Fault Lines

by Marabelle123

Summary

Crowley has a secret.
Not the usual one.

In the end, what wouldn't they do for each other?

“Wounds don’t always wither the soul, Aziraphale; in some, they make it flourish, as the desert bursts into bloom after the rain.” She fanned out idle fingers, and the angel felt Her words truly spring to life in some distant, thirsty land. “Some can drink deeply from a bitter cup without becoming bitter… and you yourself have helped to sweeten him, and he, in his way, you.” There was something faraway in the shining eyes so near to him as She spoke again, gravity mighty in each word. “He chose his fate. He has always wanted to do that.”

She was still, maddeningly, smiling.

He couldn’t bear it.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, the grieving angel took a stumbling step towards the fountain, the darkness of the corrupted water threatening to drag him under. She touched his shoulder and he steadied, despite himself. “Shall we let him keep his oath, My son?” She
asked softly, watching him carefully as fresh sorrow welled up from its eternal spring.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
In the warmth and comfort of his bookshop, Aziraphale turned the problem over in his mind.

Crowley had a secret.

Well, he was an eldritch creature; secrets came with the territory, really, but mostly, Aziraphale was not on the sticky side of the demon's web of secrecy. He had been, in fact, for the better part of six thousand years, Crowley's primary secret, and the demon was his.

Now, knowing, well, suspecting, no, truly *knowing* Crowley was keeping him in the dark about something deeply unsettled the angel. The feeling had been growing slowly, very slowly, over the six millennia of their unlikely friendship, and he felt things were all coming to a head.

What could he be hiding? What could be more secretive even than the Arrangement? Why hide from *him*? With the end of all things having come and gone, largely unnoticed by nearly everyone else on the planet, is there anything left that he himself wouldn’t trust Crowley with? What would it take to push him so far?

Dreadfully unsettling thoughts today.

Best to keep occupied. Idle hands were the devil's playthings. Well… unlikely with angelic hands, but the truth beneath held fast. Aziraphale settled into the antique writing desk he preferred to do his most careful work on, bending himself to the task he had set himself to some three weeks before. It had been a very long time indeed since he had done any traditional copying in the style of the medieval monks, but in a flash of inspiration that was anything but divine, Aziraphale felt it was about time the Buggre Alle This Bible had its own, hand-illuminated copy. His anxious thoughts eased off a touch, as he resumed work on a detailed illustration of the late, unlamented Master Scagges.

The first time he'd noticed something was up (down?) was in 1175… after the Garden, that is. 2829 B.C.E on the new calendar. Tyre was a young and bustling city just out of a particularly intense rainy season. He'd run into Crowley, then Crawley, heading in to stir up some trouble in the local economy while he'd been sent in to bless and protect the city which should have, if all went well, lasted for thousands of years, becoming one of the best commercial centers in the world. He sometimes wondered, somewhat scandalously, if someone from his people and someone from Crawley's people were comparing notes.

Besides the two of them, of course. They'd been trudging through an abandoned, water sodden field on the outskirts of the city, Crawley cursing it, Aziraphale blessing, plants withering and blooming and going to seed all around them while they debated the merits and demerits of their respective employment.

"The things you say, Crawley!"

"What? That this all seems like pointless exercise? The two of us thwarting each other through time?"
“God's plan is not pointless,” the angel protested.

“It does rather wind around a bit though, doesn’t it? And where do ducks come into it all, I have to wonder.”

“Just after snakes, I assume.”

“No need to get personal, now. Although, euh, perhaps you have a point. She had to know where it’s all going, so She would have had to know the War was coming. Why not,” he stepped in front of Aziraphale, stopping him in his tracks, and a third of the stalks vanished entirely, “just not Create us in the first place. Save some trouble.”

Aziraphale stepped around him and the stalks returned, golden grain gleaming in the sun, which also seemed to brighten considerably when the angel smiled up at it. “I think it would be wiser not to question your own existence, don’t you?”

“Nah, She doesn’t listen to me anyw-” Crawley had stiffened all of a sudden, then let out a string of curses so vile Aziraphale swayed on his holy feet, cringing.

"Crawley, what-?"

"Gotta jet. Sorry." He vanished, an odd whiff of sulfur lingering behind.

Jet? Aziraphale wished Crawley would stick with idioms from this century. Forever trying to peek ahead at social trends. The word sounded positively bizarre in Phoenician.

"Well, that was unusual."

The plants would have agreed with him, if only they could have. They liked Aziraphale. Much better than the other. The grain rustled softly, but there was no wind.

Aziraphale hadn't seen Crowley again for a decade, and that only in passing. At the time the demon seemed distracted... no, stranger than that. Nervous? Surely not guilty.

Guilty?

Well, Crowley was often guilty of one thing or the other, but he certainly didn't project that feeling outwardly... or ever acknowledge it as a possibility. He would have put on quite a display, had Aziraphale even suggested that it was. Crowley did, however, acknowledge guilt as a major flaw in his angelic counterpart. They had disagreed on many things, and ended up quickly going their separate ways.

At their next meeting, Crowley seemed his normal self, and as eager to put the incident behind them as Aziraphale himself was, and he thought no more about it.

“Ahh, Crowley!” he called out brightly, spying the old tempter in a bustling Corinth marketplace.
Perhaps he hadn’t been heard.

"Crowley?" He waggled his fingers in a cheerful little wave, unease settling deeper when
the answering wave lacked any hint of sarcasm.

Crowley could project sarcasm with any number of physical gestures. Rare were the
occasions it didn't leak out somewhere.

He seemed decidedly put out on this occasion, though Aziraphale could not fathom why.
Well, perhaps a little kindness would smooth things over.

"Hello, Crowley! Out for an afternoon temptation then? I found this little stall in the
marketplace with these khalal dates and they are scrumptious! You see they harvest them early, so
they still have this lovely, crunchy texture, not too sweet, and they are just, mmm, miraculous.
Well, near enough anyway." He proffered up the basket with a wink and watched, pleased, as a
smile attempted to crawl across Crowley's face, before it was stubbornly quashed.

Nothing too serious then, surely.

After a moments hesitation, Crowley propped open the lid. "Hmm. Well done, I'm sure."
They both knew he wasn't particularly interested in food, but it was a familiar step that they could
fall into easily.

"Not a temptation, per say," he shrugged easily. "Just tidying up some unfinished
ssssssins," he drawled, flicking out his tongue, just to needle. Aziraphale beamed at him and paid it
no mind.

A genuine grin blossomed on the demon's face as he neatly plucked out a date and fired
it with unnatural force into a bottle resting on a table behind the wine merchant, who was peddling
his wares, and his charms, to a pretty young wife.

Someone's pretty young wife, anyway.

The bottle shattered and the man spun around, forgetting his pursuit in favour of
hollering at the completely innocent jeweler nearby, who promptly lost his temper and decked him,
starting a scuffle. Aziraphale sighed and rolled his eyes heavenward as no less than four
opportunistic thieves made off with unprotected merchandise.

Crowley knocked back a swig of his newly acquired wine with a swagger of victory
before handing off the bottle to his companion. Aziraphale took a delicate sip and miracled a few
apology coins in the wine sellers pocket. He would be surprised and delighted... when he came
round.

"You are such a stick in the mud," Crowley scolded, grinning fit to burst. "Don't think I
didn't notice that. You can't fool me, angel."

"Don't think I didn't notice what the wine merchant was up to before you threw my
date," he snipped back easily.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're referring to." Aziraphale felt his lips quirk up in
amusement as deep fondness welled up in his spirit.

Crowley.

The man-shaped rapscallion sauntered on, with a touch more saunt. It would suit him,
"Sssides, I tempted him to it in the first place."

"Oh, I see. So you're doing some self-thwarting now?"

"Sure. You can return the favour in the Holy land next month. Below wants me there. I want me... not."

"Well, I suppose, I could, if you were to do some healing of the sick in Athens. Any particular reason?"

"Aside from the fact they call it the Holy land?" Crowley shook his head. "It's a long way on camel, what don't like me anymore than horses do, they're due in for a slew of rain, and Hastur likes the desert, so he's much more likely to pop in for the recounting of the *Deeds of the Day*." He made a face like he had a bad taste in his mouth. "I dunno... what's the appeal, anyway? Don't you ever get tired of reporting in? Sending memos you lied like Hell on?"

Aziraphale straightened up slightly, frowning at him. "I do not *lie* in my reports, Crowley. I... merely... emphasize other, more pertinent truths. 'M an angel," he added, in case it had been forgotten.

Abruptly, he stumbled, startled, when the demon laughed and gave him a little shove. "See, that, right there? That is why you would be so good at my job!"

"I *really* wish you would stop saying that."

"But it's just so true! You've genius for rationalization. All that angelic goodness and light bends itself nicely to tempting, really. Humans like to listen to you. I mean, can't see it being a technique we could use across the board. Most of my lot couldn't think their way out of a Chinese finger trap-"

"A what?"

"Chinese finger trap, gonna be all the rage in a thousand years or so."

"Ah."

"And I don't see Beelzebub being able to charm anything-"

"The smell of rotting corpses can be a bit off-putting."

"I keep telling them that. Who listens? Nobody, that’s who. Anyway, the point is, you would be a real asset for Downstairs."

"So you're recruiting me now?"

"I don't know," he peered at him, golden eyed and mischievous. "Are you tempted?"

Aziraphale pinged a date off his forehead.

"Can't blame a devil for trying."

"I absolutely can," the angel laughed, steering them in the direction of an early lunch.
Lunch had been a playful affair, beginning with Aziraphale scolding Crowley for wasting a perfectly nice date, and ending with them tossing grapes in each other's mouths in increasingly ridiculous and physics-shaming ways until the pressure of baffled humans staring at them outweighed the fun of the game. Aziraphale noted a young man had begun taking wagers.

"Best be off, I would say."

"Hmm..." the demon whispered to someone and gave them a friendly shove towards the speculator. "Oh, right then."

Crowley stabbed a black fingernail towards a raven swooping over head. "Oi! What's that, a raven? They say the harvest will be good when you see a raven after rain!"

As one, the small crowd of onlookers broke into a heated debate on the ability of ravens to predict the viability of the harvest while angel and demon slipped away unnoticed.

Their aimless path meandered towards a little stream where a trio of boys were having races, letting little leaf boats float along the current. Aziraphale quietly blessed them, smiling. Crowley let that one go, unthwarted.

"Wonderful creatures, children. So much potential for good."

"For good and evil both, angel. You aren't so fond of them when they grow up to be cruel men."

"Not so, my fri-, Crowley. I love them still, as She must do. I just don't love their choices."

Crowley frowned at him, serpentine eyes narrowing. "I'm not so sure," he gestured vaguely skyward in silent indication of the Almighty, "... must do. Not a particularly *patient* hand with those who invoke Her wrath."

They weren't so far after the fall of Pompeii, and the sorrow was still fresh for them both. Well, Crowley’s pain ran ever towards wrath, but the angel could understand how that went.

"Maybe we just don't understand what Her patience is," Aziraphale posited. "After all-Crowley?" The golden eyes had snapped wide in panic before quickly shutting against Aziraphale’s concern. When they opened again an instant later, there was no trace of the alarm that had so suffused him.

"You know, I'm really not in the mood for any kind of theological debate right now, angel. Catch you on the flipside!"

Gone again, leaving an absence felt more deeply than it should have been. "Until the next time, then," Aziraphale told no one.
"Peace be upon you."

Crowley didn't feel anything like peace. Could hardly remember a time when he did. Closest he came was catching a little second hand peace radiating after the Mother blessed angel.

Pushing through the Jerusalem crowds, he dug his nails into his palms viciously, furious he'd ended up here, now of all places, of all times. He really did not want to run into Aziraphale today. Which meant he was absolutely going to.

"I know how You work," he muttered, refusing to look up. "Having a great time at my expense, I'm sure." He solidly connected with Aziraphale, would have bounced back a touch if he hadn't sent such a baleful glare at Newton's Third Law. Well, it was going to be his Third Law, eventually.

"Oh! Crowley!" Aziraphale's automatic first reaction, was, strange as it has always been, and so far as Crowley could detect, genuine pleasure. It tempered quickly with confusion and annoyance. "I didn't expect to see you here... and I've been tempting unnecessarily, apparently." He didn't sound remotely impressed with him. Neither was Crowley, in truth. Things had rather gotten away from him.

"Yes, well..." he groped for a plausible reply. "Pulled one over on Heavenly Adversary looks good on the memos. I assume you've been making me look bad then."

"Myself as well, clearly," he responded unhappily.

A tiny shred of decency squirmed in the ruins of Crowley's soul. He crushed it mercilessly and grinned. "Glad to hear it. I'll add embarrassed an angel to the list. See you around." He pointed at a young rabbi, teaching a small crowd about peace and love, and some other nonsense, on the nearby hill. "Evil to foment, you know how it is." He was already moving, not wanting to see the look on that all too open face.

Unfortunately, like Lot's wife, he couldn't quite resist looking back. Turning into a pillar of salt would have been easier to bear.

The wave of hurt and anger, confusion he felt wash over him from Aziraphale was so intense it felt like it came from his own being. He nearly tripped over his own feet. "Oh, Crowley," the angel nearly wailed. "That was unkind."

"You're a fool if you expected otherwise," he snapped back, off balance and reeling between useless guilt and wild rage, before stomping off towards his target.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why did he have to end up here?

Anger and contempt warred in him as he looked over the students. Peace and love? Not when Crowley was done with them. Aziraphale didn't call after him, probably already working up some, ngk, forgiveness. He felt the burning of those blue eyes into his back all the way up the hill.

The demon settled into the crowd, near enough to the teacher to have a potent effect,
ignoring the soft welcome. He was glad, definitely glad, when Aziraphale did not follow. Maybe the angel was right to resist formalizing their little game of back scratching. The stakes were very high, if someone caught them at it.

Not that Crowley anticipated being caught; but then, he never did, did he?

He resisted the urge to gag on all the sweetness and light pouring out of these students. "But Rabbi," he interrupted, "surely you would not want us to shower our enemies with love? We mustn’t lower our guard, and so come to destruction. The unclean among us can’t be trusted. Do you not know how evil spirits roam through the world, seeking naught but to destroy and maim?"

"We must be eternally vigilant, it is true, my student, but love truly must conquer all fear if we are to live in peace with all those around us."

"Even those who would cause harm?"

"Perhaps they do not understand what they do," he responded evenly. *Bless.* Aziraphale had done quite a number on this one, clearly, probably in retribution for taking on Crowley's tempting.

"Oh, teacher," he pleaded passionately, with no real passion of his own. "Why, just looking I can see that there are those who embrace evil in our own gathering."

Nothing better than corrupting with the truth, in Crowley's books.

"Traitors in our midst, demons waiting to devour the unwary soul, why they could be anyone. Our friends might betray us in a moment... we must be vigilant against them, is it not so?" The nervous students whispered frantically and Crowley began seeing suspicious looks and slyly pointed fingers as they began to turn on one another. Sometimes he wished it was not so easy.

Sometimes, but not now.

"We must root out the evil ones from amongst our brethren," he spoke softly, letting the words wend deep. "We should kil-"

"My dear sir," the words came suddenly and the Power in them was unmistakable, "how will we know how to distinguish evil from good? For surely demons are wicked and deceptive, and their words cannot be trusted."

Crowley recoiled, truly startled. There was nothing friendly in Aziraphale now.

Maybe he had gone a bit too far. "Weh, uh, ghhh, surely-"

"I would imagine," Aziraphale continued, steamrolling over him sweetly, ruthlessly, "that evil would seem good to the ears, pleasing to the senses... but would shine forth from the eyes, windows to the soul."

Crowley's jaw dropped. His...seriously?! Well, that was just below the belt. Well, above the nose, technically, but still!

Unable to change the way humans perceived his eyes, Crowley had, up to this point in history, relied on charm and sweet lies to persuade humans to see them as gifts, a sign of wisdom, or some sort of blessing from above, rather than the blight they truly were.

In one sentence, Aziraphale had undone millennia of hard work.
The humans, who just had to love listening to angels, turned to stare at Crowley, and the fear and suspicion he had been merrily feeding swirled about, before locking on to him with laser precision.

"You," came the first accusation. "He is the one!"

"His eyes shine, burn with wickedness!"

Well, that was probably true, in fairness. Aziraphale had vanished. Too much of a "good" angel to stick around to see Crowley face the consequences of the angel's actions. Righteous bastard.

There was nothing truly stopping him from waving them all, splash!, into the nearest lake, excepting, perhaps, that, deep down, Crowley thought he probably deserved what he was about to get. He took off, a mob on his heels.

If there's anything humans enjoyed, before the advent of reality TV, it was a good bit of street justice. The angry students picked up steam, and numbers, as they chased Crowley through the street. The new additions were less than certain of the reasons for trying to kill that guy with the eyes, but it really didn't matter. It beat grinding grain for an afternoon's entertainment.

"Get the evil one!"

"He poisoned the well!"

"He stole my wine!"

"Something to do!"

He fought to get a hold of himself. It was not that he couldn't demonically miracle his way out of such a little spate of trouble, but having humans trying to pitch things at him while he ran through the streets was Heaven on the concentration, and the increasingly large crowd made it difficult just to make them forget they'd seen him.

"Dirty trick, angel," he muttered, not dependent on little things like breathing to either run or mutter. "Forgetting whose side you're on?" He skidded in the hard packed dirt as he rounded a corner... and over corrected and landed in an undignified heap at Aziraphale's feet.

"I think you've got exactly what you deserve." It wasn't so much Aziraphale's sudden appearance that threw him, so much as his appearance. He was wrapped in glowing robes and his wings. were. out! On the physical plane!

"They're coming," he hissed urgently, temper forgotten. "Put those away!"

"It's fine, Crowley. I'm due in for an Annunciation anyway. Holy land after all. Won't be mentioning just which rogue I've saved from a violent mob, of course."

"Won't be mentioning who stirred up the mob either, no doubt." The angel frowned at him, even as startled humans pulled much the same maneuver Crowley had, piling up around them, but not so foolishly as to land on their former target.

"That was almost completely your doing, and you know it."

"Hey, I have orders too."
"Oh, blessed angel-" one of the travellers murmured, face pushed into the ground. Some of them were weeping in awe.

"Oh, hello. I'll be with you all in two shakes. Crowley, that was pure spite. Don't give me that old line about orders. When will you ever take responsibility-"

"Speak to us-" Some of them were writhing on the ground. When did humans lose all their pride? He had really been slacking off lately.

"Yeah, my side is *not* about responsibility." He knew someone had wet their garments. At least it was a distraction from his own lingering embarrassment.

"And look where it's got you- oh dear." The ecstatic shrieking in tongues finally broke through to Aziraphale. Two of them had passed out.

Crowley waved a tired hand at them. "Go on then, *annunciate*, before you turn their brains to pudding.

"Right, right. Um, good people of the Holy City! Fear not! And um... perhaps some deep breaths."

Crowley helpfully, well, not actually, reached up and tugged Aziraphale's left wing over his head, sticking out a tongue at his pursuers that was rather longer than it should have been.

"Oh, bother. Not my forte. Must be why they're giving the Mary job to Gabriel. Good people, I, uh, say unto you that, um, mob justice is far inferior to using a nice organized court system, though it is certainly more efficient, ah, anyway! The point is... love your neighbour. And-
"

"Drink more wine!" Crowley chipped in with a grin that could have turned water quite nicely.

"Drink more wine?" Aziraphale echoed. "Oh, look what you made me do."

"Drink more wine!" A man spoke up. The mood among the humans, and one demon, lightened considerably.

"Yes, more wine!"

"Lo, the angel hath spoken!"

"Uh, that wasn't exactly the point, uh, and, and do unto others-"

"With lots of wine!" Crowley agreed, bursting into applause.

"Crowley!" Aziraphale snapped quietly before shouting after the crowd, "Er, okay, but only during Purim!" They watched the crowd leave, no doubt looking for wine, and Aziraphale seemed to wilt a little, wings vanishing back beyond mortal sight. Crowley let them slip from his vision too.

"I do NOT like you right now," the angel muttered. Tetchy Aziraphale. Better than hurt Aziraphale. This he could handle.

"'S'alright. Being of love and all, I suppose you can shoot for the moon and go so far as to love me... when you aren't actively trying to discorporate me."
"You deserved to be run out of town." Aziraphale replied primly, inviting Crowley to sit with him on a convenient bench with a little pat. He settled in beside the angel, spat forgotten, relief quickening his breath. He absolutely refused to tremble.

"Ehh, well. They couldn't really have done it anyway."

"I could have done. You're lucky I left it to them." Despite the snarkery, he handed Crowley a bottle of apology wine that hadn't existed until he did. "I won't do that again. I promise."

They passed the bottle back and forth, slipping into a comfortable silence that came naturally after centuries of practice.

Aziraphale fidgeted.

Crowley shifted.

The angel took a deep breath and released it.

Not so comfortable.

The demon paused, mid swing and looked over, only to be struck by the intensity of those cornflower blue eyes. Aziraphale quickly looked away. "Something on your mind, angel?"

"Oh- oh!" hands fluttered up before resettling, the effort visible in the tight, anxious smile. "No! Um... no?"

Aziraphale wasn't the only one with patience... everyone had their faults, after all.

"Except?" He was startled a little when the angel pulled the bottle from his hand and gulped down a generous portion.

"I feel like...I have this... feeling, you see."


"Crowley, is something wrong?"

"If I'm doing my job there is." He winked saucily in self defense, not liking where this was going.

Aziraphale frowned and Crowley's rum became a nice Merlot as he handed it over. "With *you*, Crowley. I feel like something isn't right with you."

"Well, first of all-"

"Don't tell me it's because you're a demon, as if that's news, as if I don't know you very, very well. There's a-" his hands fluttered again, indicating all of Crowley, "-a tension, in you. Are you in trouble?"

“If I was, your man Gabriel would have to do another Annunciation.” Aziraphale was determined, he could feel it in the way he touched his shoulder.

Despite the softness of the gesture, Crowley felt... pinned.

Like the floodgates had opened, words began rushing out of Aziraphale. Crowley felt more than a little splashed. "It's just that you've been running off, out of nowhere, and you're tense and unhappy-"

"Happy is not in the job desc-"

"Stop deflecting! It's not the job. I've seen the job; I know the job."

"Dabbled in the job-"

"You... you can be so frustrating!"

"You've mentioned."

"Please, Crowley, I'm worried. You were going to tell those people to *kill* someone. That's not your style!" He was going to kill Crowley with those wet angelic eyes. "I'm frightened, and I don't know why." Crowley made a face as that one landed in the sore achy place his heart was not supposed to be.

Damage control.

"Alright... alright. I... got carried away there. You get carried away sometimes. I was... mad at you, and, um, I am definitely not sorry, ever. But I wasn't gonna actually, you know, although, I'm supposed to." He shut his mouth desperately. He was spending too much time with Aziraphale. He was starting to sound like him. And that couldn't bode well for his future, such as he had.

"Okay," Aziraphale murmured with more softness then he could bear. "I believe you. What's going on? Tell me." He bit his lip and slid a warm hand over Crowley's. "Trust me with the truth. I won't fail you." Really not what he ever worried about, that.

"Look, I- there's nothing to be done. I just don't always...I've had some bad... assignments lately, and sometimes I forget I'm not supposed to care about... them. You...Her. All of it." He fought for his composure, squirming bodily, trying not to think too hard about slithering away. "But there's nothing I, or you, or anyone can do about it. So... just don't worry."

The angel gave his hand a squeeze and released it, looking brighter. "I can understand that. Too well. I find it can be difficult, sometimes. Figuring out where to place my footprints on the line in the sand. " His smile held a touch of sadness. "But, you're okay?"

It was easier, much easier to tease. "Okay? Have you even met me, Aziraphale? I'm fantastic."

Chapter End Notes

Not Jesus, in case you were wondering.

Getting timelines right is very tricky when you have all of history to work with.
I hope you enjoy! Drama a-coming.
A Flickering Candle

Chapter Summary

Not at all the light silly stuff that has gone on before.

His head was swimming. *Away. From. Here.* was all he could think about. Released, he sucked in a deep breath and instantly regretted it. If Dagon had gym shorts, the smell would have been less offensive. There were dead humans *everywhere.* He studied one closely, blackened skin on the nose and fingers, dried blood staining the lips and cheeks below the man's sunken, staring eyes, the expression frozen in a horror that had outlasted the patient. There was enough weeping and gnashing of teeth from the still-standing-for-now to rival the Pit itself.

The Flood was more kind. What could the humans possibly have done to merit this kind of punishment?

“No punishment,” gurgled a chilling voice in answer to Crowley's unspoken question.

*Had he spoken it?*

“Reward. I have been unleashed among them,” the withered man-shaped thing spoke, skeletal and grinning, the spectre of every hopeless sickbed brought to life on the cusp of miserable, slow death. “Born of their darkest dreams.” It reached for Crowley with shadowed, grasping fingers and the demon took a step back, eyeing him warily.

“Ahh, is it not glorious, wicked one? I thank you for your help,” it rasped. “Long will I reign now.”

Something lurched violently inside him. “I had nothing to do with this.”

“Ohhh,” it crooned, touching Crowley with a hand that burned with fever. “But you have, my love. For when you whispered to them of suspicion and greed, and they fell upon the healers and their feline companions, they allowed my friends to spread and grow and bite and gnaw and devour. With the rats to carry them to every home, in strength uncountable, I spread and grew and bit and gnawed and oh! Oh, now… watch me devour for I am Pestilence, and I will inhabit.”

“Good to have a career plan,” he quipped weakly, struggling through a nauseating wave of cognitive dissonance. Could he really be blamed for doing his job, for helping them make their own choices? He had never told anyone to start burning witches. The humans, as always, thought the worst things up themselves.

“Yes, yes,” it agreed, grinning as a staggering woman pitched forward in the street, shrieking and clawing at the blood she was coughing up with black, curled fingers. “I shall spread far, and their physicians, weak and mortal, shall fail and fall with their patients, while I slake my thirst on their misery.” Uck. Lovely. Crowley knew plenty of monsters personally, but this creature was something new, and a whole new level of horrifying.

“Aren't you a charming fellow. Well, I'll be off then.”
It caught at his sleeve with grasping hands. “Even the one who cannot fall has no power over me. He shall spend himself utterly trying, but it is meaningless.” It smiled, sickeningly sweetly, at Crowley. “Your enemy will soon fall to me. Even now, he despairs, and it is honey on my lips.” It cost the demon dearly to keep his features cool and easy.

“Ah, right. My enemy. Don’t suppose you know where he is, eh? Would certainly like to get a gander at him in his hour of defeat.” He spread his lips to bare his teeth in a grotesque graven image of a smile. The thing before him matched the expression and made it worse. With a gentleness that sickened Crowley with its subtlety, it caught his hand and brushed clammy lips over his knuckles. Angry red streaks raced, burning, over his skin, up his arm and burrowed into his mind, hard dropping knowledge into his head. He shuddered in revulsion at the intrusion.

There was Aziraphale in the middle of it all, pale, shuddering, dim. A flickering candle battling the dark, whispering empty words of comfort as Pestilence’s victims dropped around him. Crowley knew where he was, and then he was there too.

The angel startled momentarily at his appearance, but Crowley's fear dragged longer, deeper. He was still unable to speak, reeling from the sight of the distraught angel when Azriaphale looked up from his patient to greet him with a wan smile.

“Hello, my dear. I’m so dreadfully sorry you are here to see this. I… I am doing what I can. The Almighty is all mighty,” he murmured, as if to remind himself, “but unfortunately, I am not.”

There was a distant, brittle quality to his tone that Crowley had never heard before, and it ran him cold. “We need to get you out of this place,” he hissed urgently, fearful that something delicate was about to shatter, driven to action, to ancient and dusty instincts to protect and preserve. He had burned with them, once upon a time.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly just yet. I am giving succour to this man. He has a wife and a little daughter. Nice chap. Gives a little bit more than he can afford to charity. Sings like a bird. Makes terrible bread. Not much of a baker, but he's learning.”

“Angel,” Crowley pleaded softly, aching, unable to make truth kind. “He's already gone.” Aziraphale blinked at him and looked down to brush the corpse's forehead lightly with the damp cloth. Confusion dimmed his light still more. Crowley felt like he himself was fading along with the dying light in those sweet, wide eyes.

“No… no?” he murmured uncertainly, touching his patient again. “No, I was going to bring him healing. Bless him as he has blessed others. He has a wife, and a daughter.”

“I know he did,” Crowley pushed. “I know, because you already told me so.”

*Please* stop looking at me like you don’t understand this.

He did.

Reality sank in.

Anguish did too.

“Oh,” he said mildly. “I see. I… oh.”

*Oh, angel.* Go back to confusion. I’m so sor- He stopped the thought. What help would it have been?
A woman ran up to them, shrieking, stopping abruptly, absolutely silent for a moment, seeing the man gone, before shrieking again, dragging at the angel desperately. “Come, healer,” she wailed, and Crowley didn’t miss the flash of pain at the address. “Come, wise one, my husband has gone, but my daughter is waiting. Surely if you come swiftly, she will not perish… Come!”

The cosmically powerful guardian of the Eastern Gate had not the power to resist the weeping mother’s pull on his arm. With an awful feeling, Crowley knew she was not the first human to make such a plea. Nor the second. Nor the third. He doubted any such summons had ended up well for anyone.

“Of course, dear lady, of course.” He open his mouth to address Crowley but before the angel found any words, he was already answering.

“I’m coming too.” Aziraphale brightened briefly, heartfelt but heartsick, and the choking awfulness of knowing he had that trust but couldn’t live up to it wounded Crowley. Pain blossomed in some fragile place that was not already scarred beyond feeling, from what he once had been. He followed Aziraphale as she pulled him frantically through the streets, cries for mercy going unanswered filling with memories of sulfur and ash, shut doors and barred gates.

The hovel was small, but built more sturdy than most, care and hope in the construction as there was none in Hell. No roofs would leak here. No drafts would chill. Someone had made sure of that. None of it mattered. A rat scurried past his feet and into the street, ignored.

The man’s wife did not follow them in, strength spent, she slid down the outside wall, weeping the tears of a widow. Aziraphale swept into the room with determination, as though there was anything at all he could do.

No more than six, the fatherless child was nestled into a soft straw pallet on the floor, dark, matted curls framing a pale face, sleeping. A little faceless doll lay nearby, lost when sleep caused her hold to slip. It had stitched fabric angel wings, bent and crushed from being so well loved. Her nose was dark, like she had been playing with the ashes in the hearth. Pestilence had been and went. It didn’t wait around for Azrael to lay claim to its victim.

“God have mercy,” the angel whispered, but it wasn’t a prayer. He touched her forehead and the lines of pain around her eyes eased. They fluttered open and she smiled at her visitors. It cut him, hard bitten as he was to misery. He couldn’t fathom how Aziraphale was coping.

“Where's momma?” Crowley could still hear the sobs. A lot of people were sobbing out there.

“Not far, my dear, just, having a moment. A little time to rest.” She nodded, relaxing. “I’m tired.” The little girl was drifting away when her lungs caught and a terrible wracking cough seized her. Crowley produced some water in a little clay cup and Aziraphale pushed her up into a sitting position to ease her breathing. Her cheeks flushed with effort but the touch of colour only served to emphasize her pallor and the darkness of the gangrene setting in on her face. With sips and soft caresses, the spasms eased. Aziraphale slipped behind her and she snuggled immediately into his arms.

Her breathing had taken on an eerie, halting quality, Crowley had come to recognize as a prelude to the end of a human life on Earth. “I’ll be sleeping soon,” she whispered. “Am I going to Heaven?” Crowley had to look away for a moment, angry at his softness.

Aziraphale cradled the little girl closely in his arms. He smiled beatifically at her, but tears
streamed freely over his soft cheeks. "Yes, dear girl, you are going to Heaven." He said firmly, blinking rapidly. "You can be sure I have that on the highest authority."

"Will mama come too? Need mama."

"Well... yes, but you will have to wait a little while for her." Crowley scratched his back over his shoulder uneasily. He wondered if any of the humans would survive Pestilence’s hour of victory. He wondered if the angel still thought God cared. He wondered if She did.

The girl's face fell with an anxious little whimper at the idea of leaving her mother behind. “A very little. Don't you weep now. She has work to do yet, but she'll be along, and all,” Aziraphale’s voice broke and he tried again. “All will be well.”

Turning her head sideways, she rubbed her tears dry on Aziraphale’s waistcoat, then reached up to touch his face with damp hands. Crowley wondered if she could also see the way Aziraphale was gleaming softly in the shadows.

"You're an angel." With the clarity of the dying, it was not a question. She knew.

The girl glanced his way, peering into his eyes fearlessly. "Is he an angel?" He held back the usual scoffing at such a thought, and, defenseless without it, felt something burn and writhe inside him.

"Absolutely," the faithful angel whispered, with conviction that matched his certainty of her destination. Crowley shook his head and twisted away, filled with a strange mix of contempt and pity, but froze under Aziraphale’s measured gaze.

Pinned, always pinned.

"I am proud to name him family.” The angel spoke so tenderly, Crowley fought the urge to shift and slither away into the darkness. “We are angels together, my dear, always."

I'm Fallen and you know it. We don’t have forever together. It has to end sometime. The clock is always ticking. He wrapped his mind in reality, beating himself bloody with it to try to stave of thoughts of more, and better. That way lay madness.

"Will you be in Heaven too? Will you come with me?"

He smiled sadly. "I will, when my work is done. It may be a long while yet."

"Are you coming to Heaven too?" She was less certain of him than Aziraphale. Perceptive again. He opened his mouth quickly, then shut it, indecisive. He'd always had a soft spot for kids.

Aziraphale slid in the words smoothly to rescue him from his dilemma, "For my part, dear girl, it could hardly be Heaven without him." The little girl smiled sweetly at Crowley, who was too busy keeping himself together to even imitate a smile in return.

Within the hour, she had gone, nestled in her mother's arms, Aziraphale holding her cooling hand. Crowley turned over the words of Pestilence over in his mind until he no longer wanted to think about anything ever again.

He sat crossed-legged on the floor, keeping watch. Aziraphale had held the grieving mother with trembling arms until nightfall, before blessing her into a dreamless sleep. Crowley found he couldn’t look away from her hand in Aziraphale’s, soot like stains on her fingers, an awful promise of things to come. At the angel's insistence, despite the demon's attempts to spare him
more pain, they stayed three more days until she passed too.

They didn’t speak much after that, but Crowley stayed close. Unable to bear the suffering of the people anymore, Aziraphale allowed Crowley to persuade him to leave London for a cottage in a tiny village where he could try to bless the locals until his grief was eased. It didn't make much of a dent. Whatever could have?
Chapter Summary

Aziraphale learns about ants, and Crowley teaches him about plants.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took Aziraphale a long time.

Crowley, it turned out, rather liked gardens and had insisted that the cottage have an expansive one. He said it would be like medicine for the angel. For his part, it was nice, but offered no real balm for the tumult of his thoughts. How could She let this happen? And why put him on Earth and charge him with protecting and inspiring her special children only to watch them, quickly and terribly die?

*Powerless.* That’s how he felt. Unable to do what he was created to do.

Did he have his purpose all wrong?

Aziraphale sat in the garden, during the day, usually letting the eyes of passersby slide over him, seeing but not noticing his presence. He didn’t want to hear about news of the plague ravaging Europe. The compassion that made him the rather rebellious angel he was had boiled dry.

Crowley checked in on him frequently, obnoxiously so. It was the most unbroken time they’d ever spent together over the many years. He understood the demon was genuinely worried about him, but there were reasons, from Above and Below, that made this sort of prolonged contact a very bad idea. So he was relieved, at first, when Crowley vanished for a month.

Simple loneliness prompted him to make more of an effort to be social with the villagers, who were more than eager to chat him up when he allowed them to notice their new neighbour. Most humans seemed to gravitate towards him. It could be inconvenient at times. Crowley would complain and tease Aziraphale about it, but humans gravitated towards him too, a certain type, anyway.

Night had fallen and the cool, wet breeze was soothing. Little crickets chirping made the quiet all the more peaceful, and his troubled thoughts became still as well. He didn’t have the demon's strange interest in sleeping, but it was restful to feel the sleeping minds of the villagers around him, trusting and unafraid. Terribly vulnerable too, he knew, to any number of dangers. The thought made his hand twitch for the sword he'd given away, prepared to fight for them if need arose. An enemy he could actually fight would, perhaps, be cathartic.

Crowley had said he needed to get back to basics, and these were certainly instincts from early days, but he was not reassured by his own urge towards violence.

Who will I be at the end of it all?
A familiar sound, yet not one he had heard recently, drew him out of his reverie. Someone was knocking on his door. He debated ignoring it, but it was well past midnight, closer to dawn than to dusk, and he was not so far gone that he could resist a call for help.

