiar start. Zaphkiel didn’t speak to him for a century afterwards.

[313] He screeched in outrage over the Dead Sea Scrolls because pieces, Good Lord, so many pieces.

[314] And the occasional rain of amphibians.

[315] That idea is one of which Aziraphale is most proud. Crowley promptly took the idea and applied it to toddler age spill-proof cups. Spill-proof toddler cups is an oxymoron.

[316] Aziraphale strongly maintains that just because one calls themselves a scholar, it does not make them infallible, nor does it make them intelligent, especially when they have certain ideas about human behavior as mandated by a king who made for an excellent hypocrite.

[317] Apocrypha does not mean it is incorrect, it means that someone strongly disagreed with its contents for varying reasons, usually stupid and/or political reasons.

[318] Or in simpler, human terms: one can apologize all they like, but it means nothing if they don’t change their improper behavior afterwards.

[319] The Hebrews and their very, very long journey away from Egypt nearly broke Her. Moses was often put in the very odd position of having to talk God down from having done with an entire group of exceptionally stubborn people. (Stage fright and stutter aside, there is a reason why Moses made Aaron deal with them at every given opportunity.)
Crowley still maintains that this concept was an excellent idea. Except for the seasickness part.

The words as defined individually don’t even fit together. Aziraphale blames Shakespeare. He liked the man, but…honestly!

Who made lurking in cemeteries in black clothing at night trendy and acceptably uncouth and/or illegal? He did. Did anyone thank him for it? No, of course not! Bloody ungrateful demonic hordes.

*It had been a rather intense first storm, but Crawley barely noticed.

He will possibly never not blush over being asked about the sword. Or lying about the sword. He didn’t exactly intend to lie, he just got…nervous. Very, very nervous.

Angelic incest, in the early days before all the unexpected (and joyful) breeding happened, didn’t exist. Except for the twins, they were all created individually, and are sisters and brothers in name only. Crowley has probably spent far too much time on Earth. Also, he spent a great deal of effort trying to convince human siblings, half-siblings, and first cousins not to marry. Aziraphale nervously said that he should be thwarting the demon from trying to prevent love and holy matrimony. Crowley countered with *El Hechizado*. Aziraphale stopped arguing with him.

He might have suggested the idea of trying to physically kill yourself for the prize of a gold medallion, but that doesn’t mean he ever wanted to participate.

Only half of that was a lie.

This is also mostly true.

Since we’re all stuck without the original chapter six, refer to Genesis 6:1 and keep going until the Flood crops up.

That was really not his fault. The bag was labeled wrong. Hell had wanted him to keep that particular soul on Earth for a while longer, not send them Below by express service.

Aziraphale had never given a thought to seeing human women in those terms, and was thus very confused by that particular set of instructions. They were, at least, easy instructions to follow.

One of them was Temüjin, otherwise known as Genghis Khan. He was a bit overenthusiastic at his job of killing people, but there is absolutely no doubt at all that he changed the course of history. Oh, well; nobody’s perfect.

Much like the Trouble with Raphael’s Wings, the Problem of the Correct Smile is currently driving a multitude of artists on Earth completely fucking starkers.

The view of Alpha Centauri is on the other side of Heaven, and quite magnificent.

Unless they concentrate, but Crowley prefers not to zoom in; gives him a blasted headache.

Because it irritated the Heavenly host, who are all still a bit twitchy about black.

Angels were all made with an innate sense of the fundamental laws of the universe, so gravity was not a surprise.

A very nice side-benefit to having wings.

Peacocks the world over are already jealous. This will just make their attempts at
accomplishing the Worst Noises even more horrific.

[340] Yes, he will. The ones that entirely deserve it, anyway.

[341] For air, anyway. Earth’s atmosphere just has that sort of weight to it.

[342] God considers it one of her better ideas, as neither of them actually want the job.

[343] God likes feeding ducks, too. The eventual Ducks vs. Pigeons War is probably something She should have foreseen.
Israfil

Chapter Summary

Raphael has Opinions about Crowley’s flat, and those Opinions are, “Why do you live in a fucking cave?”

Much in the same way that Crowley didn’t really Saunter Vaguely Downwards, he did not Saunter Vaguely Upwards so much as slingshot himself into orbit. He didn’t actually intend to do so, of course. If he’d realized what would happen, he still would have done it anyway, just for Aziraphale, because Crowley was made to be a dramatic creature who does nothing by halves. He makes a decision and goes charging in, damn the consequences, until the consequences are on fire and he’s running for his life.*[344] *[345]

Basically, Crowley had no plans or intentions on ever being an angel again, but at least this time the resulting consequential fire was more or less intentional.*[346] He is, at least, not the first demon to figure out how to escape the pit, but no one really wants to discuss the first escapee except Michael, who confided to Crowley that the first demon to return to Heaven, Redeemed, lingered for about a month before asking to be made human so they could retire somewhere that was a bit less stressful.

Crowley, thinking on his sheer number of discorporations, both accidental and otherwise, asks, “Were they fucking mental?”

“Aren’t you?” Michael counters.

“Yeah, but I’m the sane sort of mental, which is brilliantly useful, actually.”

Michael, thinking about the six thousand years of history he’d dug up about his brother once he recognized Crowley for who he used to be, makes a faintly disapproving noise. Crowley isn’t inaccurate on either account, but some of his contributions to humanity over the millennia were really unnecessary. The original, horrific screeching of the dial-up modem, for example, is something that everyone in existence could have done without.*[347]

Traveling back to Earth is easy, and now it’s a multiple-choice option, which Crowley prefers.*[348] There is the escalator, of course, the idea of which is being kept even if the rest of Home Office is undergoing a complete structural rehaul.*[349] Now that certain restrictions regarding entry and exit into Heaven have been lifted, Aziraphale can simply will himself back to Earth, and that is what he chooses to do. He has a desperate, dire need to check on the bookshop, but rather breathlessly requests that Crowley come to visit after Crowley has seen to his plants.

Crowley thinks about how long flying has been pain, how long he avoided it because of the way it burned, and decides to take the long way. Raphael didn’t experience the dragging crawl of time the way Crowley did on Earth, but still joins him for the slow flight back down to the physical plane.

Crowley closes his eyes when the shift of reality happens, feeling the air grow heavier on his wings, and sighs. Being in Heaven is odd, even if it’s no longer toxic to his existence, but he’d much rather be on Earth.

“Do you think it’s because of how She named the dominions?” Crowley asks Raphael as they touch
down in Mayfair. A discreet bit of magic means that nobody notices the landing, or their wings, though they certainly notice Raphael as soon as they both appear to be wingless again.

“Feeling like this is your home, you mean?” Raphael shakes his head. “I don’t know, Brother. It could be because it’s what you’re most familiar with, or it could be because it’s sort of, in a very loose sense of the word, yours.”

“Mm,” Crowley grunts noncommittally. His eyes are flickering about behind his sunglasses, noticing exactly how many heads are turning in Raphael’s direction. Some of the looks are a vague, deeply subconscious sense of recognition, but the rest of it is human lust…along with a fair bit of omg Shiny. “You were always the prettier of the two of us.”

Raphael gives him a blank look. “What? What are you talking about?”

Crowley rolls his eyes. Of course his brother hasn’t noticed the attention. He has no idea how Raphael has always been the more oblivious of the two of them. It is Raphael’s literal job to notice people.

The first thing Crowley does after they arrive in front of his building is to hug his car. It isn’t easy to hug a 1926 Bentley, but he’s been practicing for years. “Hello, baby. Did you miss me?”

“I’ll grant you that it’s a very nice…” Raphael struggles with the word. “Carriage?”

“Car. Vehicle. Automobile. Stick with car, it’s easier.” Crowley runs his hand along the Bentley’s sleek bonnet. Thankfully, he’d remembered to do away with the No Parking lines the last time he left her parked at the street. He does a full inspection, miracling away any scratches and dents caused by careless, idiotic pedestrians who wouldn’t know art if it bit them in the bollocks. Removing the bird droppings is more difficult, honestly.

He leaves the Bentley gleaming and spotless, with a promise to take her out for a proper drive very soon.

Raphael has Opinions about Crowley’s flat, and those Opinions are, “Why do you live in a fucking cave?”

Crowley glares at him. “It’s modern!”

“Right.” Raphael walks through the kitchen and crosses through into the living room. “I’ve spent an entire ten minutes on this planet, and I’m already certain you could achieve modern without living in a cave.”

Crowley lets out a mocking hiss and then steps into the brightest room in the flat. “Oh.” His wings aren’t even fully on this plane of existence, and still he can feel them drooping in disappointment. “Oh, bollocks.”

The lush greenery he’d terrified his plants into achieving is gone. There is still a bit of green left behind, but it’s the dried, desiccated sort that’s just an impression of what was once life. The few remaining leaves that aren’t dried bits of dull greenery are yellow, withered, and collapsed under their own weight. It would take more than a miracle to fix this, but he’s only good at freezing time. He doesn’t know how to sodding well go backwards.

“Fuuuuuuuuuck.” The philodendrons look so brown and stick-like that he suspects they kicked free of this mortal coil the moment his back was turned. The umbrella plants, dependent on a very specific water cycle, have dropped all their leaves and don’t have a hint of life left to the bare stems. His first plant, the rubber plant, has lived long enough to attain true tree status and necessitated the rise of the ceiling, but it’s probably a lost cause. The cast-iron plant is very, very dead, which is
irritating; they’re supposed to be as difficult to kill off as an unwanted infestation of bamboo.

The bamboo is dead, too. Lazy bastards.

Then Crowley tilts his head, listening. He can hear the faintest sound of rattling leaves. Something, somewhere, is still quaking in terror. He seeks it out at once and finds it lurking behind a dead philodendron. It’s his most recent addition, a snake plant.*[354] Its tall green leaves are only just starting to wilt a bit from lack of water. When the gardening shop said it could be neglected for weeks at a time, they were most definitely not joking.

Raphael peers into the room. “They could at least have arranged a bit of rain for the plants after kidnapping you.” He frowns, reaches out, and wraps his pale fingers around the rubber tree. “Oh, hey, there you are. That’s better,” he murmurs in encouragement.

Crowley does not cry when his brother brings his rubber plant tree back to life while Crowley hugs the small potted snake plant. It’s all the dust and mold from standing in a roomful of dead plants.*[355]

“Let me ask you something,” Raphael says after he finds a watering can and proceeds to spoil the resurrected rubber plant tree. “Why do you live here? Originally, I mean. Forget how it looks. Why here?”

“It’s close to Soho.” Crowley takes the snake plant to the kitchen to see if there is any bottled water lurking in the cupboard. The rubber plant grew up used to London tap water, but the young ones just can’t handle it. “Close enough to Aziraphale to be convenient without it being obvious, you know?”

Crowley glances up after watering the snake plant. Raphael is giving him a rather pointed stare. “What?”

“Use your God-given brain. I know it’s in your skull somewhere.”

Crowley frowns and puts the plant in the sink to drain for a bit. He’s missing something very obvious —

“Oh.” Crowley’s eyes widen. “Oh! I don’t actually have to do that anymore. I don’t have to lurk down the street like a—like a—”

“Like an adversary. Which you two were always very bad at, anyway,” Raphael points out.

“Right.” Crowley looks around his flat. He does still like sleek and modern instead of something built four centuries ago, but he has no attachment to the place whatsoever. Aside from his two surviving plants and his glorious, expensive, exceptionally wonderful bed and its collection of silk sheets,*[356] there isn’t really anything here he’d want to take somewhere else. He wants his original sketch of the Mona Lisa that old Leo gave him. He wouldn’t leave without his stereo and its rather massive collection of varying media. The telly and its data server, definitely, which houses all the media that isn’t already provided by an illicit cable hookup.*[357]

Crowley wanders into his office and kicks the empty bucket out of the way, hands in his pockets. He’s keeping the landline phone and the classic ansaphone. That cassette had come in handy for trapping Hastur. He also owes the ansaphone a new cassette just to get rid of any leftover bits the demon might have left behind.

“Oh. Clothes. Yeah. Those, too,” Crowley says aloud, though he doesn’t actually own very many. When you can miracle your clothing clean and pristine, and tend not to change your mind about your outfit all that often, there isn’t much of a need for a wardrobe.
Then he frowns. Towels. Those are ludicrously expensive luxuries, and he bought large ones especially to coil up in after basking in a good shower. Otherwise, that’s it.

“Yeah. Let’s go conquer the real estate market.”

Raphael raises an eyebrow.

“Not that way! For fuck’s sake, give me a bit of credit, here!”

*          *          *          *

Acquiring a residence in London’s Soho is a statistic impossibility unless one is a millionaire. Buying an entire building is a statistic improbability unless one is a billionaire.*[358] Crowley is technically neither of these things. However, there is a German man named Engel J. Tobias who is one of those things, though only the middle initial is actually his real name.

Crowley didn’t invent the stock market (he has standards), but he quickly discovered that he had a talent for it. He was a demon known for long-term, frustrating mischief, and for creating utter chaos just for fun. A stock market is merely chaos with numbers attached to make it look official and intimidating.*[359]

Being able to miracle up money from the firmament to pay an innkeeper or buy a drink in the old days was easy. Even leasing a house or a room wasn’t much of a drain on the miracle coffers.

Then some complete fucking wanker went and invented inflation. After the value of money started fluctuating, Crowley decided that having real money stashed away somewhere was a good idea, just in case someone Below got it into their heads to develop a love for accounting.

When the twentieth century’s version of inflation arrived, Crowley sat through three different complete economic destabilizations before deciding that relying on change hidden in the sofa was a terrible investment with no return value—unless one counted the addition of lint, which no one did. He pulled out a newspaper that kept the stock listings in the back, where decent people could ignore them, raided a newsstand of every financial magazine in print at the time, and learned a lot more about true evil than he’d ever cared to know. After that, Crowley set to work on conquering it. Not because he was supposed to conquer evil, but because he deeply resented the discovery that one of the most evil things in creation*[360] had been under his nose this entire time, and it was better at its job than he was.

Thus, Crowley is not only one hidden identity away from being an actual billionaire, he is also a (vaguely resentful) angel with a goal. He is therefore far more likely to succeed than the average billionaire at getting exactly what he wants.*[361]

If Crowley was still a demon, he would, after finding the ideal location, do something unpleasant to encourage the current owners to put their property up on the market for sale. Bagpipes at 3:00 a.m. Mysterious water leaks that not only refuse to be repaired, but are the sort that plink just loudly enough to keep you from sleeping, or drive you right around the corner from frustratingly sane to homeless nutter reciting Revelations at anyone who will stop long enough to listen.*[362]

He is not a demon. Different rules now apply.

Crowley wasn’t very fond of rules even when they were brand-new rules.
After a bit of roaming about Soho, Crowley finds a building on Old Compton, one that’s just a brief walk from the bookshop. It has a hint of older architecture around the windows, but otherwise it’s a flat modern refit on the outside. The theme continues inside, to a certain extent. The electrical and the fire repression systems were recently redone, so Crowley won’t have to bribe a fire inspector to leave him the bloody hell alone. The ground floor is host to a familiar pub, while the first, second, and third storeys are devoted to three distinctly different businesses.

“Mm. No.”

Crowley buys the building from its actual owner in a transaction that lasts about twenty minutes. He then encourages the previous owner to forget he ever owned a building in the first place by way of giving the man his deepest love: a great deal of brandy from Burgundy, aged in oak for three centuries.

The pub on the ground floor can stay; pubs are convenient and consistent generators of rental income. He simply arranges for a bit of reshaping that ensures the rest of the building has a much nicer separate entrance. The new street entrance is large enough to host a reception desk, with space for a door to hide a small break room with a loo behind it. Having an administrative assistant about feels like a good idea for daytime hours, but at night, putting someone behind that desk large enough to terrify club bouncers into squeaky meekness sounds like fun.

“What are you doing?” Raphael asks as Crowley pokes around at the building’s new lobby.

“That depends. You want to room with me, or do you want your own place? Because I have to tell you, if you bring anyone home, I really don’t want to hear the results.”

“I need more details than that,” Raphael says, while also trying not to look guilty. “If not with you, where?”

“Well, I can dedicate the entire second storey as a flat that would be yours, or I could stash you in a cupboard-sized bedroom on the third storey with me,” Crowley explains. “Personally, I’d go with the second storey flat option. Gives you a lot more room to spread your wings and figure out what the hell sort of life you’re going to be living.”

“I wasn’t really…I wasn’t certain if I was staying,” Raphael admits.

Crowley snorts his opinion of that. “It isn’t as if you can’t snap your fingers and pop off to Heaven at a moment’s notice if they need you. Do you want to live down here, where we’ve already figured out that food and drink are amazing, music is varied and easily accessible, and no one is going to be trying to worship the ground you walk on? Or do you want to live Upstairs, deal with the unrelenting whiteness of everything, and have to repeatedly tell everyone who you are and why you were never really quite dead?”

Raphael winces. “All right, yes. Those are all excellent points. Down here sounds far preferable. You’re certain you don’t have another use for the second storey?”

“Nope! Not anymore.”

The first storey is home to an art gallery, which hosts workshops during slow weekdays for art students. Crowley listens to the curator, Anna Malcolm, churn out three minutes of desperate babbling in an attempt to convince Crowley not to shut down the gallery before he holds up his hand. “If you would please shut up, and please just…continue on exactly as you have been, the gallery space is now lease-free. Just don’t ever mention it to anyone, all right?”
Anna stares at him, bug-eyed, and then squeals before hugging him. Crowley freezes in place, teeth gritted, and tries not to fling off an overly excited artistic custodian. “Help.”

Raphael gently pries Anna off of him. “My brother isn’t really okay with sudden movement. Or sudden hugs. Or being thanked, but you can do that last part anyway.”

“Er, yes. Uhm. Thank you, Anthony—I mean, Mister Crowley!” Anna gasps, looking horrified again.

“If you’re this bloody nervous, how the hell do you run a public art gallery?” Crowley asks in disbelief.

“That’s…different,” Anna demurs, which is a completely useless answer. Then she turns to Raphael. “You’re his brother? Our new owner didn’t mention he would be in such lovely company. What’s your name?”

Raphael hesitates. “Uh—”

“Israfil,” Crowley supplies.

“Oh, what a lovely name. Anthony and Israfil Crowley.” Anna beams at them. “Your parents certainly made interesting choices!”

“But it’s not—”

Crowley stamps on his brother’s foot. “I’m the one who prefers the formality. You can call him by his first name, if you like.”

Raphael glares at Crowley. “Yes, that…that’s lovely. Yes. Fine.”

When they leave the gallery, Raphael’s glare morphs into a glower. “My name isn’t Crowley!”

“Oh, boo-hoo,” Crowley retorts. “You can’t go about London calling yourself Raphael, either! Congratulations; your name is now Islamic. Besides, are you really going to walk about telling people that we’re twins, but you’re somehow lacking in a family name?”

“There has probably been weirder shit, Zaherael.”

Crowley has to give him that one. “Yeah, probably, but Above’s policy is still about avoiding notice, not being completely, dramatically noticeable.”

“You would definitely prefer the latter,” Raphael says.

“Yeah.” Crowley sighs. Those were the days. He doesn’t really miss them, what with the demonic mayhem, the murder, the terror, and the constant betrayal, but he does like drama.

“You can really make an art space like that lease-free?” Raphael asks. “No issues at all?”

Crowley shrugs. “Tax write-offs are amazing things.” Come on. I have to buy out two more companies and kick them out of this building.”

“What?”

The second storey is home to a printing press that hasn’t figured out that the 1800s ended two centuries ago. Crowley is all for the continued availability of paper books, but starting up a new indie literal printing press and expecting it to be a success in 2019 is one of the stupidest ideas he’s ever
He buys them out without needing to spend much at all beyond purchasing their bloody debt, donates the printing press to a museum where it belonged in the first place, and then clears out the detritus by snapping his fingers. That leaves Raphael—now rather irritably going by the name Israfil—in a completely empty space but for the walls that surrounding the loo and the half-walls that make up a pathetic and abandoned cubicle area.*

“There you are. Have fun!”

Raphael glances around curiously. There are windows only to the southwest and northeast, since any original windows would have been blocked off by the buildings added on each side, but there’s still quite a bit of light coming into the second storey. “You do realize I have no idea what’s meant to be in a human living space, yes?”

Crowley rests his face in his hands. “Right. Yeah. Okay. Let’s go deal with the third storey, and then I’ll help you figure out how to at least pretend to be human.”

The third storey is host to a small technical firm. Crowley slowly raises both eyebrows as he listens to the co-owners list the firm’s abilities, goals, and also, their budgeting concerns as they attempt to convince Crowley that they deserve to stay right where they are, continuing to fail at everything.

Crowley shoves his hands into his hair. “You’re blowing half your fucking business budget just by leasing space in Soho! Why the hell didn’t you set up shop somewhere else and put that money to better use?”

The owners of the firm, who are most certainly not the brains behind the operation, look insulted that Crowley would suggest such a thing. “We like Soho,” Gina Harper says in rather perfect snootiness. Crowley wonders if she lives in Mayfair. Also, if her mortgage is paid off. He could always use more property in Mayfair.

“It’s an excellent position to be in for listening to the voice of the people,” says John Eastman, who Crowley suspects might actually be a demon in disguise.

“Trite. Grand. Bugger this; it’s never going to work out, and your employees deserve better. Also, I want your employees for my own nefarious purposes, so that’s really convenient.”

Crowley pulls out his mobile, encrypts the signal with a thought, and opens up several apps before framing them to run on-screen in a quad. Israfil watches over his shoulder as Crowley buys up all of the company’s public shares, making him the dominant stockholder for Technological Innovations for this Generation, Inc. Their business debt is also pathetically easy to pluck up from the banks holding onto it. Then Crowley makes certain the message of changing ownership is emailed directly to Gina and John.

The two of them pull out their mobiles in almost perfect synchrony. Gina is the faster reader, and instantly pales to the same shade of white as her precise business-collared blouse. “You can’t do that!”

John catches up. “What—but—you can’t.” He seems far less certain than Gina. Crowley definitely thinks John is a demon, one who’s still trying to figure out how humanity functions.

“That’s just…well. That’s really evil,” John continues, and that cinches it. There’s a hint of respect underneath the disbelief, a sound that of appreciation Crowley would know anywhere.

“Totally just did it, already tired of you, get out of my business and then get out of my building,” Crowley replies. “Oh, and please don’t come back; I don’t like either of you in the slightest.”
John wanders off, scratching at the back of his head, and disappears into a real office (not a bloody cubicle). Gina slams her own office door so hard that the glass pane cracks. Crowley mentally deducts the repair cost out of her severance package. No use getting into trouble with any labor boards, after all. Also, Gina’s mortgage is not paid off. By a significant margin.

Israfil glares at him. “No. There is merciless, and then there is evil.”

Crowley growls under his breath and closes that particular app. “Fine!”

The rest of TlfG Incorporated’s six employees give Crowley doubtful, fearful looks. “Are—are we sacked, too?” the nearest woman asks. She has the myopic stare of someone who doesn’t remember to leave her computer for meals, trips to the loo, or for showering unless someone reminds her, probably on a scheduled timer.

“Oh, absolutely not. I’m just going to give you all a new business model[*370] that actually has a point to it, and oh, I’m relocating you the hell out of Soho. Spending half your budget on a loft is a still a stupid idea.” Then he pauses as something occurs to him.

“Don’t you have a flat in Mayfair that’s paid for?” Israfil asks. “One that’s about to become vacant?”

“I was already thinking about that. That’s brilliant.” His flat is the perfect size for TlfG’s current staff, but this group of people has potential. He’ll figure out how to relocate them once they start making progress. Sending TlfG to Mayfair will also infuriate Gina, but that part’s just fun.

After the employees clear out of the meeting room with instructions to pack up their belongings —“Not those fucking cubicles!”—Israfil turns to him. “Just a minor demon in Hell, hmm?”

“A minor demon with excellent networking skills, thank you very much.” Crowley glances up at the ceiling. The uppermost floor is a bit higher than the surrounding buildings, so the third storey has excellent lighting on all sides, but still… “I wonder what’s on the roof.”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

They find the roof access after opening nearly every door on the third floor, including one for a loo so full of false floral scent[*371] that Israfil gags and flees while shouting, “WHY?”

“Because some people have no shame, Brother.”

Crowley hops up onto the edge of the building’s roof and walks along in a slow, contemplative circle. It’s Soho, so there aren’t any buildings nearby tall enough to block out the light. The structure is sturdy enough, and he can always magic a bit more stability into things if need be. The cooling unit for the building has also been recently updated, so that’s another concern dealt with.

“What are you thinking about?” Israfil asks. He has his wings spread, basking in the sun with his eyes closed. He didn’t bother to hide in the slightest, but if anyone claims to see an angel sunning on a roof, they’ll be consigned to join the sorts who claim to find images of Christ in the burnt part of their morning toast.

Crowley’s thoughts are full of greenery, cool and soothing after too long under a desert sun. He remembers the absolute grace of sliding into warm water, so parched and starved for it he’d probably been approaching what would have been his first discorporation.[*372] [*373]

“I’m thinking about the first time someone was kind to a minor demon named Crawley.”
Crowley is very sorry, New Mexico, but he made up for it by encouraging the Smokey the Bear campaign and all of the wildfire prevention propaganda the moment he realized fire bans were there to prevent the person with the fire from dying horribly. Hell wanted to know why Crowley was acting beneficial towards humans; Crowley convinced them that he was performing Reverse Psychology because humans don’t like obeying signs that tell them what to do. He was, unfortunately, exceptionally correct.

The running and the fire was not worth creating the chupacabra myth, even if the resulting “sightings” are hilarious.

Less.

Crowley is so proud of that one that he keeps digital recordings of the varying horrific sounds a dial-up modem was capable of creating: 110, 300, 1200, 2400, 4800, 9600, 14.4k, 19.2k, 28.8k, 33.6k, 56k, bonded 56k, and variable hardware compression modems in all their noisy glory.

Or God, who, like Death, is pretty much everywhere they want to be at once.

Completely removing a structure and replacing it with an entirely different structure is still a complete structural rehaul.

Quite a number of people on Earth just had full-body chills, and they have no idea why.

After nine decades of demonic nudges, influences, and outright magic (with the occasional angelic passenger, the Bentley is probably the closest machine on Earth to achieving true sentience. In short: yes, it missed him very much…even if he now smells like the angelic passenger.

Bloody pigeons.

Which is exactly what they did.

Snake plants are awesome: https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/houseplants/snake-plant/snake-plant-care.htm

He is immune to both dust and mold, but he’s going to claim it anyway.

Real, traditional, sand-washed silk, not satin. Or worse, polyester.

He owes someone a viewing of Aladdin.

Across the Pond comparison: It’s like 2x the cost of buying anything in the East Village.

Even people who live and breathe stocks know that this is entirely accurate.

Aside from mass murder, genocide, horrific atrocities against the flesh, and disco, among other things.

Aziraphale has three credit cards because Crowley shoved them into his hand one day and said, “Use them if you need them, and never tell anyone.” Aziraphale gave the cards labeled Ezra Z. Fell no thought whatsoever until he started paying attention to the sharply rising cost of everything, and then asked how it was one paid back a gifted credit card. Crowley stared at him and said, “What credit card?” Aziraphale wisely took the hint.
People are usually willing to stop and listen fairly often, as Revelations is full of some seriously wild shit.

He isn’t speaking of the building, which he rather likes.

The pub’s owners and staff are quite surprised the next morning when they arrive to prep for the lunch rush and find a much smaller workspace than what they’d left behind the night before.

He didn’t have any plans, but Raphael might have surprised him, and he is capable of plotting.

Raphael is a lot harder to deliberately misinterpret than Aziraphale. Human brains hear Aziraphale, and most of them immediately call him Ezra. Aziraphale got used to that willful blindness centuries ago.

Engel J. Tobias, as a stock market broker, of course does his duty and pays his taxes. He also cackles over the paperwork and all of his consistently revised sources of tax law as he does so. Loopholes are such fun.

Six thousand years gives you a lot of time to accrue a list of stupid ideas. A very long list.

Some things are too evil to miracle away. That’ll take a bit of demolition and a very large rubbish bin.

Crowley puts TGftG, Incorporated to work on doing more research on the extension of mobile battery life, and the battery life of portable electronic devices in general. Actually, he’ll back any idea they present to him that sounds like it might be useful. Their budget is Whatever It Fucking Takes. Most of TGftG is far too busy with maths, programming, technological innovation, chemistry, and other mad science to notice that their budget line has no numbers on it.

Neither Aziraphale nor Crowley knows who came up with that idea, and they both find it sort of horrifying. They’re not even human and they’re capable of recognizing that biological functions are not just going to magically go away if humans spray enough fake flowers at them.

He avoided that quite well for fifty years. He was in Bad-tibira, between jobs, when he stumbled over an angel who decided a demon’s presence immediately meant “make it very dead.” Crawley ran until he bled out, losing that corporation on the banks of an oasis east of the city.

It took another hundred years for Crawley to dare Aziraphale’s company again, and was so twitchy he panicked, bit the angel, and started a rather techy argument of discorporations that would last almost until the time of the Flood.
It’s late in the afternoon on Monday, 30th September, when Aziraphale pops back down to Earth by a means that used to be quite the habit. It’s been so long since he’s been allowed to do so that Aziraphale reels about for a few seconds, not used to the speed of the transition when he skips out on the escalator. He’ll get used to it again, of course, but good Lord, that was something!

Aziraphale opens his shop, sneezes, and then miracles away a bit of dust that insisted upon forming in his absence. He keeps a fair bit of magic in place to prevent that sort of thing, but after thirty-five days, certain books decided to be naughty. He doesn’t turn the shop sign from Closed to Open, however. He’s not ready to deal with other humans just yet. The last eleven years and two months have been ridiculously fraught, and he will be having that cup of tea now, thank you.