“Hullo?” called a young voice, still rapping. “Beggin’ your pardon to call so late, but we’re in dire straights here. Waken up, m’lord!”

“I’m here, I’m here,” he said quickly, stepping out from behind a rather extravagant primrose bush, cringing slightly as the boy started violently. “I beg your pardon. I was just… watching the stars. Whatever is the matter?”

“It's our old ewe, sir. She's having a time of the birthing. Father says it's been far too long. I know you're new to us, but your brother said you were a healer from London, would you come, sir?”

A healer would have been expected to treat as many animals as people, and especially so in an isolated village. It still hurt to be asked, but a stretchy, achy kind of hurt, the sort that heals. “Yes, dear fellow, I will.”

The boy took off down the path and Aziraphale was hot on his heels for the nearly two miles down the path, though he was decidedly, for appearances' sake, of course, winded by the time they saw the dull light gleaming from the candles held aloft by the younger children to light their way.

“Papa! Papa! I've got him!” He hollered joyfully, and Aziraphale felt, even more than he heard, the chorus of excited voices heralding his arrival. He greeted them quickly, accepting the brief handshakes politely before setting to work, using only the lightest of miracles to strengthen mother and baby.

The angel rolled up his pristine sleeves and slipped his hands inside the birth canal to check the positioning. “The lamb's head is bent backwards, but it's still alive. I'll need some thin rope.” The farmer rushed to comply and assisted Aziraphale in fastening a rope to each of the lamb's forelegs. “Now, we're just going to ease her back in a bit so I can reposition her head. Easy there, little one.” Gently, carefully, he maneuvered the lamb into the proper position before withdrawing. “Now, we're just going to slowly pull on the ropes until I can get the head lashed as well.”

Life was a gory affair at both ends, he noted, but smiled with the family when the lamb's head emerged. “Now we just pull down, nice and steady. There we are, what a nice girl you are.”

It was well past dawn when he trudged back down to the cottage. Ewe and lamb were doing fine and the humans had doted on him, insisting on feeding him a meal before letting him leave. The simple tactile pleasure of human food and human company warmed his aching being. He hadn’t eaten since things had gone so wrong, and he found that he'd missed it.

Aziraphale headed straight for his spot in the garden, taking a moment to pull the bloodstained shift over his head and miracle it out of existence. It would never really have been the same anyway, and he could pay the local tailor a visit when he was ready. In the meantime, a little ethereal replacement would do fine.

He settled into the dirt, inhaling the scent of the flowers around him. After a while, a line of ants began trailing over his toes. He felt the weight of each tiny life and the way it tickled him.

Humans sometimes compared themselves to ants. He had always thought that foolish. They were such unique and individual creatures. Ants were… ants. Pesky things, that got into the
honey. Mindless soldiers following the paths they had set out for them from the beginning. They did their jobs and if one should stray and be eaten up, the other ants wouldn’t give that one a second thought. They had likely never given it a first thought, nor a thought for themselves either. Not big on introspection, ants, which was probably for the best.

Humans were nothing like ants, except that, for most of Heaven’s denizens, and undoubtedly Hell’s too, all that really mattered were the numbers. Human souls were how Heaven and Hell kept score. How well they baked bread, or sewed little wings on a child's doll meant nothing in the long run. He wondered why he had ever thought it did.

One ant started crawling up his leg and he hovered a finger over it, imagining crushing it, debating. Were humans like ants? She made them both. Did She distinguish between them? She rarely seemed inclined to stop terrible things from happening to either of them.

“You could stop me, you know,” he told his Creator, wondering if she was paying attention. He had always believed She was, and that it was only so hard to tell because She was inclined towards ineffability.

"If this one matters to you. If any of them do. I doubt crushed by an angel is what You planned out for this one. Do you make plans for ants? Maybe there's just the one plan. Just tell me not to. Just… tell me something.”

He sucked in a breath when Crowley flicked it off instead. “She doesn’t like to be tested, remember.”

“Oh! You're back!”

“In the nick, it seems. Have you really replaced me with a bunch of ants? I'm trying not to be offended over here, angel, but really.

“Maybe I’m just testing myself. Would I kill something, just because I could?”

“Is that what you're doing then? Trying to find the limits of your own morality? Playing with fire?” Crowley pulled his novel little spectacles off his face and peered into Aziraphale’s eyes, frowning at whatever it was he found.

“I’m just wondering if any of it matters, that's all. If fifty million people don’t merit a quick peek in, then why would one? One human, one,” he waved at Crowley, “demon.”

“One angel?”

“One ant.”

Crowley hummed thoughtfully and shut his eyes briefly, inhaling the scent of the flowers around them. Several began shedding their petals and his brows furrowed. “I think it's okay, you know, to be angry at God. For a while.”

“I suppose you would know better than I.” Crowley gave him a little jab in the shoulder.

“Well, I've been at it a good sight longer than six thousand years, and I'm still here. Not a lot of perks in my line of work, I'll admit, and don’t start me on the retirement plan, but life up here is pretty good. Look here. Gardenia. Smells good.”

He moved so Aziraphale could smell it, and the angel reached over and plucked one of the blossoms slowly shredding it while they talked. Crowley made an unhappy noise, watching him.
“You need to let this go. Like with the Flood. Things are better now. Remember the rainbow?”

“Yes. The rainbow. How… kind, as you put it? I’m starting to think you may well have the right of a lot of things I’m not sure about.”

“You don’t want to start listening to me now, angel. You have your own thing going. Faith and stuff. S’nice. Works for y-”

He broke off, giving his head a shake. “Sorry, bad timing, I know, but I have to go.”

Aziraphale was up on his feet in a heartbeat. “Oh! But you just got back, are you sure?”

Crowley was already walking quickly away, he turned around, still moving backwards towards the gate. “I, yeah, not safe for us to spend too much time, you know. Evil never sleeps and all that.”

“You do. Odd as that is.”

When he came back two days later, looking worn and angry, Aziraphale was angry too, crushing ants in the garden.

*I shouldn’t have left him alone.* Not that he’d had any choice in the matter.

“What that. This isn’t your thing, remember? You know, Good guy, angel, being of love. You’re better than this. Merciful.”

Aziraphale looked up at him, emotions warring on his face until they all fell and he looked blank and desolate. “Do you know, that is, perhaps, where my strength lies, but that wasn’t my first purpose. I was created to guard, to fight and defend… to war against the unrighteous, and slay my enemies.”

He crushed another ant.

Crowley caught him by the hand. “Considering that, officially, I am your principal enemy in the world, I’d just as soon you didn’t.”

“Why do you care? They’re just ants.”

“I don’t. I care about- I don’t care, but you’ll regret this later. I don’t like seeing you like this. … it’s not the way things are supposed to be.”

“And how, Crowley, are they supposed to be?”

I don’t know, he wanted to say. Normal, he wanted to say. With drunken debating at three in the morning and wandering all over to find that one merchant with those truffle things. I can’t help you with your questions when I’m still begging for answers to mine.

“Plants,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“I need your help, with plants.”
The angel blinked slowly at him. “You need my help with plants,” he echoed.

“Don’t make me say it again ‘cause I’m not going to, he groused, pulling a cloth bag out of the ethereal plane. “I can’t make them grow.” He opened the bag to reveal a wide variety of seeds.

“Are they actually real seeds?”

“Definitely really, truly, Earth, born and raised, seeds. Have to be. What’s that poem that guy is eventually going to write? Poems are made by clever demons like me, but only She can make a tree?”

“I… will, take your word for it.” Aziraphale answered slowly, running his fingers through the seeds. Several sprouted with enthusiasm.

“See that? What that is, is disgusting.” The angel frowned at him. “What do you mean?” Crowley held his hand out, and after a moment, Aziraphale tipped the seeds into his hand. They promptly withered. “It's not fair,” he complained. “I didn’t even do anything to them. Even humans can plant gardens. And don’t get me started on the way they respond to you.

“Well, plants are not really my area-"

“Don’t rub it in.”

“I’m not-"

“Aziraphale. I told you when we first came here that a garden would be good for you. Give you something, I don’t know, hands on and quiet, alive but not human, to look after, and the blessed second you arrived here these kiss-ass plants have been growing and flowering. Do you have any idea how long I've been trying to keep a damn flower alive?”

“Well, if you'd stop damning them, it would probably help.”

He snorted and stood up. “Nothing helps. I've tried getting human advice, using the best if everything, outdoor plants, indoor plants, cacti. I even miracle them up, blooming and healthy and they take one look at me and off they go.”

He started walking to an empty patch of earth that had appeared in the back corner farthest from the house. “There has to be a better way. They knelt over the earth and Crowley began digging holes. “You plant them. It'll go better.”

With a little shrug, Aziraphale began dropping seeds into the holes. “Are you sure you aren’t just thinking evil thoughts at them, accidentally? Maybe that's a hindrance.”

Crowley sighed, stretching forward to start a new row. “You know, it was humiliating enough just telling you about my little problem. I don’t need you accusing me of being unable to control myself.”

“Oh, I do apologize.”

“I already considered that anyway, and I've been thinking nothing but sweetness and light at the little green bastards.”

“Ah, I see.”
“And it might be worth having to do that, if only I could have some success at it, but no. Whatever I do, they just keep dying all around me.”

Aziraphale sat back on his heels. Crowley began filling in the holes, decidedly not looking back at him.

“But I just keep trying, and the thing about having eternity stretched out in front of you, is that, assuming you don’t surrender, sooner or later, you have to win sometime. It’s all going to be fine, in the end.”

The angel felt his heart clench painfully. “You're always so sure about that.”

“I have to be, angel, because I really want a garden to call my own, and the thought that I can’t ever make that happen is all but unbearable. And annoying. There has to be another way to make it right, ‘cause…” his next words were all but inaudible. “I still think She can be merciful, and that gives me hope.

Aziraphale felt a warm drop land on his earth-covered thumb. He glanced up at the cloudless sky. “Oh, I see.”

A tickle at his elbow distracted him from the tear mixing into mud on his hand. There was an ant. He wondered how it had gotten so far up before he’d noticed it. “I'm really, very sorry,” he whispered, and carefully brushed it back into the grass.

“Sorry for wh-?” Crowley stopped as Aziraphale put his hands over his face and wept silently, trembling all over. “Took you far too long,” he chided kindly.

After a minute, he felt his friend shift beside him, a soft ruffle and then a warm, light pressure came to rest against his back. Aziraphale let out a little sob as he wiped his face on his bunched up sleeve, not surprised to see the shadow of dark feathers resting protectively over him. “Than-"

“Seems about time I returned the favour.” He said lightly, poking at a bright yellow buttercup in the grass. “You'll be okay, angel. It's going to get better.”

Aziraphale believed him.

Chapter End Notes

I'm heading towards a plot. Just around the corner now, but I couldn't leave Aziraphale after the plague without giving him some recovery time.
Chapter Summary

Back into the present day, Crowley comes clean, eventually.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quite some time later, Aziraphale surveyed the results of his efforts, careful not to disturb the drying ink of the Bugger Alle This Bible. He had managed a fairly accurate likeness of Master Biltonn, leering at a barmaid, and he knew Crowley would be pleased by it. He always liked it when Aziraphale dabbled in subversion.

He was still debating whether to add his own likeness to the bit about the flaming sword, or maybe a border of snakes in sunglasses when Crowley crashed through his door, popping off the hinges and collapsing in a heap on the bookshop floor.

He was only down for an instant before staggering back up, knocking over a vase as he went, leaving it as utterly smashed as he was.

"Crowley! What the devil?" He flinched at his burning of his own words as he rushed to steady his unexpected guest.

Unexpected friend, really.

"Ziraphal! Azzzzzza- you! Angel!" he crowed before spinning on his heels and dodging around him, heading for Aziraphale's manuscript.

"Oh, no, do be careful!" Hesitating over the book just long enough so that Aziraphale would know it was an absolutely deliberate act, Crowley shoved it off the table violently, wet ink smearing badly and ruining the effort of months. He met the angel's shocked stare as steadily as he was capable of, shaking his hand and hissing from the pain the mostly sacred book inflicted during the brief contact.

"Wha... my...Crowley?!” But his dismay caved quickly in the face of Crowley's obvious distress as he slumped to the floor, wailing. "I broke your book. Smite me, angel. 'M ready. G'head on with it."

At a loss for words, Aziraphale dropped to the floor and pulled him into a tight hug. "Forget the book. It's a stupid book. Shhhhh, now. Steady." He rubbed Crowley's back firmly, trying to soothe away the tremors, mumbling he knew not what while his mind did cartwheels trying to figure out what was happening and what he could do about it.

After a time, he pulled back, peering into the unfocused, luminous eyes. "I think we should get you sobered up. A little clear thinking is just the ticket, hmm?"
He wasn't surprised when Crowley resisted, clumsily trying to get to his feet. He was surprised when ebony wings suddenly manifested and began beating, lifting them both off the floor and sending books, papers and knick knacks scattering.

"Nnnnnah, not dying sober. S'dull. This issss way more fun. C'mon. Show me your true form. You know, shiny? All them wings and eyes. You'rrra cherub, right? Been ages since I saw an angel look like an angel." He attempted to poke Aziraphale in the eyes but rather missed by miles.

"Principalcy. Got demoted for letting you cause trouble. Also, the sword." He had never seen Crowley so utterly sloshed, and he had seen quite a lot of that. “So just the two eyes, and as for the dramatics, not today, dear. If you could stop flapping about, I would certainly appreciate it."

"Wrecked your book. Smite me," Crowley insisted, tussling with him as Aziraphale spread his own wings, looking for leverage to force Crowley down. Loose feathers in opposing colors shook free in the struggle, and Aziraphale's shop began to look more like an ostrich aviary.

"Not if you wrecked all the books ever written, Crowley. Never, my dear, never." Dredging up his shattered concentration, he rapidly purged the alcohol out of Crowley's system.

"Nngk," Crowley moaned, raising a hand to his head as his wings stilled and their feet found terra firma. "Spoil my fun."

"That was not fun, Crowley," Aziraphale scolded him. "And not fair either. What are you thinking? Do you know what you were asking?!"

He turned away from Aziraphale, gaining some breathing space, not that he needed breathing, but the space was welcome enough. By some wordless agreement, they both hid their wings away. "I'm sure you misheard me," he said finally, tiredly.

“My dear Crowley,” he blew tension out softly. “I hope you know you can tell me anything.” A ghost of memory curved his lips. “Seems only fair to return the favour, after all.”

Crowley hesitated, then shook his head. “I’m an idiot. I shouldn’t be here.”

Aziraphale was not about to let him get away with that. He hooked a leg behind the demon and neatly dropped him onto the couch, not entirely able to repress a quick flash of amusement at Crowley's gaping mouth. "I'll make you some tea... and then you and I are going to have a conversation, no smiting allowed."

"That's not a good idea."

"Coffee then? I'm not giving you anymore alcohol, and you should know that I'm certain this conversation we are about to have is among the best ideas I have ever had."

Crowley didn't respond immediately and Aziraphale left him with the mess in the sitting room and the sad ruins of the corrupted bible. He wasn't through heating the kettle when the quiet question floated over to him.

"D'you think that could change?" He debated answering at all for a moment, preferring to do this face to face, but if this was what Crowley needed...

"Do I think what will change?"

"S-smiting."
"Of course, not, silly demon." He nearly spilled the steaming water as he poured it unsteadily into their cups.

"What if... hngkkmkymmad."

More vowels would help.

"Beg pardon?"

"I said," he sighed deeply, voice catching ever so slightly. "What if I made you mad, did something-. Some things really... bad?"

Walking in with the tea, Aziraphale plastered a smile on his face, so false it nearly leapt back off again in shame. "We've known each other for thousands of years, Crowley."

The room was perfectly restored to its usual clutter. He walked in just in time to see the redhead bending down to scooped up the mangled bible. He hissed as it singed his fingers and he set it down hastily on the table. “Um, sorry, I couldn’t-"

“It's alright. Not surprised you couldn’t touch it. It's still a bible, after all, sound, but for a unique flaw, corrupted, perhaps, but intriguing.”

“Sounds like you, shady angel.”

“Sounds like you, friendly demon,” he returned easily, patting the cushion beside him in invitation. Crowley accepted it, tucking his legs underneath himself as he settled.

Aziraphale handed him the teacup after stirring in an extra dollop of honey. "As for your question, do you really think I don't know the kinds of things you get up to?" He settled back with a sigh, willing tense muscles to relax. Crowley blinked at him slowly in response. "Maybe we shouldn't be ... associating, as it were, but we have and we do, and I can't really imagine anything that would change that. Nor would I want it to."

Crowley nodded shakily, before visibly gathering himself back into his snarky armour and reaching into his pocket and drawing out something dark. He slapped it down between them on the settee. It reeked of sulphur and Aziraphale recoiled instinctively. It looked like some sort of certificate but the sigil at the bottom made him want to grope for his long lost sword.

Crowley didn't miss Aziraphale's shudder and snatched it up again. "Whoops, sorry. Straight from my head office. I don't like it any better than you."

Aziraphale had his own issues with Upstairs... but at least his boss wasn't... Crowley's boss. His gut twisted in sympathy and regret for the way things were.

"Sss'a damn commendation. For a thing." He faltered abruptly, disappearing it as his courage did as well. "Did you read it?"

"I happen to know most of your memos are made up anyway," Aziraphale murmured, mildly burning his lips as he rushed to drink the too hot tea. The burn of the words he could not have failed to read was worse.

Surely not. Crowley would never.

But his friend looked on the verge of tears. Aziraphale could not recall ever seeing genuine shame on Crowley's face before. "Uh, right. Made 'em up. Loved writing to them about it."
He swallowed hard, looking ill, looking frightened, looking anywhere but at Aziraphale.

He opened his mouth, struggling to find words that would not condemn.

Oh, Crowley, you didn't.

"You really burned down an orphanage?"

Can't have. Can't have?

The demon was up again and pacing. "I shouldn't have told you! Look at the way you're looking at me!" He was yelling, aggressively, but Aziraphale had been on Earth long enough, and, much more importantly, known Crowley long enough, to recognise pain when he saw it. He braced for a wave of defensive rage to come flying out at him. It could not have been worse than the self immolation going on inside Crowley.

He'd heard it said by other angels that demons forged their own chains.

Oh, my dear.

He fought for composure. One of them had to be calm. "It... it just doesn't sound like something you would do."

"Sure about that, are you?" He thought he had been, but just from the way Crowley was acting- he didn't miss the armour closing down hard over the hurt in those riveting eyes. "Good. You shouldn't be."

"Surely, no one was-"

Crowley was up and circling him, almost predatorily, like he was sizing up an Adversary, preparing for a standoff. He did it often in times of stress. It was an unsettling habit and Aziraphale wondered if Crowley even knew he did it.

"Don't be certain of anything about me, angel," he spat the term angrily, "for your own good and everyone else's." Emotions flashing from one extreme to the other in an instant, the mercurial creature dropped to his knees in front of him, reaching out to touch Aziraphale's knee before redirecting it to drag down his own wet face. 'I'm a demon. I'm not good. You can't be thinking I'm good.'

Had Crowley been other than he was, and Aziraphale other than he was, or either one of them less than sober, he would have pulled him into another hug. As it was, he determined to use his words to accomplish the same, feeling something he wouldn't dare call loyalty well up in his heart. "I don't believe you."

"...wha?" Crowley plucked at the carpet. His voice was small. "Happened. For real."

"Crowley, my dear Crowley." He waited for the yellow eyes to meander up to meet his. "I don't know what happened, not the whole of it, but I do know the whole of you, and I am absolutely certain you didn't set out to hurt any children."

He felt the weigh of a heavy head, and a heavier heart drop into his lap. "I like kids," Crowley mumbled.

"I know you do, my dear. No doubt." If there was one thing Aziraphale had, it was faith. And thanks, in good part, to many, many, debates with Crowley, it was faith that stood unshakable,
even when assailed with a barrage of exquisitely pointed questions. "I'm an angel, after all. I know Good. You're good, Crowley," he raised a hand to counter the inevitable protests. "You are."

"You can't just go around saying things like that, Aziraphale. Do you have any idea what they would do to me if they heard an angel thought I was good? Even a mad, reckless one?"

"Best leave that out of both our memos," he said lightly, gentle fingers running through Crowley's hair in with a softness in sharp contrast to the questions still stampeding through his mind. Patience was more than just a virtue in such times, it was a necessity more than breathing... especially in their case, where breathing was more of an affectation. He waited, listening to Crowley's breathing, feeling him relax under his ministrations. Finally, when he felt he could, he spoke. "What happened?"

Crowley inhaled sharply, then released it shakily. "Euughnn...I... well, you know, our people, Above and Below, and you and I too, we've just been um, made differently from the humans."

"...yes."

"Right, and we have, you know, what they call miracles, and immortality, and head offices, but they have, I don't know, free will, and creativity and decent music-"

"Mm, and food!"

"Heh, yeah, and alcohol."

"And books!"

"Yeah... cars..." Crowley was ducking his head down, but Aziraphale could hear the little smile in his voice he had found for all the things they loved about the world, "they think of all kinds of clever things our sides never would."

His voice fell off and his smile did too. "What did they come up with, this time in particular?" the angel prompted softly, lightly tweaking the ginger hair. Another swallow. "I don't suppose angels can be summoned, can they? By the humans, I mean. Like... black arts, kinda stuff?"

Aziraphale froze. "Summoned... can they actually do that?!"

"Not most of them... but every once in a great while, someone gets it right."

"Oh, my dear boy," Crowley was looking at his hands, and the angel ached for him.

"You know what's awful, Aziraphale?" Crowley turned from side to his back, tipping his head back to peer up at him. "Until just this second... I thought it was you, your side, I mean, what taught them how to do it."

The angel stiffened, offended. "My side doesn't, doesn't promote the black arts, Crowley! That is definitely more within your side's purview!"

"I know that now," the demon insisted quickly, "but only now. Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad...exactly. A little... miffed."

"Don't do that either, then."
"I'm not supposed to have pride, but really, Crowley. The black arts."

"Well, but why would we ever do that to ourselves? I mean, I know it wasn't me, so, I thought, well... we are supposed to be enemies, Aziraphale!"

"Yes, and we never really have been, and less, mm, adversarial all the time, for better or worse. I wouldn't do that to you, or anyone, Crowley. I like to think I wouldn't stand by while it was done, either. Don't you know me?" he asked wistfully.

Crowley was up beside him in an instant. "I do! I just-" he pressed his fingers to his temples and golden eyes slid shut in concentration. Aziraphale felt him looking for listeners. With a sincerity that startled him, his friend touched his hand. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I thought that of you. I wouldn't even have blamed you, if you had. We don't always have choices. You just... drop off the wrong book in the wrong person's collection. I could do it, easily..." he trailed off, cringing as his own thought process took him too far too easily. Wouldn't be the first time he'd brought himself down with his own scheming.

"It's fine, it's fine," he hushed him quickly, touched by the most explicitly sincere apology he had ever heard from Crowley in their long association. "So...you've been summoned? By humans?"

The demon's nod was nearly imperceptible, made all the more so as he slithered sideways into a sprawl, his head resting in Aziraphale's lap and his long limbs dangling over the arm of the couch in a way that would have been miserable for anyone with the standard human spine. "I can kind of... feel them pulling at me when it happens. That part's not so bad. Gives me time to get away from... humans."

"And me, as I recall. I didn't understand why you would just... rush off. I was worried. I should have pushed harder."

"My angel. Always fretting about something."

"Hardly unjustified in this case, dear fellow. So you would run off to hide-"

"Not, hide, not exactly. It's... it's a lot of dark energy. Really malevolent stuff. Wasn't sure what it would do to, anyone, nearby. Not a fun time being in the middle of it, I can tell you."

"Tell me."

"You know that feeling, when, after you've been discorporated, and they finally give you a new body and send you back, but... it doesn't feel like all of you can really, fit? in a human form?"

"It can be a little cramped in here, at times."

"It's being, well, if you'll forgive a snakeish kind of word, constricted, with... evil. I dunno, like the general merry atmosphere of the 9th circle is looping around you, chaining you down- got any rum?"

"I just got you sober."

"If you want details, I'm not going to be sober." Aziraphale pursed his lips, before relenting. Not wanting to move, he plucked a bottle from his wine cellar out of midair, following it with two glasses shortly thereafter. A nice vintage, but not his best. Just in case Crowley started chugging it with no regard for texture and quality. He handed one to Crowley and poured for them both, being rather over generous for the other's, under his demanding gaze. "Mm... better."
"You were saying? Constricting?" It was an upsetting thought, the dear thing being bound up in darkness. Aziraphale, took a longer sip as the image took shape in his mind.

"Euk, yeah. Then it kinda burns and I find myself with a bunch of idiots in black robes doing terrible things with blood and snakes, and playing with things they will," he added darkly, "eventually understand and wish they didn't."

He wondered if Crowley was referring to his own vengeance or their likely spending the remainder of all days Down Below. Consequences of free will, he supposed gravely. "What happens then?"

"Sometimes they really are idiots, and don't take precautions to actually contain me once they've got me. More fools them." He drained his glass abruptly and tossed it up in the air before sending it sailing it over Aziraphale's head to shatter against a wall.

"Feeling destructive, I see." Crowley held the same glass up again, whole and ready for more, waggling it under the Angel's nose until Aziraphale refilled it with a roll of his eyes.

"Nah... I feel... powerless." Aziraphale found his fingers gently massaging Crowley's scalp, unbidden. "Can't say I like it."

"No... I didn't like it either," he whispered. "What do you do if you're free?"

"Well..." Crowley tried to sit up but Aziraphale fluttered his hands around him until he gave up and settled back down. A little fussing never hurt anyone. "It depends on what they've been up to. I don't like it when they kill the snakes. I mostly just tell them how stupid they are, give them a scare. Nothing fatal. Probably should do."

"Maybe."

Crowley's surprise made his pupils blow wide. He made a few inarticulate Crowley-type noises that landed in, "Really, angel, not very merciful of you."

"I don't abide cruelty. It's not in my nature."

"Unless it's carved in golden letters on postcards from on High?"

"Don't be unkind."

"I'm being true to my own nature."

"No," Aziraphale said firmly, "you aren't. And, maybe they should … perish for their trespass. I cannot bear the thought of you enslaved."

Crowley stared up at him for a moment before shrugging with careful insouciance. "I am enslaved, so you will have to get used to such thoughts." He tilted his chin up defiantly. "But, I chose my own chains, which is more than you can say. You are as much a prisoner as I. Freewill was granted to the humans as their gift. We can only look on and covet."

"I don't covet."

"Don't you?"

"I don't covet their freedom, Crowley, and though you spin your own decisions as the chains of liberation, I don't covet yours either. I do... I delight in knowing such a thing exists for
"Humans are so easily corrupted. A third of us Fell from Heaven. They weren't so hard to corrupt either, in the end."

Ancient grief washed over Aziraphale's spirit. Those were bad days. One of the only things they didn't talk about. It caused the gap between them to yawn open terribly, menacingly... absolutely a purposeful distraction. Crowley wasn't pulling punches. If the Fallen angel was leading them that way, he absolutely did not want to tell Aziraphale about that orphanage.

With a will, he dragged his thoughts back to the matter at hand, and Crowley with them. "What happens when they are better prepared for you?"

Slim fingers found, and began toying with the intricately braided rope belt Aziraphale was wearing. Crowley wasn't meeting his eyes anymore. Thwarted.

"That depends on them too," he said quietly. "And I don't have much say about that."

"They have control over you, then?"

"They can use me for their purposes. If they've done the binding really thoroughly, I can't even register my objections. If I can, you can be sure that I do," he punctuated the statement with an angry hiss. It didn't quite drown out the feeling of nervous little tugs from trembling hands. "One time, I couldn't get out of it for ages. Aziraphale... I had to wait for the human to die before I was released."

"Oh, Crowley..."

The demon gripped the braid tightly and twisted it angrily. "Don't worry about that one. Plague got her. Popped Down Below just after, and made sure the New Arrivals committee knew about what she'd been getting up to."

"...good," Aziraphale decided, giving a gentle tug of the red hair for emphasis.

"At least... she didn't forget about me. Took full advantage of the opportunity of having a captive demon. Enjoyed it as much as she's not enjoying Things now." He rolled over and pressed his forehead into Aziraphale's thigh in a smooth, twisty maneuver no human could have replicated.

"Sometimes they get distracted with human things. Wars or marriages or other trivia. Spent 16 years in a muddy basement once. Was fit to be tied all over again when the bonds faded enough to break free."

At Aziraphale's distressed little noise, Crowley gave his leg a pat, never looking up. "Don't worry. I napped between plotting murderous schemes, and it hasn't happened so many times, really. You know how it is. We've been poking around Earth so long, there ends up not being much on the "never done" list. Still never get to end of the to do list though. Weird." Another little pat. "Don't fret about this. S'fine."

"It's appalling, my dear. What do they ask of you?" The hand that had patted his leg curled into a fist.

"Bad things."

"Well, that stands to reason, but-"
"Curses. Blights. Poisonings. All sorts of miserable revenge on some poor sod who probably never did a thing to deserve it. People looking for my help are not good people, angel. Sometimes, it’s really terrible things, Aziraphale, worse than I would ever think to do. Not clever, or creative, just nasty. I can’t stop myself from following their orders, and it’s just... Hell."

"This last time... it was worse than before?"

*I've never seen you like this.*

He didn't answer for so long, Aziraphale wondered if he drifted off, until he heard an unhappy little, "Yeah," and the whole sordid story came pouring out.

Chapter End Notes

1 None too steadily at all. [return to text]

I know, I know. Summoning. It's been done, but not quite like this I hope, and there are many twists and turns to come with this story.

Thank you for reading and kudos and commenting. It's very encouraging. ❤
Crowley had a little extra swagger in his saunter as he left his flat to meet up with Aziraphale for supper. Most all of their scheduled rendezvous centered at a meal in one place or another, and he certainly had nothing to do with that definitely-not-mysterious trend. It didn't really matter, the angel was good-ba-entertaining company, despite the notable disadvantage of being an angel.

It all went to pieces in an instant as he felt his stomach twist violently, a crushing weight descending on him from all sides.

"No, nonononono, not now, bless it all to Heaven!" He turned tail, not that he had one in this form, and threw himself into an alleyway, skidding behind some bins to keep out of sight of any passing humans before thrashing around in a frantic bid for freedom.

The pressure was remorseless as it coiled about him, darkly, thickly. If he had needed to breathe, he would have dropped right there, next to the unfortunate rat that had been scuttling by. He was never going to make it to dinner now.

Crowley, not the rat.

Also the rat.

Aziraphale would be wondering what happened- he couldn't have the angel come looking. He would sent a note, something about a work meeting. That would do.

Thought was as good as deed, and elsewhere a disappointed ethereal foodie picked up a card bordered in a red and black inked snake that read, "Can't make it. Work is Hell."

Mission accomplished, he stopped fighting the darkness and let himself be swallowed up by the summons.

The first sensation he was aware of was burning. He scrambled off the floor before his eyes had quite opened, but he wasn't at all surprised to find himself in a church, surrounded by idiots.

"It worked!"

Satan help him.

Nevermind.

He shifted from foot to foot, trying not to look like he was doing so. It wasn't as bad as he would have expected, and from the myriad, vaguely evil, signs and sigils marking it up, this
particular church had been long since given over to Satanists.

   Why do we only attract the stupid ones?

   Not that he was in any position to judge the wisdom throwing in with Satan.

   Probably shouldn't leave the recruiting to Lidur. Wait… who was doing it now? He'd have to bring it up, next meeting, although that was a good way to ensure he'd be the one doing it.

   Nevermind that too.

   They stared at him expectantly, far more optimistic than he thought could be in any way justified. He opened his mouth but thought better of it. Idiots or no, the hold on him this time was relentlessly strong, likely because of the power in the consecrated ground. He scanned the group before him intently, but subtly, trying to appear confused and harmless. He pictured Aziraphale for inspiration.

   Weak link. Weak link. Weak link.

   Think. Think. Think.

   If he couldn't break free of the summons himself, his best bet was to talk his way free, and one did not land the cushiest job on Hell's roster without being very good at that very thing.

   "Ave daemonium, ut salutaret te cum aperta armis. Audi et vide æquitatem domini tui."

   "Beg pardon?"

   "Serva mandata mea, et servus male!"

   Crowley let out a breath through pursed lips. "Wow. Okay, first of all, your Latin is atrocious. I can hardly believe I made it here in one piece. Those online translating things don't hold a candle to actually studying the language, you know. Also, possibly a… friend of mine, did a bit of messing about with them, last year, just to cause a little trouble."

   "Oh, I, um-"

   "Secondly... why in the Hell, are we in a church?"

   "Well, because-" the leader, Crowley presumed, glanced around at his masked, and be-robed followers and straightened his shoulders, speaking with more confidence.

   "Because, we have taken this den of weakness and defiled it for the dark purposes of our evil Lord-"

   "Euuyeah... ground is still consecrated. So you're holding your dark masses still in a church. Dark Lord's not a big fan, trust a guy who knows. He wouldn't catch you dead in here... might be for the best, that."

   He peered up an upside down crucifix and flicked it off the wall. "Whatever floats your boat, or sacrifices your goat, as the case may be. Where'd you get the idea for this little plan? I would really love to know." His gesture swept up and down himself and did exactly what he wanted it to do.

   "He doesn't really look like a proper demon."
"Not really very... Helly, is he?"

"Horns and a tail, that's what I was expecting."

"Forked tongue too, right? That's a thing. In all the books." Crowley kept his mouth shut and his tongue behind closed... teeth.

“Yeah, you're really scraping the top of the infernal barrel with me, I'm afraid. I'm a lousy demon. Ask any of them. Practically left the Fallen out of the Fallen angel bit. I haven’t even been to Hell lately, although I do visit Manchester fairly often.”

He stretched lazily and flopped back to sit on the floor, stubbornly hiding the way his bum felt like he'd landed on hot tarmac. At least it gave his aching feet a break. “You wanna just call this a practice run then? Practice your Latin, aim a little lower for a better, wors- more Helly demon? I mostly specialize in traffic signals and mobile phones, maybe some angelic thwarting, if he's being especially prim-"

“Angels are real?” Crowley shut his eyes and pushed against the unyielding restraining power again, desperate. This was just humiliating. It was official. God was punishing him with competent incompetents.

“Why yes, little Timmy,” he crooned, at near toxic levels of sarcasm. “Where do you think demons came from in the first place?”

It went completely over the follower’s head. He was beginning to see how Idiot wound up in charge. Some geeky kid gets picked on, gets mad and starts a cult. He could respect that. Wouldn’t be the first time.

“Huh, fancy that. What about faeries? Or, the lock mess monster? You know him? I'd love to meet him.”

“That's Nessie. She's a girl. She's real, but she lives in a different lake. That's why they never find her.”

"Wha, really?"

"That's what I heard.” They waited for him to weigh in. Were there any strong links here? Although… it did get his wily mind a-wiling.

“No, but I do hang out with Djinn every second Tuesday. Good people, little rascally. Totally my sort. Get together for tea and scones, complain about all these rules for human interactions.”

"Djinn…?"

“What rules?” Captain Idiot demanded, helpfully leaping onto the lovely little primrose path Crowley was laying out before him.

“The Rulesss,” he dragged out languidly, clambering back to his feet to both rescue his buttocks and challenge the leader with gleaming, predatory eyes. “Haven’t you heard of Djinn? You know, what d'you call 'em, genies?”

He coated his voice in honey, like he was talking to a particularly slow child. It didn’t require much effort. “You get three wishes, three… requests. The old human stories, they all come from somewhere. You just get three requests from me-”
“You mean commands.”

“As you like,” he said easily. “And then I'm released.”

“You perform three commands for us, and then you are released,” he repeated, frowning.

“Deal.” Crowley grinned as the contract slid invisibly into place. At least he could limit the damage, and his freedom was on the horizon. The summoner's face fell as he caught on.

“What- but that's not the rule! I never read that!”

He shrugged lazily. “But you said it.”

“That's not what I meant!”

“It is exactly what you said. Do you want to appeal to a lower court then?” His tone of voice painted the image of a really, very, much lower court. “That can be arranged, if you like, but I know, oh, so many lawyers. Some even human.”

“That's not fair. This isn't the way it's supposed to be!” The whinging quality of his voice started his entourage exchanging skeptical glances. Crowley’s temporary glee over the small victory mixed silkily with wrath.

“Oh, isn’t it? Do you really expect me to take this lying down? Summoning a demon is literally asking for Trouble, capital T, and if I were you, I'd be very careful about what mood you leave me in when our little arrange-ment-contract, is up. Now, hurry up and tell me what else you want from me, because tick tock, you're on my clock now.”