He isn’t worried about Crowley, or Raphael—it seems rather ridiculous to worry about an archangel, anyway*—but when their usual dinner hour arrives on Wednesday and there is no word, his natural tendency to fret means that he can’t take the silence any longer. Aziraphale decides to give him a ring.

“Oh, hi, angel.” Crowley sounds distracted, but that isn’t necessarily unusual. Aziraphale is just happy that Crowley answered the phone instead of letting his mobile go to voicemail. Trying to call Crowley’s landline is an exercise in random chance. “Sorry I haven’t been about, project came up. Literal miracles to perform so things are done in short order. I’m really not that patient, am I?”

Aziraphale smiles. “No, you never really have been. I do believe acting as Warlock’s nanny was a personal record for length of time spent at a single job.”

“Oi, I liked that job. Care for a kid, encourage him to be a disaster, let the poor kid’s absent parents deal with the aftermath.”

“You didn’t like the Ambassador and his wife at all, did you?” Aziraphale recalls. He hadn’t been personally fond of them, either. The American Ambassador was frequently absent when his son needed him,* and the Ambassador’s wife…well, she had a remarkable lack of time for her son given the fact that she was not officially employed in any position that didn’t involve posing for photographs.

“Not really fond of anyone who treats children like they’re fashion accessories. You need anything, Zira?”

“Oh, I was just wondering when you were going to get around to turning up at the bookshop,” Aziraphale replies honestly. “I didn’t think it took that long to water plants.”

Crowley makes a gurgling, frustrated sort of noise.

“Oh, dear.” Those poor plants.
“Yeah. Look, uhm…” Aziraphale can hear Crowley tossing papers around, which means they’re most likely hovering in the air as he finds what he’s looking for. “Saturday. Pretty sure this will all be wrapped up by then. I’ll bring takeaway to the shop for lunch around about noon. How’s that?”

“Just you?” Aziraphale asks in surprise.

“Israfil is trying to figure out interior decorating along with how to People.”

“Switched to the Islamic, then?” Aziraphale thinks that’s probably for the best,* even if it does mean their names are a bit more similar than he might prefer. Then again, there are numerous angels with the same difficulty. He’ll manage.

“He is so annoyed about Israfil Crowley.”

Aziraphale lets out an inappropriate chuckle before he can stop himself. “That might be a bit cruel, my dear.”

“Look, in Gaelic, my name is completely amazing, so my brother can just suffer,” Crowley returns. “See you Saturday—oh! Preferences?”

Aziraphale considers the fact that, aside from a dozen cups of tea and an entire package of biscuits eaten in a single, distressed hour, he hasn’t eaten since they returned home. “Something unusual, but not exorbitant. Filling, but not an invitation to indigestion.” He pauses. “Oh, and perhaps something chocolate.”

“I can work with that. See you Saturday, angel.”

“Goodbye, Crowley,” Aziraphale says, and only after he’s spoken the words does his landline’s dial tone return. Unless it’s an emergency, it’s always been rather kind of Crowley to wait for a proper farewell before hanging up the phone.*

Saturday arrives with unseasonably bright sunshine. Aziraphale, just like any native London resident, gives the sunlight the sort of suspicious look usually reserved for unexploded war ordinance before preparing for his day.

He finds one of his best shirts and pressed trousers before giving his waistcoat a forlorn look. He’s had it from the moment it was produced, but no matter how many miracles one can perform on cloth, it just never lasts. Natural fibers were designed to be biodegradable, and he is firmly offended by clothing made with artificial compounds.* He hangs it in his closet, resolving to have it remade once he can bear the idea of parting with it long enough for the design to be copied, and chooses a smoky grey waistcoat he’s worn exactly three times, all for events which Crowley had determinedly slept through. He frowns, tapping the cloth to give it a bit more of a beige tint so it doesn’t clash with his trousers. There is a matching bowtie for that waistcoat somewhere, and he finds it behind his bureau. He uses the mirror to tie it properly in place. Pale olive, pale smoke, and beige lines bring it all together nicely, and his coat refuses to clash with anything because he won’t let it.

It occurs to Aziraphale as he’s tying his shoes that he hasn’t put this much thought into dressing for the day since he last visited one of his favorite gentlemen’s clubs, which was sadly closed down after sexual equality activists demanded they accept female members. It wasn’t yet legal to be gay, queer, or anything of the sort, so protesting the inclusion of women on the grounds of, “Us blokes would like to continue liking other blokes in peace, please” just wasn’t on.*

Aziraphale goes downstairs in a thoughtful mood. Is he dating Crowley? Are they remaining friends who have simply realized that friendship can have unfathomable wells of affection? Would Crowley
want to date him, if they ever decided to try it? Aziraphale is not the most fascinating angel in existence, even if he is a familiar face. Would it be dating with or without anything…physical? He is well aware of Crowley’s reaction anytime Catherine the Great is mentioned, which is to shudder and mutter about stickiness. He might not even like that sort of thing.

He opens the shop just for the distraction of trying to drive customers away (unless they want to purchase the children’s books) and sits at the counter, tapping a gold-tipped quill against a nearly empty registry. Aziraphale wouldn’t care at all if there was a…a lack of anything further in regards to physical pleasure. They’re divine beings, and if he ever feels the urge to indulge in anything further, he has two working hands and a private flat.

Crowley doesn’t merely walk. He slinks. He glides. It’s a natural motion of body that Aziraphale noticed centuries ago and resolutely decided that the safest course of action was to get very inebriated in order to stop thinking about gliding of any sort. It was only a reaction of base physical lust in those days, and he is quite capable of resisting such things.

Good Heavens, he needs to collect himself. He’d rather be certain of his opinions on the matter before they become issues in need of addressing, but these thoughts are also making him blush.

Crowley shows up exactly at noon, which is such a rarity that Aziraphale is startled into dropping his quill. “You’re on time? Not fashionably late?”

“I really did try for fashionably late, but the takeaway place was prompt.” Crowley nudges the door shut with his foot, turns the deadbolt, and then flicks one finger to flip the shop’s sign to Closed. Then he takes off his sunglasses, which is still a rare delight when there isn’t alcohol involved. He hasn’t changed a thing about his wardrobe, but to Aziraphale, there is a lightness to Crowley*[380] that is very mindful of a great and terrible weight being lifted.

Crowley gives him a curious look as he wanders closer. “Are you overheating?”

Aziraphale realizes he’s still quite flushed. “Yes,” he admits, which isn’t a lie at all. “But I’ll be fine in a moment. What’s for lunch, then?”

“Vietnamese. There’s a deli down the way, corner of Oxford Street. We haven’t done Vietnamese in…” Crowley pauses. “At least five years?”

“Six, I think.” The smell coming from the bag that Crowley sets on the countertop is heavenly, except better, because Heaven is still struggling with the entire concept of food. Inside is a green papaya salad, Vietnamese slaw, summer rolls, and very fresh steamed pork buns. “Oh, my dear. This is absolutely perfect.”

“No chocolate, though. I didn’t trust their dessert selection.” Crowley snaps apart a pair of takeaway chopsticks while Aziraphale digs around and retrieves a rather old, lacquered set from his desk. “I thought about grabbing another dish to make up for it, but most of their meat is duck. Felt a bit weird, eating something I’ve been feeding in a park for the last four centuries.”

“Duck is delicious, and they owe us for the sheer amount of bread we’ve purchased on their behalf,” Aziraphale counters.

Crowley smirks. “Bloodthirsty angel.” He starts prodding at the salad in curiosity. “New waistcoat?”

“No, actually, it’s an old one. I’ve only worn it a few times since I purchased it, so it’s in excellent condition, is all. You were, ah, napping at the time of purchase. Prodigiously.”*[381]

The rest of the meal passes in silence, but it’s a comfortable one. Aziraphale realizes how tense he’s
been when his muscles slowly begin to relax, distracted by delicious food and Crowley’s soothing presence.

Crowley’s presence has always been soothing. Startling, sometimes, with the way he often had of sort of appearing out of thin air to say hello, but otherwise—soothing.

He doesn’t have to hide that anymore, Aziraphale realizes, a rather ridiculous smile on his face. There is absolutely no reason to hide his association with Crowley from anyone.

“Oi, what’s that look for?” Crowley asks, pointing at him with both chopsticks.

Aziraphale polishes off the last pork bun while he thinks of the proper term. “Relief,” he finally decides. “That is what it’s for.”

“Relief.” Crowley glances down and then snaps his fingers to get rid of the rubbish so it doesn’t end up in a landfill, or worse, floating around in the ocean. “Come over to my place.”

Aziraphale leans back. That was rather forward. “Why?”

Crowley gives him an odd look. “Because you’ve never been to my place but the one time for the great switcheroo, that’s why. Besides, I wanted to show you something.”

Aziraphale reminds himself…and promptly flushes again as he reads implications into Crowley’s words that probably don’t exist.

Crowley raises an eyebrow. “Surviving plants, angel. I want to show off my two survivors…and the new ones, for that matter. Think you can keep your mind out of the gutter long enough for that?”

Aziraphale buries his face in his hands. “I hope so.”

To his surprise, the Bentley isn’t waiting outside. “We’re going to walk all the way to Mayfair?” Aziraphale asks in dismay. It’s not truly a great distance, but he just ate, and he wasn’t expecting a bloody stroll!

“Nope. We’re going to walk all the way to my flat,” Crowley replies with a pleased drawl, leading them down the walkway on Old Compton. Prince Edward Theatre is in the midst of letting people in for an afternoon show, so the street is far less crowded than it had been five minutes ago.

Aziraphale frowns and hurries after him. “What are you up to, you old serpent?”

“I’m not up to anything.” Crowley is entirely smug, which is always a warning sign. “I’ve already done it.”

“Done what?” Aziraphale asks, and then nearly plows into Crowley when he suddenly stops in front of a building. He knows the pub, of course. They’ve had a round or two there on previous occasions. It just looks as if the private entrance for the building’s upper stories is a bit…larger.

“Bought a building. I actually really hate Mayfair.” Crowley pushes open the door to the private entrance. “After you, angel.”

“You bought a building?” Aziraphale blurs in astonishment. “Anthony Crowley, people were using this building!”

“I like this building. I was getting shitfaced in this very pub when you turned up, still discorporated, and motivated my arse to get where it needed to be,” Crowley says.
“Oh.” Aziraphale steps inside, feeling a brisk, climate-controlled breeze ruffle his hair as he passes over the threshold. “I suppose I see the appeal, then.”

Crowley makes an amused noise. “Besides, other people are still using this building. The useful types, anyway—Carol? What’s wrong?”

Aziraphale spies the desk at once, which has a closed door behind it. It’s a very sleek, dark, and modern bit of furniture, though the foyer is otherwise brightly lit, with wool rugs over a polished wooden floor. Carol’s desk placard says she is Carol Ngapoi.*[383] She has vaguely Asian features and dark hair, but with the definite feel of a transplant from Tibet who’s been in London so long that the family might as well be native to Britain.

Carol is dressed in rather fashionable lady’s business wear. She is also crying, hunched over in her chair and desperately dabbing at her face with a handkerchief. Her mascara gave it up for lost and is escaping down her face, the poor girl.

Crowley goes right to her and leans over the desk, but his voice is quiet, his posture oddly unthreatening. Aziraphale is really not used to seeing his friend do anything of the sort. “Sweetheart, come on. Tell me what happened, and I’ll be off directly to kick their arse.”

Carol lets out a shaky, unhappy laugh. “I’m so sorry. A man came in and insisted he was here to visit you. I tried to send him away, but he—he scared me so much. I was afraid if I didn’t let him in, he’d hurt me, Mister Crowley.”

“It’s just Crowley, I told you.” Crowley frowns. “Definitely not expecting rude visitors. What’d he look like?”

“I knew you were due back soon, so I thought it best if you decided if he was just…rude, or if I should maybe call the police,” Carol whispers. “But, uh—he was very tall. Creepy, older sort with white hair, and possibly a skin condition.” She shivers. “It looked like he had black pits instead of eyes—”

Crowley immediately straightens up. “Hasssturrrrrrrrrrr!” he growls through clenched teeth.

“Oh.” Carol tries to clean more of her streaming makeup off her face. “Am I calling the police then, sir?”

“Crowley!” Crowley insists. “And…nah. I’ll deal with him. You lock up the front door here, go in the back, make yourself a cuppa, and just breathe for a few minutes, all right? Oh, pretty sure the chocolate biscuits are in the cupboard.”

Carol manages to watery smile. “But—but we ate all the chocolate biscuits yesterday afternoon.”

“Funny how they keep turning up again, isn’t it? Oh, and Carol?” Crowley smiles, a hard edge to it. “Don’t you worry a bit about that Hastur bloke. You’ll never have to deal with him again.”

Carol sniffs back her tears. “Please do not make me bury any bodies, Crowley.”

“I’d pay you so much more if that was part of your job description,” Crowley replies absently. “No, don’t worry. I’m not going to kill him.”

Aziraphale follows Crowley up a rather nice, recently remodeled staircase. The wooden steps should be slippery, but they have an ingenious roughened edge ground into the wood to provide traction.
“You’re not?”

Crowley pauses at an open doorway, gesturing for someone to come closer. Aziraphale peers over Crowley’s shoulder; it appears that the first storey hosts an art gallery. That will definitely be worth exploring later.

He is quickly introduced to Anna Malcolm, the curator of the Representation for the Arts gallery. She looks quite shocked by the idea of the building being invaded by anyone dangerous. “What should I do?”

“Lock the gallery door and tell your patrons it’s just a security drill. Shouldn’t take long to get rid of the annoying bastard,” Crowley tells her. “Maybe look into anti-anxiety medication, Anna.”

Anna makes a face. “This is with the anti-anxiety medication, thank you.” She steps back, and after Crowley gives her another nod, she locks the gallery door.

“Second storey is Israfil’s flat, or it will be,” Crowley says as they pass a closed door on the second landing. “Work in progress, that. He’s been staying upstairs with me to avoid all the dust. I really hope he’s out right now. Israfil isn’t…aside from me, he hasn’t really encountered a demon before. Fallen angels, yes, but not a bloody demon. Well, except that minor demon I kicked out of this building, but he was so far down the rank and file system he barely registered as being demonic at all.”

“What are you going to do about Hastur?” Aziraphale asks as they make it to the third storey. “Also, please install a lift.”

“This building can only take so much alteration. The gallery has a lift, it being a public space, but that’s it,” Crowley says. “You’ll learn to love stairs.”

“You also said I would learn to love trudging over mountain ranges, and that was a filthy lie,” Aziraphale reminds him, trying not to pant for breath. “Hastur! Plans are needed, remember?”

Crowley glances over his shoulder at him. “Angel. Holy water.”

“Oh! Right, exactly,” Aziraphale realizes. “It’s a bit messy though, isn’t it?”

“That stain would not come out of the carpet in the other flat,” Crowley agrees. He slides off his sunglasses, pockets them, and then opens the first of two doors on the third storey. It wasn’t shut or locked, merely pushed to.

Aziraphale has only a moment to glance around a surprisingly bright flat before his attention is caught by the demon Hastur. He’s standing in the middle of the living room, teeth bared in a rotten grin,* as arrogant as if he owns the place. Aziraphale has never formally met Hastur aside from “Crowley’s” trial in Hell, but he already dislikes the demon a great deal.

“Crowley,” Hastur’s voice rumbles. It’s joined by a maggot that falls out along with his words. Aziraphale wrinkles his nose in disgust. “So lovely to see you again.”

“Can’t say the same in the slightest.” Crowley shakes his head. “What the hell are you doing, you daft bastard? Why, why are you stupid enough to even be standing there?”

“I heard you changed addresses. Thought I’d look you up,” Hastur sneers. “Found you shacked up with another ginger that looks quite a bit like you. Always knew you were queer, but that level of vanity would shock even the lords of Hell.”
Crowley’s expression becomes the unfeeling gaze of the serpent as his eyes dart around the room. Aziraphale finds Israfil first, noticing the cuffed edge of the pale blue shirt the archangel has taken to wearing. “I’ll go,” he murmurs, and rushes into the kitchen, rounding the open countertop. Crowley’s brother is stretched out on the floor, as if he’d tried to brace himself against a sudden fall. He kneels down to check on him, but the only wound Aziraphale can find is a spot of blood on the back of Israfil’s neck, along with a bit of a goose egg hidden by his long hair.

“He’s all right,” Aziraphale says, standing again so that Crowley isn’t facing the demon alone. “Bit of a bump on the head, but it’s not bad.”

“Hasssstur,” Crowley hisses. “You stupid fuck. You really, really shouldn’t have done that.”

“Revenge isn’t any fun if you’re not killing people.” Hastur spits onto Crowley’s wooden floor. “Should’ve hit the bastard harder, I suppose.”

Crowley rolls his eyes at the spitting. “There’s something else you should have kept in mind, too.”


“Oh, I am probably going to enjoy this far too much,” Crowley says. Then he braces his feet and reveals his wings, letting the darkened bronze feathers free from their confines. They spread until they’re raised in full battle display…and not so coincidentally, revealing the golden tips of his feathers.

Hastur takes a step back, finally losing some of that irritating arrogance. “What the—what the Heaven are you?”

“An archangel. The last of the very first Seven,” Crowley breathes, and the temperature in the room drops a degree or ten. “Or the sixth. We were born at the same time, so it’s never really mattered. I just liked to shove Raphael to the front of the line. That’s him you went after, by the way.”

Hastur doesn’t seem to take in the archangel significance, or Raphael’s name. “No demon can be redeemed,” he snarls.

Crowley reveals his teeth, his incisors quite a bit longer than normal. “Anyone can be. That’sss never changed; we jussssst stopped believing it. But that’sss a conceccsion you can worry about ssssome other day.” Crowley lifts his leg and stamps on the wooden floor five times, letting the sharp sound ring out. “Ohhhhh, Luccccifer! I need a word with you.”

Hastur looks completely outraged as Aziraphale’s jaw falls open. “You just did what?” he squawks, but that’s all he has time to say.

There is no dramatic rumble, no smoke, no hint of sulfur. One minute he isn’t there; the next moment he is.

Lucifer glances about with calm expectation while Aziraphale stares at the first glimpse he’s had of the Morningstar in well over six thousand years. He is currently about Crowley’s height, human-shaped and slender; his skin has a faint reddish hint to it, like someone who’s spent just a bit too much time in the sun. He is currently lacking in horns and wings, and is wearing a bespoke three-piece suit that would certainly turn Gabriel’s head for its quality. Lucifer’s long hair is a rather ordinary brown, as are his eyes, yet his eyes are on fire at the same time.

Israfil chooses that moment to groan in pain. Aziraphale clenches his hands, swears under his breath, and then goes back to him. “What th’ fuck,” Israfil slurs.
“You let a demon into the flat, and he knocked you over the head,” Aziraphale says quickly.

“Did utterly not let one of them in.” Israfil looks insulted. “I was in the kitchen, the door blew open, and then…” He raises his hand to the back of his head and his fingers come away red with blood. “Bugger. That hurts.”

“Would someone please explain why I’ve just been Summoned,” Lucifer requests—rather politely, Aziraphale decides, while helping Israfil to his feet. “I am a very busy man.”

“Sorry about the abrupt Summons,” Crowley says. “I needed you here to observe one of the old rules.”

“Old rules—Crowley?” Then Lucifer’s eyes widen. “No. No, not any longer. Zaherael. It is good to see you this way again.”

*It is?* Aziraphale thinks blankly. One would think Lucifer would be the opposite of pleased.

Crowley’s wings flutter in irritation. “Look, just—really, Crowley’s fine. That’s not why we’re here, anyway.”

Lucifer’s eyes drift over to Aziraphale, who would dearly like to hide behind the kitchen cabinetry again, and then to Israfil, who is still bleary-eyed from a possible concussion. “Raphael. We have heard your name spoken again in recent days, even in Hell, but none of us knew what to think.”

“Yeah, it’s a bit recent, me being not dead,” Israfil says. Aziraphale feels a flare of angelic power, and then Israfil is standing fully upright, his eyes clear. “Hastur, huh? Wasn’t that once Daniethael?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. Morningstar, what are the rules regarding healers?” Crowley asks.

Lucifer tilts his head a bit to the side. “Do you still intend to honor the old ways?”

Crowley shrugs. “No reason not to, not less you’ve got other plans.”

“I do not. The healers are neutral in our eyes,” Lucifer says, one precise line of an eyebrow starting to lift. “They are respected; the Fallen do not touch them, for the healers judge us not…unless certain circumstances require it, of course.”

“Glad you remembered that part. Hastur here just admitted to trying to kill my brother.”

“Did he?” Lucifer slowly turns his head to look at Hastur, who seems to be a bit less confident in his continued existence. “Was there provocation?”

“Lord, why would I need provocation?” Hastur demands angrily. “He’s an angel!”

“He is a healer;” Lucifer hisses, his eyes burning with even brighter demonic flame. “The Fallen’s regard for the healers has not changed because of where we dwell!” Lucifer draws in a calming breath. “But, I remind you, Healer, that this is your judgment to make.”

“Shit,” Crowley grumbles. “I was really hoping to avoid that part.”

Lucifer’s expression gains a faint smirk. “It is your role, Healer. I am merely here to witness the judgment and see that it is carried out.”

“Oh, fine.” Crowley’s wide smile should really have been a warning, but Aziraphale is truly surprised by what he says. “Then my judgment is thus: Hastur is to have no rank in Hell. He is to have no name. He will never bear a name again until he earns something entirely new…oh, and he
has to absolutely loathe his new name. That’s the best part.”

“You can’t do that!” Hastur shouts in rage, which spills a few more maggots to the floor.

“Well, your boss is right. It actually is my job, so yes, I can. And I did,” Crowley responds, starting to grin. “Besides, I gave you that name. That means I can fucking well take it back.”

Lucifer snaps his fingers when Hastur opens his mouth again. The demon vanishes. Aziraphale notes in distaste that Hastur left a much larger pile of writing maggots behind as a parting gift. “It will be done, Crowley. I will see to it he does not return to this Earth for a very long time. Oh, and your recent trial was most amusing, by the way. I was very fond of the idea of the rubber duck.”

Lucifer was fond of the rubber duck, Aziraphale thinks in a state of complete confoundment. This situation cannot possibly get any more odd than it already is.

“Course you were. You were always a weird one,” Crowley says, but he’s still grinning. Like this is funny; like they’re friends, not enemies standing on opposite sides.

“Hi, Lucy,” Israfil decides to add.

“Oh, no…please don’t,” Lucifer protests, an odd look on his face. “It is good to see you returned, Raphael of the Seven, Healer of Heaven’s Dominion. I trust this resurrection can be blamed on Crowley?”

“Absolutely,” Israfil answers.

Lucifer nods. “He was my absolute favorite demon when it came to causing mischief, you know. I just couldn’t tell him how much it reminded me of the old days.” He hesitates. “Healer Raphael. There is one among our number who would be quite pleased to see evidence of your return to existence.”

Israfil looks startled by that. “There is? Still?”

“They might have stood at my side, but they did not pledge their loyalty to me until after they witnessed your unexpected death.” Lucifer glances down at the pile of maggots and glares until they all vanish.

Why not? Aziraphale thinks, and clears his throat. “You seem to be, er, rather all right with a lacking Apocalypse.”

“Principality Aziraphale.” Lucifer regards him quietly for a moment. Aziraphale has to all but tie his wings down to keep all four of them from flaring in response. “Yes, actually. The dramatics really sealed the deal, didn’t they?” Lucifer seems pleased. “I wasn’t certain if they would. Turning up and appearing normal, though—that might have swayed my son’s dedication.”

Crowley lifts his chin. “All right, then. That makes a bit more sense.”

Lucifer nods. “I am very proud of my son for being capable of doing what I cannot.”

Aziraphale tries not to despair. Things really are capable of becoming odder than they already were.

“It’s not too late, you know,” Israfil says before Lucifer departs. “He’s always there. You just have to reach for Him.”

Lucifer offers a grimace in response. “Honestly, that just makes things ever so much worse. Oh,
and…” He glances at Crowley. “I am very sorry.” Then he vanishes. There is a quiet pop, like a hot ember jumping out of a fire, but otherwise Aziraphale senses no other hint of magic, occult or otherwise.

The Morningstar is bloody terrifying.

“What? What was—oi, you can’t just say things like that and not explain them!” Crowley shouts at his empty living room.

“What’s the problem? Aside from the he is terrifying part?” Aziraphale asks, feeling his hands start to shake. Oh, dear God.

He faced down the bloody Morningstar. He feels like he just survived another war.

“Lucy never just says thing like that. It’s not the way she thinks,” Israfil answers. “It’s always a hint that makes no sense at all until it’s already too late.”

“She gets it from Mum. Or he does. Or whatever mood Lucifer is in lately,” Crowley growls. “Are you all right, Brother?”

“Just a bruise to the brain, honestly,” Israfil says. “It’s already dealt with. Granted, if I was a bit more fragile and human? That probably would have been fatal. That demon hit the famous human off-switch.”

Crowley lowers his wings, slowly pulling them in until they sleekly highlight his back, and then puts them away. “Hurray for that, then. Fuck.” He pulls out his mobile and dials a number. “Anna? All clear. Promise. Clean house, everyone is safe, nothing is on fire, and no one is dead. Close down the gallery and have a drink.” He hangs up and inputs a different number. “Carol? Everything’s fine. Call in Bruce if you want to go home early. He said straight-up that he wanted the extra hours, anyway.” Then he hangs up and shoves his mobile back into his jacket. “Fuck!”

Aziraphale looks at the bit of blood on the kitchen floor, then at the empty, maggot-free living room. “Where’s the loo, Crowley?”

“That way, first door on the right when you turn down the hall,” Crowley points beyond the kitchen. “Why?”

“Lunch and I are no longer so fond of each other. Please excuse me.”

* * * *

Aziraphale finishes performing one of the worst acts of biology imaginable\[387\] and washes his hands before cleaning out his mouth. He would very much like a strong bit of brandy right now, or even tequila, as it certainly tastes better than that.

He looks around while drying his hands. The bathroom’s design is definitively Crowley, but it isn’t nearly as dreary as his Mayfair flat. The floor is bamboo, a choice that dominates the entire flat. The walls are still very modern, but they’re white, not shades of dark navy and black. The shelving is built directly into the walls as a series of cubby squares, not external fixtures. The pedestal sink is also rather nice, a bit Grecian. There is a glassed-in shower tiled in black.
Aziraphale makes further examination and realizes that the tiles are indeed patterned in a Roman motif* that was lost when Mount Vesuvius had an overly dramatic reaction to shifting tectonic plates. The bathtub’s backsplash is a delightful fresco not of people, or the far more typical Roman pornography,* but a stylized and framed scene from a hinted Roman garden—no, wait. Aziraphale recognizes this one. Crowley just decided not to replicate the pornography that used to be at its forefront. It does fit better with the minimalist, modernist theme that way.

*Two people could fit inside that bathtub easily,* Aziraphale thinks, and sighs as he promptly flushes pink again. This is terrible; he has really got to regain some sense of control, or he’ll spend the next thousand years blushing at the drop of a hat.

Aziraphale neatly re-hangs the towel where he found it and goes back to the kitchen. The bloodstain on the floor is gone, as is Israfil. “Crowley?”

“Over here.” There is a very small area just off the living room that seems to have no purpose that Aziraphale can discern, unless it’s to display quite a bit of history. There are a multitude of shelves built into the wall, just like in the bathroom. On them are scattered stones of varying types, a few seashells, a bit of petrified wood, old urns, jars, and glass, woven bits of what looks to be ancient cloth, small painted frescos on tile from a multitude of artistic periods—even Crowley’s favorite da Vinci sketch is hanging on the wall above the shelves and their treasures, resting under protective glass. Aziraphale is almost certain he recognizes one of those round Roman vessels, too.

“I had no idea you owned any sort of, er, mementos. Aside from the drawing, I mean.”

“I’d forgotten about most of it, really. Then I opened a closet in Mayfair, found a trunk. You know how it is.” Crowley lights a lone white pillar candle that’s sitting by itself on the lowest shelf, this one jutting outwards from the wall to act more like a table.

“Oh,” Aziraphale breathes in recognition. It isn’t a very traditional altar, but Crowley isn’t traditional in the slightest. “I never knew you to be the praying sort.”

Crowley smiles. “Oh, wow, were you not paying attention.”* He shakes out the match and then twists his hand so it disappears. “This isn’t that, though. It’s more of a translation request. I’d really like to know what the hell the smug bastard meant by that last part before it’s a problem. Are you all right?”

“Oh, much better. Not how I wanted to treat a fine lunch, but…” Aziraphale lifts both shoulders. “It couldn’t be helped.”

“Don’t feel bad. I was considering that option, too,” Crowley admits.

“Where is Israfil?”

“Oh, I suggested he should go meet with Anna. Monitor her alcohol intake, what with her being on a sedative.” Crowley raises both eyebrows. “Perhaps have a messy bit of sex in an unoccupied closet. She’s not looking for a boyfriend, she’s far too tense, and he’s been staring at her arse for four days now.”

Aziraphale blinks a few times. “That’s…a thing? That Israfil does?”

“Angel, I spent so much money on sound-dampening acoustics for this flat,” Crowley says in tones of deep resignation. “Care for a distraction?”