“You aren’t the one in charge here,” he snapped, in the shrill voice of someone who knows he is losing control. “I tell you what to do, and you obey!”

There had only been one time in his life when that was true, and it hadn’t lasted particularly long, but he let it pass. There was already plenty of blood in the water.

“So tell me, boss,” he offered a snarky little salute. “Oh, unless you lot didn’t think this far ahead? What'sss the matter? In too deep now, aren't you?”

Worry and needle and mock...

"Just give me a minute!” Crowley grinned, and it was absolute malice. “Sure thing.”

He closed his eyes and focused on the specific words. It wasn’t a small task. He had done this before once, on a larger scale and in far dire circumstances, and it had positively wrung him out to dry. When he opened his eyes, time stopped. It took his captor a few seconds to realise what was happening, and he used up several more seconds waving his hands in front of his frozen followers. His only regret was they would miss their leader's humiliation.

Crowley peered cheerfully at his ludicrously expensive watch and counted the seconds, that were not actually ticking down. Here, as Down There, the time was Too Late.

“What are you doing?!?” Crowley grinned acidly at him and ignored the question, and the similar ones peppered behind it.

“Aaaaand one extra minute, as commanded.” He released his hold on time, shakier than he wanted to let on, but still taking petty pleasure as the human toppled off his feet and down at
Crowley’s. “I hope that was worth it. One down, two to go. What else d'you want?”

“Shu-” he caught himself and glared at Crowley, who had become very interested in his fingernails. “I hate you.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot from our lot. Hurry up and tell me what you want. I’m feeling vengeful.”

Something about that seemed to sink in at last, and Crowley enjoyed watching the arrogance die and the slow spread of fear over the young face as he considered the contract. His breath quickened and the demon drank it in like a nice scotch. “Tick,” he said sweetly. “Tock.”

One of the followers broke and ran. “Mark, you coward!” he screamed after him, glaring around at the others, who shifted nervously, uncertain who to follow. Crowley fought back a laugh. If his feet and his behind weren’t feeling so scorched, he’d think this summoning was turning out to be fun.

“I'll make you a new deal,” the summoner panted out, voice thick with fear and rage. “I'll give you that traitor, his soul, in exchange for you surrendering your vengeance.”

“Pass.”

“Don’t you want a crack at a human soul?!” he demanded, in the fashion of someone questioning whether a human male was living up to prescribed gender roles. Crowley didn’t give a single sweet damn about either challenge.

“Well, yes and no. In this case, no. You’re what they call low hanging fruit. I mean, do you really think Heaven is chomping at the bit to get you people up there? They’d turn you down even if we offered. Also, you don’t own his soul, so you can’t barter it anyway. You could offer your own, but it’s already as good as ours.”

“Fine!” he spat angrily. “Then my second demand is that you never seek vengeance against me… and my loyal friends here, he added, when one of them hissed something urgently at him. Crowley made a show of being put out by that, using his very best, pout-at-the-angel-for-ruining-his-evilish-plans-but-actually-now-we-can-go-drinking-so-really-it-all-worked-out-face.

“Deal,” he said simply. “Last chance, buttercup. What d'you want?”

Looking at him hard, the thrice frustrated summoner beckoned to his followers and then all four left without a word. So did all his fun. Crowley, now just as frustrated gave the fallen crucifix an angry kick, which did his sore feet no favours. He was beginning to wish for a convenient Nazi bomber to come by. The memory brought back thoughts of Aziraphale, which oddly wore down on him heavily in this once purely holy place, and he found himself missing the angel keenly.

“Great. Stuck in a damned church basement for who knows how long.” He edged a little closer to a scrawled pentagram with an intimidating goat's head, and the burning of his feet eased off a bit. He gave it a friendly pat. “There's no place like home.”

Three days later, looking cold and smug, the man returned, alone. Crowley wasn’t doing well. He had all but plastered himself to the pentagram and had perched on the cursed cross. All
the same, he felt weak and not half cooked.

“I have carefully considered-”

“Yeah, yeah. Get on with it.”

“I want revenge.”

“I know the feeling.” His eyes widened in alarm and Crowley wanted to bless himself into oblivion.

“You promised-”

“I did, I know. It’s done. Go on with it. I’m shutting my fool mouth.”


It hit him like a blow from Michael herself, and his immediate, internal rejection of the command was swamped by a terrible unceasing compulsion. “No,” he shook his head violently as agony shot through him. He wasn’t allowed to say no.

Why did they have to summon him? Hastur would have loved this, would have done it while humming a Disney theme song. On the off chance he’d ever heard such a song. [1]

“You must!” his Master demanded, rumbling underneath the unholy contract, forceful and unyielding, overriding the same, paltry words proudly crowed by this mortal.

He had never really had free will. He felt the weight of his chains more than he ever had before. Heaven bless him, he felt the power twist and coil, build and burn within him, until he could no longer contain it. With a cry of anger, of agony and anguish, it burst free, and some miles away, the Blessed Hearts Home for Children burst into Hell-born flame.

“Did it work?” the summoner asked. But Crowley was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

[1] He had. Tomorrow from Annie. He didn’t get it. [return to text]

Talk to me, people. It's lonely out here.
The kids. The kids. The kids.

The thought rampaged, shrieking, inside his head as he went crashing through the doors. The malevolent energy behind the blaze was overpowering, made all the worse because it was his own.

It licked at him mockingly, a horrifying twisting of what used to be his own natural angelic form. He had come face to face with his own self, and stumbling blindly into Holy Water would have hurt less.

Despair clawed at him, raking deep wounds even while it sung to him like spun sugar and dotted little kisses down his spine. He wanted to sit down, be consumed and disorporated by it, crash back down to Hell into the darkest pit and never emerge again. He wanted to burn so completely there was nothing left of him to be ravaged by guilt.

Why the Hell had She left him capable of feeling this?

Perhaps it was punishment, for this very act, set in stone from the Beginning, iron-wrought in the ineffable Plan, in which case, he rather thought he deserved it. Aziraphale could have made a good case.

I am so, so, so, sorry.

He'd never come anywhere near this kind of remorse before. He didn’t even know who he was apologizing to, the kids, Aziraphale, who thought better of him than he should, or God herself.

Lord, help me.

He didn’t mean Satan this time.

Crowley would have given anything, his pride, his wings, his freedom, and the bitter, worthless, dregs of his soul to see Aziraphale here, all light and reflected Glory, shielding, protecting, saving the children in this Hellstorm of his own making. Unfortunately, the wretched truth of the matter was that all he had was himself, and much worse than that, all the children had was Crowley.

He forced himself on, skin burning, charring black with a pain he had neither the leftover strength to resolve, nor the heart to worry over. Foyer, bathrooms, meeting room, dining hall. Bedrooms? Probably upstairs, where the worst of the smoke would be.

He bent his will to the bedrock of Creation, concentrating on survival, imagining little
humans, breathing easily, unburned, unharmed, alive, letting the plea consume the scattered remains of his reserves. Artful illusion shattered, the strain revealing his true nature, black wings, scales appearing scattershot over his skin, fangs and forked tongue, fire burning blue behind the ragged amber of The Serpent’s eyes. His glasses were already melting and he tossed them aside.

Crowley looked every bit the monster he had discovered he was.

Movement caught his attention, eyes tracking it before conscious thought caught up to him. A figure stumbled down the stairs, veiled in smoke. A hacking cough shifted hard into a terrified scream before Crowley caught the arms of a young woman. She flailed in terror at his appearance.

“It's the smoke,” he snapped, mentally reinforcing it with no time to be delicate. She sagged under the violence of the invasive thought, and he forced her down to the floor where the covetous air still held some oxygen back from the flames.

“Crawl on your belly,” he ordered, thrusting a guiding thread into her mind to direct her to the doors. “How many?”

"I can't-"

"How many?!" He gave her a rough shake.

“Twelve! Twelve kids! Mike's trying to get them. He told me to go!” Her wail was awash with guilt and fear that Crowley knew with new and reluctant intimacy. At four and twenty, she wasn’t much more than a kid herself.

“Go!” he commanded, sending her off, breathing, scorched but alive.

Twelve.

Let me find them like her. Let me find them like that. Let it be so. Let it be so. Let it be so.

Stairs! He charged up the half flight, staggering as he slipped rounding the tight turn onto another set leading to the second floor. The stairwell window shattered abruptly under the pressure of water from a firehose, and threatened to drown him in memory once more. He flung off the images and flung open the door, surging flame boiling up the walls behind him, fed by the marauding fresh air.

The flames hadn’t reached the second floor yet, but the smoke was thick and deadly, far more treacherous than the fire that first spawned it. Sirens pierced the rippling air like the cries of frightened children. Someone, Mike, must be, was frantically slamming his body into a locked door.

“Tyree! You have to let me in. I know you're scared, but please! Sarai! Open the door! Don’t listen to him!”

“Get out of the way!” Whatever he may have thought of Crowley’s appearance, Mike grasped onto him like a drowning man.

“He's locked them in! He's panicking!” The lock was nothing and a thought made it less so.

The door flew open, colliding with an angry ten year old boy, tears streaking his face. He bounced down on the ground but was up again in a second as Crowley reached for him. Tyree
launched himself at the demon, kicking and scratching and biting, lost in the fury of his panic, ready to fight to the death against the threat.

Crowley ignored it all, pulled him closer and willed him to sleep. The boy sagged in his arms and pure bedlam erupted as the other children, huddled together behind him, saw his collapse.

He's dead! You killed my brother!” shrieked a young girl, pitching a snow globe at him. He ducked and it shattered on the rough-treated floor.

“I didn’t!” he yelled back, turning away from the accusation, stretching out his arms.

Let it be so.

Crowley pushed the sleeping child at Mike who scooped him over his shoulder. “Lead them out! Get them back to the stairwell. Fast, before it cuts you off. There's a window. Do what you'll have to.” He held the man's gaze for a moment, to ensure the knowledge sat and stayed. He imagined firefighters ready to catch, paramedics to save. The children were fading like ash before him.

Please. Please. Please.

He begged, silently, without any shred of pretense or pride. Such things were meaningless now as he entreated in raw agony for enough Power to do something right. If he had had time to think about it, it would have turned him inside out to think of how terribly right way wrong he had become, but Crowley was fading too, and there were only ten children.

“Go. Stay low. Stairwell. Window. The floor will hold.” It would.

Mike looked past him, into the choking maelstrom of black smoke. “The toddlers-”

"I'll get them. Just go.” The gratitude in the wet eyes was no more bearable from the human than it was from the angel, and Crowley shuddered.

“Follow Mr. Mike,” the man called kindly to the children, “It's going to be okay. Down on your knees now.”

Carrying Tyree, Mike could only manage a hunched over, awkward loping step, the boy swinging low enough to brush the floorboards. “Come along now, kids.”

Mike in no way resembled the physicality of Crowley's own special angel, but he felt the kinship of those kindly souls all the same.

After waiting a moment to concentrate on tamping down the fire eating up the stairwell, Crowley tore off down the hall and quietly, brusquely, opened the door to the toddler room he’d seen in the caregiver's mind.

He didn’t see the children at first, and lost precious seconds searching until he found them, a boy and a girl wedged tightly under the bed. He shoved it aside and gathered them up under his wings, sickened by the lack of a response to his movements.

Breathing, he thought, hard as he'd ever thought.

Alive, he thought. Harder still.

Uncertain whether he was feeling shallow breaths, or imagining shallow breaths, or
Imagining shallow breaths, he barreled out of the bedroom door and careened down the hallway.

He had run out of time.

The burning heat of the door told him as much but he couldn’t spare even a flickering hope that Mike had gotten the kids out. Everything he had left, precious little now, was wrapped in the still bodies of his charges…his victims.

There was no using the stairs now. He changed course and ran for the other end of the hallway; these modern public buildings always had another way out.

The floor was burning his feet like the acrid fumes assaulting his eyes. He had never felt so immersed in the boundaries of his corporation.

Without warning, a floorboard snapped under his feet and his leg pitched down through the hole, splintering wood slashing through his jeans and flesh as he descended. Saved from a complete fall by virtue of having two legs, he had to let go of the children momentarily to pry himself up.

“Yes!” he choked out in frantic gratitude when he felt the little boy stir in protest against the rough landing. “I’ve got you!” he promised, yanking them up and making it to the second stairwell.

This door was relatively cooler, and he plunged through them, desperately hoping for a second window. He swore as his hopes were dashed. No window. No way out but through the inferno that used to be the first floor.

He stole a moment long enough to wrap strong wings and soft black feathers tightly around the kids as he cradled them against his chest. The edges of his vision blackened inward as he scrabbled to draw dark and sheltering Power around them.

Cool breezes.

Still water.

Green pastures.

Yea, though I walk…

Cut off in ages past from the Unrelenting Glory of God, Crowley wasn’t sure his utmost would be enough.

Please... I'm sorry. I'm sorry for it all. Do whatever you want to me later, but give me enough to do this.

Taking a deep and deadly breath he didn’t need, Crowley held the kids close as he pushed past the doors and dashed straight through the blaze in as selfless an act as he had ever done, even at his very best. It could have been noble, if he hadn’t caused this nightmare.

His human body was completely overwhelmed and coming undone. Blinded by the orange and red the world had dissolved into, he relied on older, deeper senses to guide him through. It wasn’t the soul-searing immolation of that pool of boiling sulfur, but it was as near to it as anything on Earth could have been.

The smack of the outdoors hit him like an ice bath. He collapsed on the ground, a last whisper of thought disguising his true colours. Crowley released the children from the shadow of his wings
before merciless darkness took him to a place, about which, sleep could only dream.
“-three, four, five.”

Something was touching him.

“One, two, three, four, five.”

The odd, rhythmically stuttering pressure was very distracting. He wanted to sleep.

“One… Two…”

Something was doing weird things to his face. He didn’t care much about it, really. He did want it to stop.

Sleeping.

Right.

For now would be good. For always wouldn’t be bad.

“One, two, three, four, five.” He felt quite disconnected from everything. Maybe he had been discorporated, that posh angel-type word for being quite without a ride.

He wriggled his nose. Stupid face thing. Itchy. Crowley needed to let go, but he couldn’t break that last, tenuous thread.

“One, two- Did he just move?”

“Can't have. Still no pulse. Should we call it?”

Just let me go.

“One, Two, Three, Four- no- he's frowning.”

“I'm telling you, he can’t be. He's not got a pulse.”

Pulse. Pulse. -the Heaven was a pulse?

“One… Tw-ow!”

There. That would put off the face thing for a bit.

“Bastard hit me!”
“You're being very unprofessional. I’m sure he has a family. You can’t be calling the deceased a bastard.”

Scrambled thoughts began to congeal. He was Crowley. Bad things had happened, and his family, present and past, had worse names for him.

“Do you even know how to take a pulse?!”

Ohhhhhhh… pulse. Bless.

“I do! And I’m telling you, he d-oh. Wait a sec.”

Alright, got that figured out. What else did humans do? He tried to drag his muddled thoughts to their metaphysical feet.

“I don’t know how you got your licence.” Breathing. Eurgh. That hurt like a Hastur handshake. What in Grace had he done to himself?

“Vitals stabilized. We need a gurney over here, STAT.” A crackling sound… ah, a radio.

Crowley bit the bullet and opened his eyes, gagging a little under the onslaught of human concern. Damn. He clumsily whacked the ventilation mask off his face with arms that only vaguely remembered how to arm. They were learning fast, however. He stabbed a finger in a direction that was, most importantly, away from him, and swayed dangerously as he clambered to his feet.

Feet. Huh. Two of the buggers.

“Look, humans, a… a thing? Go see the …thing.” They stared at him, things hanging open. One of his fingers poked experimentally at his face. Face hole for talking. Right. He could manage this.

“Look… it’s a really big thing.” He felt like he was floating within his own body, yet totally distinct from it. Movement was slow and difficult, swimming in a dream, as though he was giving himself orders through a disinterested third party.

Paramedics were annoyingly well practiced at ignoring rambling patients, far better at it than ancient villagers watching silly grape-tossing games between sillier friends. “Sir, you'll need to lie down now, you've been severely injured.”

The paramedic caught his shoulders and tried to guide him down again. He gasped as the gentle grip sent white-hot shards of agony through his hidden, but very real wings, like charcoal now in more ways than one. He felt his essence slam back down fully into his human-presenting form, and the extent of the pain of his physical injuries made itself well and truly known.

Distantly, he felt entirely embarrassed to have screamed like that in front of the mortals.

Crowley was positively burnt to a crisp. It dawned on him that only the uninvited human intervention had stopped the mangled demon from discorporation. He wasn’t sure that was a good thing. Maybe it was time for a hard reset. It must have been very close, down to just that last fraying thread. He was still here, but loose and unravelling.

They were all over him, and Crowley needed space like fire needed oxygen. He was far too exposed to even begin to stitch himself back together. The men were still working on him, sticking things in his arms, resisting his attempt to make them, mmm, misplace him, in their minds.
The demon only needed a split second of interruption to divert their thoughts, but they were maddeningly attentive. He was contemplating property destruction in the form of blowing out the windows of a nearby car when he was again rescued by a human.

But not in any way he wanted to be.

“Calling time of death, 8:37pm.”

“What are you doing?” a strident and newly recognizable voice rang out. “You can’t just stop! Keep going! You have to keep going!”

His heart and breathing stopped too, as he turned to look at the second team surrounding a nearby stretcher, but for him, those things didn’t matter. For the humans, though…

The rescuers turned away from the prone figure to try to console the young woman rapidly giving way to hysterics. “Ma'am, I need you to come over here.”

“They aren’t doing anything! No!” she wrenched her arm away. “Mike? Mike!”

“I am so sorry. He was very brave, ma'am, getting the kids out. Come away now. We need you to answer a few questions for us. Come this way, please. We need your help.” Crowley watched the senior police officer firmly steer her away from the paramedics. His own saviors had forgotten him entirely and rushed to other stretchers.

He looked around at last, really looked.

The sun had just dipped below the horizon and everything was bathed in a warm, golden glow. Death was there, timeless and immovable, arching Scythe ready for the harvest. Completed the harvest? He wasn't sure how it worked, and people weren't grain, even if, perhaps, their Maker saw them as such. Crowley couldn't meet those eyes now, even if Azrael had had them.

There were ambulances, police cars and fire trucks, blue and red emergency lights staining the soft, sinking glory of the setting sun. The humans had gone to their work with a unified will, and though they swarmed madly, he began to pick out the victims.

Tyree was alive, as was his sister, who was clinging to him with tear streaked cheeks and damp, tangled hair. They were perched together on the bumper of an ambulance, and he was glowering fiercely at the adults trying to tend them. The hardness that a hard knock life had already taught him was shifting from iron to steel. Hope remained for his young soul, Crowley could see with his practiced eyes, marked in the protective arm slung over the young girl, but there were no guarantees when Wrath was so virulent.

Another ambulance was being frantically loaded, paramedics performing CPR even as they moved. He couldn’t see anything of him but his little hand, curled and still. He didn’t have another plea to a silent God in him tonight, so he just watched them go.

Five of the luckiest, if that could possibly be the word, were wrapped in blankets, shivering but not from cold. Though soot covered and frail, they were as he had Imagined so fiercely.

Unburned.

Unharmed.

Alive.
Burned as he was, Crowley himself was unharmed. Alive too, if you could call this strange eternal twilight life. It wasn’t like a human life.

He wore his burns like a jacket, swathed in a thick coat of pain. He could think them gone, easily enough. He would get around to it. For now, his injuries were a little something to keep him real, and tethered to the Earth. Otherwise, he feared the appeal of sinking down and being swallowed up, or else flying off into empty space, landing somewhere colder and less welcoming than Alpha Centauri. No more thinking.

Three more kids were on stretchers, but sitting up, oxygen masks strapped firmly to their faces. He didn’t miss angry burns being quickly and delicately wrapped, nor the hiccuping sobs of pain. Alive anyway, if neither unharmed nor unburned.

That left another stretcher.

Her name had been Micaela, he knew, having never been told. He wondered if she’d died under that bed, or in his arms, or in the inferno he had carried her through. Crowley really didn’t know, he must not want to know.

Micaela, Gift of God.

He already knew how quick She could be to take back her gifts. He had never known how he had, still, in the Beginning, been supposed to bless her name when She did.

A heavy wooden creaking drew his attention back to the still burning, water-logged structure. Shouts from the firefighters went up and they retreated as the Blessed Hearts Home for Children collapsed. He didn’t so much as twitch at the awful crash.

For a moment, everything stilled, the humans staring at the ruins of the building, but only for a moment. Disasters were nothing new for humanity, and often on a much bigger scale. It never stopped them long.

Crowley watched as the flurry of activity resumed. The children were taken somewhere else and investigators arrived. He doubted ‘demonic intervention' was on their list of possible causes.

Death had gone and the air pressure changed, becoming less oppressive, but he felt no relief. He didn’t feel much of anything, except the heat of his burns, almost comforting. Like finally landing in the pit, there was a kind of security in knowing there was nowhere lower to fall. It was over.

Crowley wondered if Azrael had gone off to follow that ambulance with the little boy. Maybe his work was not done yet.

Crowley’s certainly was.

It would have been easier if he had cause to give rein to the uncharacteristically murderous thoughts making his burnt hands twitch. He yearned to track down the summoner, make him see the destruction Crowley had wrought on his behalf, but he had not dreamed, at the time he was being, **oh, so damn clever**, that he would have wanted anything more than petty revenge for the humiliation of being forced to do their inconsequential bidding.

Crowley wasn’t playing any games now, so perhaps it was just as well he was bound against harming the nasty little psychopath. He could just see the look on Aziraphale’s face, if-when, he found out about Crowley’s plot to murder some random human. It was certainly not the kind of tit for tat favour he could ask the peaceful little bookshop owner to handle on his behalf. The angel
was just too Good, and even if it was fully justified, the disappointment written all over the sleeve where Aziraphale kept his heart would be worse than any little torment Hell could come up with.

That was another problem.

He doubted he would be able to keep this one hidden from them, any more than he would have been able to murder someone on Aziraphale’s watch. The angel would send him streaking back down to the First Circle on principle alone. Probably apologizing as he fell. He could hear the exact inflection as it played out in his mind.

"Oh, dreadfully sorry, my dear, but I do have work to do, and you are a demon after all. I’m sure you understand."

Probably give him a little buck up, fist bump on his shoulder before kicking his ass.

And Crowley was so weak when it came to those sad puppy dog eyes.

"Oh, quite alright, angel. Let’s go see that new off-Broadway number when I get back to town. Do water my plants while they’re torturing me downstairs."

“Certainly, dear boy.”

It would all be very civil, until he was trying to explain how he ended up without a body to Head Office. He supposed he should be grateful the humans had revived him. He wasn’t entirely sure how Beelzebub would have reacted to learning he’d been discorporated rescuing children from a fire, but it was a safe bet it would not have gone over well, and he’d have to writhe there, probably on fire, smiling sweetly and telling them how much fun it had been to burn the place down. Totally an accident, saving the kids.

Not that he's managed to save them all. Crowley supposed he'd gotten off lucky, with two, maybe three fatalities. He felt his stomach twist violently at his own thinking.

Lucky? What kind of a thought was that, anyway? But what kind of thoughts should he be having?

He was angry at himself, suddenly, for being wretched enough to care. Something was terribly flawed in his makeup, all the way down to the electrons, and quarks, and strings and flaming rings and whatever else this strange Crowley shaped thing had been molded from.

None of the other demons cared. He knew them back in the day, creatures of love, to a one, but none of them would bat a black-holed, soulless eye sending up the orphanage. In fact, there were plenty of cold, beautiful, stone-hearted angels that could have done it too, with the right flimsy motivation.

Anthony J Crowley was struck hard by the thought that he really didn’t belong anywhere.

Usually, that feeling meant it was time to pay a little visit to a book shop that was warm and cozy, unless you were trying to buy a book. He closed his eyes and concentrated, and the burns he was cloaked in fell away in a trifling miracle that stole away a little more of his soul. Creeping away from the ashes of his sin, Crowley badly wanted to see his one and only friend, but there was no facing him like this, so he slunk off like a beat dog.

For three days, he stayed in his flat, hitting the bottle hard and watching the news. When the little boy died, he went to find Aziraphale.
The Damned Breaks

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale cushions Crowley's landing, and begins to make some plans of his own.

Lots of sugar in this one, but I do think the opening scene is one of the most fun things I've ever written.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And that was just…. I didn’t know what to do after that, so I just left. Went home for a bit.”

Crowley had moved off of Aziraphale’s lap during the tale, ‘round about the time the fire started. He had continued subtly putting distance between them as he spoke, a hundred tiny shifts, until he’d ended up sitting on the floor with his back pressed against the wooden chair under the writing desk. If it hadn’t been there, the angel rather suspected Crowley would have been, arms wrapped around his knees, head turned towards the darkness, all but in the fetal position, not that either one of them had ever been a fetus.

It had been a very long time since Crowley had made eye contact. When he trailed off, he was broadcasting a raw fear that cut Aziraphale deeply. The dear fellow was afraid of him, of his reaction.

It took him a minute to gather his thoughts together, and after a tense silence, Crowley made an unhappy noise before he was up on his feet and heading for the door.

Fleeing.

Fleeing for the door.

Fleeing Aziraphale’s silence.

Aziraphale was after him in a flash. “No, no, no-“

“I’m leaving.” He shoved his way out the door, nearly slamming into a customer who had been peering at his business hours with a calculator and a dictionary. Aziraphale, far less naturally graceful, although certainly more Grace-full, sent her sprawling roughly to the ground.

“Sorry!” he called quickly, adding, “We're closed!” for good measure. He didn’t stop moving however; he couldn’t afford to let Crowley get to the Bentley. He was not having this conversation at 100 miles an hour with other people’s lives flashing before his eyes.

“Stop, Crowley!”

“I'm gone, angel. I was never here.”
“You’re here now! We aren’t doing it like this! Stop!”

“Won’t! I’m *so* stupid!” He stepped right out in traffic without a second thought, and Aziraphale eeped in terror at the resulting series of near misses. “Tell the angel. Brilliant! Moron!”

“Crowley, don’t you dare.” The redhead snorted and grabbed the door handle. Oh, Crowley dared.

“I swear I will put that mmm, *damn* car in Tanzania. Stop!”

Crowley… did stop, frowning first at the angel, then down at the Bentley, then at the angel. He let go of the handle, then spun on his heels and sauntered himself past Aziraphale without looking at him.

“Language, angel,” he scolded, feigning scandal.

“Drama.” Aziraphale positively snarled, jabbing an accusing finger at his retreating form. “Queen.”

The small crowd that had dropped everything to stare at their little domestic broke into a smattering of applause as they disappeared back into the shop.

The next day, Aziraphale would receive four cards in the mailbox. Three encouraging him to forgive Crowley’s indiscretions, one suggesting he dump him until he knew how to treat a man, a bouquet of flowers attached to a startling proposition that caused the angel a near discorporation through mortification and an advertisement for wedding photography.

Inside, Crowley stomped his feet and threw himself petulantly onto the couch so hard, he nearly sent himself over the edge. The flurry of frantic scrabbling quite ruined whatever dramatic effect he had been going for.

For his part, Aziraphale pulled out the chair to his writing desk and settled in it daintily, resting his fingers on his lips as he thought.

"Angel," Crowley began menacingly.

"Hush now. I just need a minute." The demon muttered something impolite but subsided under Aziraphale’s raised eyebrow.

“Don’t assume the worst of me,” he chided softly, sadly, at last. “I am your friend. For always.”

A little intake of breath. The demon recognized an oath when he heard one. Neither one of them swore to anything lightly. Crowley tipped his head in acknowledgement, relaxing enough to gather up his knees again. Some of his own tension eased as well.

“Promise me you won’t run off if you don’t like what I have to say.”

“Mmrrgh, ‘kay.” He nodded, accepting that, largely non-verbal, response.

“Good. It’s harder to smite a moving target.”

“Wha-?” Crowley’s head snapped up in surprise and Aziraphale waved at him with a wiggle of fingers and a teasing smile.

“Why, hello. There you are now. I would rather we talk face to face, my dear.”
“Euchh,” said Crowley, noncommittal, but much more himself.

“I heard about the fire, of course,” he began behind steepled fingers, frowning, but careful not to direct it at his troubled friend. “A terrible tragedy, and I had also suspected, its origins were not entirely natural.”

“N, n-decidedly not.” Aziraphale smiled at him, a gentle approval of the calm response.

“But it has been three days, Crowley, and apparently, before that, this has been happening over *thousands* of years. Why are you only coming to me now? What have you been doing these last few days?”

Crowley threw out his hands as if astonished by the question. “You saw the state I was in. I was doing what I am going to be doing as soon as you stop hovering. A dedicated experiment to find out if I can discorporate from alcohol poisoning.”

“Then I shall have to hover all the more,” Aziraphale promised softly, thinking. “Why today?”

Crowley tucked his head against his knees and brought his hands up to pull at his already messy hair. Finally he answered, “Kid died in hospital. Thought he might live. Didn’t. Might have, if it were you.”

His own breath caught as the simple words stabbed his heart, layered as they were with grief, guilt and rage. There was no accusation though, towards the angel, perhaps just a bit of longing for what he thought could have been. The anger was all turned inward, frightening in its intensity, intimidating even just by being near enough to feel it radiating outwards.

Aziraphale wanted to dive into Crowley’s head with his sword and his shield, throw himself between his friend and all that wrath, defend him from his own hurting self. “Oh, my dear, our being different… that doesn’t mean I could have-”

“Sss’a fact, Aziraphale. He needed real Power. From Her. They both did. Little things like nothing in my arms. I couldn’t do what I needed to do. I’m too far off the mark, and I was stuck in a church for three days, which didn’t help matters, but even forgetting that, I just wasn’t enough.”

He raised his eyes again, wet and shining, terribly human in his pain, despite their inhumanity.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. I do!” He launched himself up and for a moment, Aziraphale thought he was headed for the door again, but he veered off sharply to pace around the room. “I know She would have listened to you. She would have let you save them. You’re a damned angel, actually, no, I am,” he laughed without an iota of mirth, as bitter a sound as Aziraphale had ever heard, “and I couldn’t undo what I did because of what I am.”

“Crowley, you know fully well, that there have been times when I could not do anything to help them. I know what that feels like-”

“Did you start the damn plague? ’Cause I started that fire. You are still very much in a state of Grace, Aziraphale! I’m not built for healing and rescues, not anymore. And if only I had been-” he stopped, shuddering from head to toe with a little hiccupping sob.

Aziraphale was reeling.

Crowley had been alternating between celebrating and downplaying his Fall since the day they’d met, and probably Before as well. He had never- “You can’t mean what you’re saying.”
"I heard on the news that that kid died, and I just, I woke up then. Aziraphale, I’m a damned monster, and I have been laughing about that for six thousand years.” He gave his head a quick shake in disbelief. “I have corrupted my purpose utterly. Everything I was supposed to be, I’m not, and can never be again.”

He dropped to his knees then and Aziraphale was clinging to him in the twinkling of an eye.

“What have I done?” he demanded brokenly. “I always thought it didn’t matter, because it was my choice. I thought it was on me. You know who had to pay the price for my Fall, angel? Two little human kids. Never did a thing. Never got a choice.” His voice was dark and haunted. “Got stuck with mine. I can feel the weight of their little bodies in my arms still, and it’s worse than the heaviest chain.”

He rubbed Crowley’s back, a simple tactile act of love, feeling the tremors of unshed tears, trying to find words that could bless and heal a demon with enough wild audacity to care. “You did all you could, my dear. You didn’t want to start that fire. You tried to save them.” He grasped for the name. “M-Mike, you helped him rescue the others. You saved the young woman. You did your best.”

Crowley was very, very still for a moment, more motionless than anything mortal could be. “I just wasn’t enough. And I don’t know how to live with that. I never really understood just how far I Fell. Didn’t think about it. Too busy sauntering.” He released a heaving, heavy sigh of regret which ended in a self-mocking little smile. “I never thought it mattered, and now I know it did.”

He took hold of one of Aziraphale’s lapels, crushing it tightly. “D’you know, Pestilence said the Black Death was my fault, a little, sort of?” He cringed as he finished the thought. “Seems like the kind of thing it would know.”

“Crowley. Crowley. Stop. You can’t carry the weight of the world, my dear. No more than I could, remember?” He felt it, the weight of the world, dragging at his own heart, for the way it sat in Crowley’s.

“Why am I… this, Aziraphale?” And Crowley sounded more curious than distraught. “Why do things matter? What went wrong when She was creating me, or even when She was casting me out? Something went wrong. I was a mistake, and should never have happened.” Aziraphale had an image of a field of grain, swept thin in a moment under the unyielding rule of purity.

“Blasphemy,” he scolded lightly, giving him a tender squeeze. “She makes no mistakes.”

“Hastur.”

“Well. I don’t pretend to understand that one, mind, or really, a lot of what She does, but you, I do understand you.”

The look he received was so suspicious and skeptical and pure Crowley that his heart felt lighter. “Oh, really? Do tell, because I have no idea who or what I am right now.”

Aziraphale hummed a little and extricated himself from the demon’s clinging hands, gathering himself up, before stretching a benevolent hand down, upturned in invitation.

“Come.”

“Where?”

“Upstairs. We need a cozier spot.”
He knew the inevitable, drawn out question was coming, quite possibly before Crowley did.

“…why?”

He didn’t want to say, ‘Because that’s where the bed is,’ and he really didn’t want to say, ‘because you need a nap,’ and he extra really very didn’t want to say, ‘because now I know what’s going on, and I will move Heaven, Earth, and Hell too, the whole kit and caboodle, to stop anyone from hurting you like this again, and to do that, I need some thinking time to plan.’

So what he did, was rely on Crowley to trust him. “Coming or not?”

And the demon took his hand and let Aziraphale pull his slinky self back on his feet. He did grumble something about bossy angels thinking they knew everything, but as an angel, he had nothing if not excellent manners[1] and ignored him.

They climbed the wooden stairs to the little flat, featuring a kitchen, bathroom and bedroom, not a one of which saw any regular use. There was also a sitting room featuring an enormous flat screen which only saw any use when Crowley popped over for soap operas and sitcoms, which he did on the regular. It had never been plugged in, but that had never crossed their minds, so it wasn’t a problem. The flat was mostly a thing to have because people would have one, but it had largely become just another wing of A. Z. Fell and Company, and thus was scattered with books and notes and prophecies and whatever other project had caught Aziraphale’s fancy.

It was well to have a lot of projects on the go when one was an immortal being who quite predated the earth, and rarely slept. Kept the mind humming.

Sitting on an end table in the bedroom, there was also a little African violet, gifted to him by Crowley, and when he walked in to the room, it immediately burst into terrified bloom, two of them coming up gardenia.

“I hope you're not slacking off,” it's former gardener told it menacingly. A dahlia flower nervously sprung up as well.

“If you could leave off terrorizing the plant life, dear boy, that would be helpful. Come have a lie down.”

Crowley hesitated a moment, then scooped up the trembling violet and carted it off to the living room. “Not good for them to see weakness,” he explained, before miracling himself into black silk pajamas. He set his glasses, appearing from wherever he’d left them, on the nightstand in place of the plant.

“Pain isn’t weakness, my dear.” He followed Crowley’s lead in choice of apparel and climbed into the bed in a tartan flannel number he thought was rather dashing. He felt his lips twitch when his counterpart rolled his eyes in exaggerated contempt, pleased by the sight.

Aziraphale propped himself up on the bed and gave his lap an inviting pat that caused Crowley’s eyebrows to make a bold attempt to ascend to the Pearly Gates all by themselves.

He knew it was coming. The trip up the stairs had done wonders for Crowley’s snark-plated armour.

“Are you planning to ravish me, angel, in my vulnerable state?” He battled his eyes, which would have been terribly unsettling for any human catching sight of it. Aziraphale felt a rush of fond amusement.
“Not tonight, dear, I have a headache,” he said sweetly. “Well, no,” he added, honestly, “I don’t really, but I do have other things in mind.”

“Uh huh…” Crowley hesitated. “What are you up to?”

“To Good, as always, naturally. Get a wiggle on,” he added, just to see Crowley make the face.

“Looks a lot like No Good from this angle, angel,” but he slid into bed between Aziraphale’s legs, resting his head on the tartan draped belly. Some of the tension went out of him as Aziraphale began idly toying with his hair.

“You said downstairs that you weren’t certain who you are anymore,” he began, feeling a bit shy, but driven on the strength of his convictions. “And I thought I might be of some help with that, if you're willing.”

“Well, you've already gotten me out of my clothes and into bed, so that must speak a bit to my willingness.” Crowley’s devilish teasing did not hide the nervous way his fingers gripped the sheets.

He softly touched a finger to each of Crowley's temples. “With your permission, my dear?”

The demon swallowed hard, and Aziraphale understood it. Even among angels, linking spirits was an intimate thing, rarely done, and certainly one would never be able to trust such a vulnerable part of oneself to a demon, even if they were one's fellows.

Crowley often complained about the way his bosses would casually invade him to drop knowledge straight into his head, and the thought of such a violation was appalling.

A long deep breath followed by a soft sigh, and Aziraphale was already trying to organize words to convey the same knowledge instead when he felt the defensive walls drop and a shy welcome extended. He reached out and did something that had never been done.

*For you and I, my dear,* and he suffused the word with all the depth of feeling it conveyed, *I think we do not truly fit these rigid structures into which we were created.*

Aziraphale was immediately aware Crowley hadn’t quite given him free rein. He could feel a different kind of structure surrounding him here, something fearful, yet protective too. Outside the spiritual walls in which Crowley had caged him, a storm was roaring. He was being shielded from the anguish and wrath that was ripping through his friend.

He pressed softly against the walls, trying to shine peace and strength. *Don’t be afraid. I’m not afraid of you. I know you, my friend, so very well.*

The walls thinned out a bit, and Aziraphale felt the grief in Crowley’s mind more keenly. He countered it with what he had already quietly checked when they were still downstairs, projecting an image of Mike, blinking in wonder, a delighted smile breaking out across his face as he looked around at something which Aziraphale knew Crowley, even now, through angelic eyes, could not see.

He tried to compensate for that punitive blindness, colouring the image with laughter and joy as Mike was embraced by first young Micaela and then little Jack. He let Crowley see the tears and flash of dismay on Mike's face as he understood what had happened, and how quickly those tears were wiped away as the children tugged him to his feet, pointing eagerly, leading him forever onwards and upwards in a place where time held no limits, and where every minute was better than
The small part of his mind still aware of the physical world heard Crowley’s gasp, felt him try to sit up, soothed him back down with a little feeling of warning about losing the tenuous connection.

The sense of loss was still very much present in Crowley, but the pain of his grief was eased and sweetened by the imagery. *Is it real?* came the tentative thought.

*Very real,* Aziraphale confirmed without hesitation. *Set back a bit in time though, that was when they first arrived. It'll will be all the better for him now, three days in, if you can measure eternity in days. It's all relative, well, you understand.*

A soft wave of gratitude suffused him, and it struck him that Crowley was beautiful.

*Shut up, angel, or I'm kicking you to the curb.*

*No, no, don't do that now. Let me help you.*

*Get on with it, then. Weird having an angel in my head, thinking *nice* things about me.*

*Try to relax, you ruffian. This isn't easy to maintain, and I have more to say.*

Refocusing on his task as Crowley relented, he turned his attention to the guilt swirling around inside him. To counter guilt, he projected a flurry of memories, he had so many, of Crowley being Good, or at least fun, cheering him up, using his snake form to scare customers out of the shop, causing trouble for those who made trouble for others, rescuing him from danger in a church full of Nazis, comforting him with plants in a garden long ago.

*Are you always so sentimental? I have no idea how you stand being in your own head. Ucc, angels.*

*Yes, it's a dread fate to be sure.* He thought dryly. *You can't help yourself, can you?*

*Clearly not, or we wouldn't be here.* He sent along an image of himself rolling his eyes, and it was immediately returned with an image of a snake saucily flicking out it's tongue.

The storm was still raging red around him though, and he turned clinical attention back to his angelic task.

Rage was fought, in the only way it could ever be fought, with forgiveness. He set about demonstrating Crowley's own skill in this area, remembering to him Aziraphale’s own faults, and examples of Crowley’s patience, endless patience, with all his attempts to put distance between them, with his own temper, with every time he could remember saying things he knew had caused Crowley pain. He let the demon see the guilt he quietly carried, and the deep joy as again and again Crowley turned up on his door, with a wink and a drink and a toast to a new start.

*I just like drinking with someone who knows how far the liquor industry has come, angel.*

He ignored the defensive teasing with well practiced skill. *You always say you don’t want to be forgiven, my dear, but I am so grateful for all the times you have forgiven me. I should truly love if you would extend that same forgiveness to yourself… not for the fire, or the deaths of the humans, because that was not in your control, but for not having control.*

He was startled, but not entirely surprised to find himself solidly back in the bedroom he had
never left, dizzy from the summary ejection.

“S-sorry, reflex. I didn’t entirely mean-“

Aziraphale simply switched to verbal communication and soldiered on. “You didn’t choose this, and you had no way of knowing what would happen. As for what could have been if you hadn’t Fallen, no one can know that, my dear Crowley, and I-“ He cut himself off, uncertain of Crowley’s reaction to his thoughts on the matter, but should have known he could not have left it lie.

“You what?”

It was the trepidation there, that he could not help but soothe. “I think perhaps you are exactly where you are meant to be, and so am I.”

Crowley rubbed his forehead, blinking rapidly, and the angel raised his fingers to his temples again, waiting for permission. He was surprised when the weary soul quickly acquiesced.

Aziraphale finished his lesson in All Things Crowley with a scattering of images that simply made up the best memories of his long life, memories of Crowley scampering into the book shop waving a potted begonia in the air, raving about having unlocked the key to gardening at last, Crowley terrifying him on his first ride in the Bentley, and every ride since, Crowley passed out asleep on the couch in the bookshop, still impossibly balancing a full glass of wine, and Crowley stopping all of Time itself to give a young boy a pep talk so he could stand up and save the world.

*You are quite extraordinary, my dear.*

*Mnnahch... stop it.*

He smiled inside, a kiss of sunshine for the token protest. Feeling him bolstered, and so finding courage, Aziraphale probed cautiously, and with exquisite care, at Crowley’s memory of the fire.

*No,* the demon snapped, and Aziraphale found himself, once again, unceremoniously tossed out of Crowley’s head.

“Oh, I do beg your pardon, my dear. I thought it might help.”

“I- You helped enough, angel,” he gritted out stiffly, “but I just can’t go there… now.”

“Too soon?”

“Yeah,” he looked relieved. “Too soon. Might not ever be-”

“I understand. What I wanted to help you see was… well. It’s a human thing, you know. It wasn’t your fault. Really,” he insisted in the face of skepticism, “it wasn’t. You were forced, and I have no doubt at all you fought them to the limit. It’s not your fault you couldn’t stop them.” Crowley was frowning but his eyes were fixed, softly desperate, on Aziraphale’s, like a man in a desert finding a fresh spring. “I have seen that many humans wrestle with that kind of guilt, when something terrible happens.”

“I’m not human.”

“Well, we have lived among them so long, we are perhaps closer in nature to them than to our own kind.”
“I’m… I’m glad it’s we,” Crowley said quietly, before turning that piercing gaze away and shifting into a more relaxed position, eyes fluttering closed. “It’s still we, yeah? You and I, not your side, my side?”

“What a glad thought that is,” Aziraphale murmured, thinking of a place where, where they could just be, and every minute would be better than the last. “Our side, as you say.”

Crowley grasped his hands suddenly, reaching back, questing thoughts almost frantically checking the sincerity of Aziraphale’s words. He quickly let him in, letting trust and affection wrap around the promise. *Yes, dear, our side.*

With that, the tumult of Crowley’s mind finally settled and his thoughts became clouded with sleep.

*Um-*

*Go ahead, it will do you some good.* Aziraphale gently broke the connection and held Crowley as he fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

1Unless you were trying to buy one of his books. [return to text]

Talk to me. Comments make me write more... is that encouraging or threatening? ;)


With Crowley drifted off to sleep, Aziraphale could finally give way to his own feelings about the wicked summons, and yield to his innate desire to protect, anyone, even a demon, from being victimized.

And, of course, this was Crowley, who was many things, aggravating and dear jumping foremost to mind, but never deliberately cruel, forced to be cruel. He felt a surging fire of righteous anger burn through him, such as would cause the wise to tremble, at the knowledge of what had been happening to his very best friend.

Were he less honest of heart, if not always so honest in word, he would have denied being annoyed with Crowley, but he was indeed, just a very little bit.

You should have told me. You would never have let me go through something like this alone. Did you really doubt me so?

His angular face was so peaceful now, slack in sleep. Trusting, it seemed, and defenseless, to a degree. No… if Crowley doubted whether Aziraphale would rise to his defense, it wasn’t a lack of trust.

There had never been a pair like them. In all ways opposed, yet in Truth, well matched and symbiotic. It would have been a dreadfully lonely existence without Crowley, and for him, the angel was certain, without Aziraphale, whether or not the tender-hearted villain would ever speak it aloud.

Although, to be fair, that recalcitrance had been mutual, more often than not.

And more him, than demonstrative Crowley, if he was going to make any claim to honesty.

There were times, many times, yet so fleeting, when he wished for a different world, one where Crowley had not Fallen, where they could have been easily united from the Beginning and Before. It just… would have been so much easier, for both of them, surely.

Perhaps, and oh, the wild way his spirit shuddered with the delicious horror of the thought, it would have been easier had he himself Fallen, sweetly pitched off the endless struggle between
faith and feeling, justice and wrath, obedience and shameless rebellion, throwing in with the Enemy.

Oh dear.

Did he really have to choose between Crowley and his Creator? For though he was hardly the epitome of angelic restraint and hard-edged nobility, Aziraphale still deeply loved God. He had always wanted to please Her, and be all that She had designed him to be.

Wanting was not succeeding, but temptation was not sin, and Aziraphale was no rebel. Though he sometimes quietly wondered why She had, evidently, forgiven him his disobedience giving away the flaming sword and outright lying about it to her face, yet She had, for Her own reasons, and he was profoundly grateful. If anyone knew about his less than angelic relationship with Crowley, it was God. Nothing was hidden from those eyes.

Crowley claimed he thought She wasn’t paying attention, though it did not stop him from voicing his complaints, but Aziraphale could not shake the feeling, the faith, that She was more on board than any of them, angels, demons, and humans all, really understood.

He hoped so, anyway.

Aziraphale longed for Her intervention so keenly at times, though not without fear of what that might entail. Perhaps it was that begging, glutton…ish, part of his soul that made him desperate for a place, a forever place, where he could have Her and Crowley both, without conflict.

She wasn’t the changeable sort, but was it so mad to wonder if Crowley could return to his angelic roots? Although, that had never been done, ever. The thought itself was nearly blasphemy. She makes no mistakes, so… the War, the Fall, it was all part of the Ineffable Plan.

In theory, one could be forgiven anything if there was true repentance. One huge turn around and go the other way. Humans repented all the time. And then they backslid. And then, they got up and did it all over again. There had never been a demon that repented. Aziraphale had never heard of anyone who even considered it possible.

And yet, there was only ever one Crowley too. He was not afraid to pin such a hope to such a being.

Perhaps that was unfair.

His attention was drawn down to long fingers reflexively clutching at the soft flannel wrapped around him. Such thoughts were always fleeting. In the end it was their opposing natures that so deeply connected them. He wasn’t alone in his desire for duality, for he knew Crowley better than Crowley, and the way the demon longed for Good, just a little perhaps, just a little balm to soothe the ache in his mischievous spirit.

It was terribly tempting to believe they were made, as the humans said and sang and dreamed, for each other.

“Such temerity, Guardian of the Eastern Gate,” he scolded himself softly. What fanciful notions turn your head.”

He turned it again, bending to the most critical of efforts, discovering a way to defend his companion from any who would do him harm, for surely such a battered soul did not need any other burdens to bear.
Aziraphale sketched a little circle in midair, imagining a shield against all invaders.

Oh.

There was another reckless, foolhardy thought. Could it be possible to shield him? It was audacious, no question, but maybe just a little experiment?

No, he thought, committing to the notion. In for a penny, in for a pound- was there no limit to the charming little idioms the humans invented? Best to dive in with both feet, where angels feared to tread… what was the rest of that?

With a little hum to keep his nervous mind company, Aziraphale closed his eyes and opened his eyes, focused on the delicate and invisible strands of Creation, soft and strong as silk. With the merest fraction of the skill that had crafted all things in the first place, he began weaving the holy light of the unseen delicately around Crowley, a hedge of protection, to alert and defend against evil. It worked well enough for humankind on the rare occasions he'd been tasked with granting one, but he could not imagine anyone had ever tried to shield a demon with such a thing.

Well, they had always forged their own rules… largely thanks to Crowley and his freewheeling imagination for that.

Oh!

The angel yelped in surprise as a sort of spark of holy …feedback? flared up, singing him slightly. A little too tight there. It didn’t mix well with demonic power.

“Ouch!” he complained softly, giving his smarting fingers a soft shake.

"Mmmwhah?" Crowley stirred, brow furrowing as he reacted to the release of his own energy.

"Shh, sleep now. It's only me. Sorry. Rest, my dear.” He held absolutely still until he felt the ginger head relax again, one cracked eyelid fluttering briefly before Crowley succumbed to sleep again.

Terribly human habit of his, but it would come in handy now. “Funny old boy. Letting it all go for something like peace. If sleeping isn’t faith in something, what is?” Soft, even breathing was his only answer.

Aziraphale wasn’t entirely confident of his gift being accepted, and either way it would be easier to put in place without the inevitable litany of criticism.

'What the Heaven are you doing, angel?' he could well imagine. 'I'm a demon, in case you've forgotten.'

Or perhaps: 'I'm not meant to be coddled, you eternal mother hen.'

Or even, 'It's all fun and games, Aziraphale, until someone implodes.'

Oh, he did hope no one was going to implode.

Crowley didn’t think he deserved good things, and claimed he liked it that way, but Aziraphale couldn’t help himself. He wanted Crowley to be safe, and happy, and he was, perhaps, more willing to look for loopholes than he strictly should be, in order to see that happen.
Could kindness really be the Wrong thing? What about ‘Love thy enemies’? What about
the Prodigal son, or the Good Samaritan?

He had made his choice in any case.

When a seeking touch on Crowley’s shoulder brokered no response, the angel went back to
his efforts, knitting an ethereal shield around Crowley, looser than he would have liked it to be as
he tried to avoid triggering the demon's natural defenses. There had to be a happy medium in the
placement somewhere.

Aziraphale was uncertain if he could get it to hold; he could well imagine Gabriel's
scandalized reaction to learning about his little plan, but if it failed to protect Crowley from being
summoned again, it should at least alert Aziraphale to any danger Crowley might be in, and that
would be worth whatever judgement came his way.

It was only the charitable thing to do, after all, and Aziraphale was inclined towards
Charity like She was toward Ineffability.

More than that, it was only fair. Crowley had demonstrated his own uncanny sense for
turning up unexpectedly just when Aziraphale could do with a demonic miracling out of trouble.
Surely there was no harm responding in kind, even to his Adversary[1].

After all, the nature of Grace was in mercy, not earned or deserved, but freely given. He'd
certainly received plenty of Grace from a being long barred from receiving it.

Why are you the way you are, my dear? So different from the others on your side? He let
old questions slide over him as he settled the hedge of protection around Crowley. It shimered
and waivered, as confused as its creator, before setting fast.

It looked alright, he supposed. The radiant light played over the red hair and smooth skin,
giving him a bit of an ethereal glow of his own, if you knew how to look.

Those who had eyes, let them see.

It wasn’t so hard to imagine Crowley coming home sometimes.

First step accomplished, Aziraphale wriggled out from under his sleeping charge, aiming to
fetch a spot of tea before moving on to step two, the Bugger Alle This Bible.

All was in place when Crowley came trotting down the stairs nearly a week later, looking
awkward and determined not to be. “Hey angel, g'morning.”

“Noon has been and gone, my dear. Coffee?”

Crowley stretched languidly, spine cracking and making Aziraphale shudder. “Nothing like
a bit of Sloth to start the day,” he responded, accepting the cup Aziraphale had found for him at
little flea market in the countryside. It was black, with white writing and read, If Heaven is a place
on earth, Hell is me before my coffee.

He wandered over to where Aziraphale had been working diligently on his project. He had
undone the hand stitched binding of the battered manuscript and removed the pages that had been too damaged from Crowley’s assault to be salvaged. He had completed the recopying and once again the Bugger Alle This Bible was waiting to be illuminated.

Whip tense and prepared for action as he was, needing answers, Aziraphale understood the feeling.

“You've been busy, I see. I… I want you to know-
"

He smiled warmly up at the nervously shifting guilty party. “And I do know. It is forgiven. Think nothing of it. Actually… I think it may have been useful.

“I wasn’t thinking very clearly-Oh?” he shot a sideways glance at the angel.

“Yes,” Aziraphale answered simply, in a way that neatly dodged the question. “And are you thinking clearly now?”

“I’m not okay, if that's what your asking.” He gave his head a little shake. “Actually, I feel a bit strange this morning. Prickly. Not sure.”

“Mid afternoon, dear,” he corrected absently, mind whirring away, watching to see how his newest little project was holding up. “I’m glad to hear that. Sounds like you're doing better than I thought you might be.”

“Are you actually listening? I just told you I’m not okay.”

“I know, and it's wonderful. I thought you would lie.”

“…yeah. Well, I’m off the clock.”

Under Aziraphale's million watt smile, Crowley sipped his coffee slowly, all but hiding behind the cup. “You say you feel ‘prickly’. Are you uncomfortable?”

“No, I don’t know. Can’t explain it. S’weird. Maybe I need to shed.”

That set him back a bit. “Sh-what?”

“Shed. My skin. Gets itchy.” He flicked out a tongue that was far more serpentine than typical in his human presenting form.

“Well, perhaps that’s it then. So long as you aren’t uncomfortable.”

Golden eyes narrowed as the seeds of suspicion took root. “Why so interested?”

He took a page out of Crowley’s book. “Oh, no reason really. Just want to be prepared in the event I find a 10 foot python skin on my couch one morning.”

Crowley gave him an offended look. “Hey, I may be a demon, but I do have some manners… would be a Heaven of a prank though. Hmm.”

Sometimes Good sowed the seeds of it’s own destruction too.

“Rather than dwell on that charming thought,” he hastily distracted the demon, “I could use your help with something.”

“Something diabolical, I hope.”
“Little bit, actually.” he replied, enjoying the play of emotions of Crowley’s face.

“Sounds promising,” he decided on, in the end. “What'ssss it about, then?”

“Are you familiar with the concept of restorative justice?”

“Not got a real strong association with either of those words, in fact,” he replied saucily.

“Well, isn’t today your lucky day then? I’d like you to help me sort out the book you gave a little roughing up last week.”

“Last week? Was I asleep a week? What day is it?”

“Tuesday, the next one. Yes, near enough. Will you help me? I’d love to see what illustrations a rascally demon would come up with.”

He squirmed, rather efrit-ish, “I don’t do Bibles, angel, because they do not do me. Don’t you remember?”

“I know it may be a bit uncomfortable, my dear, but I think it will make us both feel better,” he tried to keep his expression mild. It was one of his better expressions, ‘Be not afraid' in facial form. “You could give it a try?”

Before Crowley could make a firm refusal, if he was going to, Aziraphale slid the rebound Bible into his hands. They squeezed around it automatically, but he gasped in the anticipation of pain like one might if someone had just handed them a cranky porcupine, and thrust it back to Aziraphale… then blinked those striking eyes, realizing.

The angel grinned, suffused with glee, quite ready to dance the Gavotte on the head of a pin.

“Wait, what?” he sputtered, yanking it back quite impolitely, before staring at Aziraphale in astonishment. It didn’t take him but a second. “Angel, what did you do?”

Oh.

He was not as prepared for that question as he should have been. “Ah, yes, well-”

Crowley smoothed his hands over the cover in astonishment, lingering on the word, “Holy”.

“What,” he repeated more testily, “did you do?”

“Oh, well, it seemed to me, um, while you were having a little nap, as it were-”

“What in all the nine circles did you do, Aziraphale? Did you-? Am I-?” He had paled considerably and abruptly manifested his wings, still quite ebony black, whipping around to look at them in something like panic.

It struck him sadly, and he held up his hands in mute apology. “Oh, no, no, nothing like-well, I’m good, my dear, but I’m not that good.”

Panic gave way to annoyance. “Good,” he snorted, “I'm beginning to have my doubts about that.”

He couldn’t help himself. “Hardly beginning, my dear Crowley. You had your doubts back in the Garden.”

He bit his lip, fidgeting. It wasn't like he felt ashamed, exactly, just a bit... vulnerable. Perhaps he should have asked first.

“Ah, well…I wanted to, you know, keep my eyes on you, so to speak, so I… did a thing.”

Apparently, Crowley's patience had run out. He shut his eyes in concentration and the radiance shimmering and twisting around him revealed itself. “- Blessed Mother. What-“

“It's a hedge of protection. Like for special humans-"

“I am a demon.”

“Oh, really, fancy that news!” he snapped, moody in his nerves. It wasn't fair, really, he drew the line between them all the time, carving out their identities in stone.

Maybe he did fear forgetting.

“I just want to be sure- and look, it's working!” He gave the Bible a fond pat. It’s shielding you.”

“Shielding it from me, technically.” The sacred did not so much jump out and bite as demonic energy lashed angrily back at the source. He settled a bit, fascinated, bathed in the delicate shimmer. “You really are past believing. How are they going to take that little trick Upstairs?” He frowned abruptly, warily. “How are they going to take this downstairs?”

“Oh, well, unless they're looking for it specifically, I don’t 'imagine-"

“I would argue you have one Hell of imagination, angel, to come up with something like this, which, don’t get me wrong, I have to a little bit love the sheer insanity of it all,” he laughed a little breathlessly, opening the book and running delicate fingers over the text, “But I can’t show up in Hell draped in a blanket of angelic good will.”

“Ah, yes, well, you will be able to break it of course, if you choose,” he demonstrated a ‘pushing outward, in a spiritual plane kind of sense' gesture, before adding, “But do hold off, if you please, for a while?” He gave Crowley his most pleading look. “I just want to help you, and until we have this nipped in the bud, the hedge of protection may help.”

Crowley had already put his hands up, but he let his hands drop back down. “Look, Aziraphale, I’m fine. Let’s just forget about this nasty business, yeah? It probably won’t happen again for ages, and if it does, well, comes with the territory. I’m not going to worry about it.”

“Back on the clock again, I see.” The look Crowley gave him could have blackened white. He resisted the urge to peek at his own wings.

“Alright, fine. I’m worried, but I’m more bothered by this Holy charm bracelet you slapped on me than by another summoning.

“Well, that was one of the biggest lies you've ever told me,” he observed flatly.

“Call me a silly bugger, Aziraphale, but I have a great fear of spontaneous demonic combustion. Whufff!” he flung his hands and wings out expressively, whacked a bookshelf, winced and drew them out of physical existence.
“Woof? Why do I feel the urge to scratch you behind the ears?”

Crowley was always a bit too easily led down the garden path. “’Cause you’re painfully cuddly. One of my many punishments, no doubt. I could do the dog thing… but I’d never be a dog. I’d be a Hellhound of course. Some big menacing, scary-

“Of course you’d be, my dear, as vicious as the Hellhound of the Antichrist himself.”

“Yeah, like…you mean Dog.”

“Oh, I do.”

“Well, I mean, he really is the worst of them all. If you look underneath appearances.”

“As I always do. Quite a fell beast.”

“Euuuyeah! I mean, they gave him the most powerful they had. Big ol' teeth.”

“Big soft eyes.”

“Glowing red eyes. Of evil.”

“Sweet puppy breath.”

“Stench of brimstone!”

“Unswerving loyalty.”

“…actually, yes.”

“Good boy.”

“Don’t make me go all maggoty. You know I’m capable.”

“Not in those jeans.”

“Is that a challenge?” There was a dangerous curve to his contemplative smile.

Aziraphale leaned back in panic, caving immediately. “No, no, no, definitely not.”

Crowley grinned in victory, but the smile slipped abruptly from his face.

“I wonder if they ever had a dog.”

The angel’s heart sunk, and he offered up a watery smile. “Given their circumstances, it seems unlikely, my dear.”

His hands flexed hard on the loving little tribute to Aziraphale’s rebellious side. “I still feel the weight. It hasn’t let go of me, and I can’t bear it, angel.”

“I’m so sorry, dear boy. Truly, I am.”

He gently took the manuscript from Crowley’s hands and set it on the desk before pulling out the chair, slight left of centre. “Come help me with my book. A little sacrilege and a long nap, always good for the soul.”

Crowley pressed his lips tightly together before settling down. “Bad,” he suggested.
“What was that, my dear?” Aziraphale asked, dragging up another chair beside him.

“Bad for the soul. Definitely not good.”

“Ah, yes, without a doubt. Positively soul-destroying. Why, if I listen closely, I can almost hear the wind whipping though my feathers while I plummet.”

It was only when Aziraphale dropped into the chair beside him that Crowley grinned. “You bastard.”

Azriaphale made a shocked little ‘O’ with two eyes and a mouth before handing Crowley a calligraphy pen. “Cheeky.”

“Yes, you are,” Crowley muttered, before pressing pen to page. The light from his borrowed halo danced over the ink in a place only they could see.

Chapter End Notes

1 Official Adversary. It was on all the forms, signed and sealed. Crowley had drawn a forked tail on all the Y’s of Aziraphale’s copy, and devil horns on Gabriel’s G. [return to text]
Crowley sat back, surveying his work with a little grin playing at his lips. Aziraphale was determinedly engrossed in the delicate flourishes around an elaborate uppercase ‘C’. He did not look over.

*Tap. Tap. Taptap.*

Aziraphale hummed a little, moving on to inking little green leaves in a lovely little border around the 23rd Psalm.

*Taptaptap. Tap.*

Crowley cracked his neck from side to side. He coughed, soft and wildly unnecessary.

Red berries, like holly, or something more floral now? He could keep it as is. Simple, lively and green. Beside him, Crowley took a deep breath and sighed.

*Tap. …tap…. tippytap. TaptaptaptapTAPTAPTAPBANG!*

“Something on your mind, dear boy?”

“Look!” the demon demanded brightly, as if he hadn’t rattled several pens and his own sunglasses off the desk with his pounding.

Aziraphale was not entirely certain he could.

“I… daren’t.”

He didn’t have to see the pout to know it was decidedly hangdog. “Wha- you get me to doodle in your Bible without me ending up in the burn ward and you won’t even look at my artistic endeavour? Can’t say I’m feeling the generic Heavenly- ggghhhhk- love right now, angel.”

“Look at the hedge of protection again, then. You're bathed in it.” The angel fanned out his fingers in front of Crowley’s face, beaming, but not without mischief.

“I could dose you in fleas, wouldn’t make you a feral cat,” he raised his hand up as though to snap his fingers.
Threat taken.

“Try it, serpent. See where it gets you.”

And answered.

“Angelllll…” he whinged, “Just look.”

Aziraphale folded like a gambler who knew when he should, not that there were many of those about. “Oh, I’m sorry, Crowley. Just wondering what I’ve gotten myself in—ohhh…”

He recognized the smooth stone of that ancient, long obliterated wall, and the skillful rendition of colour made the flaming sword nearly leap off the page. Riveting as it always was, the holy weapon was not what stole his breath away.

Young Principality Aziraphale was gazing fearfully, furtively up at Heaven, soft eyes captured with stunning clarity as he extended the hilt of the sword to Adam, whose expression was a mix of wonder, terror and grim determination. Eve was as beautiful as she had been in life, the fire reflected over her dark skin, jaw set, hand curled protectively over her gravid belly.

‘Aziraphale,’ read the slightly modernized text, which Crowley had apparently seen fit to update. ‘Where is the flaming sword I gave you?’

“Oh, Crowley,” he sighed, enchanted.

“S’alright then?” the demon asked, with a casual air that had never fooled anyone.

“Oh, my dear… it is magnificent.” He blinked wet eyes. A beautiful gift.” Crowley rubbed the back of his neck and visibly tried not to look pleased.

A sudden thought struck the angel. “But you weren’t there. You didn’t see it happen, the way you asked after the sword, way back then.”

“…sssh’how I imagine it. Beside you still make that face when you think you’ve been Bad.” He laughed a little, “Angel’s first sssin. Seemed an appropriate choice.”

“That wasn’t sinning that was…um.” He ran out of words.

“-kind,” Crowley offered, before quickly flipping the page, revealing-

“Oh, merciful Heavens- What is that snake eating- who is- is that Michael? The Archangel Michael?”

“I’m impressed you recognized her by just the feet.”

“Not so much the feet as the broken shield. What did she ever do to you?”

“Oh, they’ve always got her smiting me in all that medieval artwork. Figured ‘bout time I repaid her public relations team. And she was happy enough to help them dunk you in Holy Water, thinking you were me.”

“Hmm…in that case, let me just add one thing.” He scooped up a pen and the ink became a shimmering gold. A few quick strokes and he raised an eyebrow at Crowley who grinned at him in sheer delight, peering down at the halo hovering over the snake. “Look, She approves.”

“That seems unlikely. Now! Let’s find that part with Mary. I have a little vengeance to wreak
Crowley was beginning to get a bit… antsy. Aziraphale had promised to hover, and he was being annoyingly true to his word. The first week had been great. He slept through it, in a dark, dreamless sleep that served mainly to eat up time.

The second week was alright. He ached constantly, like he was rubbed raw on the inside, but the angel kept him busy and distracted through the worst of it.

By the third week, he began to feel suffocated by the constant attention. It wasn’t that they didn’t get out, or he didn’t get home from time to time, but Aziraphale would have had to be a hummingbird in order to hover any closer.

Crowley was sprawled on the couch, perennial glass of wine in hand, contemplating how to nice — well, no, not nicely, how to polite — no, really not that either. Hmm… how to deliver the message in a less than shockingly rude way, that the angel should consider buggering off.

He wasn’t having much success, and he was concerned another kind of spontaneous combustion was rapidly approaching if he didn’t get some space.

The overnight bag dropped at his feet came as rather a surprise. “…sending me a message, are you?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, that's for me. Well, not that it's strictly necessary, but people tend to question distance travel without any toiletries or laundry. Not that I'd wear anything that came out of a bag. Not that I know what is actually in the bag. Useful things, I imagine.”

“You're rambling,” he went to the extraordinary lengths of sitting up properly. “Are you leaving, then?”

“Yes. Can’t be helped, I’m afraid. Feel free to stay here, but if you intend on getting completely plastered when I step out, at least put the Bible somewhere safe. I quite like how it is turning out.”

So did Crowley. “Fair enough,” he agreed, lifting one uncertain shoulder in an approximation of a shrug. “Where are you off to?”

He made an oh-dear-you’ve-caught-me-and-now-I-have-to-lie-but-I'm-an-angel face, which would have concerned Crowley more deeply had he not seen him make that face when asked what happened to the last dessert pastry. “Ah, well, I thought I might spare you the details.”

“Think again, angel.” Aziraphale’s sad eyes gave it mostly away anyway. He tilted his chin up defiantly. “Something to do with the summons?” He swallowed hard. ”The fire?”

“The summons, any of them, all of them. I thought it best to do some research.”

“I know you've been reading through your less that savoury material, which is saying something, for you. Not enough?”

“No, I think I need to talk to some people with more experience.” Hmm… interesting.

“Well, you don’t pack an overnight bag to pop Upstairs, and I am reasonably sure you have the
good sense to stay out of Downstairs… and don’t think being dressed in a Crowley suit would help you much this time. So… who? Where?” He peered down at the innocuous bag. “Humans?”

“Yes, an old friend. Well, a young friend. Well, acquaintance. Though, saving the world together does create a kind of kinship.”

That rather severely limited the field. Shadfield was a loon, who, he would have admitted, had he been inclined to admit things, had pulled the wool over both their eyes, and patient Aziraphale was still a bit tetchy about that whole discorporation thing. Not that Crowley was any happier about it. That left- “Bike Girl!”

“Anathema, yes. She does seem well versed in occult forces, from the human perspective. I thought I would pop by, see what we can come up with.”

“No overnight bag for me, I see.”

“Ahh,” he laughed nervously, “Well, I have been positively swamping you of late. I thought perhaps you could use a breather. I’ll be back in a hiffy-”

“-jiffy,” So, Aziraphale had noticed.

“Yes, one jiffy, and perhaps we can go from there. No need to concern yourself, Crowley. Relax, look after your plants, how do they put it… you do you.”

An hour later, Crowley had finished his farewell tyrannical rant at this plants, and they were both on their way to Tadfield, flying along in the Bentley, only one of them with his eyes open.

Chapter End Notes

1 Well, with Aziraphale being an angel, it was rather freely given. [return to text]
Couples Therapy?

Chapter Summary

Sheer, rampant shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jasmine Cottage, having become sentimental, then home, then with the help of lawyers and real estate agents, their very own, was as homey and beautiful a place as it had ever been.

Newton Pulsifer could hardly believe the sheer, fantastical turn of his life since meeting Anathema. He sent her an adoring look over his shoulder as he neatly arranged fresh biscuits on the decorative plate in preparation for their houseguests. Plating was his domain, because he was absolutely forbidden from using the stove, rather unfairly, he thought.

That strange car accident that brought him crashing into her world had been the best disaster that had ever happened to him, and he had seen plenty of disasters in his time, most of them technological in nature.

“Should I put the tea on, Mrs. Pulsifer?”

“Let’s wait until they arrive, Mr. Device,” she replied with a wink that swept him away. “I’m not so sure one can expect mystical beings to show up for dinner on time.”

Which goes to show they didn’t really know Aziraphale so well, yet.

“Right.”

It’s not that he was nervous per say, of their company; they had seemed like nice enough chaps that time he had sort of, on purpose, had a hand in averting a nuclear apocalypse.

Anathema seemed to have a better grasp of what had really happened in those tumultuous days. It almost didn’t matter anyway; they were happy; they were safe; they were together. All was right with the world.

Well, hopefully.

“You don’t think he wants to talk to you about anything… Armageddony, do you?” He was not reassured when Anathema paused in her efforts, popping little quiches out of a muffin tin.

“Honestly, I don’t know, but I did get the impression it wasn’t as much of a social visit as he initially implied. He said it was important, that he wanted my opinion on ‘current occult thinking’.”

“That’s a titch odd, isn’t it? You would think a…a demon,” The term gave him a cold little shiver down his spine, “would be more than familiar with that sort of thing.”
“You’re thinking of Mr. Crowley. Aziraphale is the angel.”

“Oh, really? Thought it was the opposite. Sergeant Shadwell said as much. Though, he says lots of things.”

She shook her head as she finished popping out the savory tarts. “I don’t understand why you listen to him about anything.”

Newt felt his lips curve up irresistibly as he took the plates of biscuits and quiches and brought them to the dining room table. “Well, he made me a Witchfinder, and I definitely found a witch, didn’t I?”

“Aren’t you supposed to set witches on fire?” she called, peering around the door in playful challenge. “Just something you’ll be getting around to then? Should I invest in some asbestos pyjama if you want to burn me up?”

“Thought you said I already did,” he replied easily, before they both dissolved into newlywed giggles. He was reaching for her when the soft knock at the door interrupted.

“Oh! They’re here! I’ll get the tea going. You get the door.” She gave him an affectionate little shove when he hesitated. “Go on!”

It wasn’t that he was afraid of them… exactly. Mystical beings.

Nice ones.

Of course.

He swallowed hard and opened the door. “Oh, hello!” The blond … man? greeted him cheerfully, extending a polite hand. “Newt, is it?”

He had to admit it wasn’t so hard to believe this one was the angel of the pair, with the warm blue eyes and soft curls, all wrapped up in a cream suit that looked like it had come off an old timey Christmas card.

“Yes, uh, Aziraphale?” he stumbled over the unusual name, but only just a touch. Anathema had made him practice.

“Welcome, Anathema is just putting on the tea. Is it just you then, because we thought-”

His guest rolled his eyes and released a put upon sigh as he stepped back. Newt could see the other one, leaning possessively over an old timey car… liked their old timey things, these two. He had sudden impression of having seen the sleek, pristine vehicle being burnt to cinders, but he cleared his head with a shake.

The red hair combined with the arms tightly crossed in his black jacket to give the idea of someone not so much looking for Trouble but having absolute command of Trouble, Trouble’s over enthusiastic boss that made it stay late on the weekends. He was glowering at… the cottage? Newton turned flustered eyes to try to track the intense gaze.

Yeah. He could believe demon.

“Come and say hello, Crowley.”

Head. Shake.
Aziraphale flung his hands down in an impatiently embarrassed gesture. “You're overreacting,” he scolded. “And being very impolite.” Newt rather suspected the angel felt that was the worst of the two offenses.

That got the other one going. Anathema peered over his shoulder just in time to see Crowley throw his hands up in a very similar gesture, only opposite, and take a few angry steps towards his friend, before shuddering and spinning to march back to the car.

“I'm being impolite?!” he demanded. “Oh, right, I’m being impolite. Invite us for tea, then leave all these wards against evil around. I’m the rude one. Oh, I am so very sorry for my unforgivable lack of manners!”