Aziraphale decides that is probably a wise idea. “Yes, please.”
Crowley shows him around the rest of the loft, which is quite easy to do. Except for the hallway and its bathroom, it’s an entirely open loft space. The high-set windows are home to rows of plants that Aziraphale suspects were chosen because they will always be small and delicate. He is proud to recognize a series of African violets in a near-rainbow range of blossoms, but the others are a bit foreign. The larger windows on the northeast and southwest sides are almost as tall as the walls. They’re as white as the bathroom, but there are enough distractions placed here and there that it’s not anything like Heaven’s ceaseless lack of color.

The telly is the same one from the flat, as is the stereo, but this time instead of being hidden away, a vast number of vinyl records are on the inset shelves nearby, along with cassettes, CDs, and— “You still have 8-tracks?”*

“Some things just can’t be replicated, angel. Sort of like dust on a vinyl record.”

The bird statue from the bombed-out church made the transition to the new flat, to Aziraphale’s soppy-smiled amusement. So did the, er, statue of the pair of angels, which only elicits another annoying blush.*[392] “I’ve been trying to figure out exactly what they’re doing since I first saw it in Mayfair,” Aziraphale says.

Crowley glances over at the statue in question. “Oh, that. François Rude carved it out, and when he was done, even he couldn’t decide what those two were up to. He gave me the prototype, wisely convinced that it was probably not the sort of thing people in those days wanted to see in full-sized relief on their wall. Everyone in France was far too tetchy to make a go of it, anyway.”*[393]

“Why do you, er, still have it, then?”

“François and Sophie were interesting people with enough political savvy to survive seven violent changes in French government without ever being threatened by the very large and efficient head-chopping-off machine,”* [394] Crowley says. “It’s nice to have something to remember them by.”

Everything in the kitchen is sleek black, cabinets, countertops, tiled walls, and appliances, which definitely helps keep a balance against the white. The bamboo flooring should not make this much modernity seem organic, but it does. The plants help with that impression nicely, too. “Oh, is that your rubber plant tree? The original?” Aziraphale asks, admiring what seems to be very healthy leaves.

Crowley glares at the tree. “Israfil saved its life, so now it’s completely in love with him. I’ll probably have to give it to him to keep downstairs when his flat’s finished, or else the bloody thing will pine for him.”

“Better to pine than to be a pine, I suppose.”

Crowley groans. “Zira, no. Just no. That was awful.”

“How is Israfil’s attempt at decorating going?” Aziraphale asks, pleased that he made Crowley despair over his word choices. He doesn’t manage that sort of victory very often.

“My brother has developed such a love of blue that I’m probably going to have to stage an intervention,” Crowley replies. “Otherwise that flat is going to look just like Picasso’s Blue Period.”

“You did your entire kitchen in black,” Aziraphale points out.

“That is entirely different.”

The only other surviving plant from Mayfair is a snake plant, which already looks quite green and
healthy. Aziraphale thinks it makes perfect sense that a plant bearing such a name survived Crowley’s absence, and that it doesn’t seem as prone to quaking in terror as the rubber plant tree. It has a home in the windowsill next to a minimalist computer desk, which hosts a closed laptop, a charging station, a landline telephone, the ansaphone antique enough to be at home in Aziraphale’s bookshop, and a printer that is probably capable of replicating fine art prints.

The sofa is new, with deep set cushions that seem as decadently indulgent as that bathtub. Aziraphale considers it, realizes that two people of his and Crowley’s size could easily stretch out on it at the same time without risking cramped legs or falling off, and immediately turns pink again.

Crowley glances at him. “Do I even want to know what you’re thinking?”

Aziraphale decides honesty can’t possibly be any worse than the blush. “I was just realizing that two people could lie down on that together quite easily.”

“She could.” Crowley develops an absolutely wicked smirk. “That’s why I bought it.”

“Tease?” Crowley tilts his head until he’s nearly looking at Aziraphale sideways. “Oh, I wasn’t… thinking of that. Yet. Uh. It’s just that you’re warm!”

Aziraphale takes another look, observing the placement of the telly on a clear glass stand, with some sort of computer underneath rather than any sort of media player, and how the sofa is positioned in relation to it… “Oh! For watching the telly. That’s… all right. Yes. That—that sounds like a very nice idea, actually.”

“Why? What else were you planning to do to that sofa?” Crowley asks suspiciously.

Aziraphale is very disappointed in himself for feeling disappointed. “Oh, nothing at all. Your sofa is perfectly safe.” He quickly changes the subject. “The sheer amount of light in here is lovely. It’s not the sort of place I ever pictured you living in.”

“Yeah, well, I can cheat.” Crowley picks up a remote and clicks a button. The odd lines Aziraphale noticed in the windows suddenly turn in place, revealing that the window shades are built directly between the panes of glass. It is instantly much darker in the flat, but still nicely lit. “And then there’s this,” Crowley adds, pushing another button. Blackout curtains unwind from some mechanism hidden above the windows. Except for a few bits of recessed lighting, the flat is now entirely dark.

“That is impressive,” Aziraphale says, not prevaricating in the slightest. Crowley smiles and switches everything back. “How on Earth did you manage to move house in a week’s time?”

“I didn’t need to move much, and rehabbing the third storey in a rush—that just required money. A lot of it,” Crowley says. “The roof required money and actual miracles. Come and see?”

“You were performing miracles to a roof.” Aziraphale is certainly curious enough to follow Crowley out of the flat. The only other door on the third storey reveals a flight of stairs that lead up to the roof access.

They step out into the bright sunshine, and Crowley gently kicks the door shut behind them. “Cooling unit’s on top, boiler is in the cellar along with the rest of the utility work, and over here…” Crowley points by angling his head. “Is the miracle-working.”

Aziraphale raises an eyebrow. “It’s a greenhouse.” To be fair, it’s a very large greenhouse, taking up
most of the roof. Water pipes and an electrical conduit run from an access point to the greenhouse itself, which must be quite humid, as he can’t see through the glass to even guess what’s inside aside from plants.

“Bit more than that.” Crowley unlatches a door that has a rather ornate Baroque handle and waves Aziraphale inside.

The humidity strikes him at once, but it isn’t nearly as thick and muggy as one would think. Aziraphale glances around and then gasps in delight.

“Like it?” Crowley asks, looking pleased with himself.

Aziraphale smiles. “I adore it.” All four exterior walls of the greenhouse are thick with plants and trees, which is where most of the humidity is concentrated. “I see that you’ve acquired more rubber plants, but what are the others?”

Crowley grins and starts pointing out each plant. Aziraphale is so fascinated by Crowley’s enthusiasm that he doesn’t even notice when Crowley takes his hand in a cool, gentle grip. There are two lemon trees, two lime trees, a set of tangerine trees, and another pair of something called a key lime, which Crowley says makes a coveted dessert in the Southeastern US that might be evil.*[395] The tallest specimens are three pomegranate trees, which Aziraphale teases is quite excessive, but Crowley replies in a serious voice that they’re three different types, and sometimes they like to crossbreed and do interesting things. Or they’ll ignore each other, or mate with the citrus trees.*[396] In front of the trees, in dark, loamy earth, are blooming birds of paradise, crotons of amazing red and gold colors, delicate orchids of varying types, and gentle ferns. There are ground plants and a type of fluffy lichen, all of them small and keeping to themselves, that will one day grow and carpet over the visible soil.

Aziraphale ducks as something gentle and delicate whizzes by his face. “Oh, there are hummingbirds in here!” he exclaims, watching as the jewel-toned bird alights at the open bloom of a tangerine tree.

“Course there are. Plants don’t pollinate themselves—well, people can do it, but I’m really not that sort, not for plants,” Crowley says, ignoring Aziraphale’s immediate, infuriating blush. “There’s a new bee colony in that corner over there, behind the unit that controls the sprinklers and the lighting. They’re a bit techy from being moved about, so I’d leave them alone for a while.”

A path of loose pebbles goes all the way around the greenhouse, surrounding the rooftop addition that definitely required a miracle or three. The center of the greenhouse is devoted to a rectangular pool sunken into the rooftop. There are three steps at the nearest end; Aziraphale suspects the water will probably strike him about mid-thigh in the center of the pool.

Papyrus is growing at the far end of the water, which Aziraphale recognizes at once. He certainly harvested enough of it millennia ago, carefully arranging, pounding, and drying it to create scrolls to write upon.

“Spider lilies,” Crowley says of spikey, fragrant flowers floating on the pool’s surface. “That’s the scent in the air, if you dig beneath the citrus.” Aziraphale nods; he’d thought he’d caught the whiff of something delicate and floral. “Water poppies,” Crowley identifies warm yellow flowers with dark hearts that float about on dark green leaves. “And the Egyptian lotus.”

Aziraphale smiles at the brilliant blue flowers with their bright green leaves. “A potent intoxicant, if I recall.”*[397]

“That little trip was not my doing,” Crowley protests at once. “I told you that you put too much of it
“But it was very relaxing,” Aziraphale counters. “It did make the wine quite bitter, though.” Then something occurs to him, and he turns around in a slow circle that allows his eyes to briefly rest on every plant, flower, pebble, and watery detail.

“Crowley.”

“Yeah?”

Aziraphale finds his mouth is too dry. “You replicated part of Eden.”

Crowley immediately shies away from him, face turned towards the door. “Might’ve done.”

“I’m not angry, Crowley,” Aziraphale says, confused by his response—and by the realization that they just spent ten minutes holding hands. Aziraphale hadn’t noticed until Crowley pulled his hand free. “It’s beautiful. I was just curious as to why. It’s quite a bit of effort, and you could have put anything in here.”

“You don’t remember it, do you?”

Aziraphale frowns at the hesitance in Crowley’s voice, mostly because it’s so very rare. “It’s a recreated part of Eden, but Eden was a very large Garden, Crowley. Why?”

Crowley shoves his hands into his pockets. “Do you remember when you received the orders to close down the Garden? That the Eastern Gate would be the last to be sealed?”

“Yes.” He still hopes that God will change Their mind one day, but humanity will have to get past their pollution stage to ever be granted access to something so pristine.

“You came and found a rather miserable serpent huddled on a rock above the sand just outside the Eastern Gate. You told that serpent to follow you into the Garden.” Crowley is now quite determinedly speaking to the plants rather than Aziraphale. “You told the serpent that God had ordered the Garden to be closed, but you were not about to send any creature, no matter who they were, into a barren desert without warning.”

“Your scales was so dry,” Aziraphale whispers, and suddenly he remembers. He remembers all of it. “You hadn’t hurt anyone, not beyond the temptation bit, and…and I didn’t want you to die. You were the first person who’d made me laugh in a very long time.”

“You made me smile,” Crowley whispers. “I’d forgotten what it felt like until that moment. And then you showed me a place that looked almost exactly like this.” Crowley shakes himself. “So, yeah. Replicated bit of Garden on my roof. Want to go back downstairs?”

“You’re in such a hurry to leave this behind?” Aziraphale asks, startled.

“Yes—well, no, but—” Crowley makes a frustrated noise. “There’s one more thing I wanted to show you.”

Aziraphale follows Crowley from the greenhouse and back down the stairwell. “If it’s in your flat, why couldn’t you have showed it to me first?” he asks when they go back inside the loft. Aziraphale recognizes its spaciousness anew when he realizes that not only could Crowley fully spread his wings in here, Aziraphale could, too. Goodness, there is enough room for four angels to completely spread their wings, though at that point they would start knocking into things. He is now far more enamored of the flat than he was at first glance.
“I was less nervous about the greenhouse,” Crowley says, which is a fascinating sort of answer. He leads them back to the hall, passing the first door on the right; the door directly across from the bathroom has the scent of clean laundry, most likely storage for the linens and towels.

They pause in front of the only other door on the left side. “My bedroom’s down there.” Crowley gestures vaguely at the only other door on the right side of the hall, all the way at the end. “Had a bit of extra space, though, and I had an idea.” He steps back and gestures for Aziraphale to open the door. “No, really, go ahead,” he says when Aziraphale pauses. “It’s a thing.”

Aziraphale pauses, puts his hand on the doorknob—which does not zap, sting, or bite him in the slightest—and slowly opens the door before pushing it open. Nothing jumps out at him, either.

“You know, if I really wanted to startle you that way, I would just leap out of the shadows at you myself,” Crowley reminds him dryly.

“Yes, I know,” Aziraphale mutters, and forces himself to go inside. Then he pauses, struck mute.

This room is nothing like the rest of the flat. It’s just large enough to be cozy instead of cramped. The floor is bamboo, of course, but the walls are dark, richly patterned Victorian wallpaper that Aziraphale has never quite lost his fondness for, and the deep blue and gold print looks pristine. The wool rug is squared to the room, a thick and luxurious Moroccan print. It not only doesn’t clash with the wallpaper, it is exquisitely antique. A desk beneath the window is designed in his favored dark wood and Victorian-styled drawers, but built to be sturdy and practical rather than fragile and decorative. A gilded lamp sits atop the upper shelf of the desk, made with a flexible series of hinges to easily adjust the angle of the light. The chair in front of the desk is padded in the same dark blue velvet as the walls, modeled after one of Aziraphale’s absolute favorites that Adam, bless him, hadn’t gotten Quite Right when he returned the world to normal following the Averted Apocalypse. A bookshelf on the left wall matches the desk, though its glassed-in shelves are empty. There is a door opposite the bookshelf, possibly a closet. There isn’t an overhead light, but brackets are mounted on the walls that look so much like the first household oil lamps, including the gentle, flickering flame, that he has to smile.

“LED bulbs,” Crowley says of the flickering lights. He’s just inside the room, leaning against the wall next to the open door. “They’re doing some really neat things with those. No smoke, no fire hazard. Just…firelight.”

It feels like a silly question, but Aziraphale has to ask. “Crowley…is this for me?”

Crowley lifts one shoulder. “If you want it to be. It doesn’t have to be any sort of obligation or anything. I just couldn’t put together a flat like this without having a place for my best friend to feel welcome. Oh, you might want to try the door,” he adds. “That one was an argument, a miracle, and three more arguments. Fortunately, I’m grand at winning arguments.”

Aziraphale is already a bit overwhelmed, but he obligingly walks over and opens the closet door… which is not a closet at all.

He steps into the Library, one of the hallways that doesn’t often have visitors except from those who are truly dedicated to seeking out every single scrap of knowledge they can find—which is to say, not many. Aziraphale knows he is in Heaven; he can feel it. He can sense books nearby, and the faint hint of helpful sentience that he always politely asks to guide him in the correct direction.

Aziraphale takes a breath and turns around. On this side of the library, the door is exactly like the one in the flat. The only difference is the lintel, which is carved with the gentle, glowing sigils of his name in the oldest, most precise angelic tongue. “Zaphkiel let you do this?”
“I told you, I’m grand at winning arguments.”

Aziraphale nods and walks back into the flat, closing the door behind him. “This is bribery.”

“I’ve still got lots of very bad habits, yeah,” Crowley agrees, smiling. “But you like it.”

“The bad habits and the room, yes,” Aziraphale says faintly. “Oh, and the door. And the desk.”

“Thought if you dragged anything in from the Library, the desk might be handy.” Crowley frowns. “Angel? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s…nothing. Nothing is wrong. It’s just everything.” Aziraphale sniffs back what feels like very much unwanted moisture. “I just—I never once thought to offer you anything like this.”

Crowley looks at him as if he’s just started speaking a demonic tongue. “Angel, your door always opened for me. Always. I would walk in, find you in that shop, and I’d be happy. I didn’t need anything else.”

“Oh, Crowley.” Aziraphale smiles and feels entirely foolish. “I love you.”

To his surprise, Crowley gives him a strange, uncomprehending stare. “Wait, can you—can you repeat that last part?”

“You need to hear me say it again immediately?” Aziraphale asks, but his attempt at humor vanishes at once. Crowley isn’t teasing him; he seems far too confused for that.

“Yeah.” Crowley gives his head a mild shake. “It’s like, I heard my name, and then words stopped making sense.” He pauses. “Am I having a stroke?”

“Asparagus, catsup, cat litter,” Aziraphale says.

Crowley’s mouth opens in bafflement. “Wait, you mean repeat those—right. Asparagus, catsup, cat litter, and your mind goes truly strange places.”

“ Those were the first words I thought of, and no, you’re not having a brainstorm.” Aziraphale straightens his shoulders. “Let me try that again. I love you.”

“Yeaaaah, no. I heard all of it but the last part. You said you were trying again, and then…” Crowley twirls his fingers at his ear. “It’s like static.”

“Odd. I didn’t think your trouble with the L-word was quite so literal.” Aziraphale has even heard Crowley say the word, though usually with sarcasm or in reference to something or someone else.

“Wait, you’re trying to talk about love?” Crowley rubs one finger along the infinity symbol tattooed onto his cheek. “Maybe there are weird side effects to spending six thousand years as a demon. Give it another go?”

Aziraphale considers it, nods, and steps forward. “Hold still and look at me, right in the eyes,” he instructs, resting his hands on Crowley’s shoulders. Crowley’s golden eyes focus on him with rapt, unblinking attention.

This time Aziraphale projects it, as well, letting the emotion become as emphatic as he can make it without it turning into an angelic shout. “I love you.”

Crowley gasps in pain, his right hand immediately grasping at his chest. “Okay! I heard that! Definitely heard it! Ow, fuck!”
Aziraphale grabs Crowley’s arms when Crowley abruptly falls to his knees, his vertical pupils blown wide and dark with shock. “Crowley! Crowley, what’s wrong?”

Crowley lowers his shaking right hand, revealing that it’s slick with blood. “No idea,” he wheezes, and then collapses forward into Aziraphale’s arms.

[374] Academically, he knows that Crowley is an archangel. Applying that knowledge to six thousand years of sharing a planet with Crowley just makes that awareness short-circuit, because it is Crowley.

[375] Including an unexpected (terrifying) stay in the hospital when Warlock’s appendix did something it wasn’t supposed to do. It could have been argued that the event was a hint that they were teaching the wrong boy, but even divine bodies aren’t perfect.

[376] The Nina Turtle references would have driven Israfil to utter frustration in a week, mostly because no one would have explained it.

[377] It took months of training when telephone communication began to standardize, but Aziraphale did manage to teach Crowley proper phone etiquette. This was a far greater success than proper telegraph etiquette, which a) Crowley refused to learn, and b) he used many words that made telegraph operators want to blush, try to flirt, or cry. Sometimes all three at once.

[378] Aziraphale is, however, quite pleased with what the textiles industry has been doing with rayon made from plants that are traditionally not known as sources of fabric. Bamboo in particular is his favorite, and the fact that there is active work being done to reduce or eliminate pollution from making the durable fabric gives him a bit of hope that all of that environmental activism and polite climate prodding might be producing some results.

[379] Aziraphale is not nearly as oblivious as he prefers others to think he is. He never minded sending along “extra” money to the Witchfinder Army, as they were dreadfully underpaid. Also, they were dreadfully amusing.

[380] Not literally.

[381] Crowley doesn’t regret the nap at all. So worth it. Also, he might’ve gotten into a lot of trouble with Hell if he’d witnessed the abominable exploitation of child workers in the latter 1800s, because he would have done something about it. While Hell would have appreciated the carved path of wrathful destruction, the reason for it wouldn’t have been nearly as pleasing to Hell’s bureaucracy.

[382] Aziraphale spent six hours staring at Crowley’s angel statue that night, trying to figure out what, exactly, was actually occurring, and if it was meant to be a hint, and of what sort, and he still hasn’t figured it out.

[383] Who also happens to be the many-times descended great-granddaughter of a boy named Avram, originally of Mesopotamia.

[384] Very much literally.

[385] Crowley maintains that it was a very good trick, thank you. So was the one right after that.
Gabriel cannot cope with gross matter, but he is such a sucker for a tailored suit that every decent tailor in London knows his face. Also, that he doesn’t know how to tip. They overcharge him to compensate.

Except for that one form of dysentery that decided it was capable of taking on an angelic immune system.

Rome was far more educational in the ways of physical pleasure than Aziraphale expected, and after the Greeks, he really wasn’t expecting to discover anything new. He was proved very wrong. Also, the Romans were exhausting.

Aziraphale is rather ashamed to admit that he never realized that the number of times he caught Crowley talking (or ranting) out loud, he assumed Crowley was merely speaking to himself.

Even Aziraphale managed to move past 8-tracks, though not very far. He still ultimately prefers his gramophone.

Aziraphale is rather ashamed to admit that he never realized that the number of times he caught Crowley talking (or ranting) out loud, he assumed Crowley was merely speaking to himself.

Over a century of far too tetchy, really.

He maintains that “guillotine” isn’t accurate enough.

There is no "might" about Key Lime Pie. That thing in the freezer section of your grocery store is not Key Lime Pie.

Basically, pomegranates will fuck anything.

There is a very good reason why the blue Egyptian Lotus is everywhere in ancient Egyptian art, and that reason is that getting stoned has been a favored human pastime since pastimes were invented.

When you want a fire without the heat, these are also available in very large sizes that mimic large flaming torches.

Doing it first and then asking if it’s all right afterwards still counts as winning the argument.
Chapter Summary

*If a demon earned the love of another, they were most certainly not living up to their greatest potential. A demon who was loved by another must be freed from that torment before it could destroy them.*

Chapter Notes

Thank you, lovely Pink, for today's chapter title, and also, all the blasted FEELS.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTCDVfMz15M

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Once upon a time, there was a Fallen angel whose heart was still whole. They questioned, and they rebelled, but they were not yet ready to give up on Heaven. They thought it could be better, the way Lucifer claimed was necessary. They believed that the united Heavenly host could do amazing, wonderful things without living in terror of their Father.*[400]

Then the Fallen angel witnessed the death of one they loved, and it was no mere discorporation, no mere change of body. They felt part of their soul die with the other, and their wings turned black as their heart broke.

They pledged themselves to the Morningstar. They joined the Fallen in Gehenna when it became clear that their home was lost to them.

When the last of those cast from Heaven arrived in the abyss, heartbreak turned to hatred. That those above, who professed to follow their Father and love all of Creation, could be so cruel, so cold—could so utterly turn their backs on their brothers and sisters—was simply the last bit of straw needed to aid a lever that had almost completed its great and terrible work.

Never again, they swore. Never again would a demon endure the heartbreak that came with the betrayal of love. They crafted a spell, and they were proud of its work when it was done. All that was needed to fuel it was hated. All that was needed to maintain it was pain, and what was existence in Hell but pain, anyway?

Besides, if a demon earned the love of another, they were most certainly not living up to their greatest potential. A demon’s task in this world was to corrupt, to take from their Father, to damn those their Father loved to join them in the abyss.

A demon who was loved by another must be freed from that torment before it could destroy them. The spell would ensure it.

* * * * *
“Crowley!” Aziraphale bites his lip so hard it bleeds as he gently places his dear friend on the floor. The black silk of his shirt is steadily turning glossy with the spill of blood. Crowley is gripping Aziraphale’s left arm so tightly that Aziraphale can feel deep bruises forming.

Aziraphale panics, remembers that panic is useless, and panics a bit more anyway as he rests his hands over Crowley’s chest. He is no true Healer, but all angels have the talent for a bit of repair when necessary—

Aziraphale’s eyes widen in shock. “Dear God, it’s like you’ve just been stabbed through the heart!”

“That’s, uh, kind of funny,” Crowley gasps, trying very hard to focus on Aziraphale’s face. “That’s what killed Raphael…”

That does not help with Aziraphale’s panic. Worse, he can’t seem to heal the wound. “I don’t—I don’t know what’s wrong. I can’t fix it, Crowley—Crowley!” he yells when Crowley’s golden eyes roll back, the slits of his pupils almost lost to sight.

No. No, he is not going to stand by, entirely helpless. Not again!

Aziraphale leaps to his feet and grips the door to the Library. He curses when his blood-slicked hands can’t turn the knob and then simply Wills the damned thing to open. The fastest way to gain God’s attention is to speak to Her in Her own home, and Crowley just gifted him with the means to do so. “Father!” he shouts, the word echoing down the empty corridor. “GOD! I NEED RAPHAEL, RIGHT NOW!”

Unlike a prayer spoken on Earth, Aziraphale has the immediate sense that his rather blunt prayer has been heard. He goes right back to Crowley’s side, hoping that prayer will also be quickly answered.

Aziraphale grits his teeth before pressing both hands over the bleeding wound on Crowley’s chest. Crowley gasps in pain as Aziraphale applies pressure, but there’s nothing else for it—he doesn’t know what else to do!

He jerks his head up when he hears the door to the flat slam open. “Aziraphale, what is it? I just got my head knocked on like a door—”

“IN HERE!” Aziraphale shouts in desperation.

Israfil’s boots shriek against the floor as he turns and runs in their direction. He enters the room and then halts in open-mouthed shock. “What in God’s Name happened?” he asks, rushing over and dropping to his knees next to his brother. Crowley’s skin is swiftly turning pale from shock and blood loss.

Aziraphale swallows hard. Crowley always made certain he kept his corporations exactly the same. He is intimately familiar with what it looks like when Crowley is dying. “I don’t know what happened. I think I—” Aziraphale pauses and allows that faint intuition to complete itself, become whole, before he voices it. “I think I set off an ethereal booby-trap.”

Israfil nudges Aziraphale’s hands aside, resting his right hand on Crowley’s chest while gripping Crowley’s right hand with his left. The moment he has settled into what seems to be a particular alignment, Israfil’s hands begin to glow with gentle fire. “I need you to be more specific right now, and maybe give me a dictionary later, because I don’t know what a booby-trap is.”

“Er, a trap. In this case, a magical trap. I told Crowley that I loved him, and he couldn’t understand
me,” Aziraphale explains, trying not to pluck at Crowley’s sleeve. He isn’t useless. Healing is Israfil’s talent. Aziraphale’s talent is in information, and that is what he can share. “I had to make it emphatic, make it heard on all levels, and the moment he could understand the words—”

“You sprang the trap.” Israfil nods, his eyes squeezed shut in concentration. “It’s like he’s been literally stabbed through the heart.”

“Yes. He—before he—” Aziraphale glances down and decides he’s being accurate. “Before he lost consciousness, Crowley said that was the same way you had died.”

Israfil tilts his head, brow furrowing. “This isn’t an angel’s magic, except it is. Dammit! It’s the magic of someone Fallen—maybe even fully demonic. I really don’t have enough experience to sort the differences yet,” Israfil says in a rush, before yelling, “FATHER!”

Aziraphale opens his mouth to say that making that sort of request on Earth is probably meaningless when God strolls into the room from the open Library entrance. Not She, today, but He—no, They. God is dressed in a robe made of fog, and while vaguely human-shaped, Their form is burning with the fire of Creation.

“Oh, dear,” God says as They take in the tableau. “I did just give Zaherael that corporation. What happened?”

“A spell, a trap,” Aziraphale says hurriedly. “Occult magic, not ethereal, but Israfil says that he isn’t informed yet on the full distinctions between demonic and Fallen magics.”

“It won’t stay healed!” Israfil growls out. “I heal it and then it tears anew, and I don’t know why! Father, please help me. Please tell me what I need to do, because I can’t let ignorance be his death!”

“Wouldn’t it—I mean, it should merely be a discorporation.” Aziraphale feels as if he is missing the obvious, and even as he says the words, they feel incorrect. “Would that not perhaps be simpler?”

Israfil opens his eyes and gazes at Aziraphale in something very like terror. “With a spell like this acting upon him? Aziraphale, I have no idea what would happen if Zaherael dies like this!”

“It is a spell cast by one who had already Fallen low enough to be considered a demon,” God says, and Aziraphale glances back at Them. Their fiery eyes are regarding Crowley with a rather unsettling gaze. “It is not a spell specific to Zaherael, but a net…a net meant to ensnare all the denizens of Hell.” They pause. “The caster believed in this spell so strongly that they even tied the geas to themselves. If the circumstances are met, they will also suffer this fate.”

“What does it do?” Israfil asks. Aziraphale notes in distress that the entirety of Israfil’s right hand is now stained dark red.

“The spell’s caster meant to keep a demon from ever knowing the grace of love. The experience was not kept from them, nor the emotion, but the capacity to hear another speak the words and know that they were true.” God looks saddened. “The caster of this spell suffered the pain of a broken heart. They were befouled enough to think death a punishment and mercy both, so that fate, that pain, would never befall another who was a part of Hell’s ranks.” God breathes out faint wisps of flame. “A sword pierced the heart of their loved one, so that is the form they demanded the spell take.”

“Oh—oh, no. Oh, Ba’al, you complete idiot,” Israfil whispers.

“Ba’al?” Aziraphale asks. He doesn’t know of any demons with that name, but he is certain an angel with that name once existed.
“It’s the sort of thing they would do,” Israfil says with a sigh. “You should have told them of me, Father.”

God shakes Their head. “They were no longer listening, dear one. I cannot speak to those who refuse to hear me. Now: listen well.”

Israfil glances at Aziraphale, who nods. “We are.”

“This spell’s essence must be purged. I will remain here long enough to collect that taint and take it with me, because it cannot stay on this Earth. It cannot remain a part of the physical plane.”

“Should we not try to attempt this in Heaven, then?” Aziraphale asks, glancing at the doorway to the Library.

“The actions and the results will not change, even with the grace of Heaven. However, that taint is not the greatest difficulty.”

“Tell me,” Israfil requests, biting his lip as his grip on Crowley’s hand tightens.

“There is grace behind this spell, but it is a terrible one,” God says. “It is designed to purge the pain caused by love from one’s heart. Unfortunately, death was also meant to be an assured side effect. No matter if it was from the wound, or from losing the part of their heart that makes one capable of feeling love, death was the caster’s intent.

“There are two ways in which this can be thwarted, though the first is unlikely to succeed. When I collect the tainted magic, Zaherael will not lose his heart, as that part of the spell will be gone. The rest of the spell will expend itself naturally, but once I collect that tainted magic, I cannot remain. The taint must be dealt with at once, and that will take time. I will not be here to assist you. Letting the spell expend itself in its own time would be easier on Zaherael’s heart, but you would be too exhausted to heal him by the time it was done. I can attempt to capture his soul afterwards and breathe life into a new corporation once this corporation passes, but I truly do not know if I would succeed. I would prefer not to take that chance, but I will do so if you ask it of me.

“Thus, I could also do this: I can speed up the work of the spell,” God continues. “It will cause Zaherael more pain, a great deal of it, but you will have strength remaining to heal the physical wounds when the pain and the spell both end.”

“I—I can’t make that decision.” Israfil swallows. “I don’t want to hurt him.”

Aziraphale reaches out and grips Israfil’s hand, the one resting over Crowley’s heart. “Israfil. Crowley would be devastated by the idea of you continuing on through this life without him, because he knows exactly what it’s like to spend centuries upon centuries without his other half. He would rather feel all the pain in the cosmos than leave you behind.”

Israfil weeps at his words. “How can you say that?”

“Because I know Crowley,” Aziraphale replies, letting out a faint laugh. “I know him very well.”

“He’s an overly dramatic shit!” Israfil chokes out, but he smiles. “He vaporized his own heart for you, you know.”

Aziraphale gapes at him. “He did what?”

“Zaherael fired a dragon blunderbuss against his chest,” God says in a mild voice. “He was intent on fueling a blood-based sacrificial spell. Zaherael’s opinion was that one must remove the blood
somehow, and it might as well be efficiently.”

Aziraphale is not so panicked that he can’t spare a moment for utter, eye-rolling vexation. “Crowley.”

“I told you. Overly dramatic shit.” Israfil looks up at God at nods. “All right, Father. The fast way it is.”

God bows Their head briefly. “Be ready. This will not be pleasant.”

“Help me to prop him up,” Israfil orders Aziraphale. “The wound takes oxygen from him and makes him want to breathe, but he’s choking on the blood.”

Aziraphale helps as best he can, but Crowley’s ability to be slippery is not merely a figure of speech. Even with Israfil on Crowley’s right side, and Aziraphale trying to support him on the left, they’re having a very difficult time. “Please actually make this easier for us, my dear.”

“Zaherael.” God’s voice rings out. “Spread your wings.”

It’s such a sharp tone of command that Aziraphale’s wings twitch, all bloody four of them, in an attempt to obey the word of God. Crowley’s wings appear, stretching outwards. That gives them the assistance needed to keep Crowley upright, naturally held aloft by his own wings. Primaries and secondaries twist, tangle, and break, but otherwise bear his weight.

“Oh, his feathers are going to be such a mess after this,” Aziraphale frets.

“I can bloody well fix feathers!” Israfil snaps at him.

“Please bicker later,” God says, sounding far too amused for Aziraphale’s current state of mind. Then They reach out with one fiery hand and speak. The Voice makes his ears ring and his skin break out in gooseflesh.

“Fuck, why did you…” Israfil trails off in shock. Aziraphale looks at Crowley to discover Crowley’s lips are parted. Something streaming black and horrid is emerging from his mouth. It writhes like wind-stirred smoke, but it feels twisted, wrong, warped—ill.

Aziraphale watches as that black foulness is pulled across the room, collected around God’s extended Hand. It fights Them, attempting to escape the Almighty, but does not succeed.

“I would call this beautiful work if it were not so befouled,” God comments. “It was so precise.”

Aziraphale catches a glimpse of Israfil’s bloodless features. Distraction, he needs a distraction! “If that were merely magic from a Fallen angel, what would be different?”

“What? Oh.” Israfil eyes the blackness with a much clearer, more clinical eye. “It would not feel sickened. Most of the Fallen were not evil, Aziraphale. They were unhappy. If they had been evil from the start, Father would have intervened at once. Only those who were corrupted were meant to be cast from Heaven.”*[401]

Crowley suddenly stiffens in their arms, his wings beating against the floor. Aziraphale clenches his jaw in wordless, frustrated sympathy when his dear friend screams.

“It is done,” God says. Aziraphale sees almost nothing of God’s fire. His view of Them is blocked by a great deal of nauseating black smoke. “I must go. All will be well.” The vague outline of fire and the smoke seems to rush backwards, out through the open door to the Library, which slams shut
behind Them.

Aziraphale clings harder to Crowley as his wings flap with such a furor to escape that he nearly lifts all three of them from the floor. Then Crowley claws at his own chest, trying to tear Israfil’s hand away. “Make it stop,” he moans, and Aziraphale’s heart cracks. “Make it stop, kánto na stamatísei, ajealh yatawaqaf, yasalā'ī rōknuhōs, ¡por favor haz que pare!”

“I’m so sorry, Brother.” Israfil keeps his hand over Crowley’s heart, though Crowley’s sharp fingernails are tearing gouges into his skin. “I love you. I’m so sorry.”

Aziraphale has no idea if it will help, but he can’t stand here and say nothing. Not to Crowley, not after everything that’s happened. “I’m right here, my dear,” he murmurs, his face pressed against Crowley’s neck. “No matter what. I’m not leaving you.

“I promise.”

*          *          *          *

Crowley is aware, on some extrasensory level possessed by anyone of angelic stock, that something has gone wrong. He can feel the fault lines on something very, very old cracking open. Utter horror springs forth from it like grasping tendrils from one of those Things from Somewhere Else.

Then those tendrils are pulled free, ripped from his soul by cleansing fire. At first, it’s only a dull ache.

It doesn’t take long for that ache to become agony. Then the tendrils, that foulness, are gone.

He has no idea what that foul shit was, but beneath it is six thousand years of grief, betrayal, murder, hatred, Falling—it’s pain. It’s so much unfathomable pain.

He claws at his chest, at his heart, driven beyond comprehension. All he knows is that it hurts, make it stop, make it stop, make it stop!

If Crowley were a mortal being, he would have been dead upon the floor already. He is not a mortal being. He is the sixth (or seventh) creature to exist in the universe aside from God Herself.

*I’m so sorry, Brother. I love you.*

Raphael.

Where is—

*No matter what. I’m not leaving you. I promise.*

Aziraphale.

Their words give Crowley a moment of reprieve, but he is an angel who can freeze time. A moment is all he needs; a moment is an eternity.

Six thousand years.

*This is going to suck bollocks,* Crowley thinks in resignation. Then all Hell breaks loose.
Zaherael is there when the trial became a riot as Lucifer’s accusatory shouts drown out the angels around them. He remembers Samael’s madness; he remembers when he felt Samael’s rage and fell to his knees, almost discorporated for the very first time by the sheer strength of the Fallen angel’s hatred.

“C-corrupt,” he gasps to Raphael. It’s a new word, brand new, but they both know what it means.*[402]

He remembers grief, young and new and terrible, as the life of the first slain angel slid through Raphael’s fingers. It didn’t matter that Raphael could hold onto their spirit until life could be breathed into a new body for the one he held. It was blood spilt in Heaven, and it changes everything.

Zaherael feels life flee from the healing in his hands, which are dark with scales as he armors himself against the magic and the blades being swung around him. Hers is a violent death, and it marks the angel forever afterwards. He cradles her soul the entire time, but when she is reborn, she is never the same.

She Falls. She becomes someone else.

He can’t remember her name as it was. He only remembers who she is now. Tenebris Mulierem, the woman who lurks in the Dark.

Crowley comes back to himself with another horrendous screech of agony. Thank God for acoustic sound-proofing, he thinks wildly, and for a moment, he has no idea what that even means. His wings hurt; his heart hurts. The scent of blood is high in his nose.


“Zira?”

“Crowley?” Aziraphale is at his left side. Crowley can see him from the corner of his eye when Aziraphale lifts his head. Blood is smeared across Aziraphale’s forehead, his white-blond hair a mess. He looks frantic.

“I—” Crowley grits his teeth and growls out the next screech of pain that tries to take his thoughts from him. “I need you to…say my name. My first—first name.”

“But I thought—”

His view of the room is already whiting out, making him desperate. “I think it’s important! Please!”

Aziraphale nods and holds him close. He whispers that name into Crowley’s ear: “Zaherael.”

Oh, he was right. Just for a shoddy fucking reason.

Crowley’s spine goes rigid, then his entire body. His head is pulled back by the muscles in his back. His wings spread wide in a full-body spasm of electrical torment.

He sees flickers of life Before, memories he didn’t even realize were still missing.

Gabriel, when his smile was real. Uriel, before the love in her voice became the summoning of a toneless bell. Michael, when his hair and his eyes were still the golden fire of stars, his light undimmed. Raquel, singing as she swung her scales about, letting the wind whistle through the chains, the first strains of music in Heaven. Saraquel, the imp, danced along in her wake, rolling his flaming crown from one end of his arms to the other. Raphael, grinning and holding out his staff
while Zaherael, in his favorite serpent form, pretended to bite it.

They were such children. They were never really children at all.

He misses them. He misses what was, which can never be again.

Zaherael remembers the very first time he saw a cherub with messy curls. It wasn’t in Eden. It wasn’t at the Eastern Gate, with Crawley making cracks about lead balloons that humanity wouldn’t understand for nearly six thousand years.

Cherubs were still quite new. It seemed like every time Zaherael turned around, there was another one in Heaven, testing their wings, fearless in their laughter, brave with their swinging swords. None of them understood what those swords would mean, not yet.

There was one who was not so enthusiastic about the swords.

The serpent watched from his favorite hiding place along the stones, shadowed from sight by the tilt of the sun in the sky. The new cherub had long locks of blond hair that were nearly white, falling to their shoulders, not in perfection, but quite the mess. The new cherub’s eyes were and were not like his; they were the blue of melting spring ice instead of the frozen winter sky.

The cherub had abandoned their sword in the grass, and was reading a scroll. No; even more fascinating, the cherub was writing on the scroll with a quill that looked to be made from one of their own primary feathers. Then another angel came forward, a white-winged archangel, and rather sternly reminded the cherub of their duties. The cherub tucked away the scroll, picked up the sword, and followed along with a rather downcast air.

Zaherael was disappointed. He wanted to know what was being written. He wanted to know that cherub’s name.

The serpent curled up in sudden embarrassment as he realized he wanted to find out if that cherub’s white-blond hair was as soft as it looked. No, no. That was something Raphael liked to do with others. Not him.

War was in Heaven. Zaherael felt like he could never get the blood scrubbed from his hands. Not even miracles would dispatch it. He could always, always smell it.

Seeing the cherub again made the blood feel unimportant.

The curly-haired cherub was not writing, and their clear expression had become pinched and worried. They still bore a sword, but didn’t hold it. They wore armor that gleamed, but it only drew forth the sadness in their eyes.

Zaherael crept closer, curious. Aside from Raphael and himself, he’d seen no other angel who did not want to rush to the battlefields to slay another. He’d seen no angel that thought to guard one of the most sacred places in Heaven.

He didn’t want to be mistaken as Raphael, which was usually a bit embarrassing.*[403] Zaherael thought on it before choosing black hair and green eyes, dark skin instead of pale, and a chiseled, squared jaw that was nothing he would want for himself.

“Why do you stand there?” he asked as he exited the shadows.

The angel jumped, whirling in place, hand on their sword. Then they saw Zaherael, with the white wings he currently bore, and relaxed. “Oh, I’m…defending the Library. It seemed—it seemed like
the best idea, all things considered.”

Zaherael tilted his head. “I like the idea of defending. What things are you considering that make it seem the best idea?”

“Oh, well. I don’t want Heaven to lose the knowledge we’ve gained,” the cherub said after a puzzled moment. They acted as if they were waiting to be chastised, which made Zaherael irrationally upset. “And some of the Fallen, they…they prefer to use fire.”

“They do,” Zaherael agreed sadly, thinking of the burns he’s needed to heal. “I think you are very wise to be standing here. Brave, even.”

“Oh! No, that’s poppycock.” And wasn’t that a fascinating word? “I’m not brave at all, or else I would be…out there. With the others.”

Zaherael wondered who this cherub’s teachers were. They clearly needed to feel the weight of Raphael’s staff against their heads. “I don’t think so. I can’t think of anything braver than defending something that can’t defend itself.” He considered that. “Well, the Library can indeed fight back, but…no sense in letting her do it alone, is there?”

The blond cherub bit their lip before nodding. “I didn’t think so, no. I—what’s your name?”

“Zaherael.” No one really knows it, not outside the Seven. He certainly won’t be recognized, not wearing this face.

“Zaherael,” the cherub repeated, smiling. “I’m—”

Then the sound of battle interrupted them, and Zaherael didn’t hear the cherub’s name. “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Wait, please!” the angel cried, but Zaherael could feel the weight of his duty bearing down on him. He was needed. He couldn’t linger. He couldn’t stay…though he wanted to.

He dipped back into the shadows, slid into the glide of the black serpent, and hurried on his way.

Crowley doesn’t expect that memory to be pain. Why did it hurt? What was so wrong with knowing he’d seen the cherub before?

Because I didn’t know his name, Crowley thinks, feeling tears burn their way down his face. I wanted—I wanted to know his name.

He starts to lose himself and dreams of Michael, grief burning in his eyes, as he lifts his foot to crush a serpent’s head. Zaherael feels that betrayal, his pain as much as Michael’s. His eldest brother didn’t want to do it. Perhaps Michael hadn’t known it would also involve a discorporation, but that was not why.

Michael knew he was trying to harm an innocent. God asked it of him, and Michael did it, because it might lead to the saving of all of Creation. God’s only gifted reassurance was the truth: Michael would fail to harm Zaherael. Michael would not be the one who would perform an act that was as fierce, as hateful, as Samael’s murder of his fellow angels.

That didn’t mean Michael had to want it, or like it. Michael will always regret.

Crowley would really rather not recall the pain of Gabriel breaking his wings, one bone at a time. He feels it again anyway, every single moment, and thinks his heart just broke anew.
The pit is Dark. It isn’t the opposite of day, as there is no Light to be found. While he hides in that unceasing darkness, Crawley screams. The burning agony never stops.

There is a puddle of water and a torch bracket, turning the water into a mirror. Crawley stares down into that water. He can’t find winter’s ice in his eyes. Only the gold of the serpent remains.

He kneels over that puddle of filthy water, hands over his eyes, crying, “Please give them back to me, my eyes, please, I don’t want to forget—”

He forgets anyway, because Hell takes from you. It strips you bare and raw. The only things you hold onto are the secrets you bury most deeply in the sanctified protection of your heart. He hides Raphael there, along with the tiny spark of what’s left of his own soul.

Hatred burns in his breast. It is nothing compared to his agonized regret when he sees a human woman shed her first tears as the knowledge of cruelty and grief breaks her heart.

Some things are stronger than hatred. Some things cannot be forgiven. Maybe God is capable of that mercy, but Crawley has never been that merciful in regards to himself.

The angel of the Eastern Gate laughs at his terrible fucking joke. Crawley smiles, thinking of how much he doesn’t deserve that kindness, but he can’t turn away.

Then he fucks up twice over.

The second time he meets an angel, it is one who doesn’t seem to have gotten the memo about how the war is over, or at least is in a holding pattern of uneasy standoff. Crawley runs with his corporation leaking blood, a path anyone with half a brain can follow.

He never told anyone that the angel followed him. He never told a soul that the angel shoved a sword through Crawley’s chest and left him pinned to the desert, a finger’s breadth away from a clear oasis that might have saved him.

He made himself forget the very last. He didn’t want to remember that angel’s face, afraid it might have once belonged to a friend.

He can’t escape it this time.

Hofniel.*[404] Oh, God.

Crawley sees Aziraphale again. The angel is carrying another sword, though it holds no flame. Crawley panics. The serpent kills the first person to show him kindness.

No, maybe not the first. There was a moment of kindness, in Gehenna, was there not?

Then Crawley dismisses the idea. There is no room for kindness in Hell.

He doesn’t know how to apologize. Demons don’t grieve and regret. They hate and they slay and they tempt and hiss of revenge.

Crawley runs, but the Earth isn’t large enough. The cosmos isn’t large enough. They find each other, over and over again: the angel who has realized he must do his duty, and the demon who has already decided their duties are pretty fucking stupid, but never has the chance to explain. Kill, or be killed.

He hates being killed.

He also hates swords a lot more than he hates anything else in existence right now.
If they hadn’t gotten their shit straightened out in Eridu, their not-friendship back on the proverbial rails about a half-century before the Flood, Crawley would have told the Earth to piss off. He would never have gone back, and there wasn’t enough torment in Hell that would convince him it was worth the trip.

*          *          *          *

When the rain begins, people race off to their homes to take shelter. Aziraphale walks off muttering about policy and floods and how this just doesn’t seem right.

Crawley has never bothered to keep his opinions to himself. When the water begins to rise, he starts to shout at God. “They shouldn’t be surprised, should they?” he howls up at the dark clouds. “Let them get a taste of how you treat your creations when they’re not puppeting themselves along like good little soldiers! It’s all meaningless, anyway! It’s complete shit! Nothing! Just a fucking ineffable game in your stupid bloody plan!”

Lightning strikes a scrub tree about five hundred paces from him. Crawley blinks the spots out of his eyes before scowling. “Oh, I’m so sorry!” he yells. “Fuck your plan! Fuck this flood! And fuck whatever the fuck a rain-bow is supposed to be!”

He stalks off, finds someone who doesn’t mind selling their entire stock of wine, and drinks for the next four days. He has to sober up a few times to stay conscious, but who cares? The world is ending in a great bloody fucking drowning flood, and it won’t mean anything. None of it ever meant anything.

On the fifth day of rain, Crawley wakes up to water swirling around his chest. He stands up, glances around, and realizes that drinking won’t solve anything.*[405]

“Fuck you,” he mutters again. “If you think you’re doing such a grand thing, try and stop me.”

Aziraphale wants to know why Crawley is rescuing two children from a roof. Crawley shouts at him to fuck off and then takes the only thing he can carry away from Mesopotamia: life.

*          *          *          *

“Aren’t you supposed to tempt me?” the carpenter from Galil Elyon asks.

Crowley shrugs. “Sure. Tempt. There. I did it. Can we move along, now?”

Yehoshua gives him an odd look with a strange echo of kindness behind it. “You are not what I expected.”

“Yeah, well, lucky you—you got the demon who thinks this is all complete sodding nonsense,” Crowley replies, holding out a drinking bladder. “Wine?”

The carpenter looks at the bladder. “You are very bad at temptation.”*[406]
“Look, I’m also bad at watching idiots die of dehydration in the desert,” Crowley says. “It’s not part of the temptation gig. Ask God or something, if that’s a legitimate thing you do.”

Yehoshua pauses for a moment, and then he reaches for the flask. “No, it isn’t. Thank you.”

Crowley’s jaw falls open. “Wait. You’re—you really can. You can hear God.” It wasn’t just the acceptance. Crowley could feel it, just for a moment: a whisper of sound that is forever beyond his reach.

Yehoshua takes a long gulp of wine and hands back the bladder, smiling. “Yes. Lucky me.”

Crowley twists the bladder, sealing it shut, before staring at the idiot in front of him. “Do you have any idea how long it’s been since I’ve met a human who can hear God who isn’t immediately driven right ’round the bend into insanity?” Crowley hesitates. “Wait, never mind. I can’t actually remember the answer to that.”

“I’m a bit of a special case, I’m afraid,” Yehoshua says. “In a sense, talking to me is like talking directly to God.”

“Oh, you’ve put the Metatron out of a job, have you? Thanks for that. He’s a prick.”

Yehoshua laughs. “No, not—not exactly. Well, then, Serpent: what is it you want me to do? Or not do?”

Crowley frowns. “You really want to know?”

“I did ask.”

Crowley points in the direction of the nearest human settlement. “DON’T FUCKING DIE FOR THOSE FUCKING UNGRATEFUL TWATS!”

“But then how will they learn the lesson that God wants to teach them?”

“I don’t know! Beat them over the head with a book! Teach the dolts to read! Dump over a few more gambling tables in a few more temples—which was really funny, by the way,” Crowley adds. “There has to be something else you can do aside from bleed all over the landscape to prove a point!”

Yehoshua accepts the wine bladder when Crowley offers it again. “Sometimes it requires sacrifice to save another.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to be so fucking literal!” Crowley retorts.

“You have,” Yehoshua points out. “You’ve sacrificed yourself for their lives—”

“No, no, hey, shut up, no one needs to hear that. You’re going to get my arse in serious trouble.” Crowley snatches back the wine. “Besides, I’m immortal. You’re not.”

Yehoshua smiles. “No, this body isn’t immortal. Neither is yours. But our souls are everlasting. Is there not anyone you would willingly sacrifice yourself for? Even if the cost was a permanent death?”

Crowley stares at him. The name is on the tip of his tongue. “Nope, no, we’re not doing this. We’re going to give your stubborn arse a tour of the world, appearance’s sake and all that. Then I’m taking you home, and you can go off and have your noble death, because I have limits, and you are all of
“That sounds lovely, thank you.” Yehoshua stands up and tries to shake caked layers of desert sand out of his robes. “Where should we start?”

“Someplace wet,” Crowley mutters. “Do you like dancing girls? No, wait, you’re married, never mind. What about dancing boys? I really can’t keep up with how you lot decide what’s okay to do when you’re married and what isn’t.”

“What’s a jungle like?” Yehoshua asks.

Crowley sighs in relief and snaps his fingers. Steamy, humid relief descends at once. “They’re like this.”

“Oh. Yes, I can see why you like it. It is very green,” the carpenter says. “Oh, and you should keep talking to God.”

Crowley scowls. “Why? They have better things to do than give a fuck about me.”

“Oh. Oh, fuck you. Just for that, I’m showing you Mount Everest next.”

He does, and Yehoshua declares it pristine and desolate in its perfection. While shivering, Crowley is already feeling sluggish, so then it’s off to Tibet, or whatever they’re currently calling themselves. The vast temples of the Khmer. Then Egypt, which is just sad, as the pyramids aren’t what they used to be and the sphynx is trying to hide in the sand.

“Hold on, bit of an illusion, this is depressing,” Crowley mutters. He concentrates and shows the carpenter what Egypt looked like at the height of its glory.

“They’re so happy,” Yehoshua comments of the people they can see. “I grew up on the stories of my people’s slavery. It seems odd to see joy here.”

“Think this might’ve been before the Pharaohs decided that enslaving the Hebrews was a great idea. They didn’t actually need to do that,” Crowley says. “Lazy bastards.”

“You met Moses, didn’t you?”

Crowley shrugs. “Couple of times.”*[407]

“What was he like?”

“Speech impediment,” Crowley says, and Yehoshua looks genuinely surprised. “Terrible public speaker, too. Drop that man down in a crowd and he’d shake like a leaf in a storm.”

“I did wonder why Aaron so often spoke for him.” The carpenter seems amused. “You liked Moses, didn’t you?”

“I like anyone who can receive instructions from God and figure out a loophole that lets them carry out those instructions to the letter while also hiding under a rock, hoping no one notices he’s the one having to call forth all of the plagues.”

So it goes, all across the world. Every kingdom, every civilization. Every tribe. Every place on this Earth that Crowley knows to exist. He even finds a few that he didn’t. He is definitely coming back to this southern point at the end of South America; the penguins look delicious.
“Why?” Yehoshua asks when they’re both sitting on a rock, watching the sun set over the western ocean. It’s an entirely different sight, watching it here instead of viewing it from the already-named Atlantic. Something about the curvature of the Earth, maybe.

“Because if you’re so set on bleeding for all of these idiots, then you should know what you’re bleeding for,” Crowley replies, and hates himself for admitting it. He miracles up another bladder of wine and gives it a bit of a nudge so it will keep refilling itself, even if he forgets to pay attention. “I’m going to get bloody shitfaced. Drunk,” he adds when the term doesn’t quite translate for the carpenter. “Care to join me?”

“I think if I tried to ingest as much of this as you, I would be dead here and now,” Yehoshua says, but accepts the bladder when Crowley hands it over. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Don’t ever thank me for this.”

“I meant the wine. Thank you for the wine, Crowley.”

Crowley sighs. “Okay, yeah. That part’s all right.”

Fuck the Romans. Fuck crucifixion. Fuck Pilate, even if the man was only doing his job. At least Pilate did ask who the crowd wanted to see crucified, and the bloodthirsty bastards decided to let the actual fucking demon[^408] walk free instead of the man who just wanted people to calm down and be a bit nicer to each other.

Crowley liked that God-hearing bastard. He never had a single bad thing to say about Crowley, and by Heaven, Crowley had done his best to earn something damning. He was too nice. Too bloody forgiving.

No one has ever spoken to Crowley as if there is nothing wrong with him. As if everything about him is perfectly right, just the way it is.

What really drives him to drink that night is the irritating realization that if crucifixion would save Aziraphale’s life, Crowley would lie down on the fucking crossbeams and tell them to hurry up with the hammering. Aziraphale is genuinely concerned when Crowley doesn’t order a jar of wine at the local tavern, but a barrel.

* * * *

“Did you burn down Rome?”[^409]

Crowley glances over his shoulder to stare at Aziraphale in disbelief. “Are you absolutely joking right now?”

Aziraphale looks abashed. “Well, you are sitting atop the hillside, overlooking the city and drinking.”

Crowley glances at the jar of wine he’s holding. “Fair enough. No, I did not burn down Rome. It is being sacked. I don’t have to remind you of the meaning of sacked, do I?”

“No,” Aziraphale huffs, and then sits down next to him. “What happened?”
“The same thing that always happens when you get too big for your britches and demand that everyone adopt not only your entire lifestyle, but also your religion,” Crowley explains sarcastically. “You make enemies. You make all the enemies.”

“Oh, dear. It was bad enough when two-thirds of Rome burnt to the ground not so long ago.”

“Where the Heaven have you been?” Crowley asks, eying him in irritation. “That was over five hundred years ago.”

“I suppose I should have visited more often. I hadn’t realized that particular fire was so long ago.” Aziraphale gracefully accepts the jug of wine when Crowley rolls his eyes and holds it out. “I was a busy in Riyadh, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other lovely areas in that region, being…a presence, I suppose.”

“Mm. So, after you packed up in 390, the Visigoths performed a series of polite sackings around about 410, and Rome fell to them. Christians versus Christians being polite to each other for once, so the people were left largely alone while the Visigoths made off with everything that wasn’t nailed down,” Crowley explains. “Then someone assassinated the Emperor in 476, whoever that was—he can’t have been that important if I can’t remember his name. The Vandals took it as a personal breach of some standing contract, came in, and repeated the bit with the taking everything that wasn’t nailed down. Now it’s the Ostrogoths, so everything is on fire and everyone has fled in terror, and we’re pretty much watching the death of Rome right at this very moment.”* [410]

“Oh, it’s been here ever so long. The world won’t be the same without Rome,” Aziraphale says sadly.

“World’s changing, angel.” Crowley removes the lenses from his eyes when the slight distortions in the glass, combined with the fire below, starts to give him a headache.* [411]

“Yes, speaking of that. I was out there in the old playground on orders from On High,” Aziraphale explains. “Apparently, a new sect of the religion of Abraham is going to be developing soon.”

“What, two’s not enough?” Crowley asks. Bugger, the wine jug is empty. He pulls the next one up from the soil, which was helping to keep the sun from baking it inside the jar. “Why does Above think we need another one? No one gets along as it is!” Really, it sounds more like the sort of thing Below would do, but Below mostly just wants to cull souls, not turn the world into a bed of religious chaos.

“I’m really not certain. I don’t even try to pretend at understanding Above’s policy decisions anymore. They asked me to make certain a man’s familial lineage remained intact so he could be born, and that’s what I did, as keeping humans alive is certainly not going to hurt anyone. They all seemed like quite lovely people, anyway.”

Crowley feels a flash of bitter anger, and beneath that, where he only has to admit it to himself, old pain. “They’re not going to ask this poor bastard to get himself nailed to a piece of wood, are they?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“Excellent.” Crowley digs up the other remaining wine jar so they each have their own. “Cheers over the death of Rome,” he mutters.

Aziraphale sighs and knocks his jar against Crowley’s. “I’m really going to miss the oysters. No one else has really gotten them quite right yet.”

I’m really going to miss having oysters with you, Crowley thinks, and then scowls. It’s not as if
oysters just went extinct or anything.

* * * * *

“Look, Leo, I’m really not the art critic you’re looking for.”

“Nonsense, my friend,” Leonardo replies, leading Crowley into the courtyard. All the exterior walls have an extended roof to shelter the space beneath from working artists and drying paintings, while the sun beats down on the gravel, the plants, and the fountain in the center. Leonardo’s current patron put the artistic genius in quite the nice place, but since that current patron is Crowley, it was a deliberate and therefore excellent choice.

“You always have good opinions to share, and you do not fear offering bad opinions to tell me if I am painting…what did you call it? Yes. Shit.”

“Yep, completely honest, that’s me,” Crowley says with an amused snort, and Leonardo laughs. They both know how things really are, but da Vinci does him the favor of pretending, and Crowley is fine with that.

Leonardo shows Crowley a large sketch that’s being illuminated by reflected sunlight. “This, I think, will be my next commissioned work. I was not certain, but after I sketched her, I knew.”

“Nice lady,” Crowley comments, and he isn’t lying. It isn’t necessarily about beauty. It’s the personality that Leonardo captured, and that’s what makes it amazing. Even her smile is this fascinating hint of mischief, one that’s…familiar.

Crowley shakes off the sensation of déjà vu. “I can’t wait to see the finished painting.”

“That may take a while. The smile, she is tricky.” Leonardo claps Crowley on the back with a brief, gentle touch. “But that is not my difficulty today.”

“No?”