“What-” Anathema began, quickly interrupted by Newt's frightened whisper.

“We've upset the demon.” He edged sideways, both in a way that shielded Anathema, and hid a bit behind the angel. Probably, an angel would not let his friend do anything… untoward.

He wondered who might win if it came to blows between them.

“Oh, then we do apologize,” she said sweetly, making sure to catch Crowley's eyes, well… sunglasses. It was a bit hard to tell what was happening under the dark lenses.

“No need, my lady. He's just being dramatic. He's fine. He's been Covered, anyway. It won’t do him any harm.”

“No, no,” she insisted, and Crowley uncrossed his arms, face relaxing. Newt realised he'd been clutching Aziraphale’s arm rather tightly. From his face, the angel had been aware of it for some time. The benevolent smile both embarrassed and relieved the very human man. He was definitely in over his head.

“Is it the horseshoe? I can take that down while you’re here easily enough. Some of the spells though, they would take some work.”

“If you wouldn’t mind terribly much? I really think he just needs the gesture. I don’t suppose I would enjoy a visit in a place that had ‘No angels allowed’ written on the front door.”

He felt a bit of pride to see his wife's grace in easing the awkward moment. She stretched up towards the horseshoe, but couldn’t easily reach it, so Newton quickly unhooked it. He made to toss it on the lawn but the angel touched his arm and he handed it over.

“Oooh!” he exclaimed, as it suddenly gleamed brightly. He resisted the urge to add, ‘Pretty!’

“I'm going to leave you here, angel!” Crowley yelled from the car.

Aziraphale handed it back with an unconcerned smile. “It will work much better now. Ah, best leave it down until we leave though.”

“Oh, thank you. We certainly appreciate that.” Newt set it down, well away from the door… but remembered where it was, just in case he needed to pitch it at an angry demon.

His own dark-haired angel was already crossing the road, hand outstretched in enthusiastic greeting. “It is such a pleasure to see you again. Thank you for coming so far. I do hope you will
forgive my mistake. The insult was entirely unintentional.”

Beside him, the angel chuckled softly as Crowley returned the greeting, mollified by the effusive apology. She led him back to the cottage, chattering happily about the difficulties of being associated with evil while Newton wondered how he did that thing with his hips, and whether that was a demon thing, or maybe the angel did it too, like a mystical being thing, or maybe he'd been crushed in some sort of thresher accident.

“Come in, both of you,” she murmured in that sweet, soothing accent. “We have fresh biscuits and quiche, and the tea will be along momentarily.”

“Oh, did you hear that, Crowley? Doesn’t that sound scrumptious! You are such lovely hosts. Look, we brought some wine for later, Chateau Ausone, which has a delightful flavour, sweet and fruity.” He handed Newt a bottle that he was sure had not been in Aziraphale’s hands a moment ago.

Thoughtful of him.

...did miraculously appearing the wine make the gesture more or less thoughtful, he wondered.

They settled down to a nice brunch, with conversation that remained surprisingly down to earth, and largely carried by Anathema and Aziraphale, until it chanced to stray to what had happened when he'd tried to update her laptop.

“And then-”

“No, no, lemme guess,” Crowley jumped in with what Newt's brain told him was rapt interest and what his heart told him was malicious glee. “Took out all the fuses?”

“Not exactly! I mean, mostly yes, which at a certain point in a marriage you come to expect, you understand-”

“Oh, I completely do,” Crowley agreed readily, muttering, “Magic tricks, with this one,” with a quick nod at Aziraphale, who pouted at him. "Hideously bad."

“Oh, well then, you do understand. I mean, the blender exploded, just whoosh, right off the wall socket. How do you manage a thing like that anyway? And you just want to say, ‘Honey, I know you mean well, but the local electricians have a poster with your face on it, and why-”

“Why can’t you just recognize your own limitations-”

“Exactly! Or hire someone-”

“Or just actually do a few miracles, if you want to put on a show for people. Humans are very easily impressed, you know. Cut someone actually in half!”

“I told you before; it's not as fun-”

“I’m not going to hire someone if I can do it myself-”

“It's not fun. Killed the dove, for a bit, on accident, naturally. Tha'ss cruelty to animals! and all those screaming kids-”

“The guy was crying. He was honestly crying, looking at all those burnt out wires-”

“I brought it back to life. It was fine. And the kids had a great time… pitching the cake at me-
“He just didn’t understand my process. You have to break a few eggs to make an omelette, and to fix a laptop, sometimes you have to burn—"

“Down the house, because I live in constant terror of that very thing.”

Aziraphale turned sympathetic eyes to Newt. “Is it so much to ask for a little support? I just want to learn a new skill.”

Newt was already nodding with enthusiasm, “Or brush up an old one. I just know I am so close to mastering computers.”

“Right, and what better way to being delight and inspiration to young minds then with an awe inspiring display of the dextrous skill of the magician? He just doesn’t understand at all.”

“I have just always wanted to be able to be that guy, you know, the one people can depend on, can call up and say, ‘Hey, Newt,’ I have this problem, can you take a look?’”

Crowley uncorked the wine, though it was a bit early in the day for that, poured it in one glass, then another, sliding one over to Anathema. He didn’t spare a single glance at either Newt or Aziraphale. “Why do we put up with them?”

His wife accepted the wine and looked at him with a dreamy sigh that made his whole world a better place. “Because we love them entirely, no matter what they do to our appliances.”

“Hmm… I blame six thousand years of co-dependency, myself. Cheers.” He raised his glass in a little salute and Anathema did likewise, not without giving Newt a quick peck on the cheek. He didn’t miss the playful wink, Crowley sent the angel’s way, and from Aziraphale’s quirking smile, he hadn’t either.

As evening fell around them, friendly teasing and chatter moved along to more serious matters, stealing away Newt’s new sense of ease with their houseguests. They retired to the den, a cozy place to make up for less than cozy conversation.

“Summoning?” Anathema repeated, frowning, and sitting up a little from where she had snuggled into his side. He squeezed her a little tighter. “Well, I can’t say I’ve been much inclined to try it for myself, but certainly I’ve heard some do.”

She turned her eyes on Crowley. “Seems unlikely that we would be able to control a demon, though. Even from the little we have seen of what you two can do, I can feel a lot of power in your auras. Could a human really enact a spell that could force demon to do their bidding?”

Crowley shifted position, splaying long legs over the backside of the sofa, practically upside down, flawlessly adjusting the wineglass as he went so as not to spill a drop. “Yessss,” he hissed softly.

“I’m afraid it does seem to be possible. We’d like to put a stop to it, naturally.”

Newton slanted his head sideways, trying to get a good look at Crowley. He stopped hastily when he was hissed at.

“Oh, I see. Is this a common problem for demons, or are you being individually targeted?”

Aziraphale inhaled sharply and looked at Crowley, who lifted (lowered?) his glasses to meet
The Angel’s alarmed eyes. “I hadn’t considered that. What do you think, Crowley?”

The brief flash of gold shocked and fascinated Newt, who peered hard at the demon's face, good sense, such that he'd ever had, swamped by raw curiosity.

“Umph!” Anathema’s elbow crashed into his ribcage. Aziraphale coughed delicately.

“Weuhh, don’t know, really. Sss'not like I’m the only one ‘round, but most everyone else is in ‘n out. Not like we compare notes. I try to stay out of Hell, ’nless I can’t avoid it.” He pointed up-ish, at Aziraphale. “’M like him, that way.”

Newt pointed his finger out and then flipped it over, experimentally.

“My dear…?” the angel prompted him softly.

“Whu-?”

“Sit up.”

“Why?”

“You're distracting me.”

“Why?” he repeated, although with better articulation. “You've never cared before.”

Did the good one just grit his teeth? An annoyed angel. Hmm… that was interesting too.

“Humans don’t sit like that, not past childhood anyway.” And then, decidedly more stiffly, “And we are *guests*”

“Alright then.”

Something strange must have happened to his brain, Newt decided. The last thing it fully comprehended was Crowley stretching out to set his quickly drained glass on the coffee table.

Then there was a weird thing happening.

Then, there was a snake. Really, a very big one.

His first thought was that Crowley had been eaten by it.

He wondered when he had stood up on the sofa. Anathema was standing too, but on the floor, her mouth wide open. He wanted to warn the angel about the snake, or possibly express his condolences on the… eatening of his friend, but the sight had the same effect on his brain that he typically had on electronics. Bit of justice in that, perhaps.

The angel did not look so much worried as irritated, a fascinating colour painting his face. “Crowley, we had a talk about houseguest manners, and you promised.”

The snake was upside down, and Newt's brain finally put it all together with a nearly audible pop. “Ohhh… he *is* the snake.”

Anathema, having recovered from the shock far more quickly than her husband, gave him the same look the angel was giving the snake, so he attempted to give Crowley a look of shared empathy… he wasn’t really sure what kind of look the snake was giving him in return. The sunglasses had slipped to the floor but it didn’t help him at all with interpretation.
“So, in your experience, are these sort of occult goings-on generally a targeted affair?” Aziraphale asked, apparently having decided to pretend nothing unusual was happening. Perhaps it wasn’t, for an angel. What was a regular day for an angel?

“Most spells are. Protection spells, for example, are focused around a person. I don’t condone doing harm to people, but curses tend to be specific too. In order to summon a demon, it may be that you would have to have a particular demon in mind. I can have a few acquaintances I can ask, as well, who may have a better idea. My life, until recently, has revolved around Agnes’ prophecies.” She frowned, looking pensive. “I was never out to hurt anyone, so I was never interested in summoning demons. What other use could there be for it, other than harm?”

The Crowley snake made a strange little sound and tucked his smooth head in his coils.

“Now don’t you take that to heart,” Aziraphale crooned sympathetically to the snake.

“Oh, I do beg your pardon,” Anathema said quickly, sweet eyes sad. Newt quickly gave her hand a squeeze.

“Sorry,” he added. “We’re a bit new to conversing with uh, your kind. Demons. Well, mystical beings in general. You know, entities of... power. And we don’t get out much either.” He tried desperately to shut himself up.

It seemed to help all the same. He had never seen a snake laugh at anyone, but if he had to describe the sound rising up from the ink-dark scales, that would have been it.

That was alright. He wasn’t above sacrificing a little dignity to smooth things over.

“There’s likely a restriction in how much power a human can channel as well,” Aziraphale mused, pulling them back on track. “Take my people, for example. As a Principality, I’m mostly set to watch over whole cities, guide and protect their development, make sure all goes well, but different angels have different roles. Some give messages to individual humans, or to protect them in bad times. Some were never really meant to leave the Throne of God.”

There was a thought.

“Bet that must be quite a sight.” He hadn’t really meant to say it out loud, but it had poured out of him in a wave of reckless awe.

The angel sipped his tea, looking a bit sheepish behind the cup. “Ah, well, I actually don’t know. Bit beyond my milieu. I’ve been down here for ages, actual ages, and one mostly sticks to one’s own choir.”

“Sssshiny.” All eyes turned to the snake, though Newt didn’t miss the naked surprise that flickered across the angel’s face.

He was rather more surprised that the snake could talk. They waited expectantly but Crowley seemed inclined to leave it at that, and after a gentle stroke of the snake’s head, Aziraphale went back to the matter at hand.

“I am troubled by the thought that this could be deliberate targeting, somehow.” He gave his head a quick shake. “It can’t be by an individual human of course, because your people are not long-lived in your corporations, and this has been going on quite a while, but maybe some sort of cult?”

“The Cult of Crowley.” He had missed seeing the snake talk again, and it was beginning to
frustrate him. The words sounded approving.

“Perhaps?” speculated the angel, “You did mention they sometimes kill snakes.”

There was no confusing the meaning of that angry hiss. Apparently, he no longer approved.

Colours shifted and stretched, and suddenly their human, well, decidedly not actually human, not really, remotely, human houseguest had reappeared, human-ish, and right way up.

Crowley reclaimed the wine glass and drank deeply. He didn’t remember anyone refilling it, but Newt was already beginning to accept the little flurry of convenience miracles that happened around them.

“I’m reasonably sure I would have heard about a Crowley cult by now, because I would have started it, and I didn’t. And if I did, they would love snakes and dress better. Or possibly worse, if I thought it was funny.”

“I shudder to think,” Aziraphale said primly, smirking a little when Crowley glowered at him.

“I think I have some books on the subject somewhere, or some magazines, just to give you some place to start looking.”

“We could try an internet search!” Newt suggested, trying to keep his voice level, and failing.

“Yes, we can. You can entertain Crowley.” The pat on his arm was not as encouraging as Anathema seemed to think it was. Neither was the look behind the glasses.

Oh. Oh dear.

How did one entertain a man who had been a snake not five minutes previous?

He hoped it did not involve being a mouse.

For his part, watching Newton Pulsifer squirm, Crowley seemed already a little entertained.

“D’ya wanna play Truth or Dare?”

Chapter End Notes

1 Not that he was frightened of them. Even if one was angry. Even if the scary one was angry. Alright, maybe he was nervous. A bit. [return to text]
Truth and Dares

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale is away, and Crowley plays.

With Newt.

More shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For more than an hour, Aziraphale followed Anathema eagerly around the cottage as she began digging up books and magazines for him to peruse. Her heart was thudding in her chest as she felt the enormous pressure of his request. The intensity wasn’t so much due to his ethereal nature, as it was due to the urgency he himself was radiating. This matter was deeply important to him, and the demands he placed on his own soul rippled lighting bright through an aura Anathema feared to look at directly, lest she be struck blind. His was a soul all in supernova, but buckled down, harnessed tight and fast against its own might.

She had the feeling he would have been surprised and dismayed to realise the weight of the task he had placed on her shoulders, his burden becoming her own, but she was her mother’s daughter, and her grandmother’s granddaughter, and so on, back through the ages to being Agnes’ own.

And Agnes’ descendants were built for trials by fire.

The angel needed her help, and she fought to keep her hands from trembling as she dug hastily through her collection, finding, considering, weighing, rejecting or selecting texts that could help give him guidance.

How could she even begin?

Anathema was far, far out of her depths, yet this Sentient, Gleaming Reflection of Inconceivable Might sidled up beside her casually, smiling sweetly as she led the way, as though her weightless mortality had a power and value to rival his own. He certainly seemed to feel that it did, and the thought stole her breath away.

For his part, Aziraphale fluttered approvingly after, commenting on her library with convincing enthusiasm. “Quite lovely, dear lady,” or, “Oh, my, I thought mine was the only copy.”
It would not be hard to love such a creature, she thought quietly, if sheer thunderstruck awe didn’t completely negate the possibility of something so human between such different creatures. She felt a sudden longing for her down to earth husband, and the quirks and foibles that were still bursting unexpectedly in her world, flavouring it with the brightness of citrus, impressing on her the studious bland days of her warrior childhood, and the fresh sweet surprises of her life today.

How had she ever gotten so lucky, so blessed? If it was a thank you gift for her role in saving the world, she considered herself well and truly repaid.

Thank you, she thought joyfully, to the universe and the Hand that gave it life. Her own hands steadied. There was nothing that was not meant to be.

“You're quite right,” Aziraphale chimed in, suddenly, bumping her out of her own thoughts as he accepted the book from her hand.

She stared at him, unable to formulate the question. Was he reading her mind?

“We'll get it all sorted,” and his gaze had turned inward, leaving her questions unanswered. “We won’t let this stand. I will not.

“Have you got this one, too?” she asked him, holding up a dark, leather-bound tome. She was slightly embarrassed to have that particular book. It had been gifted her by her now long dead uncle Woebegone.

They weren’t especially skilled at choosing names, in the Nutter line.

‘Sweep down the Stars,’ read the title in delicate lettering that belayed the dark nature of the book. Aziraphale looked decidedly unsettled, and held it well away from his body. “Enslaving the Powers that Be.”

Not the most appropriate gift for a twelve year old girl, but she'd gotten worse.

“Absolutely not,” he said firmly, before shooting her an apologetic look. “Oh I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just that it has recently been, a little bit, suggested, that I would be capable of ... pursuing power in such a way, and I haven’t quite gotten over the hurt of a thought like that coming from- where it came from.” He glanced behind him to the stairs leading back down to the living room. He had opened the book, awkwardly trying to read while balancing it on top of their other finds. Anathema pulled out the chair to a small circular table and he accepted the unspoken invitation, settling down and scanning the dusty pages.

“I am no expert,” she began uncertainly, wanting to be supportive, but feeling dwarfed by the task, “but dark magic, it really doesn’t seem like something a, an,” Anathema didn’t quite want to say it out loud, right to his face.
“Angel!” he supplied, sounding exasperated, but she didn’t think it was directed at her. “Yes, exactly! You understand, why doesn’t he? How could he think it, for even a second?” Aziraphale’s dropped low in scandal. “I can’t imagine even the least of us- which, I suppose, would be me anyway- doing anything like that. Messing with free will is quite frowned upon. Interfering with God's children, it is sometimes necessary, but must be done, oh, so carefully. It's really better just to leave you to get on with things.”

He tapped a page, then ran his finger over a line of text, humming softly. "And a demon is not a human, of course, but we aren’t meant to be out there abducting our enemies and forcing them to do things counter to their own, well, will is not really the world, so let's say, desires. I just don't understand it."

Anathema found herself remembering the story behind a pristine little lake not too far from where she grew up. It had originally been an rock quarry, but while the workers were mining stone with all their heavy equipment, someone had inadvertently struck and underground spring, and they'd had to flee for their lives, abandoning the trucks, which still, to this day rest in the dark depths below the children who splashed about on the surface. Aziraphale was quite unexpectedly pouring his heart out to her, and she wondered if she would be submerged in the rushing totality of it, and yet, true to her lineage, a thousand curious questions drew her in deeper.

"So, you don't think an angel would bind a demon?"

“That would certainly merit Falling, at least, I think so, and well-justified it would be,” Were his hands trembling? “It’s unconscionably cruel.” Quietly, eyes again wandering to the stairs again, he confessed, “I’m terribly worried about him.”

Anathema swallowed hard and managed to pull up an encouraging smile. “Well, he is not alone, and just knowing that, sometimes that is what makes all the difference.”

Aziraphale gave her hand a little pat, as if he was the one consoling her, nodding thoughtfully, expression serious. “You have a very kind soul,” he observed, in a way that made it all the more true. “I do not mean to pry, but if you ever decide to, ah, what is the current terminology?” His brow furrowed a moment before relaxing. “Start a family, do let me know, and I shall perform the blessing personally.”

“Oh… uh-"

He beamed at her, pure and sweet and rampantly ignorant of the boundaries he had flitted right through. “You know, same old, same old. Safe delivery, healthy baby, twins, if you’re feeling adventurous. Have done it for half the kings and queens of Europe, you know. The successful ones. I’m quite good at blessing the marriage bed-"

She grabbed his arm, not a little desperately, releasing it just as quickly. “I…” That was they hadn’t really talked about, words, she needed to make some words. Her eyes drifted to the book in his hands and her fingers did too, grounding her. “Thank you…ever so much. Uh, I will just go see how Newt and Mr. Crowley are getting along, if you'd like to settle in and do some reading.”
Some glimmer in his eyes suggested he was catching on to his own faux pas, but he revealed his troubled expression was born out of another thought. “They are being rather quiet down there.”

By mutual agreement, they gathered up Aziraphale’s reading material and headed downstairs, Anathema leading the way. “Oh, and about my, uh, offering of a blessing, I do apologize if I was a bit forward. Sometimes I fall behind the times a bit. It’s like with birds. One day you’re all writing poems about wings, the next day you’ve gone and built yourself aeroplanes. It gets a bit mudd-“

He stopped chattering as her books crashed to the floor, making a dismayed sound but she hardly noticed, too busy trying not to scream.

There were two snakes.

Behind her, Aziraphale let out a strangled sound, that could perhaps have been a good swear word if it had made it out of the Angel’s mouth. He set the books he’d carried down on the nearest available surface before moving past her, cheeks flushed and eyes ablaze.

There were rather more wine bottles around than there had been when they’d left the room, Anathema noticed through her peripheral vision. The sight was the tiniest ping on her consciousness, under a mental shriek centered entirely on the somewhat smaller, pinky snake… tapping on her laptop with its tail.

That got her moving. She rushed forward and yanked it out of harm’s way. “No. No way! Do you want with Dick Turpin and your own laptop, but my car and my lap top are off limits!”

Aziraphale was busy dealing out his own tongue-lashing. “Crowley! We had a gentleman’s agreement, and you were to behave yourself while we are guests. You promised you would be..., okay, you wouldn’t say good, but you did say not bad. Not bad! Guests do not turn people to snakes! Guests do not get people drunk, and turn them to snakes!”

Anathema reconsidered her snake husband. He did rather look a little unsteady. “Ssswwweetie…” he sighed, and one of it's coils slipped over the edge of the sofa, dragging all the rest of it down with it in a boneless, well, a legless heap, anyway.

“You know what I'm to do now, yes?” The angel was nose to nose… do snakes have noses? with Crowley. The snake didn’t close his eyes in dismay, because snakes don’t have eyelids, but he would have if he could.

“No fair….”

“It is your own fault,” Aziraphale scrunched up his nose as the snake flickered his tongue over it. He shot a quick look at Anathema. “Newt will be fine, my dear.” Crowley hissed as he gave away the pet name. “I'll just undo it. He did this to the health inspector once too.”
With a sharp snap of his fingers, Anathema had her husband back in his normal configuration, clothes and all, which she had a little bit wondered about. Mr. Crowley was as he had been on arrival, that is to say human-shaped and pissy, and both of them were clutching their heads. There was no escaping a hangover… at least, there wasn’t going to be with a ticked off angel doing the miracling.

Newt pried his hands off his head to raise them in a vaguely supplicating gesture towards Aziraphale. “Hey—gghh, yuck. Don’t blame Crowley, please. That was my fault, and he is entirely innocent.”

Crowley forgot about coddling his head in favour of kicking his legs out and falling backwards on the couch, howling with laughter. “You heard him, angel! Entirely innocent! Write that down! Someone.” He patted himself down frantically for a pen before simply yanking one out of midair. He made a motion towards writing it directly on their oak coffee table, but Aziraphale squeaked and slid a notepad underneath in the nick of time. The little angel wings on the pad were particularly apropos, Anathema thought, with the part of her mind still capable of thought.

“Tuesday… the 16th. Entirely innocent. Right in front of the angel. Glorious. You…” He pressed a finger to Newt's forehead, who brushed it away irritably, before his eyes widened in alarm at the reflexive action. Crowley did not appear to even register it.

"I like this one. You can be lawyer next time I’m on trial in Hell. Don’t worry, I'll send for you. Happens about twice a year. ‘Course, that was before the Thing, so who really knows now, amIright?” He was still softly chucking.

Newt looked very, very sober.

Having settled down a titch, new cups of tea in hand, and mysterious wine bottles having scuttled off to parts extremely very unknown, Newt had been pressed into explaining just how they’d ended up as two sloshed snakes on the sofa, and apparently a totally innocent demon.

Anathema and Aziraphale had just scampered up the stairs, leaving him very much alone with Crowley. He had politely, turned down the suggestion of Truth or Dare.

Initially.

Although he had found it very tempting. He had plenty of questions he had been dying to ask their guests.

But no… it seemed unwise.
So they sat there.

He looked at Crowley.

Crowley looked at him.

“So…” Newt gave his legs an awkward pat. “How are things?”

“Bad.”

“Ah… Haha, well. I suppose, for a uh, um…demon, that would be good, then.”

“Nope. Bad for me still means bad. It can mean bad for everyone else too. I’m that sort.”

“Ah… right then.”

They sat in silence for a moment, until Newt gathered enough courage to try again. “So… what does a demon like to do for fun?”

He regretted asking almost immediately, finding himself was suddenly quite terrified of the answer as bloodbaths and godless ceremonies ran through his head. It was one thing to be married to a witch, he supposed, but quite another thing to shoot the breeze with a demon.

Possibly a dangerous, evil, murderous Hell demon from Hell. As he’d heard they were. Not that he’d heard they were, in the sense of existing. But this one was right here, in their livingroom, existing.

“Gardening, mostly. Also sleep.” He brightened a little. “Drinking.”

And from there things had progressed quite nicely, swinging back to Truth or Dare again. That had probably been his idea, right? Crowley had a way of jumping on all Newt's best ideas. He was quite likable once you let your guard down.

“And that's when he turned you into a snake?”

“Yes. Well, no. Well, I went first, you see, and I said dare, so he told me to go-” a guilty look crossed his face. “Um… togetyourlaptop. But not to do anything to it! Just, you know, to see if I could get it without you noticing. As a dare.”

His wife’s gaze could do amazing things to him. At the moment, it was giving him cold sweats.

Aziraphale was giving Crowley the same kind of look his mother had always given him
when he was making up excuses for why the fuse box was open… and he was in it. Kind of an I-know-what-you've-been-up-to look. The demon was sprawled out lazily, looking like the cat post-canary.

“Theft,” the angel mouthed accusingly.

Crowley licked his finger and drew a checkmark in the air. It glowed. Newt tried to pretend he hadn’t seen that.

“And then?”

"Then he said Truth, so I asked him how and angel and a demon got to be friends, and he said-

"Isolation and booze."

“Which wasn't really as satisfying and answer as I'd hoped for. Then, on my turn, I said Truth, no… I must have said Dare, because then he dared me to umm.” He stopped, the laptop in his wife's hands glaring at him accusingly.

“Tell me,” she sighed. “You're already caught red-handed anyway.”

“Technically, he didn’t have hands when you caught-"

“Hush, foul one.” That seemed a bit harsh to Newt, who had had quite a good time with Crowley, but the lovely chap seemed to take no offense.

He mostly seemed amused.

“Er, right. So he suggested that I should go online, take a look at some of the great tech blogs that are out there, all the fantastic things everyone else is doing, that haven’t got some bizarre curse holding them back from all their hopes and dreams-” A morose, unhappy feeling settled over him.

“A blessing can look very much like a curse, dear boy,” Aziraphale broke through the stormy thoughts like a ray of sunlight, but a wry edge crept into his voice. “Trust me on that, as one who knows too well.”

He turned his attention to the demon on the sofa. “Envy?” Aziraphale murmured to Crowley, with an arched eyebrow.

Checkmark.

“Well, then he said Dare, so I dared him to show me what he really looks like, and when I came ‘round, it was my turn again.”
“Came round?” she repeated, alarmed, Aziraphale glaring, all Wrath of God at Crowley, who tipped up a careless shoulder as if to say, 'Been there, done that.'

"And is that when he became a snake?"

“Oh, no. I don’t know entirely what happened actually. It was like he didn’t do a thing. I just blinked and he said, ‘Oh, back with us, are you,’ and then he said it was my go.’ Really, it happened so fast.” His lips turned down, trying to remember.

‘Liar,’ Aziraphale mouthed to Crowley.

Checkmark.

‘Would you have wanted me to?’ he returned.

Checkmate.

The redhead stretched out and settled even further, melting into the Chesterfield.

“And things did get a bit weird after that, honestly, because he said Dare, although I really wanted him to say Truth… hoping for a bit much, I suppose. So I dared him to show me what God looks like, but he said he thought you would probably want me to live, and I should come up with something else. Then I asked him to tell me the Truth about what Heaven is like, and he made a noise like grinding gears… so then, I thought, you know, snake! and that was very interesting, until you both came down and got all upset at Mr. Crowley. I still feel like I have too many legs," and he shared a look of what he felt was understanding with the demon, "but really, it was all my idea. So, yes. Completely innocent.”

Crowley’s last mark was a smiley face... with horns.

Anathema sighed. “Alright, well all ends that ends well, I suppose. You seem fine. My laptop seems to have survived.”

"I can use Google, you know." In fact, Newt thought there may have been some demonic intervention involved in the laptop's survival, but he kept mum.

The angel wasn’t letting Crowley off so lightly.

“Crowley, we are here, as guests, with these lovely humans who are actually trying to help you—"

“I didn’t ask them to!”

“I did, on your behalf, because I am trying to help you—"
“Didn’t ask you too either!” he spat back, as an ominous feeling entered the room.

“Oh, I don’t like this, Ana.”

Aziraphale was steady. “And you made a promise to me to be on your best behaviour-

“Oh, I was certainly trying my best.”

The blond curls caught the light as he shook his head in annoyance.

“You turned Newton into a snake!”

“Well, that wasn’t my fault, was it? I dare you to draw a picture of the Almighty on this napkin? What kind of dare was that? So then I said truth, and he asked me what Heaven was like… He really doesn’t play by the rules, this one, which is kind of why I like him, and then, well, snake! Which was easy, and safe,” he rolled his eyes in derision, “and quite a pleasant state to be in, as I’m sure the human agrees-”

Newt actually did agree, and nodded along.

“There, see? Agree. So don’t get all uppity with me, angel, just because my idea of a good time is different than yours.”

For a moment, he thought they might fight, but then the angel threw up his hands before settling down in a chair well away from Crowley, who sipped some wine-from-nowhere and did not see fit to argue further.

“Who d’you think would win, anyway, if you two had a domestic? Or rather, a fight. A fight”

”Fisticuffs?”

“Wha-?” Crowley looked up from his wine.

“Newton…”

”Can't say I'm not a little bit tempted at the moment.”

Anathema was giving him a long look that Newt was beginning to understand meant they were going to have a talk later. Those talks were usually followed by a romantic tumble as he promised to correct the error of his ways, so he wasn't too upset about it.
That didn't make him any happier about the look Crowley was giving him. Where had that sense of easy companionship gone? Newt fought a sudden urge to slither under a cushion. Not that it mattered that he fought it.

"Why, Crowley," Aziraphale cut in, suddenly cheerful. "Someone else with a penchant for difficult questions."

The demon shot the angel a look of his own before abruptly relaxing. Newt also relaxed. And Anathema. And the Chesterfield which Crowley was nigh on becoming one with.

"I do… like questions."

"If you're asking them."

"'Course. But we both know this is not a difficult question."

"He would," they answered together, each pointing at the other, before simultaneously shaking their heads. "No, he would."

"Uh..."Newt looked at Anathema for help. She shrugged. It did not help.

"I'm an angel. Would I lie?"

"Absolutely, he would." Crowley answered before Newt could entirely process the question. "In a real fight-"

"-not that that would ever happen-"

"-the Pansy here would kick my ass. He just feels it's not appropriately humble to say so, and this particular angel has really embraced the concept of the white lie. [1]

"You would be an exceedingly fearsome foe, my dear. It would be quite close, I think."

Newt was suddenly put in mind of his old granny, and the sweet way she would encourage him after he would plug in the toaster and short out the kitchen. ‘You almost had it that time, sweetheart.’ Same sort of patronizing tone.

"But you know you would win." Crowley turned towards Newt more fully, warming to the subject. Newt wondered how his spine moved like that. He still had questions about the walk too, if he opportunity arose. "He knows."

Aziraphale sipped his tea.

"See?" Crowley insisted. "He knows."

"But why? Aren't you both, you know... all powerfu-"

"No,"Aziraphale interrupted quickly. "Powerful, yes, relatively speaking, but there's only One who is all powerful." The certainty in his voice caused Newt a little shiver.

"We each have advantages. I fight dirty, for one." His smile was not so much all teeth as all fang. Newt shivered again. Bit drafty in here, all of a sudden, wasn't it? "'Zira, tell 'em."

Aziraphale made a face at the shortening of his name. "Yes, dear. You're a very wily adversary."
"Right. So, I, for instance would think nothing of, I don't know, backstabbing, cheating, hostages," His lips quirked up mischievously. "Burning books-"

"Really, dear."

"But that only gets one so far. And would likely have the unpleasant side effect of seriously pissing him off. Bad idea to piss of an angel. They have that whole, Holy and Righteous Wrath thing going on. Light up like a Roman candle. On goes the smiting. A lone demon doesn't stand a chance."

He wondered if Crowley had seen the flicker of fear pass over the Angel’s face at his playful words. The conversation took a hard, fast turn to the left.

“Then it is as well, you are not alone, my dear… and you won’t be, when we go back.”

“Back where?”

He just looked at him, patiently, sadly.

Crowley sat up entirely, and Newt scooted closer to Anathema, worried. "We have to?"

“Yes, dear.”

“I have to?"

“Saw something in a one of her books," He nodded respectfully towards Anathema. "I'm sorry, my dear, but it could be important.”

“’ngk, ’kay then.”

Chapter End Notes

1 As for who came up with the original concept, three guesses and the first two don't count. [return to text]
The Snake

Chapter Summary

Remember the plot? Well, here it comes again. Playtime is over, for now.

Buckle up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They spent the night at Jasmine Cottage, Aziraphale burying himself in occult books and Crowley entertaining himself with their hosts. He only knew they had gone to bed when Crowley slithered into the room, in a decidedly smaller snake form than was typical, closer to a little garter snake, and curled up wordlessly under the warmth of his reading lamp, quickly dropping off to sleep, if he had to hazard a guess. It was a little hard to tell without eyelids.

He only knew what the trio had gotten up to by the new selfie photo perched on the kitchen table the next morning.

Three snakes were lined up on the couch.

Frivolous miracles certainly didn’t seem to earn Crowley any censure. Were he less virtuous, he might have felt a touch of envy.

Selfies were probably harder with no arms or hands to hold up the camera, but difficulty was a relative concept when you could pat physics on the back and tell it to take a breather. Crowley wouldn’t really have needed the camera either. Sometimes he was quite stunned by how thoughtful one particular demon could be.

Love washed over him like warm bathwater.

It wasn’t easy to sustain righteous wrath for Principality Aziraphale; it had to be fueled, and so he poured all that easy affection into his wrath like gasoline on a bonfire. Today, he knew too well, would be hard for Crowley, and thus, hard for them both.

He would have to stand firm.

They bid a farewell to the lovely couple, with Anathema fervently promising to continue her research and reach out to her contacts, and Newt kindly, yet bafflingly promising to reach out to his contacts as well. Crowley cheerily took a little of the cheer out of Newt by reminding him of his retention as the fallen angel’s Hellbound lawyer.

For his part, Aziraphale’s farewell was polite, of course, but his heart and his mind were elsewhere.

He clung to whatever he could cling to as the Bentley streaked away through the quiet little village. He could read Crowley’s anxiety in the way he clung unnecessarily to the wheel, driving even faster than usual. Aziraphale tried to keep his immortal terror to himself this time, squeezing
his eyes shut along with his mouth.

An odd, relentlessly driving song from the radio pushed them along their path.

*Round like a circle in a spiral,*

*like a wheel within a wheel*

*Never ending or beginning*

*on an ever spinning reel*

“You're pretty quiet.”

So much for that plan.

“I wouldn't want to distract you while you're driving.” Crowley barked out a humourless laugh.

“Since when?”

*Like a snowball down a mountain,*

*or a carnival balloon*

*Like a carousel that's turning*

*running rings around the moon*

“Since you first bought this infernal machine, actually…are you watching the road?!” He bit his lip. This was harder than he anticipated.

“I suppose,” was not the answer he was hoping for, but it wasn’t relief he felt when Crowley changed the subject, giving voice to his own worries. “We really have to go back to that church?”

The angel wished there was another way; he really did. “Yes, my dear. We need to investigate. What I have read has been very-” Well, enlightening was hardly the word. Endarkening? If he was going to stick to actual words, he would have to go with-, “Informative, and disturbing.”

*Like a clock whose hands are sweeping*

*past the minutes of its face*

*And the world is like an apple*

*whirling silently in space*

He didn’t miss Crowley's gulp. He rarely missed anything of Crowley’s, except when they were long apart, and then he missed everything, even this terrifying monstrosity hurling them along through time and space in ways that should have been, or rather were, both illegal and impossible.

*Like the circles that you find in the windmills of your mind*

Not that either of those conditions held Crowley back.

“Go on then, angel, share with the class.” His words were light, but his voice was tense.
Like a tunnel that you follow

to a tunnel of its own

Down a hollow to a cavern

where the sun has never shone

"You're in a weird mood today," He complained, abruptly slapping down on the radio. Freddie Mercury’s smash hit, 'The Windmills of Your Mind,' sped up rather frantically before a second slap dissolved it into silence.

“Summonings can be generic, but they are more likely to be successful if targeted, focused around a talisman of some sort. We need to find out how it was done on this occasion. If it was not targeted, then perhaps the hedge of protection will be enough to stop you from being summoned again.”

That may also have been wishful thinking, of which he was often guilty.

“So you want me to wear this thing forever?”

Aziraphale frowned, troubled. “Would that be a problem? You said you weren’t uncomfortable.”

Which was not really the same as comfortable, he reflected unhappily.

Crowley released a white-knuckle grip from the wheel to scratch lightly over the little snake tattoo that he wore like a silent declaration of his own identity. “No… but if they decide they’re talking to me again, and I assume they will, eventually, I can’t go down there, lit up like a new fledgling. Nevermind the inevitable trial and execution; it's just plain humiliating, Aziraphale.”