“No.” Leonardo leads him further along, past several students who are at various stages of learning to paint. Leonardo offered to teach Crowley how to mix paint and apply them to canvas, but Crowley started laughing so hard his body began demanding he take a few breaths to make up for it. Demons don’t create. He might be able to encourage someone else to do it, here and there, but if he tried to paint, the results would be so very bad. Nobody needs that sort of glimpse of Hell unless they’re being deposited there.*

“It is this.” Leonardo shows him a canvas which is about one-third finished, or nearly finished, or just started. Sometimes with him, it’s hard to tell.

Crowley studies the painting, frowning. “Commission?”

Leonardo nods. “Someone wished for a painting of the archangel Raphael, from the Book of Tobit.”

“Thought the Church hated that one.” Crowley is starting to feel vaguely uncomfortable. The features are mostly brushstrokes, but defined enough, and the hair—“Oh, please do not use me as a model for this. I’ll shove you into the sea.”
Leonardo looks surprised. “I did not,” he claims, and Crowley can smell the truth of it. “Though, now that you mention it, there is a bit of resemblance. Tobit is not considered heretical, my friend, merely…not as important.”

“Right.” Crowley eyes the painting again. The wings are sketched out, but entirely lacking color except for the bare canvas. “Aside from the creepy resemblance, what’s the problem?”

“It is the wings!” Leonardo exclaims in frustration. “An archangel’s wings are the gold of the celestial sky, or they are the white of Heaven, but these—they defy me, Crowley. If I were merely painting you, it would be a simple matter.”

“Oi, don’t be rude,” Crowley says, feeling his wings twitch in their hiding place. It had been a complete accident, Leonardo seeing those, but the artist isn’t the overly religious sort, or the overly fearful sort. He’s the intensely curious sort. The moment he realized the demon Crowley wasn’t out to tempt anyone—he was just really fucking bored—Leonardo decided he had a new best friend. Leonardo really has a thing for adopting people. It’s…sort of nice, actually.

“I was hoping you might know,” Leonardo says. “I want it to be right, but I…I do not know. Something is lacking, and the inspiration to finish it lacks, as well.”

“Gold,” Crowley murmurs, and then abruptly feels a spike of unpleasantness in his gut. “No, not gold, wait—fuck, excuse me!” He turns and bolts directly for the fountain. Then he vomits up wine, a bit of olive oil and bread, and not much else but spit. Then he heaves again anyway.

What the fuck? he wonders. He lifts his hands, captures clean water pouring down from the top of the fountain, and rinses out his mouth. Then he turns and collapses in front of the fountain, leaning back against warm stone.

His wings burn, more than their usual background noise of painful anger. It’s his chest that hurts the most, a terrible ache centered around his heart that makes it hard for this corporation to breathe.

Not gold, not always gold, only at the start, just right then—

“My friend, are you all right?”

Crowley looks up to find Leonardo peering down at him in concern. “Sure,” he croaks. “Why not?”

“Because you look exceptionally unhappy,” Leonardo counters. He kneels down, and even though Crowley hisses at him, removes the darkened lenses from his eyes. “I have never seen you weep before.”

“What?” Crowley immediately swipes at his face with his hands, which come away with tiny flecks of damp tears. “I don’t fucking cry. What the fuck? No. No, this is—no!”

“I did not mean to upset you,” Leonardo says with penitent sorrow.

“I’m not upset!” Crowley shouts, blinking until his stupid eyes finally get the idea and adjust to the bright light of the garden.

Leonardo sighs. “We both know better, but I will allow you your secrets.” He looks down at the lenses. “Your eyes are perfection. I would paint them, if you would ever let me.”

Crowley rolls his eyes. “My eyes are really not the sort of thing your patrons ever want to see on a canvas.” He snatches the lenses back from Leonardo and shoves them into place over his eyes. “You odd bloody bastard.”
“I am that, yes,” Leonardo agrees. “Come. I will ask you no more questions regarding the archangel you resemble—unless he is you?”

“Definitely not,” Crowley says. Whatever he’d been, it was definitely not a fucking archangel.

“Secrets,” Leonardo replies with a smile that’s a fair match for his latest sketch.

*I’m not keeping secrets,* Crowley thinks resentfully, rubbing at the pain in his chest again. *I have no idea what that meant. Don’t want to know, either. If it hurts that much, it’s probably fucking terrible.*

*          *          *          *

Crowley lifts his head from his pillow in Paris. Aziraphale. He knows something is wrong, that the idiot angel is in trouble. Somewhere close.

The idiot angel is about to get his head chopped off by the very big, efficient, head-chopping-off-machine.*[414] Crowley doesn’t like the sheer amount of panic that floods his corporation at the thought.

He plays it off like everything was always going to be fine. Then he takes Aziraphale out for lunch, and does his best to tune out the smell of blood permeating the air as the angel talks of all the glories of crepes.

“Please learn to make them. This place is going to be a shithole for the next little while,” Crowley suggests. He can’t hear the guillotine at this distance, but he can hear the crowd’s roar of sadistic pleasure. Bloodthirsty bastards. The Franks could really stand to calm the Heaven down and breathe for a few decades without trying to murder each other. They’ve been at it for a bloody millennium now. Heaven supported Charlemagne, but didn’t plan ahead for the death of their new Holy Emperor, and none of Heaven’s lot seems to know how to clean up after the destabilization of an Empire.*[415] You’d think they’d have learnt their lesson after all these millennia, but no, of course not. Crowley is the one stuck with the task of causing more trouble amongst the chaos, but it’s not like he has to actually do anything. It happens on its own.

“Oh.” Aziraphale blushes. “I can’t even boil an egg, Crowley. Tea is just about the limit of my, er, culinary skills.”

“Fine.”

Aziraphale never says a word about the baskets of crepes that keep turning up in his bookshop in London. Crowley refuses to mention them. If he sends any letter to Aziraphale at all, it’s to whinge about French politics. He hates French politics. They’re currently too disastrous and stupid to be enjoyable.

Why do the fucking crepes make his chest hurt, anyway? This is the stupidest fucking sensation on this entire stupid planet.*[416]

The 1800s are so dull that Crowley resolutely sleeps through the first three decades. He wakes up to a backlog of Hell-sent jobs that he was supposed to perform. He scowls, tosses them into the hearth, sets them on fire, and goes back to sleep.

He awakens in 1862 to the realization that he is, eventually, going to get himself into serious trouble.
If not by the Arrangement directly, then certainly by refusing to do some of the things Hell has asked of him—some of which are just too bloody stupid to contemplate.

Aziraphale acts like Crowley committed the worst insult imaginary by asking for holy water.*[417] Crowley growls, hisses, and decides to sleep off his resulting temper.

In 1878, he opens his eyes to discover that he’s still completely fucking furious. No. Back to bed. He doesn’t want to yell at Aziraphale. That just makes everything worse. His chest hurts enough as it is.

In 1898, Aziraphale finds Crowley sulking in a London tea parlor, trying to be more conscious. He’s still bleary-eyed and in the midst of loathing everything*[418] to ever exist when Aziraphale passes him a scone and says it will help.

Crowley gives the scone a resentful stare, breaks it in half, and then lets his head thunk down directly onto his plate. Aziraphale only laughs a little bit as he pats Crowley on the shoulder.

“What have you been up to, you old serpent?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Crowley is in so much fucking trouble. Actual, unavoidable, terrible trouble. He’s about to have to pull off something big to make up for it. “You might want to stay in Britain for a while. Entirely in Britain. In fact, don’t leave London. Maybe live in your cellar for a bit.”


Crowley sighs into his scone crumbs. “I have to be off to the Continent in order to start a war so I can avoid a rather messy and permanent death.”

Aziraphale pauses. “Er, when you say, ‘Start a war,’ how big of a war are you intending to start?”

“I don’t intend on bloody anything,” Crowley grumbles. “I just have to point out a few things and then nudge some arsehole off-course,*[419] and then boom. Humanity will take care of the rest of it themselves. It’ll be horrific. Good versus evil. Everyone from Above and Below will be thrilled.”

“Er, yes. I suppose they would be. Though personally, I would like Europe to still exist when this war is complete, Crowley.”

Crowley flicks his tongue out and snags a crumb. Scones have improved since his nap. “So would I.”

It isn’t enough that the humans decide to have a war so vast it’s called a World War. It’s enough to give him nightmares about things he can’t remember, which Crowley desperately doesn’t like.

No, they have to have two World Wars, one right after another. At this point, Crowley doesn’t actually know how the Continent is in one bloody piece. It should have split across the fault lines of all those trenches to become warring pockets of islands floating in the Atlantic south of England.

Aziraphale gets involved in the affairs of the London Underground, messing about with spies and Nazis. Because of course he does. Crowley bangs his head against a brick wall a few times before arranging to save the angel’s arse.

He doesn’t realize it will involve a church. An actual, sanctified, holy church.*[420]

_Bugger, I’m going to die._

Then Crowley thinks about crucifixion and hammers, lets out a loud, frustrated shout, and flings
open the church’s doors. His feet burn for the next six weeks, but Aziraphale is alive. It’s worth it.

He’d do it again. And again. And again.

He has to be insane.

No, it’s worse than that. He’s probably in love.

Crowley goes back to the destroyed church the next day and steals one of the surviving statues. A bird. Because he can. Not like the church needs it anymore, anyway.

If he’s being honest with himself (while lying to everyone else), he’s probably been in love for centuries.*[421]

Just his fucking luck he fell in love with a sodding angel. Their friendship is like a constant swirl of oil and water as it is.

Crowley puts the bird statue in his current rented cottage and slumps over it, hissing and blessing and swearing and blaspheming under his breath. He can’t date an angel. He’s not even certain he likes that sort of thing, but it’s a moot fucking point. No help for it. Problem already solved.

_Shut up, heart_, Crowley tells the irritating organ when it protests this arrangement with more pain. _Not like you ever have any bright ideas, anyway._

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[400] This drove God mental, because “all-powerful” was so easily twisted into “terrifying” by so many of Their children. All children have moments of fearing their parents’ wrath, They learned, but teenage rebellion was brand-new, and How Does One Cope With Angelic Teenage Hormones, Anyway?

[401] There’s a plan that didn’t work out so well.

[402] Lucifer is often called Satan, but Satan is Sammaʿʾēl, Ha-Satan, poison of god. They are distinct beings, and Zaherael would much prefer to avoid Samael for the rest of his existence.

[403] Usually because there was flirting involved, and Zaherael didn’t want to know.

[404] Supposed to be the caretaker of the Bene Elohim, but he also really likes a good fight. Too much.

[405] This time, anyway.

[406] Crowley would tell him that it isn’t a lack of skill, it’s a lack of giving a fuck, but some things just aren’t worth arguing about.

[407] The golden calf was not his fault. He just thought it was extremely funny.

[408] Barabbas didn’t know why Crowley had an obvious grudge against him, but it made his life in Heaven, and in Hell, that is a very bad thing.

[409] When Rome burned in Nero’s time, Crowley nearly set himself on fire in a fatal way trying to
stop it from being burnt down, because if Rome went away, where the fuck was he going to find a
decent drink?

[410] 476 was the death knell, but the Ostrogoths in 547 sealed the deal.

[411] At least when humanity was young, no one gave a single fuck about his eyes being the way
they are. Lenses are a pain in the arse. (When they’re made with proper glass and without
imperfections, he’ll fall in love.)

[412] Crowley didn’t mean to be the inspiration for that one particular line of dialogue, but he
cackles every time.

[413] Crowley is miffed that he doesn’t have a footnote in art history books as the mysterious wanker
who kept turning up on the doorsteps of certain artists to yell at them to STOP FUCKING
PAINTING SCENES OF HELL, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU.

[414] Guillotine just doesn’t capture the true depth of the necessary details.

[415] The Western Roman Empire’s resumption under Otto I just made everything worse.

[416] Translated: God is Love but God is Pain, so fuck all of this for a lark.

[417] Ducks really do have ears.

[418] With one exception.

[419] No sandwiches were involved. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/gavrilo-princips-
sandwich-79480741/

[420] Which are actually getting a bit difficult to find. Sanctification requires belief, after all.

[421] Millennia. He means Millennia. Not that he is going to admit that, either.

Chapter End Notes

You didn't see the chapter numbers change because he got overly dramatic. Nope. Nu
uh.
Chapter Summary

“Who spends that much money on a rug just to cut off a chicken’s head over it?”

Chapter Notes

It ran long on me, so that's why it's late. Actually, waking up with a chronic illness hangover is probably why it's late.

*Faceplant*

Crowley wakes up to a ringing mobile. This is not the worst thing he has ever woken up to, but it is, potentially, the worst possible time.

He recognizes that he’s lying face-down on his own bed by the scent of the duvet and the silk beneath. Good start. His arms feel like lead weights as he lifts them and tries to figure out where the bloody hell his mobile is.

There; jacket pocket. It’s tacky to the touch.

Crowley hopes it didn’t take on any liquid damage as he slides the green circle upwards without looking at the number. “What.”

“You are the worst thing I have ever invented,” Crowley says.*[422]*

“I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t quite catch that. Would you like to try again?”

“Please go fuck a speeding train.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t quite catch that. Would you like to try again?”

Okay, definitely a robot. “Down with parliament.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t quite catch that. Would you like to try again?”

Crowley rolls his eyes and hangs up. No variation on the theme. Not worth it.
He slowly sits up, thinking that he feels stiff from the ends of his hair down to his bloody toes. His head hates him. If he forgot to sober up before bed, and this is a hangover, then he never wants another one. Even his wings are unhappy; he can feel snapped primaries and secondary feathers, and his mouth tastes like—

His mouth tastes like stale Vietnamese and old blood. He tries to figure out if he’s ever tasted anything worse. Probably, but he can’t think of a good example right now.

He shoves his mobile back into his jacket and stretches. Ow, ow, ow, bad idea, fuck!

Crowley presses his hand to his chest and discovers that his shirt is a ruined, stiff mess that reeks of his own blood. “When’d I get stabbed? Who did the stabbing? Did I already kill them?”

Oh, well. At least he isn’t dead. There are definitely worse ways to wake up, and dead is one of them.

Crowley crawls out of bed and stands up before everything catches up at once. The memory of Aziraphale saying his name in his ear, a desperate whisper: Zaherael.

He stumbles over and leans against the wall, light-headed. Oh, that was not fun. That ranks right up there with least fun things of all time, which includes the year a fucking volcano named Krakatoa tried to cause an extinction-level event on Earth. He’s still glad he slept through that, though he did wake up long enough to wonder what all the rumbling was about. Aziraphale is still a bit miffed about having to nudge things back into alignment on his own.*[423]

Flickers of memory come to him as Crowley stands there. Some of it is from Aziraphale’s maybe-room—oh, bugger, he probably bled all over the carpet. He hopes that mess can be miracled out.

God might’ve been there, doing the torchlight thing of being a person made of fire. He told Aziraphale that stabbing was the same way Raphael died—

“Oh.” Crowley rubs at his chest again. He really did get stabbed…yesterday, he realizes after checking his watch. He has to scrape dried blood off the dial with his fingernail to figure out the time, which is about half-past ten in the morning.

Ugh, he does not want to wear this watch anymore. He’s glad he has a spare.

That was a lot of shit to process at once. That was fucking terrible.

A spell. God took a demonic spell from him, part of a spell net, one that’s tied to every single demon in hell. Nasty bugger, too.

That explains Lucifer’s apology. Belatedly, but at least it makes sense now. He doesn’t think that spell net was Lucifer’s idea, either. Lucifer respects the healers; he would have removed it to prevent the exact sort of problem he’d just agreed to punish Hastur for attempting.

No warning, just an apology. Lucifer doesn’t know who did it. Crowley will be intrigued by that later, but right now, he desperately needs clean clothes and a shower. He couldn’t miracle himself clean right now even if he was up to making the attempt. He’d get mud. Frogs. Grasshoppers or something.

Crowley just as desperately needs to see his brother and his angel. The shower can wait a bit.

Oh, he’s walking sideways down his own hallway. Fucking grand.
He can hear voices as he gets closer. Israfil and Aziraphale are speaking. Crowley stops walking, less with the intent to eavesdrop and more because he thinks he might fall on his face if he takes another step right now.

“I am such a fool,” Aziraphale is saying. “If I’d only said it sooner, said it in Heaven, of all places—”

“You heard our Father. The location wouldn’t have made a difference,” Israfil replies. “Besides, I’m far more to blame than you are.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’m not!” Israfil insists. “The idiot is my twin brother, and I didn’t tell him. Six thousand years apart, and when it really mattered, I just…assumed he knew. Zaherael is my other half, the reason I still exist, and I didn’t tell him I loved him.”

Crowley grimaces and tries to ignore the brief flare of pain in his heart. Not just a spell, but a bloody curse. Curses always hurt for a while, even after you get rid of the sodding things.

“Oh, he knows,” Aziraphale says gently. “I’m the one who…just never said.”

Israfil makes a choked sound and starts laughing. “Really? You’re that convinced he has no idea?”

“Well—”

“Look.” Shifting fabric; Israfil is probably leaning in close to Aziraphale. “What you should really be paying attention to is not the fact that my idiot brother risked everything for you. It’s that he would do it again, without question, without hesitation. If the only way Zaherael could have you in his life would be to return to Eden and once again tempt that woman into eating a forbidden apple, he’d do it. That’s how much he loves you.”

“Oh,” Aziraphale gasps, sounding both endeared and petrified. “Oh, dear.”

Crowley agrees with the petrified part, because Israfil is right. He’d do it.

“As I told my brother; that sort of love has the power to create worlds.”

“Or destroy them,” Aziraphale murmurs.

Crowley gives that brief consideration before shrugging. It was just Purgatory, anyway.

“That’s not really in our job description. Just don’t break his heart,” Israfil says. “I beg that of you. Please.”

“I—” Aziraphale sounds determined and flustered, so he’s probably blushing again. “We’ve come this far. I have no reason to abandon him now.”

“Well, he’s an archangel now, a fairly famous one,” Israfil says in a mild voice. “It’s not a demon you’re dealing with any longer. Some of the temptation isn’t there.”

Crowley can all but feel Aziraphale bristle, it’s so intense. “Crowley being a demon never had a whit to do with it!” he retorts.

*Oh, that’s nice,* Crowley thinks. Then: *Wait, what?*

“It was never about demons or angels, or right and wrong, not at the core of it. Well, perhaps more goodness than darkness, given that we’re speaking of love,” Aziraphale continues. “I didn’t fall in
love with him because the man is a walking temptation. I fell in love with the fact that he’d rather live in this world than burn it. I love that he thinks scrambling every mobile phone network in Great Britain is grand,*[424] but tempting a soul to damnation was never to his taste. I love that when I’d find someplace new, some new human creation of food or drink or art, Crowley would accompany me to see it, as pleased as if I’d just offered him all the riches in existence. I love that he would refuse to ever harm a child, even if it meant getting into enough trouble in Hell to be at true risk of destruction. I love that he’d do everything in his power to save this planet, even though everyone around us wanted to destroy it. I love that he saved my stupid, stupid books during the Blitz, even though I would give up every single one of them if it meant I would still have him.”

Israfil sounds pleased. “Good answer.”

Crowley is abruptly on his knees in the hallway, pretty sure someone just hit him over the head with an aqueduct. It would explain why his chest aches, his head is throbbing, and his face is soaking wet.

That is when the dam truly breaks. His wings spring forth with minds of their own, his mangled feathers trying to protect him from a perceived threat that doesn’t exist. Vicious, ugly sobs tear out of chest, out of his heart, out of a mind that shrieked WHY? for over six thousand years.

Everything sort of mashes itself together after that.

“Oh my God—Crowley!”

“Right, put those wings away, Zaherael. I mean it, they’re in the way.”

He does try. Maybe.

“No, I didn’t say to hit me with them!”

“Crowley, my dear.” Aziraphale strokes the back of his neck. Crowley sobs and tries not to melt into the floor at the same time. “There’s no room for your wings right now.”

“That was helpful. Oh, you are a mess. Up you get, Brother—”

Things tilt the wrong way. Crowley vaguely hopes he doesn’t sick up.

The air changes. It’s quieter, closer.

“We need water, running water.”

Closer is good. Whoever is holding onto him is warm, which is grand, because he’s freezing.

“How does one turn on this contraption, anyway?”

“You’re asking me?”

Crowley blanks out to the sound of Aziraphale exclaiming, “Oh, I’m overlooking the obvious. It has labeling!”

He has no idea how long he’s unconscious, or whatever this quiet haze might be. He only knows that he blinks his eyes open later to the feeling of being enveloped in peace.

His sharp chin is pressed into an equally bony shoulder. He can feel an echo of the same sensation in his right shoulder. Slender arms are wrapped around him, keeping him upright.

It’s raining, gentle and warm. No, not rain. That’s the rain function for the showerhead. He’s
completely drenched, water trickling down his face and neck. He feels safe and whole.

“Mmph,” he mumbles into Israfil’s wet shoulder.

“Is that consciousness I hear?” Israfil asks, his arms briefly tightening around Crowley.

“Sort of.” Crowley isn’t in any hurry to chance it, though. Besides, it’s been a while since they’ve
done this. He can’t remember the last time.

“There were waterfalls,” Israfil says softly. “High up, in the mountains. The City grew up, around,
and then past them.”

“Oh. Yeah.” There were always prisms of color bouncing through the air from sunlight spraying
through the water. Sometimes moonlight would do the same thing. “Angel?”

“Right here, Crowley.”

Crowley turns his head enough to look down at the bathroom floor. Aziraphale is leaning against the
wall, right next to the open shower door. Crowley is rather unhappy to discover that his angel is a
complete mess. Aziraphale’s face is blotchy red, eyes swollen, curly hair sticking up all over the
place. He’s stripped off his coat, waistcoat, pocket watch, and bowtie, sitting in rolled-up shirt
sleeves, trousers, and bare feet. Aside from the days of the old robes, it’s the least amount of clothing
Crowley has ever seen Aziraphale wear without being inside a bathhouse.

“You all right?” Crowley asks. His voice is rough, like he’s dehydrated. No, wait, that’s probably
from the screaming and the dramatic wailing nonsense. Bollocks.

“I’m fine, Crowley,” Aziraphale replies, granting him a faint smile. “I’m just feeling a bit worn
down, is all.”

“We managed an entire fortnight, though, didn’t we?”

Aziraphale chuckles and then wipes at his eyes. “I recall requesting it be longer than that before
something fraught happened.”

“Yeah.” Crowley lets his fingers dig into Israfil’s back, where his brother’s muscles are far too tight.
“You’re okay too, right?”

“The water’s helping,” Israfil answers, but his voice takes on a ragged edge. “I only had to hold you
together for three fucking hours until the spell wore off and the healing would take. I might’ve
passed out right afterwards.”

Aziraphale makes an amused noise. “There is no might. He did exactly that, planted his face right
upon the carpet and began to snore. Since he’d decided to turn the carpet into a bed, I…I carried you
to your bed, Crowley.”

“You didn’t have to,” Crowley says, but he knows why. Aziraphale is aware of how Crowley reacts
to waking up in unfamiliar places, and that reaction is often badly. “Thanks, though. I like your feet.”

Aziraphale raises one eyebrow. Exhausted or not, his cheeks still take on a faint pink tinge. “Er,
thank you?”

“Sorry, that was abrupt, wasn’t it? Also, kind of an odd thing to say. S’true, though. Sandals going
out of fashion was such a loss. Stupid shoes.”
Israfil adjusts his chin, which incidentally digs into a muscled knot on Crowley’s shoulder. It hurts, but in a good way. “Are you all right?”

“Yes? No. Probably.” Crowley gives the idea some thought. “Except for the literal Bloody Murder part, that spell would probably be an amazing therapy tool. Just…not like that. Fuck all of that happening at once. Also, someone remind me later that I need to give Hofniel concrete shoes and then fling his arse from a cliff.”

“What on Earth did Hofniel do to earn that particular pleasure?” Aziraphale asks.

“Stabbed me in the desert and left me to die. Fucking wanker,” Crowley mutters.

“And…er, when was this?”

“Ugh, numbers.” Crowley closes his eyes and concentrates. “Right before our eight hundred years of back-and-forth killing each other. The extended tiff.”

“That was not a tiff, that was terrible,” Aziraphale retorts with a deep, angry frown. “And I will be helping you with those concrete shoes.”

“I will point and laugh when this becomes a comedy of errors,” Israfil says. Crowley growls under his breath and considers biting his twin brother. “Honestly, Zaherael. Please recall that Hofniel has always been overenthusiastic. He saw a demon, and he reacted.”

“He saw a demon, and he tried to kill every human around me just to smite someone who wasn’t doing a damned thing to anyone!” Crowley grasps Israfil’s shoulders and pins him against the shower wall. “Miles, brother! He sliced me open and then tracked me for miles across the desert just so he could pin me to the sand with his sword and leave me to wither and die in the sun! I learned what that sort of mad wrath looks like directly from Gabriel’s eyes, Israfil!” Then he lets go and abruptly slides down to land on his arse in the shower. “Fuck.”

“Oh. So. Concrete shoes. How do we do that?” Israfil asks in a flat, angry voice.* [425]

“Crowley.” He looks over at Aziraphale, who no longer looks furious. Crowley tries to figure out if the sympathy is worse or better than fury and then decides he’s too tired to care. “You said in Eridu that an angel had killed you, but nothing else. You should have told me the rest, dear.”

“Angel, I’ve never told anyone that before,” Crowley replies, letting his head rest against the wet tile. “Never said a word. Not even Hell learned the real reason why I turned up needing a new corporation after a mere fifty years or so on Earth.”

Israfil slides down until he’s sitting across from Crowley, their legs tangled together. The shower is still running, but Crowley installed a tankless water heater for a reason. “Two people can sit in this thing at the same time. I want one.”

“Make sure you write it down,” Crowley mumbles.

“The, er, bathtub can also fit two people. Easily,” Aziraphale adds, his cheeks turning pink again. Crowley is still fascinated that his angel can still find so many things to blush about, but it also makes him stupid-levels of happy, so who cares?

“Maybe I’ll just copy your bathroom. Everything I’ve seen in those stupid design books is either useless, hideous, or both,” Israfil says. “Not so much with the Roman theme, though.”

“That’s fine. You don’t remember Rome the way I do.” Crowley lets out a long sigh and touches his
soaking wet shirt, a quick brush of magic beneath his fingertips. “Ugh, curse residue. That never miracles out. Everything I’m wearing is rubbish now. So glad I bought more than one of these bloody ties.” He frowns. “Actually, if I bled on anything the two of you were wearing, it’s probably rubbish, too.”

“Oh, bother,” Aziraphale bursts out. “I’d just taken that waistcoat out of retirement, Crowley!”

“Sorry. Blame…whoever the fuck decided on that spell nonsense. Are they dead, too?”

“No, the spell wasn’t designed to work that way,” Israfil answers him. “It was a net, but individualized.”

“Great.” Then Crowley groans and thumps his head back again. “Oh, blast, the rug!”

“Stained, I’m afraid,” Aziraphale confirms.

“None of it got on the floor, though,” Israfil says. “Ripping up the new floor would be worse.”

“Small favors,” Crowley mutters, thinking on how many phone calls it took to acquire that Moroccan rug in the first place. He pats down his jacket and then removes his mobile. It’s still working, but it’s also sopping wet, with humidity starting to appear as tiny hints of fog on the screen. He turns it off and snaps his fingers so the mobile can go dry out on his bed. As long as he can transfer the data off of it later, it’s not a loss, just a replacement.

In Crowley’s other jacket pocket, however, was a jewelry box he picked up just before snagging lunch yesterday afternoon. God, that feels like a lifetime ago right now.

There is blood on the outside of the velvet box, but he can tell at once that it never contaminated the inside. He considers it carefully. The cursed blood had dried before it was soaked in the shower, so the curse isn’t spreading. Excellent.

Crowley tosses the box at Israfil. “I figured out what was missing.”

“Missing from what?” Israfil asks, exploring the black box with his nimble fingers.

“From you—from your bloody outfit,” Crowley clarifies when Israfil gives him a baffled look. “Open the stupid box, all right?”

Israfil cracks open the box and then stares, his lips slightly parted. “Wow. I’ve never seen any sort of ouroboros like this before.” He draws forth a pendant strung on a brown leather thong with a clasp; both clasp and leather have so much magic attached that it would take actual hellfire to destroy either.

“Oh,” Aziraphale breathes in delight. “It isn’t an ordinary ouroboros. It’s the design of the Auryn, from one of my favorite stories, Die unendliche Geschichte. The Neverending Story.”

“The movie was really well done, too,” Crowley says, watching his brother examine the Auryn. He had to have that specially made, paying for it to be done at once. Then he had to pay extra to avoid the jeweler’s fearful copyright ditherings. One of the serpents is blackened gold, with brilliant yellow sapphires for eyes. The other serpent is brilliant, polished white gold; its eyes are iced blue diamonds.

“You never mentioned they’d made a film of it!”

“Sorry, Zira. It was during the ’80s. We were both sort of busy.”

“Bloody Cold War,” Aziraphale says in recognition and remembrance. “Do you still have a copy?”
“Do I still have a copy, he asks.” Crowley smiles as Israfil puts on the necklace, where the pendant settles just below the hollow of his throat. Even with his shirt soaking wet, it’s beyond obvious that the brown leather and the Auryn pendant are bloody perfect. That’s what was missing; that’s what ties together everything Israfil chose about himself. “That’s a stupid question, angel.”

Israfil rests one finger over the silver serpent. “I haven’t worn that shape in a very long time.”

“It’s like riding a velocipede. You never forget,” Crowley says, and grins when Aziraphale glares at him.*[427]

*          *          *          *

Crowley kicks them both out of the bathroom to finish the process of cleaning off everything about yesterday, and possibly a few layers of skin. Aziraphale hopes Crowley isn’t being literal, but it’s Crowley. He sometimes has opinions about how things are done…like his emerging from the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist and wearing absolutely nothing else.

Aziraphale does not squeak. He does, however, stare. Rather shamelessly, in fact.

He hasn’t seen Crowley without a shielding layer of clothing in a very long time. Not much has changed; he is still bony, sinuous grace. Like Israfil’s, his skin is pale and flawless where the sun hasn’t been able to touch it, but the way paleness fades into the warm color at his wrists and neck looks natural, not like abruptly cut-off lines. Aziraphale swallows and tries very much not to dwell on Crowley’s wet hair, which looks to already be spiked forward within an inch of its life, or at the faint trail of red hair on Crowley’s chest that disappears beneath the hem of the towel, and—

“You have a tattoo?” Aziraphale asks in surprise when he catches a glimpse of writing.

Crowley whirls around in front of his bedroom door, giving Aziraphale a started look while keeping a firm grip on the towel. “Nope! None at all.”

Aziraphale raises an eyebrow. “I’m imagining the two I can see, then.” He can’t make out exact details at this distance, but he can count.

“Yeah, sure. Let’s go with that,” Crowley says, and shuts the bedroom door behind him.

Aziraphale sighs and turns to find Israfil leaning against the open bathroom door, already changed into clean clothes, his hair dry. Crowley was right; the Auryn pendant on its brown leather thong turns Israfil’s ice-blue button-down shirt and its open collar, his denims, and the brown lace-up boots into combined perfection. “Don’t feel too insulted. Zaherael didn’t tell me, either. That means they are rather intensely personal.”

“I suspected as much, myself.”

Israfil nods and retrieves a very thick grey towel from the linens closet. “Yes, I know, we can just think ourselves dry and it’s done, but I was convinced to give it a go. Trust me, it’s very much worth it.”

Aziraphale absently and accepts the towel and then gives it a surprised look. It has such luxurious give and softness that the cotton is like a miracle all to itself. “Rome could certainly have stood to learn a few things from these.” He goes into the bathroom, shuts the door, and only then snaps his
fingers, calling what clothing he has left from his flat to the bathroom in a neatly folded pile. There is
a surprising lack of steam from the previous shower, and Aziraphale quickly discovers a light switch
controlling an updraft fan that is very quiet, and very efficient at its job.

Aziraphale doesn’t shower or bathe often. Not because he doesn’t believe in cleanliness, but because
he is usually busy with research, and he can literally just think away any hint of dust or dirt that tries
to cling to him.

He is still cranky over the loss of public bathhouses, with their steaming rooms, hot tubs, cooling
pools, and rather decadent social gatherings in terms of food, drink, and conversation. Being alone in
a cramped modern bathtub is just not the same. Seeing Crowley reminded him of how fond he’d
been of them, and also, how much trouble he’d nearly gotten into on several occasions.

The silly thing was that Aziraphale had never given any thought about indulging in sexual pleasures
until he lived among the Greeks in Athens, who thought you were odd—and possibly evil—if you
did not indulge. To keep up appearances, he had indeed indulged, and well...he had academically
known that God made angels to be capable of such things,* but Good Heavens, he sometimes
suspected that maybe God might have overdone it with the nerve endings a bit. The Greeks hadn’t
had a word for it yet, but Aziraphale figured out rather quickly that while women were utterly
beautiful, he found the form of man to be much more fascinating.

Aziraphale gives one more vague thought to simply willing himself clean, but Israfil had rather
sternly informed Aziraphale that when dealing with cursed blood, even mere residue, one used
water. “It’s got its own magic, Aziraphale,” Israfil explained, though he’d still been giving the wide
showerhead with its multiple functions, including realistic rain shower, an intrigued, rather covetous
look.* “You can’t necessarily get curse remnants off inanimate objects—not easily, anyway—
but we’re alive, even if we’re ethereal. Water will work with you, if you let it.”

“My clothes are a complete loss, aren’t they?” Aziraphale had asked in regret.

“So are mine. I’m glad Zaherael talked me into purchasing spares, or I wouldn’t have a damned thing
to wear right now that wasn’t pulled from the firmament. I still tend to only grab robes. I’ll break the
habit eventually, I suppose.”

Aziraphale gives his clean clothes a brief look as he shucks his ruined clothing before simply
discarding them into the ether. He has several other shirts in his flat, of course, but only the one other
pair of trousers, pants, and socks. He now only has one very threadbare waistcoat* with its
matching bowtie, and is genuinely mourning the loss of his coat. Crowley rescued it from some
blighter’s paintball strike before the Averted Apocalypse, but miracles won’t save it now.

It doesn’t even seem that bad, that curse residue, but Crowley rather testily pointed out that if
Aziraphale wanted to wear something that would attract every demon in sniffing range, that was his
business, but some people were sensible enough not to present as obvious targets.

Aziraphale had admitted the point, even if he hated to part with the coat. It joined his socks, shoes,
trousers, pants, shirt, and waistcoat in the ether, to safely unravel into harmless nothing.

The only thing he puts aside, letting it rest on the sink basin, is the gold pocket watch Crowley gave
him. He doesn’t think it can be salvaged, not with that smear of blood on the outside of the casing,
but...he wants to ask. Just in case.

Aziraphale fiddles with the showerhead functions for a bit—one of them absolutely pounds down,
some sort of overbearing massage feature, he supposes—before deciding that rain shower seems to
fit the theme of the day. It’s quite pleasant, as is the discovery that Crowley’s sensitive nose means
that he still only stocks the most delicate of cleansing products, odors that tend to mingle with the skin instead of overpowering one’s natural scent.

The towel is as decadent as sweetened chocolate. Aziraphale buries his face in its softness and thinks that his best friend is a terrible influence, as he now wants one of these, as well.

Aziraphale realizes after getting dressed that he also lacks another pair of shoes, which he hasn’t needed to concern himself with in quite a while. Even he knows that the lone pair of boots in his closet are so desperately out of fashion that they would attract notice at once, and probably not in a nice way.

He picks up the pocket watch by wrapping it in another, much smaller bit of luxuriant towel and then pads his way out of the bathroom on sock-clad feet. He can hear Crowley’s voice at once, so he heads in that direction out of a simple lack of having anything else to do at the moment.

Crowley is leaning back in the chair in front of his computer desk, kicked back with his bare feet perched next to the open laptop. He’s pulled on one of his form-fitting black shirts with the open collar, though his pants are loose silk, rather like pyjama bottoms. The handset of the telephone is cradled against his ear, but he’s speaking Arabic. “Look, I know what a complete pain in the backside it was the find the first one, but there was a bloody incident, and I mean that literally.” He pauses. “Ritual—what kind of people do you usually sell these things to? Ritual. Honestly, just don’t fucking tell me that. No, it doesn’t have to be an exact match for the previous rug. Because they didn’t weave them that way in those days, that’s why! The color, the point of origin, the quality. That’s what I need. Look, I paid you for the last one. Why are you complaining about this? Call me back when you have results or I’ll find someone else to give exorbitant sums of money to.” He hangs up the phone and rolls his eyes. “Rituals!” he exclaims in English. “Who spends that much money on a rug just to cut off a chicken’s head over it?”

Aziraphale can’t contain his sudden laughter. “Someone quite dedicated to their supper, I imagine.”


“Oh. Much, yes. Your towels are sinful, by the way.”

Crowley looks smug. “I know.” He glances down at Aziraphale’s feet. “Just the one pair of shoes, then?”

“I’m afraid so,” Aziraphale says, trying to ignore the very visible tattoo on Crowley’s right foot.

“Right.” Crowley picks up the phone. “Fixing that, then.”

“Crowley, you don’t have to—”

Crowley pauses before he inputs the last digit of a London area phone number. “Aziraphale, every time you’ve tried to pull shoes from the firmament, you do not get shoes. You get carpet slippers. You are not leaving my flat in slippers.”

“They’re quite nice slippers,” Aziraphale defends himself. They are, but, truthfully, they don’t make very good shoes for walking about in London.

“Right, yeah, hello,” Crowley says to the phone, this time in Tagalog. “Yes, the pain in the arse ginger, that’s me. Yes, I know you hate me, but you adore my money, so is it really a problem? Didn’t think so. Look, I need a personal visit. No, not for me. I have a friend who is far more pleasant than I am whose wardrobe was unfortunately disposed of by infernal means. Do I mean that
literally?” Crowley pauses. “Airport security inspections still count as infernal, right? Then sure, why not. He’s five foot ten inches, average build—I don’t suppose you remember your measurements off-hand, do you?” he asks Aziraphale in English.

“I don’t think I own anything that has measurements in it,” Aziraphale says. “It was all hand-tailored.”

“Right, okay.” Crowley switches back to Tagalog. “No synthetic fibers. Think modernized late 1800s in terms of style—no, not the hats. Good Lord, not those bloody hats. Oh, shoes.” Crowley glances down at Aziraphale’s feet. “Brown leather, laces, ehhhh, size elevens? Oh, fuck it, just grab tens through twelves, I’ve never been able to judge shoe sizes. Average width is fine for him, I’m the one with feet that try to escape anything sized for normal people.” He pauses, listening to a voice Aziraphale can hear but not quite make out. “Yeah, unfortunately, you need to deal with me, too. Worse, two of me, but my twin brother is a lot nicer than I am. Yes, I realize that you think cobras are nicer than I am, and I still take that as a compliment. At least my brother’s things merely need tailoring. I’m the one who—no, I did not intend for that jacket to be destroyed, thank you. Yes, I realize it will be a pain in the arse to make another one, but who plans on being stabbed, anyway?” Crowley scowls. “No, you are not the only tailor in London who makes house calls, and I will happily pay someone else if you’re that upset by the idea of—fine. Two hours, then? Fabulous. I gave you the new address? Yes, fuck Mayfair, I agree. The admin on the ground floor will be expecting you. Thanks.”

Crowley hangs up the phone and makes a loud sound that is part growl, part screech, and part gurgling frustration. “Since when is money not enough? Greedy bastards.”

Aziraphale chuckles. “I do believe it’s your winning personality that is the difficulty, my dear.”

Crowley raises two fingers and flips him off. “Winning is the important word that people keep missing out on. Israfil went to fetch something for lunch that won’t make us all loathe the idea of food forever. Did you need anything in particular before he gets back?”

“Er, yes, actually.” Aziraphale holds out the wrapped pocket watch. “I didn’t want to touch it directly, not after going to the trouble of cleaning off everything else. I know it’s unlikely, but I was hoping it could be saved.”

Crowley drops his feet from the desk to the floor before he takes and unwraps the pocket watch. “Oh,” he murmurs under his breath. “That was messy business yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“You didn’t see my coat before I did away with it,” Aziraphale says with a wry smile that quickly disappears. “Can it be saved?”

Crowley flips over the pocket watch using the cloth, his eyes tracing the Sanskrit engravings on the back. “You are what you believe in. You become that which you believe you can become. You know, I have no idea if I meant that for you or for me.”

“And the rest?” Aziraphale asks, curious. Crowley has never discussed this with him before.

“Oh, no, that was definitely meant for you. You were figuring it out on your own, but reminders weren’t such a bad thing, right?”

“Do not be led by others; awaken your own mind; amass your own experience; and decide for yourself your own path,” Aziraphale quotes. “I suppose that worked out well enough. It does make me wonder if we would still be considered to be on our own side.”
Crowley glances up from the pocket watch. “I think…I think it’s more like we were on the right side all along. It just wasn’t something anyone else could really see any longer.”

Aziraphale experiences a startling jolt that is still rather pleasant. “Why do you think that?”

“Six thousand years of both sides hating each other,” Crowley replies. “Hate’s blinding. I should know.” Then he continues on before Aziraphale can dare any sort of comment. “Machines change and grow, did you know that? They learn from us, human or angel or demon. They soak up the life and energy we give them, and eventually, if they last long enough, they turn into something just a bit more than they were originally meant to be.” Then he draws in a deep breath and blows across the blood-stained surface of the pocket watch.

Aziraphale watches in relieved fascination as all hints of tainted blood drift free from the gold watch before disappearing into the ether. “Oh, my.”

“It’d be just like if someone got cursed blood on my car. She’s been with me for a very long time. It’s not sentence, it’s just…it’s something else.” Crowley hands Aziraphale the watch. “Check it over, please.” Then he rather promptly drops his head down onto his desk.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Crowley says as Aziraphale opens his mouth in concern. “That was…I’m still tired. That was a bit much.”

“It’s gone, all of it.” Aziraphale sighs in relief as he finds not even the slightest hint of curse or taint anywhere on his pocket watch. “I’m so glad. I know it could have been replaced, but you gave that to me. For Christmas. It was the first time you’d ever given me anything that wasn’t wine for that particular holiday.”

Crowley folds his arms across his desk and rests his head on them. “I was in Mumbai,” he says quietly, surprising Aziraphale. “I know you were already curious, and I don’t mind so much any longer. Talking about it, I mean. I didn’t have a bit to do with it, though—nearly got discorporated, in fact, it was so bloody unexpected. Afterwards, I was drifting through the streets, listening to the chaos, and completely depressed, because if humans really put their mind to it, they could easily wipe themselves off the face of the Earth. All hints of their existence, every beautiful thing they’d ever done, just—gone.

“I wandered into a shop when I realized the family was opening it for the day. Seemed a strange thing to do, opening a jeweler’s shop when most of the city was in chaos, so I asked them about it. They said it didn’t matter if terrible things happened. Life went on, regardless. At the end of the month, they would still have to pay their bills, put food on the table—they would still be alive, and they would still have to keep going. They could give the dead no greater honor than to continue to live for them. So I looked down, saw that watch, and told them I’d pay them their entire month’s income if they would engrave it for me. The wife, she started crying while her husband asked what I wanted. So, I quoted a few lines from the Bhagavad Gita and the Atharva Veda that I’d been fond of. In Sanskrit. Got a free meal out of it for that, and possibly a blessing, since I felt really out of sorts for about a week afterwards.”

Aziraphale, feeling gentle and kind, and very slightly foolish, goes over and tugs Crowley upright. “Come sit down with me, at least until Israfil gets back.”

Crowley grumbles under his breath but follows Aziraphale to the sofa, dropping down and sinking a bit into the cushions. “I love this thing.”

Aziraphale sits next to him, rather startled by the sinking before it becomes a strange sort of soft firmness. “It’s certainly different,” he says, and then almost squeaks when Crowley slumps against
his side, his head resting on Aziraphale’s shoulder. They still haven’t really done this very often.

He is probably a rather bad angel for deciding to take advantage. He lifts and cradles the back of Crowley’s left hand while tracing the tiny design on the inside of Crowley’s wrist with his finger. “I’m surprised you didn’t hide the tattoos again.”

“I did tell you I’m tired,” Crowley reminds him irritably.

Aziraphale shakes his head. “I just can’t see you, of all people, being ashamed of a tattoo. You all but literally fanned the flames to make the Western world fascinated with them.”

“Didn’t take much fanning, either.” Crowley hesitates. “I’m not ashamed of them, angel.”

“I’ll forget about them, if you like,” Aziraphale says, though he’d rather not. He wants to know everything there is to know about Crowley, all the little moments he missed as their respective employers sent them in different directions. They had often gone years or decades without seeing each other. In six thousand years, that adds up to quite a bit of mystery.

“It’s not…” Crowley sighs. “They’re just private, Aziraphale. They have been for a very long time now. I never intended to show them to anyone. I always kept them hidden from everyone.”

Aziraphale nods, still studying the tiny, perfectly rendered Auryn. It’s exactly like the one Crowley just gifted in pendant form to his twin brother. The ink has a metallic shine for both the blackened gold and the silvered white. Aziraphale feels like he is being granted the sight of a precious gift as he traces the tattoo’s curving lines with reverent fingers. “It’s beautiful.”

“I got the original done in 1984. Hard not to when you see a symbol in a film and feel like you got your arse handed to you just after a horse kicked you in the chest.” Crowley stares resolutely down at his knees. “Back then, it was only black and white, but tattoo inks have improved a bit. I erased the first one and had it redone a few years ago.”

“Don’t twitch, please,” he warns Crowley, and begins tracing each solid black letter so he can translate it properly. Crowley makes a sound that is little more than an incoherent choking noise, but he doesn’t move.

“I was right. You did use the Tamil script,” Aziraphale says in bright fascination. The Tamil alphabet is wonderfully organic, turning words into art—and not so incidentally, quite a bit of squiggly lines that are often mindful of a serpent. The characters aren’t strung directly across Crowley’s foot in stern lines, but mime the rise and fall of a serpent’s scales. Then Aziraphale narrows his eyes. “You used the Tamil script with modern Hindi.”

“If I’d ever slipped up with hiding it, it would have been harder for anyone to read at a glance.”

“That it would,” Aziraphale agrees, but he isn’t just anyone. He is an angel who knows every language and alphabet to ever be used on this planet. “Don’t twitch, please,” he warns Crowley, and begins tracing each solid black letter so he can translate it properly. Crowley makes a sound that is little more than an incoherent choking noise, but he doesn’t move.
Aziraphale reads. He blinks a few times. Then he releases Crowley’s foot and grips his trousers with both hands. “Oh.”

Crowley quickly draws his feet back and crosses his legs so that his tattooed foot is no longer visible. “Yeah.”

“How—how long have you had that one?” Aziraphale asks in a faint voice.

“A while.”

Aziraphale tries not to sound frustrated. “Crowley.”

“It’s been updated a few times.”

“Crowley, please.”

Crowley hisses in frustration, slurring his words a bit more than usual. “I got it afffter I watched assa carpenter wasss nailed to a ffucking pieccce offf wood.”

Aziraphale stares at him. Crowley is scowling at his wristwatch, as if it’s to blame for everything. “You’ve had that tattoo for nearly two thousand years.”

“Had to keep getting it redone, but basically. Yep.”

Aziraphale is almost certain he’s terrified of the answer, but he faced Hell. This can’t be nearly as bad. “Why?”

“Because I realized that if it would save you, I’d volunteer for the crucifixion nonsense myself and tell them to fucking well hurry up about it.”

“Crowley,” Aziraphale tries to say, but Crowley shakes his head.

“Shut up. Just—shut up, Zira. I can’t. No.”

Aziraphale regards him in silence for a few moments, baffled. Then he recalls that not only is he an angel, he is a cherub, and he can bloody well cheat if the situation calls for it. Without revealing his wings, he mentally prods at his feathers until he remembers how to open up the eyes of his uppermost wings.

The fainter white edges of the ethereal plane wash over Aziraphale’s vision. He can see Crowley’s wings now, which are drawn up in a rather fierce protective display that practically screams *Fuck off!*

Aziraphale can do quite a lot without ever saying a word. He reaches out with a tendril of intent and brushes invisible fingers through Crowley’s wings.

Crowley immediately twitches in place several times, accompanied by several rather endearing facial tics. “What the fuck, angel? What did you do that for?”

“You told me to shut up,” Aziraphale replies in an innocent voice. Then he brushes those same fingers through Crowley’s unmangled feathers again.

By the time Israfil returns with two bags of takeaway, Crowley is sprawled over Aziraphale’s chest, his wings visibly spread out. Aziraphale is running his actual fingers through the sleek softness of Crowley’s feathers while Crowley hisses in contentment under his breath, and is quite possibly drooling.
“Oh, that’s excellent,” Israfil says after dropping off the bags on the kitchen countertop. “Keep him occupied. I probably won’t have a better chance to fix his feathers unless I sit on him.”

“Ngghfff,” Crowley says into Aziraphale’s shirt. Aziraphale decides that is probably a sign of agreement.

Aziraphale is very much content to keep Crowley in this position while Israfil does his healing work. He feels…quite ludicrously happy, actually. There is probably a silly smile on his face, too.

He was right. It doesn’t matter if there is never anything else. Just this simple act of being with Crowley is one of the greatest things in the cosmos.

Israfil pauses in the midst of growing out one of Crowley’s snapped primaries to give Aziraphale a knowing look. Aziraphale rolls his eyes; he is well aware of the fact that he is completely obvious, yes, thank you.

“What’s for food?” Crowley asks when Israfil is done. “Oh, never mind. I smell curry.”

“I have no idea what curry is beyond the meat names I ordered it under, but yes, exactly. I really liked the scent of it,” Israfil agrees.

Aziraphale sits still and watches as Crowley straightens up, stretching his arms up over his head while also stretching his wings. Oh, of course. Now he is having inappropriate thoughts. He closes his eyes and resolutely thinks of maggots.

Oh—oh, God. That worked too well. He’ll not be repeating that ever again.*[434]

Curry turns out to be five dishes: one vegetarian, one chicken, one lamb, one beef, and one pork curry. “You found a curry place this close to traditional Indian cooking that used pork?” Crowley doesn’t look impressed. “None of that for me, then, thanks.”

“Why not? It’s meat,” Israfil responds, prodding at the pork curry with one of Crowley’s real forks instead of plastic takeaway cutlery. It’s a rather sudden reminder that Israfil is also represented by a carnivorous serpent.

“Ehhhh. I don’t touch anything porcine unless I’m certain it’s unaltered wild boar,” Crowley says.

That explains why Crowley left all the pork buns to Aziraphale during Saturday’s lunch. “Why don’t you like pork? I had no idea.”

Crowley gives him a look of complete disbelief. “Wait, did Above really never tell you? I thought you just didn’t care!”

“What—you mean that business in the Book of Matthew?” Aziraphale points a spoon at Crowley. “No. That was complete nonsense. Even if it wasn’t, the point of it was that the pigs had all drowned, anyway.”

“No, no—not that.” Crowley looks annoyed. “Don’t think the carpenter would’ve been that cruel to pigs, honestly. It’s in the Quran, dimwit. That fellow you were supposed to make certain came to exist passed on one of those ‘These people fucked up’ tales out from the Negev Desert.”

“No, that was the ape nonsense. Or…not. I was rather uninterested in discovering if that particular tale was true or not,” Aziraphale replies. “Then I would have to wonder if they really deserved it, and who was really responsible, and I already had enough on my plate just dealing with the questionable morality of you.”
“I am mostly not insulted by that,” Crowley says.

Israfil snaps his fingers to gain their attention. “Would one of you tell me if I can eat this or not?”

“That depends on how you are with eating something that used to be human,” Crowley answers.

Israfil hesitates. “How long ago are we talking about?”

Crowley frowns. “About…four-and-a-half-thousand years, or thereabouts. I mean, there are descended domesticated pigs in China that had nothing to do with it, they’re all right, but uh, yeah. Domesticated pigs otherwise didn’t exist until a village pissed off Above by disobeying at least three of the Commandments at once.”

“How do you know?” Aziraphale asks, suddenly regretting several dozen lifetimes in which he was blissfully ignorant of this.

“Because I checked,” Crowley retorts. “I was just a demon, Zira. I didn’t want to eat people! That wasn’t my paygrade, and I didn’t ever want it to be.”

Israfil shoves over the styrofoam container. “All yours, Aziraphale.”

Aziraphale thinks about it and snaps his fingers, getting rid of the pork, container and all. “I’ll wait until we’re in China, thank you. Or someone puts a wild boar on a spit over open flame. That is actually quite lovely, if you ever have the opportunity to try it.”

Lunch is replaced by a terrifying Filipino family, the mysterious tailors Crowley spoke to on the phone who make house-calls. Aziraphale feels like he is half-smothered by the time they’re finished taking measurements and badgering him with questions about textiles, textures, colors, and his shoe size.

“Your shirt is too big,” one of the girls comments, scowling at his rather expensive tailored shirt.

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.” Aziraphale pats at the shirt in question. It’s been a bit less snug of late, but it is by no means too big.

“Actually…Erlin’s right.” Crowley gives Aziraphale a thoughtful look. “I’d thought your waistcoat was looking a bit trimmer, but I wasn’t really…we were sort of busy.”

Aziraphale all but turns up his nose in response. “That’s really not possible. I haven’t lost weight since the last famine occurred.”

Crowley makes an amused noise. “Darling, you do realize that we’ve been running around like madmen for over eleven years now in order to prevent certain unwanted events from coming to pass, right?”

Aziraphale’s brain short-circuits on darling for several seconds before the rest catches up to him. “Oh. Oh, yes. I suppose we have been.” He glances down at Erlin, who is glaring up at him in complete impatience. “Just…make others with the new measurements. Leave this one alone?” he suggests hesitantly. If things really do calm down, there is nothing keeping him from, er, indulging too much. Again.

Erlin seems appeased. “We can do that.” She glares at Crowley. “It will cost more.”

“Have I ever yet given a single fuck about any bill you’ve handed me except the first one?” Crowley responds.
Erlin smirks a bit. “Not our fault we didn’t know you could read Baybayin.”

“Not my fault you never asked.”

By dinnertime, Aziraphale somehow has gained three shirts that are quite lovely, two sets of trousers, several pants (which he is *not* thinking about the origins of), socks, and shoes that are perfectly sized to his feet, and of a design he finds he is rather fond of.

Israfil looks dazed by the activity. “You know some absolutely terrifying people, Brother.”

“That’s because I am still, by default, terrifying,” Crowley says. “Not over yet, by the way.” He opens the door for the matriarch, whom Crowley refers to as Lady Numeriana.

Lady Numeriana gives Crowley a stern look. “When the jacket arrives, you will not be stabbed while wearing it.”

“Cross my heart and hope to try,” Crowley replies.*

The matriarch seems to find that amusing. Then she crosses the room and thrusts two items out at Aziraphale, of matching color and familiar texture. “He insisted on these first,” she tells him, gesturing over her shoulder at Crowley. “I still think they are very fetching on men. It is good to see them worn by one who appreciates them.” Then she leaves as quickly as she arrived, though she gives Crowley one more glare before departing.

Aziraphale finally looks down at what he’s holding. One he recognizes instantly due to its threadbare quality—his waistcoat. He puts it aside and then holds up another waistcoat of the very same cut, texture, and color.

He frowns and then starts turning it around, upside down, and inside out, examining every stitch and button. “If tailors have learned to clone things before actual biologists, I think I’m horrified.”

“I told her I wanted it to be an exact match. It is, right? Because if it’s not, I’m not tipping her,” Crowley says.

“It…it…” Aziraphale shakes off his stupor and slides his arms into the sleeves, buttoning it with his usual speed. “Oh. It’s—well, it’s not exact, because it fits better. I didn’t realize the other one had. Well.” He keeps his eyes downcast, his fingers still fiddling with ridiculously familiar buttons.

Aziraphale is so busy distracting himself that he doesn’t realize Crowley is standing in front of him until Crowley uses two fingers to lift his chin. His eyes are entirely gold, not the more human-like gold over white sclera that he tries to stick with. Aziraphale’s dear friend is rather inadvertently admitting that he’s nervous. “Did I get it wrong?”

“No.” Aziraphale sniffs and decides he’s being ridiculous. “No, not in the slightest.” Then, before he can change his mind, he leans forward and wraps Crowley up in a hug.

Crowley stiffens for a moment before embracing Aziraphale, his arms tightening to the point of breathing restriction. Aziraphale realizes Crowley is shaking right before the trembling eases, tension melting out of his body like a gliding serpent over sand. “Good. Glad for that, then. I’d hate to fire Lady Numeriana. I’ve known her since 1912.”

Aziraphale leans back to look at Crowley. “That woman can’t be, well…” He adds in the years needed for a human to grow enough to pick up a trade. “She can’t be one hundred twenty-five years old.” She doesn’t look as if she’s a day over sixty.
“Oh, no. Not at all. Lady Numeriana is quite a bit older,” Crowley replies, which is just confusing. “Not entirely human,” he adds.

“Oh. I didn’t sense anything odd about her.”

Crowley shrugs. “You’re in the habit of keeping an ethereal ear out for the wrong species.”

* * * *

Crowley, probably to distract everyone, tells them they’re going to watch a movie. Israfil grins in delighted approval, so Crowley must have already introduced him to the concept.

The fact that Crowley chooses *The Neverending Story* is just blatant cheating, and Aziraphale says so. Crowley doesn’t deny it.

Aziraphale is a touch cranky that the filmmakers felt the need to rename Fantastica, but otherwise, it seems to be a very dedicated translation of the book. Israfil is completely fascinated by his first sight of the Auryn on the book’s cover, and keeps touching the pendant he’s wearing through the rest of the film.

Aziraphale unashamedly cries through the death of Artax. He isn’t the only one.*[438]

Allowing for translation issues from word to a visual medium, the only odd part is the ending. “That’s only the first half of the book,” Aziraphale says, not certain if he’s complaining or not.

“Blame budgetary limits and the concept of a film’s runtime versus an audience’s ability to pay attention,” Crowley says. “Blame bureaucracy, basically.” Then he yawns, nearly unhinging his jaw with a sharp pop before flopping back down on the sofa they crowded themselves onto for the film’s viewing. “I need more furniture, don’t I?”

“You need to go to bed,” Israfil counters, who also looks a bit peaked. “And so do I. Aziraphale, please tell me you were smart enough to remember that sleep is good for you.”

“What?”

“So. Many. Fucking. Idiots,” Israfil whinges. “In Heaven. So many. *Angels don’t sleep!* they proclaim. I told them that’s why their heads are jammed up their own arses so far they can’t find daylight any longer!”

“Yeah, it’s definitely time for him to sleep. If he starts ranting, he’ll never stop.” Crowley grabs Aziraphale’s hand and pulls him up from the sofa. He conjures forth a pillow, watches as Israfil all but drops onto it, and then calls forth a blanket that smells like it came from the linen closet.

Aziraphale’s eyes widen when Israfil’s hair briefly turns white just before he turns into a white serpent of a size with Crowley. His scales have hints of rainbow prisms at the edges. “Er,” is all Aziraphale can manage, watching as Israfil coils up under the blanket.