“I can reset it, if you have to break it. If you decide you want me to,” he added, feeling a tad guilty. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask you.”

Crowley kept his eyes on the road. “Can’t blame you for trying to do something Good.”

He felt his face break into a relieved smile. “I suppose it is true to my angelic nature.”

“I’m fairly certain it’s not remotely in an angel's nature, given how they react to me in general,” He let go of the wheel entirely to mime a violent struggle with his hands. “But, it’s definitely an Aziraphale sort of thing to do.”

A gentle warmth suffused him at the affection there, and somewhat aglow, though not actually, aglow, the angel decided to forgo a panicked demand that Crowley get his hands back on the wheel.

Maybe this was the time.

“There’s something else we have to do, and… I’m afraid I am going to have to secure a promise from you.”

The warmth was gone in an instant.

If he had listened closely, he was sure he would have heard the Bentley groan in protest under the pressure of hands that found the wheel again. “What?” came the terse reply.
“I have it in mind to…find them.” Perhaps unnecessarily, he clarified, “The humans who summoned you.”

“Ah…should have known. Most of them are in the Pit. Not what I’d call a vacation hotspot for an angel.”

Aziraphale should have expected the mocking response. “Be serious, Crowley,” he scolded, feeling very serious indeed. “You know full well I mean the living ones…oh. Are they- still living? You weren’t entirely clear on some details.”

“I take it that’s what you want me to promise, then? Not to murder the rat-faced, maggot-loving, snake-killing bastards?”

“Not sure I’d call it murder,” he replied stiffly, feeling a bit vengeful all on his own, “but yes, that’s the promise.”

“You’ve not got to worry about protecting your Holy reputation,” he made a face, “It's not going to be besmirched by you leading me to the innocent humans.” And here is voice was laced with sarcasm like hydrogen cyanide.

“That is not what concerns me. It's your own welfare-"

“Well past late for that, angel,” Crowley rolled tension out of his shoulders. “And, really, don’t worry about it. I’m still bound, concerning them. Can’t so much as let the air out of their tires, more's the pity.”

Silence settled over them for a time, thick and dreadful, resistant.

“You know where it is then?”

“I know.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t.”

It was quite an out of the way place, an overgrown lawn and a neglected cemetery surrounding the little church. It wasn’t one Aziraphale had visited, even in it's heyday. The original wooden sign had been broken down and burned, and vile, hateful graffiti was tagged everywhere.

More subtle were the occult symbols dotted around the building, a silent territorial war happening all around them. Someone had tried hard to corrupt the once beautiful place, but had not been able to totally defile the faded love that resided here for the generations of humans who had lived, celebrated, married and finally were sent off to their rest.

The occult sigils repulsed him, and he felt a pang of sympathy for Crowley’s reaction to Jasmine Cottage, and wished he'd been more patient.

“I'll just wait by the car, then.”

Aziraphale pressed his lips together. “I… I could really use your eyes, my friend. I know it's a church, and I don’t like to ask, but you are protected an-"
“You push and you push,” Crowley snarled abruptly, casual pretense abandoned in a breath, but he was already stalking to the door. “And you can’t protect me from everything… maybe not anything.”

He slammed though the entrance, pushing through without a thought to the directionality of the hinges. Not that it really mattered, if they knew what was good for them.

Aziraphale shut his eyes for a moment, awash in pain and not sure which of them it belonged to.

Steady on, angel.

Right, then. Best it were done quickly. He took hold of the handle and pulled open the door to follow Crowley inside. The hedge of protection seemed to be up to the task, in spiritual strength, although it was clearly not doing anything to help Crowley’s emotional state. He was stomping up the centre aisle, old hymn books and bibles bursting into flame as he passed them in the pews.

Aziraphale followed, putting the fires out, less for the sake of thwarting sacrilege or protecting books long gone to mould, but more to prevent the whole place from going up. There had been more than enough fire lately.

“Were you held up here?”

“Basement.”

He trailed after Crowley, who disappeared into a stairwell to the left of the pulpit. The building was old, but not ancient, perhaps two centuries or so. The stone walls was rough and cold under his fingertips, but the consecration soothed his jangled nerves. This was still a holy place, and surely, they could find some answers here.

It was likely having the opposite effect on Crowley, and not only because it was holy ground.

Aziraphale had been held hostage by humans on several occasions, but the only way he had truly been bound had been by his own desire to keep up with his human cover.

He had also, while playacting as Crowley in a fairly desperate bid to save their souls, been dragged down to Hell, but it had been with Agnes’ forewarning and at least the hope of escape.

To be imprisoned, not just of body but of mind, spirit, and will, that was a different sort of beast altogether, and though he worried, and cared, and sympathized, the angel could not fully understand what Crowley was wrestling with.

It was just like the Fall, really. Too far beyond the not inconsiderable wealth of his experience.

They left the staircase and he found himself moving sharply away from the wall before his eyes had fully registered the pentagram. There was something on the floor too, giving off an evil feeling.

“Gghhuh…” It was a sad sound, and he turned to see Crowley frowning down at the desiccated remains of a snake, some sort of python, not native to the area. It had probably been acquired from a pet store for the purpose.

“Poor creature,” Aziraphale murmured in sympathy. “What a ghastly business this is.”
“Sometimes I really hate them,” Crowley’s voice was soft and venomous. “Makes up for the odd time I felt bad for winning. Most of them have it coming to them anyway.”

“Not most of them,” Aziraphale disagreed, sliding easily into the age old debate. “You can be ever so bleak sometimes.”

He scanned the room, moving chairs and little tables as he went, searching for the occult, seeking clues to either the way the summoning had been done, or the identity of the perpetrators.

“They can be so brave and kind.”

“How can you look at this, and know what happened, and still be thinking humans are good?”

“Long, long practice, my dear.”

“Hmm, because of me?” The challenge caught him quite off guard.

“No, not at all. You're not human, as you've insisted on reminding me lately. I still think they can be good, because they can be. Someone out there is trying to cure cancer. Someone out there just signed an organ donor card. Someone quietly made a huge sacrifice to help someone in need and they'll never breathe a word about it. It all rings like bells around us.”

He touched Crowley’s shoulder, making sure he was listening. “Lots of someones, all the time. It's really, very beautiful, and most of them don’t even know where they came from or where they're going, and all the whys in between.”

A thought hit him and he shook his head, smiling. “You know, they do remind me of you.”

“Would you like me to tell you about all the bad stuff they're getting up to?” He kicked at a table leg and the whole thing toppled down. “Because some of them make me look positively angelic, like Michael and Gabriel and I do tea and crumpets every Sunday afternoon.”

Aziraphale choked out a laugh at the outlandish image. “Gabriel doesn’t eat, and I suspect Michael would try to smite you on sight.”

“That's just PR… and you've proved my point. Imagine how bad the humans would have to be to make a rendezvous like that happen.”

“Armageddon part two is likely to happen first.”

“True, because even if you could get them on board, why in Satan’s name would I go?”

Aziraphale chuckled softly and went back to looking around. He liked talking with Crowley, and it was reassuring he could hold up a conversation even in this place.

Something caught his eye. “Oh, this seems-”

There was a hand-sewn leather pouch near the staircase that appeared to have fallen behind a desk. It was positively pulsing evil, and his first thought, past nausea, was that Crowley should open it.

*You push and you push.*

No. No more burdens for Crowley. Besides, he didn’t want the hedge to be shattered from this evil, especially when he was not confident Crowley would co-operate if he needed to do it again.
“Find something?”

“Just taking a peek. Might be nothing.”

Trying not to handle it more than necessary, he gave it a quick shake, and a handful of small items fell out. A pin, and some runes that positively radiated darkness, and a tooth or some kind, possibly human.

That wasn’t what stopped him dead.

As if trying to remain hidden, dangling out of the pouch was a thin white ribbon… well, it had been white once, and there was still a bit of an energy to it. The edges were as clean cut as the day they had been thought out of raw firmament, woven together in the atoms that would have eagerly rushed to obey.

It had once been tied around something very precious. A gift that had not gone appreciated in it's time.

His heart, which went largely unnoticed except during certain car rides, gave an enormous, rather painful thud before a feeling like a sudden dunk in the arctic ocean overwhelmed him. He bit his lip to keep the cry bottled up.

He could not let Crowley see.

The demon would never forgive him, and that was nothing compared to the anguish and fury that came crashing down on him from his own spirit.

Ohhhhh no, no, no. Please Merciful God in Heaven, don’t let this be what it is.

“What is it?” Crowley was approaching and Aziraphale vanished the ribbon away into the ether, nestled amongst his own feathers, and slapped some awful parody of a smile on his face.

“Oh, seems like they left some supplies behind. Nothing telling,” he lied shamefully, surely edging a bit farther down with the act. “Dark runes, a pin…those won’t help us.”

He couldn’t lay eyes on Crowley. He was quite afraid the awfulness of it would bring his internal shrieking quite external.

Crowley frowned at him. "Are you quite sure, angel?"

“Certainly, don’t you trust me?” It was the worst thing he had ever said.

“Whu- yeah. Of course. No need to get uppity. Look, I found something too.” He flipped open a wallet.

“Mark Holland,” Aziraphale managed, feeling terribly ill.

“Betcha that was the one that ran off. Think he's still looking for this?”

“We should return it,” Aziraphale suggested, trying and failing for flippant. “It can be your good deed for the day.” Crowley was looking at him, and the angel desperately wished he would stop.

“You sure you're alright?”

"Fine,” he hissed out, lies piling up around him. “Just… a lot of evil around here.”
“Ground is still consecrated… thought you’d enjoy that. It doesn’t burn like it should. So weird, angel. I don’t know what you've made of me.”

A prisoner, he thought sickly, wanting to weep. A slave.

“…Should we get on with it then?” Crowley asked, watching him closely as he struggled to get himself under control.

“Yes! Um, yes, of course, off we pop.”

As Crowley passed by the broken little body of the snake, he paused one more time to sigh, and Aziraphale made a sudden decision.

“Just one moment, dear.”

It had been a long time gone, and this was no small mercy. Aziraphale shut his eyes tight and reached both within and without for the Power necessary. He felt it build within, and quickly shooed Crowley away with an urgent gesture when he heard the demon gasp. Crowley skittered back to a safer distance. He felt Her give him permission, and he thought with steely determination about a little snake, alive and well, unharmed.

“Angel! What are you doing?!” The Power went out from him, along with his strength, and he wilted to the floor, feeling fragile and spent. “You’re a damned fool!”

Crowley was on his arm in a second, steadying him as he angrily scolded him.

“Pretty sure that's you,” he managed, as primly as possible in the state he was in.

The demon laughed and gave him a little whack on the back. “It's both of us, and if I’m the more damned, you're the more fool!”

More than Crowley knew.

Aziraphale opened his eyes, not surprised to see the little python looking about, confused, but pleased, for a python.

“That was a big one!” the red head exclaimed, drawing Aziraphale back on to his feet. “You'll catch it hot Upstairs for that one! She was long gone, angel. Long gone.”

“Not too hot, I think. She let me do it.”

“She let you?” Aziraphale gestured tiredly to the snake. “Evidently.”

Crowley let go of him, apparently satisfied he wouldn’t tumble over, and looked over the snake, pulling off his glasses before resetting them.

He glanced up at Aziraphale, grinning. “Why, Aziraphale? Why did you do that?”

For the look on your face, he thought.

And in restitution for the lies, he thought.

And for when I have to tell you the truth, he thought.

“Oh, well, it was the least I could do,” he sighed, shaking his head.
He stumbled a little and Crowley moved to steady him, but Aziraphale held his hand up. “If you could try to persuade her to be amenable to travel, that would be helpful. I’d like to get her somewhere safer, where she’ll be cared for.”

“Oh, right, right. I’m on it.” Crowley stroked her gently and murmured something that felt like a miracle, and she allowed him to set her about his shoulders.


“Nooo, nonono… but I think you rather fit the bill.” Crowley’s whole demeanor was ten times lighter as he teased and crooned softly at the pretty creature.

Guilt burned the angel like Hellfire.

Chapter End Notes

1 Which is typical of snakes, but not typical of Crowley.

Thanks for sticking with me. There is so much to tell in this story.
Chapter Summary

Chapter warning: Violence, although I wouldn't call it graphic. Children in danger, again.

This chapter took some unexpected turns on me, but I think it works alright. Hope you enjoy it!

Aziraphale didn’t mean to be bad. He meant to be Good. He was meant to be Good.

He didn’t mean to be deceptive. He was meant to be Truthful.

He really didn’t mean to deceive Crowley. Crowley was meant to be too. He was sure of it.

But Aziraphale, mighty Principality, created immortal servant of the Most High, sometimes panicked, and a sad truth about his flawed self, one that he had learned a very long time ago, was that he could lie to anyone when he was panicked, up to and including his Maker.

And Crowley was no exception to that.

“I don’t even like you!”

It was just that he usually caught on.

“You do!”

The demon hadn’t even been worried about that distraught declaration. Rather, he was almost amused, so well did Crowley know him.

Still there weren’t many as could lie straight to Her face.

And they weren’t in Heaven's Book anymore.

Aziraphale was already sorry, had been before they'd even stepped out of the church, had been before he had actually said a single dishonest word.

It was just that he was so afraid.

Humans sometimes claimed fear was a useful thing, but he had never found it so. Survival was not much of an issue for him, after all, but he was desperately afraid now.

There were other things to lose, besides life, precious, irreplaceable things, not really things, and so Aziraphale was positively immersed in the cold slick grip of honest fear.

Not that fear had ever made anything better.
She had forgiven him, he assumed, still being in a state of Grace. He was terrified Crowley would not. He needed to tell him. Crowley deserved to know what he had done, so carelessly.

Courage was suddenly a hard thing to grasp. When he told him what he had done, well. Crowley was going to discorporate him.

Worse than that by far, Crowley was never going to speak to him again. He wanted to scream and cry and be wild for a while, anything but an angel. He certainly wasn’t feeling like a Being of Grace right now.

“Here we are then.” Crowley pulled in front of a townhouse, about twenty minutes from the church, a spot opening up right in front of a fire hydrant, which had obligingly shuffled over a few feet. Some things never changed.

Aziraphale knew he had already given himself away in his silence during the ride. Though the omnipresent sunglasses obscured a piercing, golden gaze, Aziraphale felt the questions pouring off Crowley nevertheless. He would have to explain. The problem was, how?

“Very good, then.” He hesitated, then disembarked from the Bentley.

“Answers would be good,” Crowley commented pointedly.

“We’ll find them,” he answered, feigning misunderstanding.

But Crowley would not be dissuaded. “… you look like you’ve already found some.”

Language, all language, quite deserted him. “Angel?”

Don’t call me that, the thought leapt up violently, but he mastered himself. He felt very far away from his own ideals.

Aziraphale was meant to be Good.

One breath. Two. Swallow. Look at him. There you go.

“I have something to tell you,” he forced out, feeling faint, “but this isn’t the place.” One bit of truth did not erase the lies, but it did make him feel less adrift. “This first, then…maybe your flat?”

He didn’t want the bookshop to be the last place they met as friends if the worst should come to pass. Aziraphale wasn’t sure he could live with the memory of that kind of grief all around him.

“Alright,” Crowley agreed warily, none of his usual confidence anywhere in evidence.

Ah, my dear, I am so, so sorry.

Though Aziraphale usually took the lead in interacting with humans when need arose, on this occasion he hung back a bit, while Crowley rapped his knuckles on the weather-worn blue door. There were quite a few people about today in this neighbourhood, some standing about, talking quietly, others handing out flyers or hanging up flyers. Rather a lot of flyers about, actually. The door swung open slowly, as though the person inside was as frightened as Aziraphale felt.

“Aziraphale!” Crowley hissed, beckoning impatiently and he quickly joined him.

The woman at the door was in her mid 60’s, salt and pepper hair curling around a face that
was haggard and tear-stained. Exhaustion dragged at her, and her clothes, of good quality, were mismatched and in need of an ironing. “Yes?” she whispered, eyes darting between them anxiously.

“Ah, hello, madam, my friend and I were just looking for Mark Holland-?”

“Oh, thank you. That's so very kind of you to help.” They exchanged alarmed glances. Aziraphale opened his mouth to say something delicate, suddenly realizing what those flyers had been for, but Crowley cut straight to the heart of the matter.

“We just wanted to speak with him. What's going on here?” Her mouth fell open a bit and fresh tears gathered in her red-rimmed eyes.

“Are you friends then? Teachers? You haven’t heard? My son has been missing for two days!” Her voice rose sharply at the end, and Aziraphale felt her grief like it was his own. She buried her hands in her face and let a few sobs escape, though it was obvious she was trying to rein them in.

“Angel,” Crowley said softly, warning in the touch on his elbow. He turned and realised some of the searchers, police officers, were heading their way.

“Ah, my deepest condolences, dear lady. I hope he returns swiftly, and safely. We will take our leave.”

“Yes, thank you,” she managed, closing her eyes tiredly. “Are you sure you don’t want to come in-”

Crowley all but dragged him off the stoop, moving as fast as they could without trying to draw too much attention. The pair of officers walked faster, trying head them off, but Aziraphale made them forget with a firm command.

Startled, Crowley stopped while the humans gave their scrambled heads a shake and turned their attention back to their efforts. “You're playing fast and loose, today!”

“It's not the worst thing I've ever done,” he snapped, all but throwing himself in the Bentley. “Let's go.”

“Your place?” his friend and Adversary asked, sliding in beside him. The engine roared to life and Aziraphale felt keen eyes searching him out. Crowley had certainly not forgotten the angel's promise.

“Yours, please.”

“As you like.”


Two thousand years ago, give or take.

The stint as the star had been interesting, a bit more hands off than his usual assignments, but it had been pleasant to let loose a bit, shining over the world, guiding the seekers to the Sought. It all seemed so calm and peaceful from up there, if a bit nippy.

He rather wished he was still at it.

“Go and be a witness,” Gabriel had said when he'd been called back to Heaven.
Technically speaking, an Archangel ranked below a Principality in the hierarchy of angels, but She seemed pleased with his handling of The Annunciation, so Gabriel’s own star was certainly on the rise. If She chose the Type A angel to deliver word of his assignments to him, who was he to argue?

But Aziraphale didn’t want to witness Herod's order being carried out.

“Just…watch?” he'd asked, appalled.

Soldiers slaying all the male children under two years of age in a quiet little village because a jealous, and frankly, psychotic man wanted no rivals for his power, that was hardly something an angel should just stand by and watch.

“That is the order, Aziraphale. We need someone to bear witness, and not to interfere. It's all part of the great plan. It will have to be recorded eventually, and you can handle that revelation when the time comes. Besides, it's not like we're talking hundreds of little humans, or even anyone particularly important. Bethlehem is a small village. So, a couple of dozen, twenty, thirty at the most. Nothing to be concerned about.”

When you were above it all, he reflected, it was easier to be detached. It was so different from being down on earth, walking amongst them, learning what made them laugh, and love, and cry. This was going to be screams, and wailing, and pleas for mercy that wasn’t going to come.

It hadn’t made the right “To do” list.

Probably, it was good that Aziraphale no longer had a sword. He didn’t know how he was supposed to just watch. He never knew. Somehow, he just did it. Sheer, unrelenting necessity. Obedient, in the name of being Good. In place of it, maybe. It made him heartsick.

Maybe when he was released from the task he could travel a bit, get off the planet for a while. Crawley was always talking about how much nicer it was among the stars. Maybe when you had to watch terrible things all the time, you needed some star time to put things back in perspective, or out of it. Maybe he was too close.

He entered the village in the middle of the night. It was deeply quiet, but there was a strange feeling in the air, something diabolical in nature. He would have guessed his persistent opponent was about, but this wasn’t really Crawley's scene.

Oh.

Perhaps this was less about the hand of man than the hand of the Enemy. He fervently hoped they had not picked Crawley for the task. He had been so upset about the flood.

It didn’t feel like Crawley though. For one thing, there was a strange blanket of darkness over everything.

And it was really, screaming mad.

Later, Aziraphale would come to the conclusion that he should have expected it, but angels were so very rarely attacked by anything that knew what they were doing.

He crashed to the ground heavily as something hard, and dark, and malevolent careened mindlessly into his corporation. Though he was a peaceable angel, who much preferred to sort out problems with tea and a nice long chat, he had a soldier's instincts. Aziraphale rolled his attacker over and shoved an elbow into him as his wings burst into corporeal existence, the crown on his
head and scepter appearing reflexively in his hand were a surprise even to him, and though humans usually considered them ornamental, there was no doubt the shining staff would pack quite a wallop if he brought it down on his attacker, and he had every intention of doing just that.

Crawley jabbed him in the face with a tight knuckled fist before drawing out a truly wicked blade as they both surged to their feet. Angel and demon faced off. Now they were both armed. Now it was real.

“What in the Hell, Crawley!” Aziraphale settled into a more relaxed stance, lowering his weapon. The demon did not reciprocate.

“I am NOT letting you get away with this one, Principality!” he spat savagely. “And I don’t care what my people want either. If you think I won’t send your sorry ass back to Heaven or get my own tossed back down there trying, you’re wrong!”

Aziraphale stared at the demon in utter astonishment. He wanted to banish away the scepter along with his wings and crown, but the survival instinct, which he had just discovered he had, was riveted in place by the nasty looking night-black blade. It was maybe three feet long, with artful gaps and curves along each edge. It was covered in vile sigils that spoke to death, destruction and defilement, and it was dripping in malice, predatory, he thought, longing for ethereal essence. He wasn’t entirely sure how much damage such a thing could cause an angel, but he was beyond certain he did not want to find out.

“What…” he breathed out, dropping his voice lower, seeking the threads of the easy rapport that had always woven through their interactions. “Crawley,” he used the name like a shield, “What, exactly, do you think I’m here to do?”

It had some effect. Crawley’s voice dropped too, just a bit. “If you don’t want a fight on your hands, Aziraphale, just go.” His shoulders dropped, and he looked, defeated. “This isn’t going to end well.”

It took a lot of faith in a trust they were really just building, but sometimes one had to take risks in the name of kindness. He banished the scepter, crown, and wings back to the ether, and hoped they would not be necessary anytime soon.

Slowly, not nearly as confident as he would have liked to be, Aziraphale sat down on the ground and gave it a pat, looking up at his Adversary, who had never seemed so dangerous. Crawley’s slim shoulders heaved and he dropped the blade, then himself into the dirt. Aziraphale expected him to take a minute, but the demon was already talking.

“You’re here for the kids, right?” he asked urgently. “We don’t have much time. The soldiers will be here by morning.”

“I’m supposed to-

“Yeah, but you won’t, right. You won’t kill kids. No matter what they say, right? You’re the good one.”

“Crawley… I’m certainly not here to harm any children.”

Crawley looked sick, and it hurt him to see it. I’m suppose to… supposed to make them cry, so they can’t hide them. And it’s all so pointless because He isn’t even here anymore! And it’s not like your side is about to let anything happen to Him anyway.”

“Oh, Crawley-"
“I won't do it!” There was something like madness in his eyes. He radiated wild defiance, an oath in every word. “And I'll tell 'em too. That'sss it! I quit. I can't do the flood thing again.”

“You know you can’t just-”

“Oh, I can and I will. I do!”

“But your people, they aren’t going to let-”

“They won’t ever let me up here again, that's for sure. You'll have to train a new demon. Watch yourself. They're not like me. I'll be fine.” He set his jaw. “It'll give me time to come up with new curses to scream at them and Her, and everyone. Not you though. You'll help the kids?”

He was absolutely not supposed to do anything of the kind. Crawley wasn’t going to be telling his boss off either, if Aziraphale had anything to say about it.

“No.”

“Thanks, you've no- no?”

“No, no,” he held up a quick hand, “Not like- no. You are not going to be defying Hell-”

“Ohhhh, yes, I am! Gonna rub it right in their nasty faces too. Nobody likes maggots, Hastur! And don’t start me on houseflie-”

“Shhhhh, Crawley. Hush, you mad thing. You're overwrought and you aren’t thinking.”

“Oh, I’ve been thinking. I've been working myself up about it for months while you’ve been up there, being all twinkly, million watt halogen lamp in the sky. You go ahead and be all damned obedient if you want to. It won’t be the first time I've gone down in flame, raging and defiant to the last. You just watch me.”

“I am not going to watch you-”

“I'll miss you of course. Well, in theory I'll miss you. I'll be missing lots of things, nice things, like fresh air, and not being ablaze, and sanity. Lovely thing, sanity. What I’m saying is, so much as I’m capable, I will miss you-”

“No, dear, you really won’t. Now listen to me-”

“No, you have to listen to me, ‘cause this is my goodbye, my big kiss-off to existence without agony and probably to sanity too, and it would be very angelic of you, if you would just listen. To me. The one who'll be kicking off shortly by telling Satan to kiss his ass.”

Aziraphale opened his mouth and shut it again. “Fine. Have your say.”

“…I think I’m done.”

“Good, because I am obviously not-”

“Ugh, I’m really done. Can you believe I’m done?”

“I am trying to.”

“Six thousand years, well, more than that, because time, we didn’t always count time, because who needs to count minutes when you're all immortal. You know. You were there. The
point is, six thousand years, and it's all over for Crawley, because some sleazebag petty dictator
tries to take a swing at you-know-Her while She's dropped down to spend a little time being you-
know-Him. All that divinity in a little mortal shell. You think he gets colicky? Bet that's fun. This
is all your fault.”

He seemed to run out of words, panic-driven babbling fading out as he wilted into the
ground. Aziraphale dug deep for patience enough to wait him out.

Finally, serpentine eyes met his own. “Sorry, I took a swing at you.”

“No need to apologize. I’m going to actually need you to do that again.”

“…what?”

“Well, my dear, while I do find it very touching and quite extraordinary that you are
determined to defy your Master for the lives of these little lads, I have been thinking, rather than
panicking,” He couldn’t quite keep the chiding out of his tone, “and I have an idea, if you are
amenable-”

Crawley threw his hands on the angel's thighs, eyes wild in fantastical hope. “You have a
damn plan?! Is it better than mine, because mine is terrible. It’s a terrible plan, worse than the
Great Plan, which is a rotting, scummy, bastard plan. Of course, I'm amenable. Aziraphale! Tell me
the plan!”

“Thwarting. And uh, some discorporation would be involved-”

“I can be down for a little discorporation.”

“Not you, actually. Me. We will have to make it look good. I’m afraid you will have to tell
them you failed in your mission to give the kids away, but who could blame you for that if you
were, uh, thwarted, by an angel, but managed to overcome him and discorporate him. That would
please them, I imagine.”

“…You want us to fight?”

“Fake fight.”

“Fake discorporation?”

“We can’t fake everything. Actual discorporation. I'll pop off home and tell everyone what
a vile Adversary you are, and you can go tell them you gave what for to an angel.”

“And the kids?”

“We will work together. I'll persuade the soldiers to brag about their successes, uh, plant
some images in their heads,” He wasn’t looking forward to that part, “and you can keep the kids
and the parents quiet.”

“…you’re going to tempt them to lie?”

“Uhh… just a little. Shouldn’t be hard. You're always doing it, and we aren’t so different at
the core.” Crawley was staring at him in naked astonishment, jaw hanging open. “Listen, the type
to slay little tykes in their beds are not paragons of virtue in the first place. I’m sure they're already
prone to other sins, like lying and bragging. No real harm done.”
“Can an angel really tempt someone?”

“Well, uh… I suppose, so long I keep in mind it's all for the greater good. Saving children is certainly virtuous—”

“And if you Fall for this?” Crawley asked, dead serious and wide-eyed. “Because this is outright defiance, angel. You should know what you are doing. ‘Cause I sure as Hell do.”

It felt more risky to have a demon say it out loud. Part of him, a tiny part, liked the audacity of it. Wasn’t it better to finally do something, rather than stand back, bearing witness? A handful of little lives could change the world, for better or worse, but didn’t they deserve to have them? He was simply making sure that gift did not go to waste.

Crawley was right about the significance of this quiet rebellion, though. Aziraphale had given away the flaming sword so the humans would survive. He hadn’t known what the consequences would be then, either. In fact, he had lived life since, forever waiting for the other shoe to drop. He could do it again.

“Go shush the babies. Male children under two. Herod was specific. I'll go to the soldiers. Meet you back in an hour for our little row. Maybe let's not use that monstrosity.” Crawley flushed a little as he gathered himself to his feet, bringing the sword up with him before it vanished away.

“Best not. I'll exchange it for something more human, then? Won’t they punish you for this angel?”

“Oh, I imagine they will come up with something suitable, but I'll blame it all on you anyway, wily Serpent. You have quite a reputation Upstairs you know.”

“Really? Hmm… always have done, I suppose.”

“One hour, then. Oh, and I won’t be pulling punches until I have to my dear, so do do your very best. My apologies if I cause you any harm.”

True to his word, Aziraphale didn’t, until it became vibrantly clear, Crawley wasn’t going to win this one. He pinned the demon to the ground and nodded towards a fallen dagger that had to have been placed by Aziraphale a moment ago.

“Unhand me, devil!”

“I really don’t know about—”

“Hurry up, dear.” Crawley grabbed the blade and a nervous little thrill went through Aziraphale. They wrestled for it until the demon flipped him over wrenching his arm back to force him face down in to the sand. He relaxed into the pressure. A breathless whisper slipped into his ear. “I will never forget this, angel.”

“Be quick now.”

“My fealty to the end of time, Aziraphale.” The words were hissed, almost too fast to be audible. "Sorry about this.”

Wondering if he really heard what he thought he heard was interrupted rather abruptly. Aziraphale didn’t feel much of anything when the blade slammed high into the back of his neck, severing his spine and discorporating him almost instantly. His spirit spiraled upwards, faster and faster but not before he watched his corporation dissolve in a shower of silvery sparks. The only
trace of him that remained was the golden blood painted on Crawley’s hands as a damning accusation. It would probably serve him well Downstairs.

A sadness took him as he rose up farther from Crawley, crumbling face down into the sand where Aziraphale had been, golden fingers pulling at red hair, immersed in unnecessary anguish. He determined to find Crawley as soon as they issued him a new body, so he could reassure the dear creature that all was well.
Getting called up for reassignment hadn’t taken as long as he'd expected, nor had the Archangels reacted to his discorporation in quite the way he'd expected. Expecting things to be as expected had always been a bit of a personality flaw. Life on earth certainly didn't run that way.

Aziraphale understood that here at home, he was considered a bit of an odd duck, not that they would have used, or really even understood the idiom. He just didn’t quite fit in Upstairs.

Sometimes that settled rather heavily in his spirit. Maybe it was because he had spent all of measurable time of earth. Maybe it just was.

His siblings seemed to mind it, even if they didn’t say so to his face, that he didn’t quite belong. Aziraphale tried not to mind it himself, though he did worry a bit that She might mind it.

Heaven was home. Wasn’t home supposed to be where the heart was? His was often far away from the austere halls. Was it really meant to be so empty? He liked to visit the part made for the humans. Even after corporeal death, they were so lively. After all was said and done, maybe they would let him have a post there, to watch over them for always.

He could be happy there.

“Ah, there's our Righteous, demon-slaying Holy Warrior!” Aziraphale peeked behind him before flushing in realization.

“Ah, yes. Right. Me.”

Gabriel flashed a smile that nestled itself right at home in the uncanny valley. It wasn’t so much that it seemed insincere; it was rather beyond that. It was more like the archangel had never seen a genuine smile before, and had only read about them in books with no pictures.

Aziraphale was a little tempted to invite him to some little village pond to feed the ducks and give him a lesson in human feeling, not that that sounded like a good time to him, but it could be useful, maybe. Though, the odds of Crawley crashing that social gathering were about one hundred and ten percent, and the odds of that going well were zero percent, perhaps less. Mathematics could only do so much in the face of that combination.

And Gabriel didn't need Crawley's help to make things miserable.

Oh, that thought came out a bit rude, didn’t it?
He made a point to look around as soon as he was released. Surely angels still smiled in Heaven…though Crawley did love to claim all the fun angels Fell.

A sound intruded on his thoughts. Gabriel was talking at him.

“Of course, you, Aziraphale! Who else?! Who else would stand up and fight the Enemy, face to face! Hoo-hah! Pow!”

Aziraphale thought the air punching went a bit far. He managed a smile that looked only marginally better than Gabriel’s.

“Ah, I didn’t actually *slay* the demon. He rather got the drop on me."

That much was true. He hadn’t seen Crawley coming until he was on the ground, gone all Cosmic Principality. The crown was a bit embarrassing really. He'd probably hear about it from Crawley when he got back down to earth.

“Aziraphale,” the violet-eyed being all but crooned his name.

He thought the eyes were a bit much too.

I am in a snit today. Must be the new body.

“That was valuable intel! There hasn’t been a fight like that since the Great War. And he trounced ya! Now, that one did surprise me a bit, Aziraphale, Her own truth, but I’m *sure* he fought dirty. Demon, after all, I mean, what do we expect!”

Laughter too. That should be on the list of things to show Gabriel. He wondered if Crawley knew any suitably sinful humans he could inflict Gabriel on for a little while.

No… no. Definitely far too snippy today. He could do with a nice glass of wine right about now, and maybe a snack. Definitely a snack. Something savory perhaps, with a bit of crunch-

“Isn’t that right?”

“Oh! Ah, I didn’t- right! Yes! Exactly.”

Gabriel nodded in a way that made it seem like he had an extraordinarily large and heavy head.

Not exactly buttoned down, thought the prissy angel, who possibly should not have been throwing stones.

Best to keep him off the planet for now, and *well* away from Crawley.

Probably make his head explode.

Both of their heads.

Possibly be enough to trigger Armageddon, with or without the foretold Antichrist.

“But I’m sure you'll get him next time!”

Oh, drat it all. He was drifting off again. It was so much easier to focus when it was Michael. She liked to go into the old War tales, which were interesting, in a horrifying kind of way. Any memories that weren't his own were preferable.
“Oh, um, yes! Absolutely! In fact, I’d love to get back to it actually. Wouldn’t want my cunning Adversary to think he’d run me off, now would we?”

“Quite right! Quite right!” Gabriel agreed, bringing a heavy hand crashing down onto his shoulder as he made the laughish sound again. “So full report on my desk, and then we'll let you get back to work. Nice talk, Principality Aziraphale. Well done.”

Genuinely surprised at the speed of his dismissal, Aziraphale found a real smile to offer up as a farewell. The angel had fully expected a thorough dressing down for losing the body, but having Gabriel give him a too-hearty slap on the back and an ‘attaboy’… well, it was less pleasant, if he had to compare, but it did get him out of Head Office faster, and Aziraphale considered that an eminently fair trade, and a good sight better than Falling for rampant disobedience.

Even as he scrambled to finish his report, he cast his heart quietly outwards, briefly, uncertain.

*I’m sorry if that was wrong. I want to be Good, but sometimes it's hard to tell what the Right Thing to Do really is.*

She didn’t reply.

Ineffable, he thought with a sigh.

Once he finished a carefully *emphasized* report, Aziraphale left Heaven without looking back.

Locating Crawley turned out not to be as easy as he'd hoped, and he tried not to worry about that over much. Demons took that old charge to be wandering about, hunting for unwary souls to corrupt fairly seriously. Well, not so much Crawley, but he certainly wasn’t much for standing still. He was usually in orbit around something at any given moment.

Oftentimes that something was Aziraphale.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t turning out to be one of those times.

Well.

Five weeks back and it was clearly time for a different strategy. It wasn’t as though the angel spent all his time seeking Crawley out, anyway. They just ran into each other, through the course of normal celestial, and occult activity, as they passed through all the kingdoms and ages of the Earth.

Simple.

He idly wondered what the actual odds of them running into each other was, and if the number of encounters was more or less frequent than random chance would dictate.

He’d have been lying to claim he didn’t enjoy it. Just having a familiar face, when so many others came and went, flickering in and out like fireflies, was oddly reassuring. Even if it belonged to the opposition, there was something comfortable about constancy.

Crawley and the stars, he thought wistfully, peering up at them after weeks of fruitless
searching. Not much else stayed the same in this world, and even the stars shifted in their positions
in the sky, because of the spinning planet beneath him.

Aziraphale had finally decided to stop moving and stay put somewhere nice and visible,
from a spiritual force point of view. He had planted himself on the ruins of an Norte Chico
pyramid, legs dangling over the side. Just for the Heaven of it, he had even miracles off his shoes
and socks to feel the warm, damp breeze. The people were long gone and no one new had found it
yet.

So far away from anyone else, it was a safe enough place to stretch himself out, shining
like a beacon. Maybe Crawley would find him. He would certainly stand out to anyone looking.

Three nights later, a rustle of wings, dark as the sky above him filled him with joy.

“Well, that’s one way to get my attention, angel.”

Crawley grinned, dropping down beside him. The spiritual equivalent of fireworks popping
and bursting around them faded away, having accomplished their purpose.

“Hello, my dear, uh, Crawley. Hello, Crawley. I trust all went well for you then?” The
demon made a put upon face.

“Too well, they had a damn parade in my honour for discorporating the Guardian of the
Eastern Gate. Burned you in effigy.” Aziraphale winced a little as Crawley’s hands flared up in
dramatic imitation. “Let me tell you, Hell is bad enough on a normal day, but it’s twice as bad
when they’re throwing a party. Eeuuch. Didn’t give a second thought about the kids. Bastards.
Anyway, you're back faster than I would have expected.”

“I've been back for weeks, actually. Hard to track you down. Deliberately anyway.”

“I’m like a bad penny that way. Always turning up when you're not looking.”

“Bad penny?”

“You'll see. I mean, you'll see pennies. Not sure how one could be bad. Humans, and their
ways. Why'd they re-corporate you so fast?” The word jarred oddly in his head, although, he
supposed there was sense in it.

“Oh, they forgot all about the kids too.” Crowley hissed grumpily at that revelation. “Didn’t
bother to check in on that whole business, which is certainly the best we could have hoped for,” he
reminded his Adversary firmly. “They were pleased I showed initiative, trying to smite you.”

“Tried and failed. Not that you were actually trying. They didn’t care that you'd got
discorporated?”

Aziraphale shifted uncomfortably. “They said they appreciated that I was brave enough to
have the first skirmish with the enemy. Gabriel thought it might be useful to gather intelligence.”

“I'm certain he could use some.”

“Rude.”

“Yes, he is.”

Giving up, Aziraphale pressed on. “I did have to promise I would, uh, get you next time.”
“Ah, well, consider me gotten. That euuu-actually, reminds me.” Crawley kicked his feet idly, where they too dangled over the side. The demon hesitated so long, apparently admiring the radiant glory of the local galaxy, Aziraphale wasn’t sure if anything more was going to be forthcoming.

“Reminds you of…”

Crawley went still, and the angel felt that everything else, everywhere, did too.

“Listen, angel. Aziraphale,” he added, almost formally. “You did something for me. Biggest thing anyone ever did. Biggest good thing. Weehhh, I suppose I was created; that was big too. Jury is still put on whether it was good. Anyway, what you did, I want you to know it matters.”

Quite flattered by his awkward sincerity, Aziraphale beamed at him in delight. “Ah, well, say no more. I was glad to help the children. It worked out well for both of us, in the end.

“It did!” Crawley said urgently. “But it didn’t have to. That was no small risk.” The redhead was very quiet when he next spoke, buoyed up by the natural harmonies of the wild creatures around them. It felt like he was divulging a secret of ancient weight and particular magnificence. “I want to give you something.”

“Oh, how thoughtful,” Aziraphale began automatically, manners on autopilot.

“It is,” Crawley surprised him with his sudden vehemence. “It is very thoughtful, very carefully thought of, and something I would not give to another being in all Creation.”

Aziraphale swallowed hard, struck by the gravity of Crawley's words and expression. “Oh, I see-”

“You don’t, but you should. I can trust you, Aziraphale. I do trust you.” He inhaled sharply and exhaled shakily, staring hard at his scaly feet, “And I want you know that.”

“Ahh, well, um, demon Crawley, that is very-” A cool finger pressed against his lips briefly in a startlingly intimate request for silence.

“I am not asking for you to trust me, so don’t say anything you don’t mean. I know what we are. I haven’t forgotten it. We can’t ever. Wouldn’t end well.”

The echo of his words from that night, which now felt like ancient history, sent a little tremor through him, but he held his tongue.

Crawley pulled a little white ribbon out of the ether and wound it through his fingertips as he spoke. “Before the Beginning, before I Fell, everything was so different, angel. I had really forgotten what trust was. I forgot it could be real, and not just a sadistic game to be played and won. You brought something back to me, I thought long gone, and the truth is, I can’t actually repay you for that gift, because you don’t even have a concept of being without it.”

Crawley’s smile was subtle, and so was the liquid shine in those unnatura- supernatural eyes.

“So I will do what I can do, and give you the best I have to offer. Okay?”

Aziraphale felt transfixed by the determination on his face, recognized the weight of this choice Crawley was making. “I made a pledge to you, before I brought that knife down. You heard it?”
He had quietly decided never to make mention of it, in fact, but now....

“...I did.” The words felt small and far away to his own ears.

“You sacrificed yourself for the little kids, but also, don’t deny it, to protect me from my own, mmmm-”

‘Reckless compassion’, Aziraphale’s mind supplied without hesitation.

“You sacrificed yourself for the little kids, but also, don’t deny it, to protect me from my own, mmmm-

“Stupidity,” Crowley finished with a wry little shake of his head. “The boys will honour your sacrifice by living.”

He was surprised by the sudden hand on his, the urgently sought eye contact. “I’m going to give you this, if you'll have it.”

Crowley drew down his right wing and took hold of his longest primary. Aziraphale gasped as he caught up to the intention. The flicker of pain caused him to flinch sympathetically as the demon yanked it free quite forcefully, but Crawley was calm and deliberate in his motions.

“I want you to understand what this means, Aziraphale. Are you listening to me?”

“Intently,” he promised. He could not have stopped.

“I have never surrendered any part of me by choice., which isn’t to say I haven’t lost a lot of what I started out with... but I need you to know this is freely given.”

Gold shimmered at the very tip of the quill, testifying mutely to their common heritage as Crawley neatly wrapped it in the ribbon, winding it about and tucking it tightly, dark and light together in pledge. He made to hand it to the stunned angel, but pulled it back for a moment.

And Blessed it.

More than breath, Aziraphale’s whole being caught at the extraordinary sight. Crawley handed it over quickly, shaking his fingers as the traitorous feather lashed out at him with his own Blessing.

Task accomplished and moment broken, he straightened up, brightening immediately as Aziraphale held the unprecedented gift. “I’m glad your back, angel. Boring getting away with everything. I best be off. Somewhere in the Ottoman empire sounds good. Try and stop me. Really,” he insisted with a wink, “do.”

“Crawley-” the angel struggled desperately to give voice to the roiling waves of emotion swamping him.

This was a gift of love. He would never have dreamed his Adversary capable of such an act.

He wondered how he could continue to hold him in the old titles.

Adversary.

Enemy.

Opponent.

Serpent.
Demon.

It all suddenly felt like friend.

“Don’t thank me. Just take care of it. Part of me will always belong to you now.” He nodded to himself in confirmation. “So I guess… when it all goes to Hell, some part of me will always be safe with you. I like that thought. Remember me sometimes, after. Then I'll really be immortal.”

Aziraphale held the blessed, black feather tightly to his chest, completely overwhelmed. Crowley was gone long before he could think of what to say.

Chapter End Notes

If your last question was what is the ribbon, then I bet your new question is Aziraphale, what did you do?
Teams

Chapter Summary

What Aziraphale did.

Also, history by Google.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fear made a person do odd things, he thought, setting down a plate of biscuits along with the tea. Aziraphale didn’t want to eat. Certainly, Crowley had no interest in biscuits.

Crowley was sprawled in a throne, waiting him out while he fussed over useless things, drawing it out, savoring the last sands in the hourglass.

*Please. Please don’t go*, he pleaded in his head. *I couldn’t blame you, but please don’t.*

He couldn’t put it off forever.

Wordlessly, Aziraphale held up the white ribbon.

Crowley stopped.

A tiny, little, pathetic sort of sound managed to slip past his armour plated, stone-fired defenses. “It’s your-"

“I found it. I lied to you.” He tried to keep from trembling. “I found it. At the church. In their things. I found it there, and I lied to you about it.”

Confession. He did not hope for absolution.

Thin shoulders, wrapped in leather and casual cool heaved with each heavy, silent breath. “Where’s the rest of it?”

Aziraphale stared at the floor, before squaring his shoulders and meeting anguished eyes, no less than his own. Crowley deserved that much.

He deserved so very much better. “I-I-"

“You lost it?” Hot tears spilled down his cheeks and he stubbornly refused to commit the selfish act of acknowledging them.

“No, my dear. I didn’t lose it.” He could see the driving, frantic questions speeding through Crowley.


“Gave it away.” Crowley clutched at his chest as he sunk down, appalled.
“You… what?”

“I gave it away,” he whispered, ashamed. "Not… to anyone, exactly, and not to – those people. I would never-"

Too late, far, far too late for that kind of defensive protest. It might well have been better if he had. Crowley looked at him like he was what had been given away, abandoned, rejected.

Again.

532 A. D.

Not for the first time, not by a long shot, Aziraphale felt things had rather gotten away from him. He had been stationed in Constantinople to protect and guide the city, and in particular the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian, who had an ambitious plan to revive the glory days of the whole Roman empire by conquering the lost Western territories. His Head Office seemed to approve of Justinian's grand designs, so off he'd been sent.

Aziraphale had had worse assignments, and he enjoyed living in the heart of the bustling city. It was easier to keep tabs on the humans when they were congregated in one area. It also meant a plethora of dishes to try, and that was always delightful.

It came with another benefit he appreciated, oh, perhaps a bit too much. Crowley was in Constantinople too, spending quite a bit of time involved in the chariot races that had captured the rapid interest of the elite and the common folk alike. The major teams, the Blues and the Greens had fostered quite an intensive rivalry and the politics of the day were woven in and out of chariot races and gambling.

It was nothing but pure trouble, a veritable hive of sin and villainy, with frequent small, yet violent riots breaking out, but Aziraphale couldn’t bring himself to be too bothered by it all, not when it afforded him a chance to spend time with the only being in existence who really understood what it was like to live like this, wandering amongst them forever, but never really being a part of them.

Aziraphale knew he shouldn’t like it, and oh, he really did. There were so many things he wasn’t supposed to like. The angel could chant ‘don’t get attached’ until he molted his wings bald, but it was no use. He would have understood, if it were some other angel with this problem.

He didn’t expect any of the others to understand him.

With the two of them living in such close quarters, relatively speaking, they'd ended up spending quite a lot of time together, and Aziraphale was learning quite a lot about the demon, and how he thought about the world. He hadn’t even known Crowley slept, and how long and often he indulged, until he'd popped over for a visit in his frankly ridiculous ostentatious quarters¹ and gotten the fright of his very long life.

Aziraphale had nervously knocked on the door, filled with a not entirely proper, yet heartfelt concern. They had arranged to go see a chariot race together but he ended up annoyed and worried when Crowley hadn’t turned up.

The demon's absence hadn’t done the humans any good, which was not to say an angel’s presence had either. They’d gone on indulging in a remarkable array of vices, culminating in yet
another riot. He had absented himself quite quickly from the melee and headed straight away to find his missing… what? What were they now?

Surely in order to be Adversaries, there had to be at least some sort of, territorial animosity. As it was, the farthest they went was a companionable bickering about life, humanity, Her above, and their own respective “sides”.

He wanted to call Crowley his friend, his dearest and perhaps only, these days. His impulsive, surprisingly sentimental… acquaintance? companion? had already thrown in with Aziraphale entirely, and centuries ago, at that.

The angel walked the slower path.

Crowley never brought it up again, the feather and the loyalty pledge that went with it, but the angel could feel it, sworn again and again in little looks and gestures, in every time and place they met.

_Fealty._

But Crowley didn’t really belong to himself anymore than Aziraphale did. He had effectively betrayed his own Master in that quiet moment under the expansive night sky.

Oftentimes Aziraphale wondered if they should talk about it, and if he should offer to formally release him from the pledge. He did appreciate the thought, naturally, but oh, he did fear the consequences.

He could only imagine what might happen to he himself if he had been caught pledging his loyalty, which could only belong to God, to one of Her more traitorous creations.

Aziraphale was only a creation, like Crowley, and he was not anything the demon should have pledged himself to… and yet he had, and the weight of that responsibility was like the weight of the earth itself. One could not let these things go lightly, and even to discuss it would have hurt his…his friend.

Can we really be friends, without it all crashing down on us?

Does it make me a traitor?

He rapped on the door once more. “I say, Crawl- Crowley, are you in, my dear?”

He knew he was. He could feel the soft, warm shadow and the way it pressed on the fabric of reality within, warm as his corporeal form was cool. Aziraphale hesitated, it wasn’t a distressed feeling, exactly, but a calmer, quieter energy than how it typically manifested. Off a bit.

“I’m just going to come in to check on you, if that’s quite alright.” There was no response as he entered the dwelling.

“So, I did come in, though I beg your pardon for the intrusion. No need to do anything nasty in reprisal. Not that I assume you would. Maybe you would. If I startled you. So you should definitely not be startled. No threat here. Just silly old Aziraphale. Not anyone, you know, _smitey_, and they’d have some nerve just walking in and smiting you, peaceably hanging around in your home. Temporarily home. Bit of a palace, isn’t it. Seems bigger on the inside. Keeping up appearances, I see. Well, isn’t this quite the… statue. Reminds me of our little ‘bout in Bethlehem actually, without the blade. Did you have it commissioned? Crowley? Crowley?”
Alright. Maybe he's in a snit. Were we supposed to meet here? What have I done to him lately?

He followed the delicate lines where reality bent around Crowley until they led to a small, darkened room and everything stopped. Limp and still, not a sigh or a sound or a breath, Crowley was sprawled on the bed, facedown.

He knew demons didn’t need to breathe, and he knew there wasn’t much that could have happened to Crowley, but he also knew a demon couldn’t be kind, couldn’t love kids, couldn’t be friends with an angel, or anyone.

So he didn’t always put much stock in what he knew.

“Crowley!!” he grabbed the redhead by the shoulders and shook him roughly. “Are you quite well?”

“Hmmwahh? Ssssstopit, I'll bite ya.” He blinked with exaggerated slowness before stretching into a yawn so languorous and indulgent it had to violate some commandment or other. “Oh, you. What are you on about?”

“I’m on my last nerve,” he complained, heart struggling to find a more regular rhythm, but he was smiling too. “Was that …dozing?”

“Sleeping,” he corrected, then shrugged. “Napping, dozing, having a snooze, what does it matter? And why are you here?”

“Because you, what’s that phrase you use, stood me up?”

Confusion crawled across Crowley's face. “Meeugh. What day is it?”

“Same day it started as. Monday. Chariot race ring a bell? You begged me to go!”

“I do not beg. Or apologize.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“Didn’t mean to fall asleep though. I was reading that book you lent me, the Greek play. Trying to. Made me sleep.” He stuck out his lower lip, considering. “Could be a selling point.”

“Get up, you philistine. I about discorporated from fright seeing you like that.”

“What, sleeping? You've never seen anyone sleep? Don’t you sleep?”

“I tried it once. Didn’t much care for it, besides, it's got to be slothful, if you don’t need it at all.”

“Mmhmm,” he hummed, all mocking and priggish, “Well then. Can’t have that, unless, oh wait, woke up demon today. Sloth is why I like it.”

“You weren’t breathing. What would a mortal have thought?”

“Same thing you did. That I was extremely dead. It's hard to remember to keep up appearances when you're sleeping. You would know that if you ever tried it.” He tilted his head thoughtfully. “Why would there be a mortal in my bedroom?”

Aziraphale’s eyes danced merrily even as he pressed his lips tightly together in a failed
imitation of a frown. “I have no idea why I bother trying to civilize you, you miscreant.”

"'Cause you're a ridiculous, mule-headed angel, angel."

A thousand, ten thousand memories of just… being silly, being happy, a sweetness that soothed his soul in a world where so much went so wrong. Another person to talk to, regardless of their similar start and divergent paths. There were times he was so thankful for Crowley that he almost dared to thank Her.

How would that go over?

It saddened him, his own uncertainty, wrestling about whether it perhaps was wrong to feel such joy having such a mad, impossible, incomparable creature in his life.

Surely, they could be friends, really truly, openly, someday.

*Feet on the ground, angel.* There was enough wild and rebellious thinking going on in Constantinople today.

“What should I do, advisor?” The emperor asked tiredly, the raging crowd outside all too easily heard.

*Go back in time and don’t hire the advisors I suggested you avoid,* he thought with a sigh. He had never been fond of political games, and this one had rather blown up in his face.

“Might you consider commuting their sentences? They weren’t the ringleaders of the last riot, and you are very likely looking at another one, aiming for your throne, if you don’t. It’s the aristocracy you should most be concerned with, in future. They don’t think you are fit to rule.”

Justinian shook his head in amazement. “As always you speak forthrightly, without fear.”

*I’m not the one the mob wants dead,* he thought snarkily, before repenting. He was supposed to be helping.

Aziraphale was just tetchy because once this was all said and done, he was to expect a new assignment, and he wasn’t ready to leave just now. It had been so nice being here with Crowley, and now it was all coming to an end.

“These are the times one endures to pay the price for power, my lord. You have safe passage to the sea, if you have wearied of your crown.”

“I ought have you executed, impertinent servant.”

Aziraphale smiled, “As you will, my lord.” The emperor was an unusually fair minded ruler, with quite sensible ideas around justice practices for females. He would be a good ruler, if he survived this crisis.

“Theadora doesn’t want to leave. She says royal death looks good on her, or something.”

“If you like, I can make my way to the church, see if they may be amenable to a compromise?” Justinian’s eyes lit up hopefully, but to his credit fell again nearly as fast.

“I would not put you in harm’s way.”

“On my honour, I will be safe, sir. I am well liked by the people and not your advisor in any official capacity, which will serve us well now.”
“If you are certain-"

“T’ll be back in two shakes of a lamb’s tale!” he called over his shoulder, already making for the back entrance.

Crowley was outside the church where the escaped murderers had chosen to beg for sanctuary, looking fairly tetchy himself, actually, but also totally unconcerned by the humans working themselves up into a full-scale mob around him.

Aziraphale was concerned about the mob, but that didn’t stop him easily wandering through it without being noticed.

“Hey, angel, how’s the day doing for you then?”

“Well, it’s a bit loud. You let them out of prison?”

“I’m supposed to be fomenting an insurrection. My side doesn’t want your guy on the throne. Not enough chaos and misery for their tastes. So, I’m fomenting.”

“You led them to a church?” He did an odd thing, like a shrug with one side of his face. “Well, technically, I was supposed to let them get beat down by the guards, getting everything off to the races, as it were, but…”

He stepped back and Aziraphale was able to get a look inside the church where the two chariot racers, originally competitors, arrested for murder with a handful of other rioters, were clinging to each other in terror while what surely must feel like the end of the world raged around them. They were just lads really, maybe sixteen years. He supposed that was adult enough in these times.

Crowley wouldn’t see it that way.

“It’s like looking into the future, isn’t it?” Crowley said quietly.

“Pardon?”

“Never said a thing.”

Aziraphale gave him a reproachful look for the lie, but his focus was the present.³

“The Emperor wants to offer them a compromise, commute the executions, give them prison time. Think these ones might be persuaded?”

Crowley frowned. “I don’t think so. Maybe a complete pardon, but this isn’t just about those two. The other families don’t want your man on the throne. Also, my side.”

“Your side wants Justinian deposed?” “Deposed, jailed, disgraced, executed. It’s all the same, really.”

“I wonder why such interest. He’s quite a good fellow. Wants to improve the justice system… and rebuild the empire, which I suppose would be alright, if it were just.”

“Well, that’s just it, isn’t it? Your side wants it, my side doesn’t, and ever we go on and on in circles, ad infinitum.”

“Gets a little tedious sometimes.”
“Only for you and I, I expect. Our respective teams love the game.” Crowley sighed, peeking inside the window. “And the players are just trying to make it to the next match.”

“Well, I shall have to make the offer anyway. I don’t suppose you'd mind directing me to the more reasonable leaders—Crowley!”

He flinched as long fingers latched on to his forearm hard enough to bruise. “You need to go!”

Aziraphale felt it too. The swell of dark power. Something was coming. Something wicked. More than one.

He braced reflexively against Crowley’s frantic shoving. It was far too late for that and anyway, he was an Angel of the Lord. He wasn’t about to run from evil.

“My my. Are we interrupting something?”

By one accord, Crowley and Aziraphale turned his frantic attempts to shoo him away to safety into a convincing struggle. They broke apart and Aziraphale glared at him as the redhead backed away, not quite positioning himself with the other two demons.

Beelzebub herself, one of the founding Princes of Hell and another who seemed familiar, but whose name escaped him appeared genuinely surprised to see the angel. They were attempting an appearance of humanity, but not being particularly successful at it. He didn’t reach for his scepter, but he prepared for the possible necessity.

There were humans everywhere. This really wasn’t the place for an actual skirmish in a long cold war. Not that skirmish would really be the word.

“Lord Beelzebub! Lord Dagon! How fiendish of you to drop by!” Crowley greeted them with a flourishing bow and a too bright smile. “I was just working on vanquishing my Adversary here—”

“Came to check up on you for a change. We don’t want any cock ups, but look at this,” she gestured at Aziraphale who settled into a defensive stance. “A cock up.”

Well, that was uncalled for.

“Heaven has declared that Justinian's reign will go on, oh, corrupted ones, and I will see the Will of the Lord come to pass. Get thee gone back to thy faded kingdom of misery.”

Dagon laughed, high-pitched, loud, and abrasive. “Listen to the angel. Thinks it can tell us what to do. How did you enjoy that disorporation this bit of vermin here dealt you way back when? I tell you this, Lord Beelzebub, if Crowley can take down an angel, then we could drag it back down to Hell with us, no trouble at all.”

“Right to the Maszzzzter. He'd enjoy that.”

A panicked thought slammed hard into his brain. It was neither his thought, nor his panic.

Flamingswordflamingswordflamingsword!

I gave it away!

Crowley winced and gave his head a shake.

Sorry, Aziraphale thought, softer.
Fake it! Light show. Something! We aren’t letting *him* get a hold of you, angel!

There are people everywhere! Some things can’t be hidden!

They took a menacing step towards Aziraphale, who did draw out the sceptre and a golden shield. “Perhaps we should relocate, gentlemen, not that you are anything of the sort. Too much of an audience if we’re going to be fighting it out.” He weighted his words like ancient stone. “And if you intend to take me anywhere, know that you and I will be going to war.”

A quiet sound stole his attention utterly. Crowley had pulled out his sword. Beelzebub and Dagon grinned at the sight, turning their eyes back to the angel with a disturbing hunger for long sought revenge, not so much against him, but against She who had cast them out. In comparison to theirs, Crowley’s wrath was a gentle, sorrowful simmer.

Panic hit the angel full force.

Crowley meant to keep his pledge, and that sword wasn’t intended for Aziraphale.

You can’t!

Have to, came the grim reply.

He really did, Aziraphale realised, horrified. Crowley had well and truly bound himself to the angel, and whether he still wanted to or not, whether it was a hasty, foolish pledge in the first place, it was absolutely going to hold him to his oath. And Hell would hold their treacherous son accountable for throwing in with an angel against his own.

It could not be borne.

“Nika!” A cry went up from the humans angrily milling around. “Victory! Victory! Victory!” Thousands of them began spilling out of the Hippodrome where Greens and Blues had United under the victory cry. They began rampaging through the city, assaulting the palace, the church, and anything else in their paths.

“Unholy Hell,” Beezlebub muttered as chaos erupted all around them. Crowley gaped at Aziraphale, who stood grimly composed, eyes never leaving his enemies. Heart and mind never straying from Crowley.

The blade disappeared. “Not the time for a war, my lords,” he suggested firmly. “And we’ve got what we’ve come for now.”

Slowly, reluctantly, Beelzebub nodded. She had always been more even-keeled than most of the Fallen. “Right. Best be off. Let the humans do their thing. Come with us, Crowley. I want to hear your account.”

“And I have forms need filling out. Triplicate. Comic sans. Handwritten, so you’d better get the curves right.”

“Until Armageddon, angel,” Beelzebub said icily. He repressed a shudder at the familiar address from an unfamiliar source.

Save me, the thought pinged, playfully petulant inside his head, bubbly with relief.

All three sunk down in an unnatural flame dwarfed by the surging fires that were beginning to consume the city.
“I will try,” he murmured, inaudible amongst the screams and shouts filling the city.

More than thirty thousand people were killed in the following five days. Peace was only restored when a clever advisor suggested paying off the Blues to abandon the Greens to their fate. Soldiers stormed in to the Hippodrome and put the rebels to the sword. It was an awful, gory, bloody affair and Aziraphale was more than happy to put his back to the city when it was all over.

He still had another battle to struggle through.

We can’t be friends.

We can’t be friends.

We can’t be friends.

An angel and a demon can’t be friends, because an angel cannot be friends with a demon, and neither can a demon be friends with an angel. It was doubly forbidden, bound and sealed in the eternal struggle that ruled over them both. They were only bit players in the long game, and the consequences of rebellion were as dire as they had always been.

How naïve he was to think otherwise.

He loved Crowley all the more for his audacity in thinking he could pledge himself to an angel, even one who nearly matched him in recklessness. One did not endanger those they loved. In love; one laid their life down for their friend. Crowley had wanted to. Aziraphale, being of love, could not allow a friend to suffer for his weakness, giving into the temptation of their friendship.

He returned to the ruins, dangled his legs off the side, and wept in miserable contemplation until his corporeal head hurt, nearly as much as his spirit did.

“What shall I do?”

He waited, and he listened.

Inconsequential time flickered in its bubbling stream around him, and Aziraphale waited, cut from raw and aching stone.

When the silence was too great for the Guardian of the Eastern Gate to endure, he spoke again.

“I suppose, this is as good a time as any, to let you know how very,” his voice broke, and stubborn tears welled and slipped free from their fathomless pools, “how very grateful I am.”

“I’m sure, I don’t say it often enough, in fact, but really, I am so, so thankful. I don’t pretend to understand why you have chosen me for this path. It is painful, but, it is also so beautiful.”

He nodded to himself, a shuddering mess of a creature. “I am honoured to have been chosen.”

“You know all things, so you know well now where all my heart lies. I- I just wanted to tell you, how very grateful I am for your creation Crowley. He is very dear to me, as I am sure he must once have been to you.”
It felt like divulging a carefully guarded secret, but of course, that was foolish. There were no secrets from She who walked in Secret. “I sometimes imagine, he must still be very dear to you. Surely, your Love is not fickle. Surely it will be, in the end, all that matters.”

If She was listening, She did not say.

“You made me to guard the precious things, and yet, I cannot always protect him from himself. I cannot hold him captive, even to his own oath. It should never have been spoken. I can’t undo that… but I can release him from it.”

He reached into the ethereal plane and drew out Crowley’s gift, still wrapped in the delicate ribbon. A wind swept up and the feather fluttered in his hand, as if seeking its own freedom. “Demon Crowley, who was called Crawley, and had another name Before, the Serpent of Eden, the Tempter of Eve, and my very dear friend, I hold your pledge to me fulfilled, and release you from your promise. What freedom I can give you, I do.”

He pressed his lips to the ebony feather in thanks and in farewell. “Let his Blessing not go unfulfilled,” he pleaded, struggling to let it go. “Send it swiftly to one who needs it, to the place where it may do the most Good.” A sudden gusts ripped it from his fingers and he watched it flutter away, until it was past human sight, and then until it was past his own.

Chapter End Notes

¹ Which was saying something, because Aziraphale also very much enjoyed the finer things of life.

² What she actually said was “Royalty is a fine burial shroud”. Quite the lady. Feisty. She made it to Heaven and she gives all the guardian angels a hard time about the decor.
"Hang something up! Anything!"

³ Which is in fact the past. Keeping up? Have a drink.

Thanks for continuing to read. Have a teddy bear. Gonna hurt for a bit.
Neither one of them had gone to the extraordinary effort of stopping time, but it felt as though the obliging universe had decide to stop anyway, just to listen in. The only sign of life in the flat was the quiet trembling of the plants. Certainly the man-shapes creatures weren't exuding any.

Crowley stared, not at the ribbon, still dangling, the sword of Damocles between them, hovering on the precipice of another, terrible fall, but straight into Aziraphale's wet eyes. “You gave it away?”

“I released you,” he tried, frantically, “from your oath! Which you should never have sworn in the first place! You must never swear to anything lightly!”

In contrast to Aziraphale's stern warning, Crowley's voice was so eerily quiet, lifeless and calm, a sterile lake, poisoned by the silky caress of Pollution. Nothing in it, anymore.

“Never have. You didn’t want it, then.” He didn’t mean the oath, or even the feather.

“It wasn’t mine to take.”

“It was freely given. You didn’t stop me. You could have, if you didn't want it.”

“From the oath? I never saw it coming! We were so desperate, fighting, sort of! And you are so reckless, Crowley! You know better than I do what they'd have done to you when, when, when they caught you!”

He wrung his hands in a flailing outlet for a distress that ran too fierce to measure. “You can’t ask me to bear that, so I took it back to Norte Chico and released it, and you.”

The flash of anger in the eyes he knew so well was almost a relief. “Oh, can’t I? And reckless! I’m reckless? You took my oath and the best part of me and tossed it off a bloody pyramid!”

“Not to hurt you-”

He laughed bitterly. Aziraphale used to love the sound of Crowley’s laugh.

“Oh, my dear, please. Of course you can be hurt,” he sucked in a breath that burned like acid, trying to find courage and responsibility. They had never come as naturally to him as they should have, rather they were as unnatural as breathing.

“I know I have hurt you terribly.”

“Nope,” Crowley answered coolly, grinding down feeling like a granite mill wheel. Aziraphale could watch it happening. “Dead. Not dead dead. Inside, you know. No you don’t. Burned up all my feelings in the Fall. It’s much better that way. Some of us are still screaming. Didn’t want to let go. Fools.”

Aziraphale fought past the horrifying memories of those screams. Crowley was underselling the awfulness of it all. He’d hardly been down there a day and it had changed something in his make up forever.

How much time had Crowley spent in Hell?

What did that do to a person with a heart?

“You’re not, you are not dead inside, outside, or ever. I know that’s not true, and so do you. I never want to hear you say that again.”

“Wish it was. Should be.” He made a miserable little sound that could have meant ‘easier’.

He was probably right, but-

“Easier isn’t better, Crowley. Hard things can be worth it. Look at us, how far we’ve come.” He tried to catch his eyes. "Don’t think that letting that feather go was easy for me. Don’t you ever think I didn’t suffer over it “

“Lots of people did. You were just the first. You want the list? ‘Cause I have a damn list, carved it out in my charred soul. Me, reckless. How the Hell did it get into human hands, hands that knew what to do with it?”

“I don’t know!” The angel threw up his hands in a frustrated toss up between anguish and confusion. “I gave it to Her!”

Crowley…

had never quite made an expression like this one before. It was twisted devastation, a charcoal heart crushed to dust, the kissed betrayal of Judas, and the last act of praise from the Morning Star.

There was nothing earthly about the sound he made as he slid to the ground in front of the empty throne. “You gave it to Her?!”

“It was the safest thing! I thought- Oh, oh, what I’ve done,” the lament slipped out without stopping to ask his permission. “What I have done,” he repeated brokenly. It wasn’t a question.

“What have you done?” Crowley agreed. "You could have just,” he snapped his fingers and a lick of flame arched in front of Aziraphale's face, close enough for him to feel the radiant heat tearing at his skin. “Why not burn it to ashes if you didn’t want that terrible burden?”
“I didn’t know-”

“Liar!” Crowley growled, grabbing him by the bowtie hard enough to strangle, but only for the briefest moment. He sagged to the floor, and a moan escaped Aziraphale to see such defeat in him. “You knew there was power in it. I Blessed the damn thing!”

“I did!” He clung to Crowley in return. “I did know that, and it was too beautiful.” He let go, fisting his hands in the delicate blond curls. “It was so, so beautiful. Your Blessing! I couldn’t see it go to waste! Such a gift, you'd given me! What it must have cost you to bless, truly bless it! I couldn’t let nothing come of it!”

“Oh, well done then! Bravo!” Crowley sought refuge, as he always did, in dripping sarcasm, clapping slowly, angrily.

“She is the highest authority! The only one! Who else could I have ever given it to?”

“What the Hell made you think She'd want it any more than she wanted the rest of me?”

The despair of it. That’s what broke him. Aziraphale's steady tears became a torrent and for a time, he was swept away in it, unable to speak.

Crowley neither wept nor spoke, and so Aziraphale wept all the harder for both of them, until an exhausted quietness settled over him, the wellspring run dry.

“It was probably just the wind, anyway.” Aziraphale raised his head, only then registering the way he'd ended up kneeling, crouched over, hot face pressed damply into cold stone floor. He drew his jacket sleeve carelessly over his messy face, ashamed such a little thing as his jacket had been treated so much like a treasure, while a soft ebony feather had been left to flutter forgotten into darkness.

“Oh, what's that?”

“She didn’t take it from you. She hasn’t done anything herself in a thousand years. Left the lights on and buggered off. It's all on autopilot now.”

“It was Her, Crowley. I know that.” He was so weary, down to the aching bedrock of his soul. “I felt Her.”

“No one feels that anymore.”

“They do, of course they do,” he insisted, unable to let the words go. “It's unmistakable, you know th…”

His mind caught up to his mouth at last.

Oh, I truly am a bastard.

“She’s still at it then? I don’t even remember what that’s like. I suppose it's stupid to be surprised. It's all radio silence here.”

He stood up, and startled Aziraphale by extending a hand down to help him up. Hope flared in the angel and he accepted it gratefully, holding a little too long after he stood, ‘til Crowley all but shook him off.

“You should go now.”
“What? No, we have to talk about this-"

“Don’t want to. M’tired. Sssso tired. I can’t fight it anymore.”

Fight what? He was far too afraid to ask. Panic flooded the angel, and he wanted to grab Crowley, the sudden sensation of something irretrievable slipping from his fingers utterly terrifying. He crushed his jacket in his hands, just to hold on to something.

This was Aziraphale’s fault, and he trembled like a new fledging before the throne of the Almighty Herself. Crowley sounded broken, and he had done the breaking. “I am so… so sorry-“

“You always are,” he waved it away like a bit of down, slipping from an unkempt wing. “Sorry to fraternize with me, sorry for the Arrangement, sorry for taking that last bit of baklava, so sorry about that Fall, Crowley, must have been a bit rough,” he added in mocking imitation. “Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. It’s all the same, isn’t it?”

“I, really didn’t mean to-“

“You never do! Not built for it!” He flopped angrily down into the throne again, looking down at Aziraphale through sunglasses that had reappeared in full force. “Have you ever meant anything? Ever? Honestly, Aziraphale, I’d tell you to kiss off and go to Hell, but that’s rather useless, isn’t it?”

Maybe it was, but maybe it shouldn’t have been. His intentions had been good, kind, protective, but the humans had a saying about that, and they were always so clever.

I’d do it again, he thoughtSadly, knowing it was meaningless. I would trade places, and stay if I could, if I had to, if it would help.

Least he could do, if only he could do it.

“Maybe I do deserve to Fall.”

Crowley sat up out of his sprawl, all sharp angles and whip tense as he snapped to face Aziraphale head on. “Yeah, maybe you do. Or maybe we wouldn’t even have you. Maybe there isn’t a damn circle low enough. I trusted you.” Something far too close to a sob forced it's way up. “I trusted anyone. How stupid am I?”

“You are not stupid, of course not! There’s no one more clever-”

“Just go. You go, or I’ll go, until you’re not here. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Oh, no,” he would not have thought it possible, but his heart sank lower. “Please, please. Please don’t leave, don’t make me leave. We… I can’t have you go. Please. Stay. We can fix this. We have to-”

He tried to slide his fingers around Crowley’s, who reacted like they burned like the holy damned things they were. He was up and had the throne between them in a breath.

“Don’t touch me Aziraphale! Don’t- just stay the Hell away from me, okay? I can’t- You know what they made me do… and you made it possible for them to do it! And I don’t want to fight about this or think about this right now!” He gave the throne an angry shove that sent it sliding towards the stunned angel.

The world was spinning, he was lost in a whirlwind of guilt and anguish, and only some of
the deluge was his own. Heartbreak and betrayal rolled off Crowley in waves that were all but visible.

“I, alright. Alright, my dear. Alright. I'll go.” He didn’t miss the slight hiss at the affectionate, yet unhappy address, and he didn’t miss Crowley not calling him angel since he drew out that ribbon, though he did, already miss it. “If that's really what you want, I'll go, but I'll be here, whenever you're ready.”

Before he'd got to the door, Crowley laughed, without an iota of joy. “Crowley?”

“Well- can’t say you didn’t warn me. You always went on and on about us being on opposite sides, and it not being safe, and, oh no! we can’t trust each other.” He laughed again and this time his voice cracked. “I just thought you meant me, you know. You couldn’t trust me… and that was fine, because I know me, and I knew you could. I'd have done anything, with a song in my twice damned heart, that you’d asked me to.”

“I know.”

That was the heart of the problem.