“It’s a thing,” Crowley says. “Sometimes we just sleep better that way. Am I seeing you off, angel? I mean, you can stay if you want. Or…Library. Or whatever.”

“Crowley.” Aziraphale gently grips Crowley’s arms before he starts flailing. “Do you want me to
“You don’t sleep,” Crowley replies a bit desperately, which doesn’t make any sense at all until—

“Oh!” Aziraphale tries to bite back a foolish smile and can’t manage it. “I don’t necessarily need or want to sleep right now, no, but I…don’t mind. If you don’t mind.” His smile widens. “I’ve seen your bed. It’s not as if there is a lack of room.”

“I get twitchy!” Crowley protests. “And probably clingy. I didn’t want to. Uhm.”

“Presume?” Aziraphale guesses, and Crowley nods. “My dear,” he says softly, “I don’t mind your clinging in the slightest.”

Crowley stares at him, unblinking. “You don’t. Not at all.” He lets out a faint puff of air. “Zira, can I do something? Without you thinking it’s weird?”

“That depends on what it is.”

Aziraphale can feel the muscles in Crowley’s arms shift as he flexes his fingers. “Can I touch your hair?”

“That isn’t what I expected to hear, to be honest,” Aziraphale says in surprise. “Nor is it the slightest bit odd. Of course you can.”

Crowley hesitates, pupils flaring, before he reaches out with both hands and touches just the ends of Aziraphale’s hair with fluttery fingertips. He seems encouraged by the fact that Aziraphale doesn’t protest, and after a moment runs his fingers through Aziraphale’s hair the same way Aziraphale was running his fingers through Crowley’s feathers.

Aziraphale contemplates melting into a puddle on the floor.

“I always wanted to know,” Crowley whispers. “I wanted to know if it was as soft as it looked.”

“And?” Aziraphale manages to say, his throat nearly too tight for words. He’d thought he understood all the ideas, definitions, and potentials of intimacy. He was very much wrong.

“Fine. Wiry. I think maybe it’s better.” Crowley abruptly drops his hands before turning away. “I should have stayed,” he murmurs. “I should have asked for your name.”

Aziraphale follows when Crowley walks away, heading directly to the hall and the bedroom at its far end. “What do you mean?”

Crowley hesitates in front of the open bedroom doorway, doing his twitchy, all-over hesitation bit that is always reflected by the way his eyes dart around. “Come in. Please.”

Aziraphale nods and steps inside, feeling unaccountably nervous. He has been in Crowley’s bedroom before, just last night in fact, but to be invited in is a direct implication of intimacy that doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with sex. Bedrooms have been considered sacrosanct spaces by humans for almost as long as the concept of private sleeping chambers has existed.

Much like the rest of the flat, it is very modern, if far more austere. The biggest difference is that the entire room is carpeted, which seems to make the room feel more peaceful.

Crowley surprises him again by turning and undoing the buttons on Aziraphale’s waistcoat with
rather single-minded intensity. “Are you planning on undressing me?”

The corner of Crowley’s mouth quirks up. “Not unless you want me to. This is self-defence, angel. You aren’t in the habit of dressing for bed, and I don’t want to wake up stuck to your buttons. Or that belt buckle. That would hurt.”

Aziraphale lets out an undignified whimper.

“What? What did I say?”

Aziraphale whimpers again. Just the idea of trying to explain it means he has no words left at all. Crowley raises an eyebrow and then smiles. “Angel, your mind is absolutely pornographic.”

“That’s not helping!” Aziraphale rasps out.

“Sorry. I’m not meaning to tease you.”

“Liar.”

Crowley grins and then makes off with Aziraphale’s belt. “Yep. Take off your bloody shoes, Zira. You don’t wear shoes to bed. Usually. Oh, that didn’t help either, did it?”

Aziraphale squeezes his eyes shut and tries to think of ice cubes. He also thinks he has read far too many of the wrong sort of books.

“Oh, fine.” Aziraphale lets out a startled squawk when his shoes are suddenly gone from his feet and he drops a half-inch to the carpet. “Maybe with a bit more warning next time, then,” Crowley decides, sounding very amused.

“Oh, for—Crowley, why are you like this?” Aziraphale asks. The hell with ice cubes. He needs the Arctic Circle.

“Because I was literally made to be like this. What’s your excuse?” Crowley holds out his hand. “I will mostly be a perfect gentleman, I swear, because sticky is still a problem.”

Crowley has silk sheets. Sand-washed, silken perfection. “Are you deliberately trying to tempt me to live like a hedonist?” Aziraphale asks, sighing into the soft, gentle give of the mattress.

“Please, you already are a hedonist.” Crowley flings his arm over Aziraphale’s chest before he digs his nose into Aziraphale’s shoulder. “Food, drink, bathhouses, pornography, tailored shirts—you just forgot beds, sheets, towels, and showers.”

“Fair enough.” Aziraphale flicks his fingers at the light switch, plunging the room into familiar London darkness, which is never really dark at all.*[439] “Can I finally ask about Catherine and the sticky incident?”


Aziraphale smiles. “What is with the sticky?”

“She liked syrup,” Crowley whines, sounding completely pathetic. “She liked syrup in places and it was everywhere and I couldn’t even look at a jar of honey for a century afterwards without feeling nauseas.”

“You slept through the next century,” Aziraphale points out.
“And that is part of the reason why!” Crowley retorts, pressing his face more firmly against Aziraphale’s shoulder. “I didn’t have to look at any fucking jars of honey!”

Aziraphale is trying very hard not to laugh. It wouldn’t be nice. “Then let me reassure you, my dear, that I have absolutely no interest in food play.”

“Oh, for shit’s sake, it has a name?”

“So does that, I’m afraid,” Aziraphale can’t resist saying.

Crowley screeches against Aziraphale’s shirt and then bites him for good measure. “Stop with the things and the other things! You’re terrible! You’re a completely rotten bastard of an angel!”

“And you love me anyway,” Aziraphale says. Then he holds his breath. He hadn’t quite meant to say that so casually.

Crowley’s arm tightens over his chest. “Yeah. I’ve loved you forever.”

“Don’t be silly. Forever is what you’re meant to declare after the love is admitted.”

“No.” Crowley lifts up and pins him with a rather stern look, distant streetlights reflected in his eyes. “Forever,” he insists, and lies back down.

Aziraphale is about to protest when he can sense/feel Crowley attempting to tell him something by projected thought. Crowley has never deliberately done so before, mostly because they both had quite legitimate concerns about angels and demons combining in a way that might be rather like sodium greeting water.*[440]

It’s a scene of Heaven, from the very old days, long before war existed. It is, Aziraphale realizes with a shock, a view of himself. The angle is odd, but very close. His hair was still quite long, which he did away with the moment he had the opportunity to do so—it kept feeling itchy on his shoulders, which was distracting. He has to be young, given he hadn’t yet learned not to have his sword out of reach.

He’s writing on a scroll. Aziraphale thinks back through careful partitions of memory and suspects that may be the very first time he ever did such a thing.

*And that*, he hears Crowley say in his thoughts, is the very first time I wondered what someone’s hair might feel like. Yours, in particular. That is followed by a wave of ancient grief. I never knew your name. I wanted to. You even told me once, during the war, but I couldn’t hear what you’d said.


“Mm.” Crowley releases a sigh that seems to ooze from him until he’s all but a melted puddle against Aziraphale’s side. Not this face. Another memory floats into Aziraphale’s view. This one isn’t smooth or calm, but flickers of rushed thoughts that were briefly calmed by the sight of a cherub guarding the Library. *I thought you were so brave. I still think so. Bravest, crankiest bastard angel, who told off an Emperor for serving sloppy food because it was undignified.*

“Domitian deserved it.”*[441] Aziraphale says automatically, but is distracted by his own memory of that moment in front of the Library. It had been a male angel he’d seen, or at least one that was male in body. The memory is very unreliable, as if Aziraphale tried to forget it on purpose. Dark skin, dark hair, but green eyes—the vibrant green of the tropical plants in the Garden.

Aziraphale gasps. “That was you?”
He can tell from the wobbly sensation of Crowley’s thoughts that he’s nearly asleep. *Totally was. Sorry. Didn’t want to be mistaken for my brother. It was always so awkward, because it was usually someone flirting, and then I had to listen to it.*

“Zaherael.” Aziraphale swallows hard, feeling tears prickle at the corners of his eyes. “That’s why your name seemed familiar. I just couldn’t remember why.”

“That’s why I’m saying forever,” Crowley murmurs against Aziraphale’s shoulder, hot breath soaking through fabric, dampening Aziraphale’s skin. He shivers in response. “Because it was. Because it is.”

Aziraphale feels a blossoming sense of wonder and awe. Who else would know what forever means but the first beings of Creation, those who came before God decided to put the wheels of time into motion? “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Aziraphale can feel Crowley smile against his skin. “Shut up and go to sleep, angel.”

Aziraphale lets out a brief snort of amusement. “Very well,” he agrees. To his surprise, he does sleep. He dreams of a black serpent lounging across his shoulders, his attention on the scroll in Aziraphale’s lap as Aziraphale carefully marks out the next letter of what would eventually become a Celestial alphabet.

A bright light causes them both to look up. An incredible nebula is blooming across the dark sky, full of beautiful shades of red, violet, and gold.

*I helped make that one,* the serpent says happily.

Aziraphale smiles up at the emerging stars. “You did an excellent job, my dear.”

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[422] It’s a toss-up, really. Robo-calling is certainly one of the most annoying.

[423] In 1883, the effects of the explosion were recorded by tidal meters as far away as the English Channel. Crowley is being literal about the rumbling.

[424] 2008 would have been a great year, but then two demons handed Crowley a basket with an Antichrist baby in it.

[425] Hofniel is about to experience the absolute worst run of bad luck it’s possible for an angel to have in Heaven…which, as it turns out, is fairly awful. For a decade. He’ll never really understand why…or why whenever he goes to see Raphael, the archangel stares at him as if he wants to set him on fire.

[426] Fuck certain sunken Russian submarines. It isn’t Crowley’s fault that they sank, but they sure liked doing so when he happened to be aboard one of them, trying to do his stupid job.

[427] He will be letting that moment go exactly Never.

[428] The Nephilim were proof enough of that.
Aziraphale is aware of this because he is doing the exact same thing.

It was surviving very well until eleven years of Apocalypse preparation and prevention occurred. By the time they were both respectively put on trial, it had developed very large threadbare patches.

They are always, literally, the best slippers in existence. Crowley is never going to admit how long he’s kept a pair of them.

French does not count, because French was one of Crowley’s inventions.

“I would die a thousand deaths if it means that you can live your whole life.”

Dammit, Hastur.

Basically, the origin of the rule against pork in Judaism is: “Stop eating that because you’re not cooking it thoroughly, and you keep dying of trichinosis.” The rule against pork in Islam comes from: “Stop eating that because those used to be people.” The rule against pork in Christianity is rather simple in comparison: “Don’t forget the bacon or we’ll excommunicate you.”

The family’s matriarch stole his waistcoat right at the start of things. He does hope she’s going to bring it back.

Later, he’ll realize he probably just cursed himself, but he isn’t a demon anymore, so maybe not? Then again, habits are habits, and a lot of people are very angry with him right now.

If you can watch that scene without tearing up, you have a physical condition that prevents the formation of tears and you should probably get that checked out by a doctor.

The 2003 London Blackout was Crowley’s fault only in the sense that he nearly electrocuted himself on an electrical grid when someone much larger than himself decided he needed to be tossed onto an electrical grid. He still has no idea why that lightshow didn’t discorporate him, but all of London might have made the attempt to kill him if they’d ever found out about it.

Boom. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTFBXJ3Zd_4

Domitian angered everyone to such an extent that even his own wife helped with his assassination. https://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/titus_domitian.html
We'll Make It Out Alive

Chapter Summary

Beelzebub is just fine where they are in Hell, thank you. Raphael disagrees.

Or:

Beelzebub does not like sushi, healers are terrifying, and Adam Young's godparents teach him how to fly.

Chapter Notes

That's it, that's the epilogue. *thump* It's been a hell of a trip in the best ways, even if I hit "OMG TOO EXHAUSTED TO SEE STRAIGHT" around about chapter 17.

I hope you guys enjoy it as much as I do. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s Crowley,” the first demon to look up hisses. Then they all look up from their grubby desks and mouldering paperwork, watching as the smug-faced ginger demon strolls through the halls of Hell as if he owns the place. Several of them hesitate and then follow along a safe distance behind Crowley. A demon who is immune to holy water is one to be feared, but also…also…

A demon who is immune to holy water is one to be admired—in secret, of course. Always and only in the darkest parts of the heart, where a demon’s soul might still lurk as a faint spark of warmth.

The Lords of Hell—though mysteriously, not their Prince—had, of course, told and threatened every demon within reach and hearing that the bathtub incident was a fluke. It had never happened. An example had to be made, that was all, and if it meant putting the literal fear of God into their demon army so that they would all remember to obey, then that’s exactly what would be done.

The rather bubbly, messy, and shrieking fate of Hell’s seneschal was ignored with determined, silent terror. That alone had temptations and bureaucracy churning out progress at numbers not seen since the Black Death had tempted half of humanity into giving up possessions, body parts, emotions, and their entire souls, if only it meant their loved ones would survive the plague.*[442]

Lord Dagon is one of those who follow Crowley, but not because of any spark of spiritual hope. He quite likes his place in the grand scheme of things, and feels no urge to change.

Dagon follows Crowley because of Crowley’s thrice-blessed daring, and because Crowley has always been the entertaining sort. He’s even dressed in his usual ridiculously dramatic human fashion, those unnecessary sunglasses included.

Besides, if Crowley is going to do anything stupid, like confronting anyone over the matter of his trial, or his current lack of employment, that will definitely be entertaining. Most likely it will be a
short spectacle, but still great fun to watch.

Dagon is feeling so cheerful about this prospect—and about Barachiel recently introducing them to good coffee, as well as less bureaucratic fights regarding the depositing of souls—that he doesn’t think to contemplate stabbing Crowley in the back before the idiot demon can arrive at his destination. Dagon even deigns to hold out his arm and give a certain white-haired, wrathful demon a cold look.

“Remember yourself, Nameless One,” Dagon says. “Your punishment was named by our great Prince.”

The demon formerly known as Hastur grows in thwarted vexation. “Fine. But I’m following him. I want to know what the bastard is up to.”

Dagon rolls his eyes and continues along. He doesn’t care what the Nameless One does as long as it does not go against their Master’s wishes, and their Master was…rather specific. Crowley is not to be accosted by the forces of Hell, not for any reason, nor is the archangel Raphael—whoever the Heaven Raphael is, anyway. Dagon has a vague memory of once knowing them, but if it was during the war, then he doesn’t particularly care. Whoever they are, they’re an archangel, and it’s not his job to give a blessing about archangels.

Dagon raises both eyebrows and grins when Crowley strolls directly into the throne room. Humans can keep their ridiculous telly. This is real entertainment!

Lord Beelzebub, who has been sulking for sodding days now, abruptly stands when Crowley comes to a casual halt at the bottom of the dais of Beelzebub’s iron throne. It’s one of the three Higher Throne Rooms, of course and this one belongs to Beelzebub. Dagon’s fellow lord even kept the bathtub from the failed execution attempt, calling it a reminder of the fate awaiting traitors.

“Crowley,” Beelzebub snarls. The buzzing of a thousand angry flies fills the air. “You dare to show your face down here again?”

“I dare a lot of things, really. It’s fun; you should try it sometime,” Crowley replies.

Dagon sighs and runs his tongue along his needled teeth in pleasure. Yes, this will be worth it.

Beelzebub hesitates a moment before the angry buzzing returns. “If you are here to plead for a return of your plazze in Hell, Crowley, then you are a fool. I don’t care what our Mazzter hazz inzztructed; you are a traitor, and you will alwayzz be treated azz one!”

“That’s a shame. I don’t want to treat you that way at all,” Crowley says.

Dagon frowns. Wait. That…did not sound proper.

Beelzebub’s eyes, always dark as pitch in Hell, narrow to furious slits. “You will zzay what you mean, traitor, or I will have your tongue for myzzelf.”

“Oh, already with the flirting? That’s a grand start.” Crowley grins. “There’s just a bit of a problem here, sweetheart.”

Dagon nearly chokes on his own spit. That the demon Crowley would dare—!

“Flirting?” Beelzebub shouts in a fury. “Problemzz? The only problem izz your gall, your arroganzze, your—”
“Wing color?” Crowley interrupts, and reveals his spread wings.

Dagon takes several steps back and tries not to trip over the demons crowded along behind him. Those feathers are not black. Those feathers are golden. There are dripping hints of soot left at the tips, but—no.

No. It can’t be.

Crowley takes off those Heaven-blasted sunglasses. His eyes aren’t like a snake at all. They’re blue.

What?

“I’m not my brother.”

The words are whispered and carried by the demons trying to crowd into every corner of the throne room. *Not my brother, Not my brother, Not my brother* repeats in a seemingly endless, maddening echo.

The archangel tucks the sunglasses away inside a jacket that Dagon only now realizes is not black. It’s an exceptionally dark color, but not black. Then the archangel takes a step forward into a rare shaft of light, revealing that the shirt lurking beneath his jacket is an obscenely bright blue.

_Not Crowley_, Dagon thinks, and then blesses viciously. They should’ve known. Crowley hasn’t had long hair like that in two millennia, but this bloody archangel otherwise looks *exactly* like the traitor!

Beelzebub isn’t shouting any longer. They are merely staring. “Raphael.”

“Hello, Ba’al Zəbûl, beloved Prince of the Second Gate of the great City.”

Dagon reels back along with the others. To call a demon by a name they have rejected is a very fast way to earn the worst of tortures in the deepest pits of Hell.

“There izz no zzuch perzzon any longer,” Beelzebub snarls. “They died long ago.”

“Nah, no, I don’t really think so. I spent over six thousand years mostly dead, so I’ve sort of got a knack for spotting who’s dead and who isn’t,” the archangel says. “You’re not dead, love, but you’ve got a terrible case of myiasis going on there.”

Dagon feels a moment of detached curiosity. He didn’t know there was a name for that thing Beelzebub did with the flies. Now that he knows it, he can curse people with it. That will be fun.

The archangel’s eyes flicker to watch as several flies emerge from Beelzebub’s neck, joining the others that hover like a cloud in the room. “Yes, we’ll be fixing that.” The archangel holds out his hand. “Right now, actually.”

“There izz nothing to fixxx,” Beelzebub hisses.

The archangel’s eyes flare a brighter blue. Dagon throws ups his hands to save himself when a sudden burst of fucking Heavenly light rings out, following by the sharper tone of something divine striking the floor.

When Dagon cautiously lowers his arms, the archangel is still holding out one hand in imperious instruction, but he’s bearing a dark, wooden staff in his other. The symbols on it make Dagon’s head hurt.

Dagon swallows. Now he remembers why he’s terrified of archangels. Barachiel is always too polite
“Right now, Ba’al,” the archangel orders. “Healer trumps you being Lord or Prince of anything. Move your arse.”

Dagon lets out a pathetic whimper of terror when Beelzebub, still scowling, obeys the archangel and walks down the dais to meet him. “I don’t have to. I am… volunteering,” they sniff.

“Don’t be stupid, sweetheart. It doesn’t become you,” the archangel chastises them, and then grabs Beelzebub’s hand. Dagon watches in fascination as all of the wounds and sores vanish from Beelzebub’s pale skin. Then their hair begins to shine with—ew, health!—and becomes a softer dark brown instead of stark, sooty black. The pitch of darkness leaves their eyes, which are sort of a pale blue-grey that doesn’t fit in with the denizens of Hell at all.

Beelzebub looks horrified before they turn, lean over, and start retching onto the floor.

“Yes, go ahead, let it out—oh, wow, that’s bad,” the archangel comments in a mild voice. “I don’t think you’ll miss the pneumatic infection. Or the—oh, that’s really disgusting. You lot need to get out and about in the fresh air some more. This place is not healthy in the slightest.”

“It’s Hell!” a brave (stupid) demon yells. “That’s the point!”

The red-haired archangel turns his head to glare at the demon. “Tell me, do you actually enjoy suffering?”

“Er, well—uh…”

The correct answer is yes, of course, absolutely. There is no other acceptable response.

“No,” the demon admits, rather shame-faced.

“Then practice your fucking free will and go take a walk in the sun every day. For God’s sake, everyone’s gone stupid in six millennia regarding the basics self-care!” The archangel pats Beelzebub on the back. “All right, one more thing. Don’t fight it, or I’ll club you over the head and do it the hard way.”

“What—” Beelzebub gasps, and then they are sicking up something so foul that even Dagon finds it to be nauseating. It’s a complex bit of spellwork, and it reminds him far too much of those nasty Beasts that pop out to play if you fuck about with mirror magic.

“No,” Beelzebub whimpers. “No, you were meant to leave that be!”

“You nearly killed Crowley with that,” the archangel suddenly growls. “You nearly killed a healer, Ba’al! You know what that would have meant!”

Beelzebub straightens up, looking ill and angry. The archangel offers them a handkerchief, which Beelzebub snatches away and uses to wipe their face. “That traitor is no healer!”

The archangel smiles and bends down to peer directly into Beelzebub’s eyes. “How is it do you think that I’m standing here, then?”

The archangel’s smile widens when Beelzebub looks uncertain. “Don’t you remember his name?”

“Of course not! I don’t—that is—” Beelzebub growls, thwarted, before the expression fades into confusion. “Zaherael?”
“There, see? You’re already doing better now that you’ve purged that awful shit from your body,” the archangel praises them.

“Crowley is Zaherael. Zaherael is Crowley—” Beelzebub’s eyes widen in horror. “I nearly killed a healer.”

“Yes, nearly, but it didn’t happen. It’s fine, completely fine.” The archangel holds out his hand again. “You need to go for a walk, with me, right now. You look like hell, sweetheart.”

Beelzebub, with the sort of dazed expression reserved for those who’ve just been clubbed over the head with a baby seal,\[^{[448]}\] accepts the archangel’s hand. “Uh…all right.”

“Hey!” Dagon’s voice cracks, which is upsetting. “Hey!” he shouts again. “You can’t just take off with our Lord Beelzebub, you fucking bastard angel!”

The archangel pauses and smirks at him. “Honestly, it isn’t as if I won’t bring them back. Besides, Dagana, you’ve got to remember: healers are neutral.”

Dagon stares after the archangel and his departing fellow Lord of Hell. The other demons are doing the same. “Oh—that’ll not do—back to work, all of you!” Dagon yells in fury. “Nothing more to bloody see here! Out! All of you! Anyone I find in here after the rush is going to be scrubbing out the lowest level toilets with their tongues!”\[^{[449]}\]

“I hit that queer bloke over the head, and here he comes waltzing down here and makes off with our Lord,” the Nameless One growls in rage.

“Go the Heaven back to whatever your current assignment is, and forget about it!” Dagon orders. The Nameless One glares at him in pure hatred before stalking off.

_Healers are neutral_, Dagon repeats in mocking thought as he terrifies everyone else into returning to their posts. _What sort of shit nonsense is that?_

That question is followed by a much quieter thought, one which Dagon barely registers. _I know that archangel from somewhere, I just know it. Probably a complete wanker like all the rest of the pretty little bastard birds Upstairs._

The name Zaherael doesn’t really linger in any demon’s thoughts at all, but Crowley prefers it that way.

* * * *

Beelzebub has no idea why they chose to accompany Raphael onto the physical plane of Earth, up the stairs of a building, and into a strange room. They are aware, on some level, that they are…fond of the healer, who now calls himself Israfil. This journey is related to why Israfil insists upon calling Beelzebub by a name that is no longer theirs. However, it is inconsequential.

One does not disobey a healer. That was law before there were laws.

They are startled when Crowley appears from a hallway, dressed in black, his hair not groomed at all. Beelzebub wants to sneer at him, but one look from Israfil convinces them not to dare.
Crowley stops short and stares at Beelzebub. “Brother, why is my ex-boss sitting in my kitchen at nine in the morning?”

“Because I decided they needed fresh air.” Israfil gestures at the teacup sitting in front of Beelzebub. “Also, tea.”

“Tea.” Crowley looks down at the steaming cup, raising an eyebrow. “You drank any of that yet, Beelz?”

Beelzebub, feeling an odd sort of relief that Crowley still acknowledges their name, shakes their head. “I have not. I do not understand the point.”

“Right.” Crowley is suddenly looming over Beelzebub, his wings spread, the fire of God in his eyes. “DRINK THE FUCKING TEA. NOW.”

Then Crowley leans back, wings gone. He sniffs once and gives himself a brief shake. “Going for a shower. Have fun, you two.”

Beelzebub has already drunk half the tea in a complete panic. They’d forgotten. They’d entirely forgotten why healers were always to be obeyed.

Healers are terrifying.

Observations come to them slowly. Crowley’s wings were not soot black. They are darkened bronze with golden tips, like they had been when Crowley was Zaherael. Crowley does not bear his brother’s blue eyes, but has chosen to keep the golden eyes of the tempting serpent.

Golden tips. Archangel. The first Seven.

“Demons cannot be redeemed,” Beelzebub whispers in horror.

“Go ahead and keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better, sweetheart,” Israfil says.
Beelzebub, feeling entirely out of sorts, takes another sip of the tea they were ordered to drink.

It isn’t so bad, actually. The liquid does strange things to their tongue that isn’t entirely unpleasant. It is sweet and bitter, smooth and something else, perhaps…astringent? Yes, that word fits very well.

Israfil looks so very pleased when he discovers that the teacup is empty. “Thank you.”

Beelzebub glances up at him. “For what?”

Israfil reaches out and brushes Beelzebub’s cheek with his fingertips. “For trying.”

They are not fond of the nervous fluttery sensation in their midsection. It doesn’t seem natural.

Israfil offers them a second cup of tea. Beelzebub decides that it is safer to agree.

When Crowley returns from the “shower,” his hair is still damp, and the feel of humidity in the air accompanies him. Ah; a shower is a method of cleansing with water. Crowley is perfectly coifed in the way Beelzebub is accustomed to viewing Crowley, though he has forgone the sunglasses.

Israfil sits down near Beelzebub, in touching distance, which does more strange things to Beelzebub’s midsection. Crowley accepts a cup of tea from his brother and sits down in a chair across from Beelzebub, resting his bare feet on the stone countertop. Beelzebub has a vague thought about sanitation, but without any real understanding of why. “So,” Crowley says, and then falls silent.
“Yes?” Beelzebub acknowledges.

“Irsafil told me that he wants to convince you to give Earthly pleasures a decent go of it instead of me having to order you to do so,” Crowley explains. “Which, I’d really prefer not to do. I’d forgotten I could do that, and it felt really odd.”

“You are a healer, Zaherael.”

“Crowley. Crowley,” the healer insists, rolling his eyes. Beelzebub also finds that to be a relief, though they don’t know why. “I’m a healer who doesn’t really remember how to do most of his fucking job, to be honest. I’m used to things being a bit different, and you know? I was pretty damned good at what I did, so let’s give that a shot, instead.”

Beelzebub frowns. Crowley has always liked to speak using too many words. “What is it you mean?”

“Well, I know you don’t want to be up here. You want to be in Hell. God knows why, to be honest. It’s a complete shithole.” Crowley takes a sip of tea and briefly closes his eyes...a sign of pleasure, Beelzebub thinks. “What you need to remember, Beelz, is that for us, being on Earth is being in the den of sin itself.”

Beelzebub feels a stab of...of curiosity. Yes. That. “Explain, please.”

“Almost everything on this plane of existence is designed for physical pleasure,” Crowley says. “It’s hedonism. It’s all the pleasures denied in both Heaven and Hell. Earth is every little temptation a demon is supposed to nudge you into trying, because how much closer will that take you to the edge? How much closer will it take your soul to the brush that’ll tarnish it forever?”

Crowley smirks at Beelzebub. “It’s all about existing, and experiencing, and chasing one thrill to the next just to find out what it might be like. What does this taste like? What does that feel like? What sounds are pleasure, and what sounds are horrific? What can I do to that person’s heart using just the right words?”

“You are—you’re tempting me!” Beelzebub blurts with a vague feeling of outrage.

“Yep.”

“I should actually disapprove of this, I really should,” Israfil says, “but if it means that you’ll figure out how to be a living being again instead of that parasitic-infected shell I found down in Hell, then my brother can tempt you all he likes.”

Crowley shrugs. “The thing is, all of it is just a part of living, Beelz. God made the Earth, but humans filled it with wonders. Haven’t you ever wanted to know why they didn’t just stay in that Garden? Why these buildings? Why beds? Why houses surrounded by flowers? Why silk and linens and cotton? Why sushi? Why tea?”

“What is sushi?”

Israfil smiles. “Oh, I sense interest.”

“I overheard the Archangel Gabriel complaining of it. He spoke of it as foul gross matter.”

Crowley snorts out a laugh. “Kicking Gabriel’s arse back into shape is going to be worse than dealing with any bit of stubbornness you think you have. He was designed to be a stubborn prick. You, at least, are not that much of a raging twat, Beelz.”
Beelzebub blinks a few times. That makes no sense. “I sentenced you to execution by holy water.”

“Gabriel sentenced an angel who had \textit{not} Fallen to execution by hellfire without even a mockery of a trial,” Crowley counters. “Which one’s worse?”

“The lack of trial is…concerning,” Beelzebub admits. “But I did worse to you. I nearly killed you with an ancient and powerful spell.”

“God complimented it, too,” Crowley says. “They said it was beautifully precise, if completely fouled up by the intent behind it.”

Beelzebub finds that to be the most incomprehensible thing they have heard in eons. “God complimented my work?”

“It’s not like She isn’t there, Beelz,” Crowley reminds them, but casually, as if it isn’t important right now.

“I watched Raphael die,” Beelzebub says, and hates the weakness in their voice. “It blackened my heart. It blackened my wings. I experienced what the loss of love did to an angel. I saw what it did to you as the gold fell from your wings and drifted away in the wind. I never wanted anyone who’d pledged themselves to our Lord and Prince to ever feel that way again. There would be no suffering. It would be a swift, merciful death.”

“Yeah, not so much on that swift part, really,” Crowley disagrees, grimacing.

“Oh, sweetheart.” Beelzebub glances over to see that Israfil is resting his face on one hand. “I understand, but for God’s sake, that was really taking things a bit too far.”

“You were \textit{gone},” Beelzebub rasps. Suddenly it is difficult for this corporation to breathe. “You were mine and you were \textit{my heart} and then you were \textit{gone}!”

Israfil reaches out to take their hand. “God tried to tell you that I would return to you one day, but you weren’t listening to Them any longer. But still, that isn’t…I’m sorry, Ba’al. No one meant for it to happen, but I’m so sorry that I left you alone.”

Beelzebub hates that their eyes are wet and dripping. It feels like their corporation is betraying them. “Where have you been all of this time?”

“Right here.” Crowley places his hands over the part of his body that hides his corporation’s heart. “Right where he could heal in safety, and never be found.” Then he pulls a handkerchief out of the firmament and hands it to Beelzebub.

The handkerchief is black silk. It smells like softness and wild things. It feels like sweetness upon their skin.

Beelzebub doesn’t think Crowley meant the handkerchief to be a temptation. It becomes one, regardless. They are never giving it back to him.

“Is that why you did not die in the holy water?” Beelzebub asks. “I thought it was because you’d gone native.”

Crowley tilts his head and gains a sly, serpent’s smile. “If you swear an oath—a real oath—not to tell anyone else, then I’ll tell you a secret that only four beings in existence know. That’d make you lucky number five. Want to give it a go?”
Beelzebub thinks on it and then gives him their oath. If they break it, they will die, but it is not a difficulty; they will never break their word.

Crowley tells them the truth.

They screech in thwarted vexation, slosh out their tea, and then admit, resentfully, that it had been very well done. Hell had put a Principality into a bathtub of holy water. A bleeding angel!

“How?” they ask.

“We’ve known each other for over six thousand years,” Crowley answers. “It really wasn’t all that difficult to switch places for a day.”

Beelzebub narrows their eyes. “Then I could be speaking to the Principality right now.”

“Oh, nah. Israfil wouldn’t want me to fuck with you that way.” Crowley lifts his head, looking off to the west. “Aziraphale’s at his shop, anyway. Rather resentfully opening for an hour, too.”

Beelzebub feels a sharp pang in their chest. They had once shared that with Raphael. They had always known where Raphael was in Heaven.

“It’s not too late, you know,” Israfil murmurs, squeezing Beelzebub’s fingers in a gentle grip that is more like a caress.

Beelzebub glares at him. “I am a demon.”

Israfil smiles. “Who gives a fuck?”

His response is so startling that Beelzebub forgets to be angry. They have not been not-angry in a very long time.

It is…nice.

The Principality arrives after one hour and thirty minutes pass, accompanied by several scents that are far more intriguing than tea. “Sorry I’m late, someone from the local uni needed to do a bit of research, and—” The Principality stops and stares at Beelzebub. “Oh. That’s why you requested four of them. Very well, then.”

Beelzebub stares down at the lidded cup that is placed in front of them. Then a something is placed on a plate next to it. “What is this?”

“Coffee. Gimme gimme gimme,” Crowley says to the Principality, who smiles and hands over another one of the cups. “Oh, God, thank you.” Then he pries the lid off and starts drinking the contents as if his life depends on it.

“You have an addiction, my dear,” the Principality murmurs, but in a very fond way that makes Beelzebub feel as if they’re intruding. “Lord Beelzebub—can I avoid using the Lord title? It feels very inappropriate.”

Beelzebub considers it. “The rubber duck was funny. You may refer to me without my title.”

The Principality looks briefly outraged. “Crowley!”

“What?” Crowley grins at the Principality. “Oath sworn not to tell anyone else, and it was for a good cause.”
The Principality rolls his eyes. “Of course it was. Heavily spiced chai tea,” he says of the cup he places before Israfil. “As requested. At least you are civilized.”

“It’s not about civility, it’s about being twitchy. Zaherael is twitchy enough for all of us even before the coffee,” Israfil responds.

Beelzebub watches carefully as Israfil pries the lid from the cup and then copies the motion. What is inside is pale, with white froth above it, and little bits of something dark sprinkled over the froth. “What is this?”

“That is decadence in a cup,” Crowley tells them. “Caffè mocha with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. It tastes like sin and kicks like a bloody horse afterwards. The other thing is a croissant, but I’m not as fond of them as Aziraphale is. Or bread in general, really.”

“They are quite decent croissants, for all that they were not baked in Paris,” the Principality offers while handing one to Israfil. Beelzebub notes that Israfil looks far more enthused about the idea of croissants than Crowley.

Beelzebub looks at the Principality. “You do not mind sharing a table with a demon?”

The Principality gives Beelzebub a vastly amused look that makes them feel uncomfortable. “Beelzebub, I shared a great deal with Crowley for over six thousand years. Demons are not a new experience. I only have difficulties with demons who decide to be rude.”

That feels like a hint regarding manners. Beelzebub lifts the cup to demonstrate their understanding and sniffs it. There is richness and warmth inside, sweetness like the tea but not quite the same, tanginess and intrigue. They take a sip and feel their eyes widen.

Crowley is a liar. This goes far beyond decadence. This is amazing.

The croissant has texture and oil and unpleasantness. Beelzebub decides that bread is also not for them. Israfil immediately claims it. Beelzebub does not know how he can eat two of those...things. The chocolate espresso coffee drink with its whipped cream is much preferable.

“Okay, so: I promised Aziraphale that I was going to show him a certain film before...well, shit happened,” Crowley announces after the coffee is, unfortunately, gone. “You can stick around for it, or Israfil can drag you off somewhere else, I don’t care which.”

“A film.” Beelzebub wonders if this is meant to be another temptation.

“No, see, if I was trying to tempt you by cinema, I’d pick something else entirely,” Crowley says at once.

Beelzebub scowls. “What is this film?”

“It’s an animated film that was aimed at children, but really, it’s for anyone who appreciates mischief and insanity,” Crowley explains with another faint shrug. “Most humans really liked it. Heaven hated it, which should immediately be a reason to watch it right there.”

“Why on Earth did Heaven hate Aladdin?” Aziraphale asks in surprise.

“I don’t know, Zira. It was either the magic bit, the freedom bit, or the fact that it made people happy, and how dare a movie studio do such a terrible thing to humanity?”

Beelzebub glances over to discover that Israfil is giving them a look. It makes their insides feel wrong
again, and is accompanied by a sense of guilt. “Stop manipulating me.”

Israfil grins. “Not if it’s working, sweetheart.”

“Fine! I will stay and watch this film. I will hate it.”

They don’t hate it. That is truly irritating, but they are too distracted by the film’s colorful nature to concentrate on their irritation at the moment.

They do notice when Israfil, sitting next to them on a small “sofa,” takes their hand again and simply holds it, loose and pliant. Israfil’s long fingers stroke across their skin every so often. Beelzebub does not know how to respond, so they choose to ignore it as much as possible—even if it is a pleasing sensation.

They also notice that on the other sofa, the Principality and Crowley are sprawled down the sofa’s full length, treating it as a bed instead of sitting on it properly. Crowley is using the Principality as a place to rest his head and part of his body, a position of entrapment that the Principality does not seem to mind. The Principality is even touching Crowley between his shoulder blades, exactly where his wings would be if they were manifested on this plane.

Beelzebub glances away from the singing on the screen to look at Israfil. “Are they?” they mouth.

Israfil nods. “For a very long time now,” he adds quietly. “Their only problem was admitting it.”

That terrible, fluttery, almost nauseating feeling in their midsection is back. Israfil does not care about the color of Beelzebub’s wings because he knows already that it will not matter.

It is more difficult to concentrate on the film after that realization, but the flying carpet is intriguing.

Ugh, romance. Devotion. Love.

Beelzebub slumps further down on the sofa. Their wings want to present. They want to hiss.

They would like Israfil to look at them that way again.

Fuck.

The film concludes with the frenetic genie’s freedom. Beelzebub does not like that the scene makes their chest hurt. They don’t know what that joy is like any longer…but they are still glad for the genie. How very odd.

Crowley and Israfil insist that they’re all going out to lunch when the film is done. Beelzebub does not realize this includes them, as well, until they are out on the street, walking next to the Principality, and completely baffled.

“They sort of just happen,” the Principality says, and Beelzebub nods. “You may or may not like sushi, but this particular restaurant is one of my favorite places to eat it outside of visiting Japan.” The Principality begins to explain the concept of sushi and its origins, which are more interesting than Beelzebub suspected they would be. The Principality is well-versed in most of the Earth’s history. Beelzebub is…not.

Then Crowley and Israfil, seemingly bored by the explanation, link arms and begin singing the songs from the film. In public. On the street. Loudly.

The Principality speeds up his walking, a blush staining his face. Beelzebub, curious, keeps pace
with them.

“I am desperately pretending not to know who they are right now,” the Principality explains while Israfil and Crowley fill the air with a rather accurate, on-key repetition of the whole new world song from the flying carpet scene.

“That seems very wise,” Beelzebub agrees, and remains in the Principality’s company. Healers are terrifying. Also, they are embarrassing. Beelzebub knows that the street-singing isn’t part of the tempting. That is Crowley and his apparently God-given desire to fuck with other beings as often as possible. That Israfil is participating will only make that tendency worse.

They briefly remember a time when they loved the twins’ mischief. They remember laughter.

Beelzebub does not like sushi. It has texture and slime and chunks and sour and sweet and—well, they probably could have ejected the food more politely than they did, but some things are not meant to be endured.

“Sorry, sweetheart.” Israfil makes the rejected sushi vanish before anyone in the quiet restaurant notices. “It’s not really for everyone, but that’s all right.”

Beelzebub nods, appeased. They do like the restaurant itself, which is dimly lit in ways that feel soothing—oh, they aren’t meant to enjoy that. They decide to enjoy it, anyway. There is very quiet music lurking in the background, accompanied by the soft sound of running water from a quiet fountain composed of bamboo and some sort of artificial stone.

The Principality seems thoughtful. “Cooked, perhaps?”

“That might do it,” Crowley agrees.

“Vegetarian,” Israfil adds.

The Principality nods and then speaks to the chef in Japanese when the human approaches again. Beelzebub is annoyed to realize they don’t understand this particular human tongue. That is unacceptable.

The human chef returns with a plate that steams, releasing fragrance into the air that is immediately more appealing than the rolls of seaweed and raw fish. It is rice and odd, finely sliced vegetables, with hints of flavors that Beelzebub does not know how to identify. The food is…delicate. The flavors remain their own instead of the sushi’s terrible melding.

“Better,” Beelzebub pronounces. They would be willing to eat this again.

Again. That implies that they will…return. That they will repeat a day such as this.

“Bollocks, we broke them,” Crowley says after observing the expression on Beelzebub’s face.

“It’s just temporary breaking,” Israfil replies. Beneath the table, he rests his hand on Beelzebub’s thigh. “Still with us, sweetheart?”

Beelzebub blinks several times. Repeating this day means that they will repeat spending time with Israfil. “Yes. Yes, I’m…here.”

Israfil escorts Beelzebub back to the escalators that will take them Downstairs after the meal is complete. He is humming under his breath. The song is still one from the film, but at least he is not sharing the sound with everyone around them.
“Here.” Israfil hands them a sheet of folded paper. “I know there are telephones in hell. That’s the number to my mobile. I want you to call me once a day, every day. Healer’s orders, Ba’al. Even if the only word you can manage to say is ‘Hello.’ I still want to hear from you. All right?”

Beelzebub unfolds the paper long enough to read the string of numbers before folding it again, tucking it away in their jacket. “Healer’s orders. I understand.”

“Good.” Israfil touches their face with both hands, his fingertips resting along the line of their jaw. Something within them awakens in recognition; their eyes close just as Israfil kisses them. Upon the lips.

It is gentle. It tastes exactly the same as they remember.

They want to be angry with Israfil for the impudence, but the clear happiness on Israfil’s face stops them. That, and the feeling inside their chest. It feels…it feels.

The corner of Israfil’s mouth turns up in a mischievous smile. “Call me.”

“I will.” They stand in front of the escalators until Israfil walks away. His walk is not the sinuous glide that Crowley could never leave behind, but a confident stroll that makes the air around him seem to vibrate with ethereal energy.

They reach up and touch their lips. Then Ba’al turns and rides the escalators down to enter Below. They will telephone Israfil tomorrow, Ba’al resolves. They will say more words aside from Hello.

* * * * *

Adam wanders out to the apple grove out behind his house, still wondering if he dreamed last night’s message. He thought it was a message, anyway. It had been a bit weird, being back in that place that didn’t/did exist. It looked like barren sand with an empty sky, but it hadn’t felt barren. It felt like potential, like that same magical itch that’s always just under his skin.

He doesn’t use it, of course. Not ’less it’s really important, like saving Mrs. Baker’s cat from that weird flash flood, or keeping Brian out of really bad trouble last week when he hadn’t actually done the thing everyone thought Brian had done.

(It had turned out to be one of the Johnsonites, of course. Not Greasy, though, which was odd. Greasy seemed awfully preoccupied lately.*[450])

Either way, that demon from Not-Armageddon had been there. Except he hadn’t been a demon anymore, and his wings were absolutely wicked amazing as blackened gold. “We wanted to show you something without scaring the hell out of your parents,” Crowley’d said, dark glasses resting over his eyes. “About an hour before sunset tomorrow, so you won’t miss out on the fun that happens after dark. You’ve got apples nearby, right?”

Adam admitted that he did, and then the dream ended. When Adam opened his eyes, Dog had been giving him an odd look, but he wasn’t upset. Adam decided it couldn’t hurt to go out the next evening to see what’s what.

It’s Hallowe’en, so he’s in costume already. Pepper said he should totally go with a devil outfit.
Adam, his stomach tying itself in a knot, had rather firmly retorted, “Pirate.” Pirates are only a bit misguided. The devil costume just seems like…like inviting bad luck. Or it’d be like reminding people that Atlantis is still out there in the Atlantic because Adam forgot to put it back.

When he hooks up with the Them later, Adam will discover that Brian, Pepper, and Wensleydale all decided to go out as pirates, too. It will make for a fun evening.*[451] Right now, though, there are apples, and wandering past a very old car in pristine condition. Adam grins at the black car, which is so bloody cool. It’s definitely the sort of car a not-demon would drive.*[452]

There are three people waiting in the apple grove instead of the two Adam expected. He slows down, tilting his hat and then pulling off his eyepatch so he can get a better look.

The blond angel is still very much an angel, though he seems to have calmed down a lot. Aziraphale, Adam thinks in recognition. Then other information just slots itself into place, like it usually does: Principality. Cherub. Guardian of the Eastern Gate of Eden. Rather completely married to Anthony Crowley, but they forgot the paperwork part.

Adam blinks a few times and grins. Okay, yeah, that does explain a bit of their weirdness back in August.

He looks at Crowley, who is leaning against a tree with his arms crossed. More information slots in, aside from the marriage bit: Zaherael. Last of the First Seven (or sixth?). Twin of Raphael. Healer. Complete trouble-maker, but God made him that way, so it’s fine.

“Wow,” Adam says of the new angel, because he has to. Aziraphale doesn’t beam that way; he’s really just like a human if Adam ignores the magic and the hint of wings he can just barely see. Raphael (Israfil) looks just like Crowley but with long hair. Israfil shines, like he doesn’t know how to turn off the angel bit at all. Israfil is Raphael: Last of the First Seven (or sixth, and that repetition is weird). Twin of Zaherael. Healer. Assistant trouble-maker because he’s a shit-stirrer. Also, a hopeless flirt, which is quite a bit more than Adam wanted to know.

“Hi Aziraphale,” Adam says, grinning. “Nice to meet you, Israfil. Crowley, your wings are grand.”

Crowley raises both eyebrows and then slips off his sunglasses, tucking them away. His eyes are brilliant, gold with slit pupils like a snake. Which he is. So is Israfil. Except they aren’t. But they are. Adam gives his head a brief shake and tells his brain to behave itself.

“Hello, human not-Antichrist.” Crowley says with a lazy drawl and a smile. It makes Adam feel warm and happy, because Crowley isn’t saying it to tease or be mean, but because he loves the very idea of it all.

He loves Adam, and not because he’s apparently somehow an angel again. Crowley loved Adam when he was still a demon, too.

“Nice to meet you, Adam Young,” Israfil says after rolling his eyes at Crowley.

“A genuine pleasure to see you again, young man,” Aziraphale adds, extending his hand. Adam, still amazed that people are starting to treat him like he’s a bit older, and not such a kid anymore, happily shakes the angel’s hand. “How have you been?”

“Oh, I’ve been grand,” Adam effuses. “Everything’s been totally great. Well, except for Atlantis—I really, really didn’t mean to forget it!”

Crowley laughs. “People are sailing around it and trying so hard to pretend there isn’t a bloody
continent in their way. It’s worth it, Adam.”

Adam smiles. “Okay, then. I guess they’ll... get over it. Eventually.”

“Israfil reminded us of something, and as your unofficial godparents, we feel it’s our duty to show you,” Aziraphale says, and Adam’s attention snaps over to him.

“I have godparents?”

“Well. We liked the term at the time,” Crowley tries to explain. “Besides, guardian angel didn’t fit us both. No one really wants a guardian demon.” He glances down at Dog, who lets out a happy whine. “Okay, most people don’t want a guardian demon, but that hellhound of yours is shaping up rather nicely.”

Adam glances down at Dog, who ducks his head and flattens his ears with guilt. “Dog’s a hellhound?”

“Yeah. Does it really matter?” Crowley asks.

Adam gives it a moment’s thought. “Nah. Dog loves me, an’ I love him, and that’s all that matters, right?”

“Exactly so.” Aziraphale looks so proud that he’s starting to beam. Literally.

“Right, so, we’re running out of daylight, and this kid has places to be.” Crowley steps forward with a grin. “See, you’re human incarnate, but you’re still angelic stock.”

“Yeah, I kind of... figured that out,” Adam admits. “I didn’t mean to keep any of that power, but it’s just... there.”

“It’s who you are. You made your choice, but some things are wired to the bone,” Aziraphale says in gentle reassurance. “And there is still not a thing wrong with that. You received the greatest lesson of all in regards to why it’s so important to behave yourself, so we’re not a bit bothered.”

“Well, Upstairs and Downstairs might be bothered on general principle, but they can go hang.” Crowley pauses, his head cocked. “Cept for Mum. She likes you.”

“I thought—” Adam tries not to be nervous about asking. “I thought God wouldn’t. Because of who my dad used to be.”

“All right, that means there’s a first lesson you’re going to hear before we get to the point of all this.” Israfil smiles at Adam, his ice-blue eyes all but glowing in the darkness. “The most important thing to remember, over everything else, no matter what anyone else ever says, is this: God is love. She’s some other things, too, but the love was first and last. That’s the Alpha and the Omega of Creation, Adam: love.”

“Oh.” Adam heaves a sigh of relief. “That’s all right, then. Second lesson?”

“Ah, to be that young again,” Aziraphale murmurs.

“I would not do it,” Crowley retorts.

“Ignore them,” Israfil suggests, his eyes shining with humor. “We’re here, Adam, to show you how to find your wings.”

Adam stares at him. “I have wings?”
Crowley snorts. “Angel stock. I said that already, didn’t I?”

“Okay.” Adam thinks he can handle wings. Not-Armageddon was way worse. “What do I do? I didn’t even know!”

Israfil seems to think about it before he leans down close to Adam, his pale hands resting on his knees. “It’s not about thinking about wings as a color or a shape. You’re looking for a concept, an idea. You know the wings are there because we’ve told you, and lying is dead boring. I wouldn’t lie about that, anyway.”

“I might!” Crowley insists. Aziraphale elbows him in the ribs. Crowley dances away and looks indignant. Adam has to bite back a laugh.

“Basically,” Israfil continues, “you only need to reach for something that’s already there. Then you realize that they’ve always been there, and you just have to let them exist so that they’re here, too.”

Adam thinks on it and then closes his eyes. He has wings, and they always existed. If he can part the hedge in the garden to let Dog escape, he can do this.

It’s the pulling them out to be here that’s weird. It feels like he’s reaching through that barren-potential place, or shoving them forward past all of that.

When he opens his eyes, Israfil is smiling, Aziraphale is applauding, and Crowley is laughing up at the sky. “I FUCKING TOLD YOU!” he shouts.

“LANGUAGE!” Aziraphale retorts, but he’s still pleased.

Adam cautiously turns his head. His wings are there. He has wings. They flutter when he shivers in excitement.

He can feel them, all these extra muscles in his back that aren’t normally there, ready to make his wings do whatever he wants them to do.

“This is so wicked cool,” Adam breathes. He spreads his wings, more on instinct than anything, and takes a look. His feathers are a gold-burnished dark red.

Adam frowns. Aziraphale’s feathers were stark white. Crowley’s old feathers had been soot black. “Is—the color. Is that bad?”

“Not in the slightest,” Aziraphale says at once, hands clasped together. His wings are out now, but instead of two, he has four. They also sort of look more like albino peacock feathers with closed eyes.

Then two of the feathered eyes on Aziraphale’s wings open, wink at him, and shut again.

“That was amazing!” Adam exclaims. “Do that again! Can I do that?”

Aziraphale blushes. “You’re not a cherub, young man. It’s unique to us, I’m afraid.” He does, however, repeat the bit with the winking.

Crowley is showing off his dark-bronzed wings with the golden tips. Israfil’s wings are completely gold with blackened tips, like they’re opposites of each other.

Oh. That’s exactly what they are. Sort of. Not really. But at the same time, yes?
Adam gives his head another shake. Sometimes too much stuff wants to cram its way in at once. “Is there anything I should know about the color?”

“It’s a seraphim thing,” Israfil tells him. “Well, for some of them, anyway. It seemed to depend on what sort of mood God was in at any given moment when she was making them.”

Adam feels his wings droop a little. “They’re like my not-dad’s used to be, aren’t they? That’s why they’re red.”

“Adam.” Crowley lets out a brief sigh and then walks over to put both hands on Adam’s shoulders. “Anyone can be good. Anyone can be evil. Humans are spectacularly good at being both, sometimes at the same time. You’re not your…not-dad. You never were, and you never have to be.” He takes a breath. “The Morningstar is called that because once, she was so very bright. She was fire and life, and she loved creation as fiercely as God. If you want to think about your not-dad in any terms at all, think of that. You saved the Earth—and incidentally, all of existence, by the way—because you loved this place just as fiercely as she once did. Sometimes…sometimes I wonder if maybe she never stopped. I’m walking bloody proof that demons can love, so why not her, too?”

“Why are you calling not-dad a girl?” Adam asks, soothed and rattled at the same time.

“Angelic stock,” Crowley repeats, and then grins. “Gender is a bit meaningless. If you ever wake up one day and decide you want to be a girl, it might actually be a thing that happens. Immediately. Before you realize it. Something to definitely keep in mind, that.”

“Oh.” Adam isn’t ready to contemplate that idea at all. He’s still busy trying to figure out who he is, much less a girl-version of himself. “So—can I fly? I mean, it seems like gravity would be a thing, ’cause people are heavy.”

“We did say we’d show him, if he asked,” Aziraphale says in what sounds like a reminder.

“We did, yeah.” Crowley glances around in every direction before snapping his fingers. They don’t go anywhere, but Adam can feel Time just…stop. Time stops for everyone on Earth except the four of them. “There. You don’t really want to be caught flapping about. Like, really, humans have been odd about that sort of thing from the very beginning.”

“It only happened the one time,” Aziraphale mutters, but Crowley just grins at him.

“Look.” Israfil offers Adam his hand. His skin is cooler than a human’s, but Adam runs hot, as his Mum says, so fair is fair, probably. “Spread your wings, but not up. You want to go wide, but with a bit of an arch in the center.”

Adam concentrates, wiggling various parts of his wings until he figures it out. “Like that?”

“Exactly.” Israfil praises him. “Now, the next thing to remember is that gravity can’t stop you if you don’t let it. Don’t ditch it entirely, mind, what with there being a distinct lack of atmosphere in space, but—”

“Weight is meaningless, only your mass matters,” Crowley interrupts in annoyance.

“Oh! I understood that.” Adam bends his knees a little, like he’s getting ready to run, and instead he pushes straight up. The ground is suddenly not there anymore. He flaps a bit wildly until Israfil, already in flight, takes his hand again. “Calm down. Don’t worry. You’ll get the hang of it.”

“It’s like riding a velocipede,” Crowley comment as he glides by.
“Crowley!” Aziraphale yells. He extends all four of his wings and starts chasing the not-demon.

“What’s all that about?” Adam asks curiously.

Israfil shrugs without letting the motion interrupt the gentle beat of his wings. “No idea. Come on. Let’s get you used to the air while they flirt like idiots.”

Adam giggles, and then starts practicing his wing-flapping. The air tickles his feathers. There are warm spots and cold spots, updrafts and downdrafts. It’s like the best amusement park ride there ever was, but better, because he can take it with him wherever he goes.

“All right, I’m really starting to feel the press of that particular wheel,” Crowley announces about a half-hour later. “I’ve got to start things back up again, or I’ll have a hangover for a bloody week.”

Adam is disappointed, but then he’s distracted by the act of learning how to land. It isn’t nearly as easy as it looks. He would have tripped and landed with his chin in the grass if Aziraphale hadn’t reached out to catch him.

“Thanks,” Adam says, but he means it for more than just the quick save. He means it for everything.

Aziraphale smiles. He looks very, very happy for someone who spent their entire flight unsuccessfully catching Crowley. “You are most welcome,” he replies, and Adam can tell he means it for everything, too.

Crowley wobbles on his feet for a moment before snapping his fingers. Adam feels Time start up. He almost expected it to be a jolt, but it’s smooth, like Time never stopped at all. “Bollocks. I need to not do that again for a month or three.”

“I’m going to see you guys again, right?” Adam asks after he collects his hat and his pirate eye patch. “I mean, if you’re going to claim to be my godfathers and all…”

“Oh, we can probably work something out.” Crowley’s thoughtful look is full of plotting.

“Crowley, don’t—just—let’s discuss it first, please?” Aziraphale asks. Crowley looks vaguely disappointed and nods.

“Were you just going to convince my parents that you always were my godparents?” Adam asks in disbelief.

Crowley shrugs. “Sorry. Some habits are really hard to break, and I’ve had a lot of practice at just… nudging things along. S’more convenient that way.”

“We’ll figure out something, and whenever we do, we’ll see if you think it’s a good idea first,” Israfil says to Adam. “They’re your parents, after all.”

Adam smiles. “Thanks for that.” He pauses. “Maybe a little nudging. I mean, they’re weird about strangers, especially if three random blokes turned up on the doorstep. But only after we talk about it!” he quickly adds.

“Deal.” Crowley shakes his hand, smirks a bit, and then wanders off in the direction of the sleek black car with his hands in his pockets. Aziraphale offers him the same, but sneaks over a small pack of biscuits just afterwards. “For Hallowe’en,” he offers, and then follows Crowley.

“What’s with the bloody candy?” Israfil asks. “Or biscuits, in this case.”
“I think it was an American thing, but it’s fun, so we started doing costumes and stuff, too,” Adam explains. “Besides, free candy.” He offers Israfil one of the chocolate-topped biscuits.

“Thanks.” Israfil gives him another one of those beaming, ethereal smiles, and joins Crowley and Aziraphale, who look to be bickering their entire way to the car.

“Wow, you’re really gonna want to tone that down a bit,” Adam whispers, giggling under his breath. Then he crams another biscuit into his mouth and runs off to join the Them.

After all: free candy.

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[442] Hell would always keep their promise. The loved one in question would survive the Black Death. Once.

[443] He has already heard the jokes. He has heard all the jokes. He is eventually going to find this Former Prince, and they are going to pay for his humiliation.

[444] The Highest Throne Room being the one that no one wants to enter.

[445] It also makes demons absolutely terrified of the idea of bathing. Not that most demons were very keen on the idea in the first place.

[446] More accurately, Barachiel is too lazy. His job is not demons, his job involves mortal souls.

[447] Upper management strictly enforces this rule.

[448] It’s not Hell’s fault the humans got it backwards. They made it even worse than Hell intended.

[449] Hell has decided that sometimes humans have really good ideas.

[450] Greasy Johnson is trying to figure out how to convince his parents to send him to a high school in the United States so that he can learn to play American Football. This is a slow task for him, but he’s pretty sure he can manage it.

[451] Ronald P. Tyler despairs when the Them discover the idea of toilet-papering objects for Hallowe’en. (Pepper insists upon using recycled, bio-degradable paper.)

[452] Adam is one of those rare humans (or not-quite humans) who understand why a not-demon would want a car. Cars like this are fun—not like his Dad’s car, which wasn’t designed to be any sort of fun at all.

[453] Aziraphale’s first discorporation was embarrassing.

Chapter End Notes

One of two inspired playlists with some of the music mentioned during Innocuous, along with a few that don't get mentioned, but are definitely meant to fit in there
somewhere: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?
list=PLjt2fQTRpfr3FVOTZW0KeboX15umHkNjql

End Notes

Please do not mistake a character's musings as the author's beliefs. Smiting isn't just for angels.

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