“But it wasn’t me that shouldn't be trusted. It was you, and I never saw it coming.”

Bereft, and guilty, Aziraphale left.

He was gone. Crowley lay on the table in his flat, staring up at the ceiling in total darkness.

Not total darkness.

He was still surrounded by the angel's shield and had brought it out for a long, hard look. It didn’t quite feel like it fit him just right.

He stared at the strange thing. It was wondrous in its way, all bright, shining power and beauty. No demon had ever experienced such a thing.

Aziraphale, such a rebel.

It was the denial that made him a bastard.

He pressed occult- wreathed hands softly against the shield, feeling it flicker and struggle against him with something akin to a will of its own. Built to defend him from outside threat, it could do little against the threats from within.

Crowley had, if not for always, then for a very long time, built all his walls around the two of them. Crowley and Aziraphale. Their own little unspoken kingdom, with Eden's stone walls, and a Hellhound on every side, flaming too, why not?

His defenses had been breached from the inside out too.

The Garden's Little Guardians had never stood a chance against Crowley, who had never stood a chance against the Guardian of the Eastern Gate.

They were all already outmaneuvered before settling to their posts. Lost before the battle began.
He did feel defeated, as he had never entirely before.

Maybe close to it, what with Satan himself coming up for one Hell of a talking to with his charming little son first, and a firestorm of revenge on them next on the docket, but Aziraphale had been there, to demand the impossible and remind them of the ineffable, and it had all come out rather better than expected.

It was good to expect bad, because sometimes you were just a little surprised.

Aziraphale had been the author of just about all his good surprises. Like most things though, it had all come back to bite him in the ass.

The worst of it was, he still felt something he should never have felt for an angel, any angel, in the first place.

Pity. Nasty thing.

You can want to do the right thing and still have it go terribly wrong. Crowley had known that for ages. It also applied to most every wrong thing he had ever done. Someone up there did not like him at all.

But Aziraphale would never have believed such a thing until he had to. No, he believed Right things led straight down the garden path to Right things, nevermind what actually history was happy to paint in blood around them.

Now, he had to face it, and Crowley knew how much that hurt.

You can do everything right and still lose, lose, lose.

He wanted to ask Her why that was.

He wanted to never talk to her again.

Maybe it was at.

Talk at. Talk at Her.

It certainly wasn’t with.

Such a warm thing, this hedge of protection. It would only take a little more force to shatter the shield. He wondered if Aziraphale would feel it go.

Probably.

It was partly him, after all, like an invisible arm slung protectively over his shoulders. Brotherly, maybe… oppressive, if pushed too far, but it felt like safety and friendship and home, and Aziraphale, so he’d allowed it far longer than he really wanted to.

What did he want now?

He stroked it gently, lights sparking as electrons danced over his skin. He could dance with them, if the mood struck.¹

Crowley could destroy Aziraphale’s gift, and be free. The angel might even approve, if he wasn’t too deeply wallowing in hypocrisy. He had said, after all, that he wanted Crowley to be free.
He'd been all the more enslaved by that act.

"It's not fair, really."

The angel didn’t mean to do that to him, anymore than Crowley had meant to hurt those kids. Aziraphale had a share of that responsibility too, now, and he couldn’t help but worry about how the angel would hold up under that burden.

Stupid, stupid me. Absolutely pathetic, positively humiliating, the hold Aziraphale had on him.

That oath was just a formality anyway. Why couldn’t the angel wrap his head around that concept? Crowley had nothing whatsoever to lose except Aziraphale. He had found that out in a burning bookstore on the Eve of the End of the World. He went, and it was like everything else went too.

Bugger alle this, indeed.

“You know, that was a right nasty trick to play on him, right?” he complained, breaking radio silence yet again. She was much better at this game than he was.

"Assuming he's right and you still bother to check in now and again. He really thought you could, would...” He frowned, deliberating, “could, do something proper Good with a demon's Blessing.

“That's the kind of angel you abandoned down here to look after the world all by himself. Clever and stupid, just like me, except actually really very good. You know he tries.” He sighed, sketching out a C, then an A in the yielding, shimmering light.

"He does try. Try being nicer to him. Pat on the back or extra dessert or something.” He settled into a more relaxed sprawl, melting into a position probably illegal in the more uptight countries. “I’m still pissed at you both.”

Chapter End Notes

¹ Not what you'd call "good dancing".
The Calm

Chapter Summary

I did not like this chapter, until it was all knot together, and now I do.

If you have ever played tug of war with a large dog, you will know it involves a lot of violent jerking back and forth, but it's all fun and games until someone loses Aziraphale.

I apologize in advance for everything I am about to do to you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Exiting Crowley’s flat, Aziraphale tried to tell himself it would all work out in the end. They'd had words before, after all, although, these were big words, huge words, Kraken-sized words, and, if nothing else, the simple, steadfast passage of time had always brought them drifting back together.

How much time, was the real question. And would things ever really be the same? Could they?

Some things you never really got back from.

Aziraphale had chanced to run across a talented writer named Maria Louise de la Ramée, back in 1878, living in Villa Farinola, and she had made quite an impression with her extravagant spending and perhaps excessive, if kind, efforts to rescue dogs in need.

Lovely Ouida had once written that friendship was usually treated as a tough thing, which could survive all manner of bad treatment, but cautioned that was an exceedingly great and foolish error, for friendship could die in an hour of a single unwise word.

It was a dreadful thought, if a wise warning. He hoped that did not apply to a friendship that had stretched, in deed, if not in name always, back though countless lifetimes of man.

A single unwise word… or deed. Should they not be made of sterner stuff than that? Silk was soft, yet woven together, strong enough to stop a bullet. Wasn’t that how it should be?

Aziraphale hovered anxiously¹ outside the flat, wondering what to do next. He was awash with guilt and self-recrimination, and without Crowley to talk to, he really had no outlet for any of it.

Today. Just for today.
Crowley needed the outlet too. Even if they ended up shouting at each other, it had to be better than silence. He felt very much alone, and upset all the more, because he was sure the demon was feeling the same way, but he didn’t want to share that burden with Aziraphale, now that he’d proven unreliable.

How could he blame Crowley for feeling like he wasn’t to be trusted? He couldn’t. He didn’t, but how his angelic heart ached to heal and restore and ease and lift and shelter. It was misery to be denied.

As he passed by the Bentley, walking back towards the bookshop, a sight in the window refreshed his memory. Snug in a basket, with a dark flannel covered heating pad, was the little snake he had rescued. They had meant to find a safe place for her, before they had gotten dreadfully distracted.

Well, Crowley would remember her and get her somewhere soon enough.

Aziraphale took a step and stopped. Took another, and stopped. Nodded to himself, took another, sighed, and stopped.

He didn’t like the thought of putting her back in some pet shop or another, to end up who knew where. She was quite truthfully a miraculous little creature, alone in the big world and hmm, perhaps someone nefarious would try to use her for ill purpose… again. The very thought set more than a little divine wrath ablaze in his soul.

That was it. Far too dangerous to let her go.

Plus, he needed someone to dote on.

Aziraphale looked down at the basket Crowley had miracled up to transport the little python. She flicked at her tongue at him, smelling, he supposed, in what dredging misery suggested to him was a snaky blessing.

“Don’t get attached, my dear, I shouldn’t like to let you down as well.”

The Bentley opened to him easily enough, though he knew Crowley would be aware of it immediately.

*No need for alarm. The Bentley is fine. I’m taking Matilda,* he sent the words to float in shimmering gold before Crowley.

A note card fluttered before him, and he struggled and failed to catch the elusive thing before it drifted under the car. He hesitated, pouting a touch, before getting down on his hands and knees to reach for it.

“Who the Heaven is Matilda?” he read out loud.

The familiar voice dropped hard into his head before he could formulate a reply.

*Never mind. Don’t care. Leave me alone, Aziraphale.*

Already rubbing his head, he banged his shoulder on the door quite painfully as he clambered back to his feet with the note. “You did that on purpose,” he complained in the general direction of the flat.

He peered down at Matilda. “He did that on purpose.” She looked very sympathetic.
It made him feel the tiniest bit better.

The first thing that leapt before his eyes and slapped him across the soul when he returned to the bookshop was the Bugger Alle This Bible. Fond memory became painful in an instant and he shelved it hastily.

Feeling restless, he bent himself to the task of making a nice little home for Miracle Matilda, creating a large terrarium on the table in the back with a large flat rock for sunning and a heat lamp Crowley had once suggested would make a nice Halloween present.

The demon refused to accept anything for Christmas.

What else did a snake need?

A shallow, yet generous, water dish, branches and plants to make things homey, a little sign modeled after his own with _M. Matilda, Professional Snake_ written on it.

Visiting hours: Whatever she likes.

Possibly never.

He didn’t particularly relish the thought of feeling her mice or rats. “I don’t suppose you'd find manna an acceptable alternative, would you? Went over very well with the Israelites. Probably not. Don’t worry your dear little head about it, Matilda-Tilly? Do you like that? Best do what comes naturally. I much prefer sushi, myself. You should keep that under your… scales, however.”

He'd probably have to hide her if he were to receive any angelic company, who were put off by food, so only She knew what they'd think of him cohabitating with a snake, although he wasn’t sure keeping up appearances really mattered anymore, and she was truly a lovely little creature.

“Can I tell you something, Tilly- Tils? Mattie?”

Marvelous Mattie.

Mighty Mattie.

Magnificent Mattie.

Maybe he would stick with Matilda.

He took her silence the way humans took his, as invitation to unburden.²

“I have an idea, an idea about how to solve this problem my friend Crowley has been wrestling with. You remember him, he was quite taken with you.”

Back in the church, back when things were not good, but still good.

“But it’s sort of… a dangerous idea, and I’m quite certain he would not approve of it in the least, and he's already so…. ”

He stroked her smooth head with a sigh. It was warmed from the reflected glory of the sun lamp.

She'd have been dreadfully cold without it.
“And yet, I think I will need to take steps to put my idea into place.”

He didn’t want to use the word plan. His plans had not gone well lately, and this was of dire importance.

“Of course, you are quite correct, I should tell him…but he is already rightfully upset with me and my fanciful notions. I don’t want to go behind his back.”

He stretched his shoulders, feeling the weight of the unseen, weary, yet driven forward on wings of necessity. “However, if I don’t follow through, I don’t know how we will ever get to the bottom of this, and I am certain there is more of this than meets the eye.”

She began to move closer to the sun lamp, shifting smoothly up a thick, supportive branch, turning her head towards the warmth above. He smiled to see her looking pleased, in so far as he could tell.

“And I am quite determined to see him safe and justice done.”

Decision made, Aziraphale took a deep breath and manifested his wings. The motion seemed to startle the snake and he quickly apologised.

“You're quite safe, my dear; don’t worry. Not a thing wrong.” He stroked her gently until she lifted her head back towards the lamp. “Who could blame you for being so tense after what those vile humans did to you. No, no, don’t think about it. Onward and upwards, my dear girl.”

He made a careful choice, flinching a little as the primary came free. It hurt rather more than he’d expected, and he felt another round of regret assail him with the experience. The angel produced a ribbon and made one last, careful alteration before tucking it out of all natural sight, but nearby, as to be ready for the right time.

He pressed a kiss to a finger and dotted it delicately on her head.

“You're quite a lovely listener, my dear. It does help me to sort it all out.”

And Aziraphale had quite a lot of sorting to do.

If Crowley wanted space, he should have it. The demon wasn’t taking his phone calls, but he left him a message everyday, just to try to keep the connection alive.

Aziraphale hadn’t been all that sensible about it in the beginning, and the first message he left was mostly miserable babbling about how much Crowley meant to him and how he was sorry, sorry, sorry. It was a mess, and likely embarrassing to both of them.

He decided right then, no more drinking alone.³

The next day, his message was more sober, but no less pleading, as he begged Crowley to pick up the phone and talk to him, yell at him, something, anything.

On the third day, he decided he was doing very poorly at giving Crowley space, so he kept it short.

“Hello? Crowley? I just want to apologize, oh, well, not about that, I mean, yes, about that, but also for the last two messages. I didn’t mean to go on and on and on…and on, of course not. Oh dear, I’m going on again. So sorry. You must be tired of me apologizing. I could stop. Unless
you don’t want me to. I’m really not sure what you want. Are you quite alright? No, silly question. I am sorry though. Oh, I’ve done it again. This isn’t going well. Sorry. Oh. Sorry. Oh!” he’d finally hung up and spent the rest of the day resisting the desire to call and apologize for that message too.

On the fourth day, he didn’t apologize at all, rather he talked about Matilda and the ordeal of feeding her. Manna had not gone over well, and he was considering hiring a snake sitter.

“I’m not actually sure how you would feel about me taking her in like this. I’d love to have your opinion about her uh, habitat. Maybe you’d have some plants to suggest? Also, is her mouth supposed to open like that? She has no table manners at all for such a dainty thing. Perhaps I’m being judgemental. I’m sure I wouldn’t do so well without arms and legs. Maybe I should try out being a snake for awhile. Might help me get a better feel for looking after one. Two. No, no, not two. Even when you’re a snake, you’re not a snake and neither would I be. Oh dear, off I go again. Be well, my dear.”

On the fifth day, he didn’t leave a message. Just called and listened to the recording of Crowley’s voice, then hung up and listened again. Four, five, six times, until feared it bordered on harassment. Aziraphale missed the taciturn demon beyond measure.

How was he going to make it through a month, a year, a decade?

Eternity? Surely not. It just couldn’t all end that way.

But he wasn’t sure, and it was lonely as Hell.¹

On the sixth day, he kept it simple.

“I miss you, my dear, and I would do anything to fix this. You mean all the world to me. If you don’t think that’s true anymore, you should. It is utterly true; it will always be true.”

On the seventh day, rather than resting, he reached for phone again… and nearly went off like a nuclear fusion reaction when the phone rang. For a few breathless seconds he struggled to manage the mechanics of his hand and arm well enough to answer.

“Crowley?!”

“Oh, uh-”

It wasn’t.

“No, this is Anathema… Device,” she clarified while he closed his eyes tightly and fought back profound disappointment. The silence clearly became awkward for her. “The witch. Remember? Agnes Nutter's descendant? Helped out with the whole apocalypse thing, uh, what else? bike girl?”

Words. She was expecting words.

“Yes, yes, of course, dear lady. I shall never forget. However can I help you?”

“It's how I can help you, actually. I've been talking to some friends about summoning, and I think I know where you should look next.”

“Oh! Oh, really!”

The emotional exhaustion plaguing him gave him a temporary reprieve as his phenomenally
intelligent mind⁵ latched on to her words with all the focus of Crowley inspecting a new plant, or a human target for temptation, or a prim angel who let his guard down for weakness, in any of it's forms. He was very good at ferreting out weakness, like Aziraphale was good with discerning complex words.

As she explained her findings and a clear path opened before him, Aziraphale felt himself sink into a kind of sharp-eyed readiness, a calmness he hadn’t felt since poor Crowley had come, crashing and distraught into the book shop, begging to be smote back to Hell, or worse…

Out of existence.

He pulled out a chair and settled into it, feeling purposeful and steady like the foundations of the cosmos. Crowley would be free, really, free, and Aziraphale would make up for his error by seeing righteous justice done for a demon who had earned a little time on the other side of divine wrath.

“You've been most helpful, my dear, thank you. Do give my love to your husband, and your own as well, I should think.”

“Oh, you can tell him yourself. He's right here.”

“Oh!” came the excited voice. “It's them? Oh, the angel? Is Crowley there? Because I wanted to tell him- "

“It's just me at the moment, I’m afraid. Crowley’s… resting.”

It was probably close enough to true, he reasoned.

“Aw, I was hoping to talk to him.”

Myself also, and the yearning that passed over his heart shook some of the calm out of him.

“Can’t be helped-"

“Would you tell him I’ve started a garden? All pansies. His suggestion. Seemed to think it would be funny for some reason. They're holding up alright under the transplanting I think-"

Muffled hushing interrupted him, and Aziraphale politely pretended not to notice.

“Oh, ah, seems I have to go. We do wish you all the best with the uh, trouble. Do come back for a visit soon!”

“I'd be delighted, of cour-"

“And bring Crowley! He said I could be an aardvark next!”

Angels were patient beings, not given to moaning and rolling their eyes⁶ in exasperation.

Some days were easier than others.

“My deepest thanks to you both. Go in Grace.”

“Means something when an angel says that-" he heard Newt exclaim before the call disconnected.

Wonderful people, humans.
Many of them. Most all of the sometimes. None of them always, but that was the poetry in them. Imperfect perfection, springing to life all over.

He stopped calling Crowley, though he was discorporating to tell him what Anathema had discovered, and he had to all but sit on his hands to do it.

The very next day, the phone rang.

“Hello?” he breathed.

“Saint James Park.”

His heart leapt into his throat and he clutched the phone like a lifeline.

“Crowley! Oh! You, you want to meet up?”

“Guess so. You'll be there, then?

“Oh, absolutely, with bells on- oh, sorry. I don’t mean to sound flippant, I'm so, ah,”

Hopeful?

Terrified?

Desperate to see you?

Ridiculous?

Well, that one he was certain of.

“Alright, alright.” Though his voice was gruff and his tone irritable, there was something shy and sweet in it too. Not that he'd dare break that to Crowley. “Half an hour then?”

“Yes, without fail!” He smiled giddily at the phone for a moment for a wave of anxiety washed over him. Crowley wanting to see him, and talk with him so soon, it was better than he'd hoped but it didn’t mean everything was tickety-boo between them.

Baby steps.

He could prove himself worthy of Crowley.

Aziraphale arrived early at the park, unable to find patience to wait. Being there wasn’t much help, and he paced in uneasy circle, twitching at every noise.

He was so worked up about their meeting he did not initially register the strange, ill-boding feeling skittering rapidly up his spine.

When he did, he cried out in alarm and vanished as every duck in the park took off in a flutter of feathery panic.

Chapter End Notes

¹ though not literally.
It didn’t always work out terribly well for them. Several were now incarcerated for bank robberies and other crimes they should have thought twice about confessing to angel about. Crowley accused him of being a nark. He considered it both his civic duty and a chance for them to find redemption. Crowley had blown a raspberry when he'd said that.

Although he did finally understand what Crowley was referring to when he said, ‘drunk dialing’. The demon said it was most fun done sober, to fully appreciate the other party's reaction. As the frequent other party, Aziraphale disagreed.

Actually, being lonely in Hell ran more along the lines of being lonely in a crowd. A smelly crowd. Of demons. A tightly packed sardine can of smelly loneliness. Don’t lick the walls. Probably best to try to stay out of Hell.

Book smart. Really, very, book smart. All the books. Every one of them. Even that one. Just not very… savvy.

Made you look.
Aziraphale

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale puts his plan into place. Crowley tries to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Did I get that backwards?

Complex chapter, lots in it. Hope you enjoy!

PS. I just finished a rewrite of this chapter. I think it improves the flow and the characterization as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was so, so bright.

More than that, it was Holy, shining from the big, deep echoes of Creation, a sudden surging of an ebbing tide, which had quietly been drawing back into the sea of Her very own Being since before the sun warmed away the first sweet dew of Eden. The universe expanding ever outward, while her Grace withdrew within.

A shimmering spark of the Being that made all else Be.

Aziraphale.

Had to be.

Every ounce of grinning, unrepentant darkness in him was trying to skitter away from the inherent threat of the Light. For though all shadows danced into life from the playful edges of light, what shadow could endure the direct glare of the cascading sun?

Neither could the heart of a demon withstand the Light, so close, so direct.

His own had changed forever at the first dawn, under the soft shadow of a wing proffered unbidden, unexpected, and nothing had ever been quite so dark for him since.

Crowley planted himself as best he could against the instincts screaming at him to flee. He wasn't running from his own angel, however obnoxiously shiny he happened to be at the moment.

Hurt though.

In lots of ways.

"Crowley?" Strange to hear a sound so frightened from a being so powerful. He wasn’t entirely certain the angel even still had a mouth to call to him at present, though he had managed the task
nonetheless. The invisible structures that held reality to its rigid courses were bending, straining under the force of Aziraphale's unleashed nature.

He resisted the urge to call out in return. Crowley's voice would have shuddered out fear in the exact same way, and there was already more than enough terror shrieking silently through the air.

Someone was gasping, whimpering and sobbing, and Crowley was somewhat relieved to realise it was neither he, nor the luminous cataclysm standing between him and whatever was happening all around.

Something was dragging at him, malevolent and aching, but never quite getting the grip it sought, a sensation he knew too well, but softened, watered down.

He felt protected. That was new.

Aziraphale's overzealous halo did make it very hard to see.

"Ugh... turn down the lights, will ya? There's not enough sunscreen on the planet."

"Ah, sorry. In a bit. Perhaps a bit over excited. Just... doing a little ah, smite...smiting."

What the Hell- Heaven- What?!

“You- no, you're not. You're not smiting humans.” He started to get up and was utterly flattened down again by an incomprehensibly powerful force. He suspected he'd have already been tumbling back down, stripped of his human form, had the hedge of protection not been positively thrumming, sharing merrily in the ethereal glory, steadfast in its purpose.

The combination of the angel and the hedge was astonishing, and making it very difficult to think.

“I can’t allow them to continue on this path.”

Radiance washed over him, a sensation very nearly like coming Home, and Crowley was beside himself, completely overwrought, and trying frantically to keep that sensation under wraps. He felt like screaming, singing, laughing under the unexpected sweetness of it, and he couldn’t do anything like that, because here was Aziraphale, scintillant, stunning, and utterly terrifying in his rage.

Crowley felt like a seraph again, and wondered if he might just burst into the reflection of divine fire once more, and the insane vision of ancient and painful memory combined with his own bloodied, unbowed soul to plant the image of a lowly angel taking Her to task for all the misery She so blithely allowed.

He had a quite a few things to say on that score, although, he was, perhaps, not in any position to judge, given his own efforts in causing some of that misery.

He tried to reign in both sanity and angel.

“There's not going to be any smiting, Aziraphale. It's not necessary, and you'd be eaten up by it. You know you would. Just get them to release me from the summons. We'll find the feather and we'll go. C'mon.” He drew a deep breath, speaking in hushed, soothing tones. “Settle down now. It's alright. They're just humans.”

“Who are killing with demonic power. They have chosen their fates.” The frightened cries
picked up in volume.

He pushed himself harder, in the hopes of getting through to Aziraphale. “Leave them to Her, if you like. No need for you to carry the burden of their fates. Calm down, now.”

The Light did fade, and he could make out familiar features once again, though Aziraphale still had the strangely compelling crown on his head, wings spread wide, intimidating in their unrelenting purity.

The Guardian of the Eastern Gate spoke softly, all fire and molten steel. “Crowley… vengeance is Hers, and as her duly appointed representative on Earth, I will do what I must in her Name.”

Momentarily robbed of speech, Crowley realised Aziraphale was not only speaking to him.

Neither was he bluffing.

Aziraphale was absolutely lousy at poker, which he would only play for hors d’oeuvres, which Crowley would simply slide back over to him at the end of each round.

He always bet big.

Must have been a faith thing.

“Release him.” It was a soldier's order, an officer's command that brooked no argument.

“You have no power here!” came the ragged cry. You couldn’t be more wrong about that, Idiot, Crowley thought, recognizing the voice right away.

He wasn’t particularly surprised. Well, he was a little surprised the human was still capable of defiance in the face of the angel, given the state he’d been in. That took a strong will.

He was also surprised that Aziraphale was actually here with him, all Guardian of the Eastern Crowley. He’d always been alone before.

Clearly, the demon had been summoned again, and if anything it was worse than the last time. He was bound powerfully and the weight of it was enervating. If it wasn’t for the hedge of protection he doubt he’d have any autonomy at all. Someone had been practicing. There was madness and rage adding fuel to this occult maelstrom, and coupled with the countering force of Righteous Angel, Crowley found himself exhausted and wanting to go to bed for a decade or ten.

“You are quite mistaken, I’m afraid,” came the gentle reply. Crowley rather thought the human was the one who should be afraid. He was certainly afraid. Things were on the cusp of going terribly wrong again, and he’d had about enough of that.

If the man had had any heart at all, he would never have tried this again, and here, of all places.

Doubly trapped by the ashes of his own Fire, Crowley ruthlessly used his need to protect Aziraphale from himself to keep his shattered soul wrapped together with bailing twine and wishes.

The Blessed Hearts Home for Children, only home for cinders and sorrow now.

There was a terrible logic to it, Crowley supposed, wrestling with an angry surge of bloodlust that shocked him. He wanted this human off the planet and paying the price for his cruelty. The energy from, not only the Hellfire itself, but his desperate, futile efforts to save the kids made the
still air vibrate with his own name written in cold condemnation.

Oh, dark lord below, do you know where we are, angel?

Can you feel what I've done?

What we've done?

Soft blue eyes met his, sadly, kindly, angelic, as the miserable sound escaped him, as they could not.

Aziraphale. Aziraphale. Aziraphale. That's why you have to stop him from smiting the whole bastard lot of them, he commanded himself firmly. It'll be over and he'll have to live with it for eternity. He still snifles about the damn ants.

To Hell with vengeance, not to Her!

“You can’t stop me, whatever you are! I have a demon. It's mine! It'll be mine forever when I buy it with the traitor’s blood. Get him over here!”

Suddenly it all locked into place. The whimpering, sniveling sounds… they'd had nothing to do with Aziraphale’s dramatic display, or not much anyway.

Several of the cultists dragged a bound and gagged Mark Holland from where he'd been tossed on the ground to an inverted pentagram before them, done up in charcoal from the fire.

Crowley scrambled back to his feet, pushing back against Aziraphale’s quick effort to suppress him again. The demon was a mighty creature in his own right, in no way helpless next to Aziraphale, whether Adversary or friend.

Alright, maybe when he looked at him with those big pleading eyes.

But not always. Not now. He was dismayed, but not surprised, to see the maniacal summoner draw out a nasty looking dagger with sigils all over it. It would have gone nicely with the décor in Hell. He wondered from where the wicked thing had come.

“If you take his life, you will tender up your own, fell creature. I swear it in the name of our Creator.”

That would do it. Crowley made a sound of absolute terror. The angel was committed now, and nothing he could do would stop the angel from following through with that oath.

You should never have sworn to it in the first place! Aziraphale’s words rang harshly in his memory.

He'd have to stop trouble before it began.

“Go on with it then. Might want to put on a raincoat first though. These things tend to get messy. Probably good we're outside.” He did his best to project an air of insouciance, which to be fair, was his go to, as well as convincing eagerness to see that blade come down.

It helped to draw his eyes over the place where Michaela's stretcher had lay, imagine the leader there in place of Mark. Better if the humans sorted it out themselves, and Aziraphale could stay out of it.

The summoner glowered at him and raised the blade. Crowley clapped his hands and let out
an eager giggle. The blade drifted down again. “What are you laughing at?”

“Oh, uh… don’t mind me.” Frowning, the leader waited, indecisive, clearly not forgetting the game they’d played when last they spoke. “I’m getting my revenge at last.”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing. Go on. Haven’t got all day to wait for revenge.”

“Speak, demon!” and Crowley hissed in response to being actually compelled.

But he didn’t cave.

“Sssshan’t.” Idiot still hadn’t learned to be specific.

Aziraphale, perhaps feeling the shift in the power holding Crowley, took a threatening step forward and the summoner stopped him by pressing the blade to Mark's throat. The angel produced his scepter in response, radiating determination.

“Stay back!”

“Release him,” came the order again, and Crowley belatedly realised Aziraphale had not been demanding his release from the summoning, but Mark's. He found it oddly reassuring.

“What revenge? You can’t do anything to me.”

“True, absolutely true, lucky for you- well, not really. That Wrath of God stuff, that's what's really scary. And I don’t have to do anything now, do I?” He pointed casually at Aziraphale before grinning cruelly. “He's going to do it for me. That's a bit of an unexpected turn, isn’t it. Good fun, watching you get murdered by a pissed off angel. Heh, I thought today was going to be a bad day.”

“Angel?” he echoed, staring at Aziraphale, considering.

“Mmm, yeah. And he swore to it too. There's no backing down from that, you know. Look at him there, if you can stand it. He's just waiting.”

It was true enough. Aziraphale shifted into a more relaxed stance, eyes watching them quietly. Crowley didn’t miss the questions in his grave expression.

I’m trying to keep you from having to live with his death later, that’s what I’m doing.

“I could order you to stop him.” Crowley nodded slowly, catching Aziraphale’s eyes.

“I could order you to stop him.” Crowley nodded slowly, catching Aziraphale’s eyes.

Look, so evil, and so human. Doesn’t understand a thing. Find some mercy, angel. Find another way.

“Yes, you could, and I could give it the old college try, I suppose. Might buy you some running away time. But Aziraphale is my friend, and if you think he's upset with you now, you can’t imagine how he'll be feeling after he's done smiting me back to Hell. But, don’t worry about that. Go on with your plan.”

He didn’t expect Aziraphale to suddenly drop his shoulders and his head, soldier evaporating into watery-eyed book selle- keep- hoarder. “I am your friend.”

“See? Told ya so,” he addressed the summoner, eyes locked on the blade that could compel Aziraphale to terrible action. In the face of Aziraphale’s emotion, Crowley hung on to his own
composure with two hands and a constrictor's strength.

Shhhhh, angel, demon is working.

“He's on my side, and you don’t have a thing to offer him except total surrender.”

“Hell, no! Resume the spell!” Dutifully, the chant went up again and so did the sacrificial knife. Mark moaned and tried to move away from the blade. The angel fanned out his wings in a threat posture.

“Do not strike.” There was righteous wrath, but a plea there as well. If Aziraphale had a better option, he would take it.

If.

Crowley made a show of examining his fingernails, grinning desperately in the face of horror, as he had always done.

It's going to be fine. It's got to be fine.

“This win-win thing is so much fun, isn’t it? What're you going to do first, bash his head in with the shiny stick thing? Sss'pretty, by the way.” Aziraphale did not even look over.

“Lightning from above might be cool. Plague of frogs. Nah, might hurt the frogs. How ‘bout lice? Whoever ran the Egypt campaign was a creative sort, I'll give that to you. Was that Sandalphon?”

Aziraphale did not look at all amused with Crowley's words, which was entirely the point.


The summoner gritted his teeth and began chanting along with his followers as their voices rose, swirling darkly though the rapidly cooling air. “Hey Mark, your mother misses you,” Crowley added, a bit nastily, stubbornly ignoring the chastising look Aziraphale shot him.

The man had chosen his people, and possibly his fate, and Crowley wasn’t long in sympathy for any of them, though he did perhaps feel a twinge for his mother, but only a jot.

Perhaps if she'd done a better job looking after him in the first place, it wouldn’t have come to this.

He'd said as much himself to Someone else.

Distraction again proved very effective as the leader stopped chanting to taunt him again. Beautiful. “I am on my guard against you now, demon. You can’t be trusted.”

“Definitely not,” Crowley agreed sweetly.

“I'll have total control of you, after the blood sacrifice.”

“I doubt it. My boss downstairs doesn’t even have that. When you see him, don’t tell him I said that.”

His followers interspersed the chant with cries of “Spill his blood!” and “Death to the traitor!”, and as before, the summoner took confidence from that, smiling with cold malice.
“You are making a grievous error in judgment,” Aziraphale cautioned, in the same ominously calm tone that could only bode ill.

Mark shrieked in terror as the blade came down, kicking up his feet to try to defend himself. Crowley cried out harshly, unleashing his own true form, as dark as Aziraphale was light. Bound as he was, distraction was about all he could do, but it was enough.

The summoner reeled back in surprise, but only for a moment before he made to stab his latest victim. The blade was fast, but Aziraphale was faster, crashing solidly into the summoner as pandemonium erupted.

Some of the more zealous cultists actually had the nerve to go after Aziraphale, who pinned all of them to the ground with a thought. Jaw set and eyes flashing, he raised the scepter over Crowley’s captor like a golden finger poised to crush an ant.

In an instant, Crowley pushed through the summoning binds and felt the hedge of protection finally stretch to the limit and give out.

He was free but at a cost, as the full weight of the darkness in this corrupted place washed over him. It was all wretchedly personal. Sometimes, on bad days, when Home felt particularly far away, he wondered if it was even possible to further blacken his soul. In this place, he felt like he hadn’t quite landed.

Crowley gritted his teeth and pushed through the grief and guilt, rushing to Aziraphale’s side. Sliding between them, he pinned down the summoner with a foot on his back, before willing him bound with zip ties, and the others as well, for good measure. He didn’t dare touch the scepter unprotected, but shifted to face the wrathful angel and shield his raving target.

“Why are you trying to save him?” Aziraphale snapped, letting slip his anger. He sounded like a stranger and it caught at Crowley’s soul.

“They’re just human. You’re supposed to be their guardian, not their executioner, Aziraphale.”

Oh, angel. You’re angry, but don’t stop being you.

He knew that cut deeply, and the emotions that sliced rapidly across Aziraphale’s face slashed back at him in double-edged symmetry. He touched his arm gently, changed it to softly plucking at the sleeve.

“Have I not been clear? I don’t want you to have to live with this.”

“Maybe I want to do it. Maybe I’m tired of letting evil have free reign. Sandalphon would have done them in ages ago.” He hadn’t heard that old argument in so long, and he wasn’t any happier to hear it now.

“He’s the new paragon of virtue you’re aiming for? How the mighty angels have fallen.” The reprimand in the answering look was comfortably familiar, and did much to stabilize his trembling soul. “There's a difference between wanting and doing, Aziraphale; they're light-years apart. I know it, so, so well, because I've been shooing humans over that line since I slithered into Eden, and I’m telling you,” he stared pleading into softening eyes, “Don’t cross that line. It'll be like the ants all over again. You'll carry it, and it will change you.”

He ducked his head and inhaled shakily. “I don’t want you to change.”
“Maybe they really are like ants,” Aziraphale insisted, still conflicted; he was forever conflicted.

“I could make the case that they're not as useful, and far more destructive, but do you really want to carry him around for eternity?”

His eyes drifted over the human Crowley was pinning, none too gently, and his hand tightened again on the scepter.

"Angel,” and Aziraphale snapped to attention at the name, “you'll never get over it.”

“I am a soldier, Crowley, and I fought in the War.” For them, there had only been one.

“He isn’t.” Crowley spread his arms wide, encompassing the pitiless, pitiful lot of them, before going for broke. “What does it profit an angel if he smites all the villains but loses his soul?”

“Really? You're quoting scripture at me now?”

“Misquoting, and it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“I’m not going to Fall for smiting the unrighteous, Crowley. They'll probably give me a commendation.”

“Yeah, I earned one too, right here. Yours would be just as easy to live with.”

With a distressed little sound, Aziraphale turned away from them both, crown, scepter and wings giving way to reason and compassion.

“Damn,” the summoner huffed out a breathless laugh. "That's an angel? Does what a demon says? I chose the right side. All power to the dark lord! You bastards-ah!"

The foolish human gasped as Crowley jabbed an elbow into his spine and forced his face into the ground, leaning over him to hiss menacingly into his ear.

“There isn’t one better, and there's not a luckier bastard on the planet than you right now. You used me to murder three innocents, two of them children, and someday you're never going to stop paying for that. If I could, I'd drop the nightmare that's waiting for you into your head so you could live through it every night for the rest of your worthless life, but you'll get there soon enough.”

“I deserved to win for once!”

“Believe me, human, you're going to get everything that you deserve. Stay the Hell away from us.”

An eerie silence settled over the scene. As Crowley got up from his captor turned captive, he saw Aziraphale, leaning over a collection of various occult items, searching for, then holding up one extraordinary feather, black as the blackest hole, inescapable, drinking in all light. He stroked it softly and sighed.

His own conflicting emotions tumbled violently through him at the tender sight of it.

The angel turned away abruptly, taking in the sight of the humans rolling, trying to free themselves, dotted all across the dew-soaked grass, skin painted with the ash of their sins.

The pressure in the air abruptly eased and Crowley felt the summoning chains around him
snap and dissolve completely. Moments later, the zip ties vanished and the cultists staggered to their feet, before streaking off into the night, scattering in all directions.

“This one too?” he asked, referring to the man still squirming beneath his heel, uncertain of what answer he hoped for.

“If you please, my dear.”

Crowley released the man, and he started to move, then abruptly veered towards the items Aziraphale had been examining.

To his absolute stupefaction, the angel stepped back out of the way and let him snatch the irreplaceable feather.

It was like watching his own abduction.

Crowley let out a shout and took off after him, but Aziraphale caught his wrist and nearly hauled him off his feet.

“No, Crowley. Leave him go.”

Profound hurt welled up in him, before slam-changing into rage. “What do you mean, leave them go?! They've still got the feather!”

“You're quite correct, and we are going to let them go, with the feather.”

He hadn’t intended on grabbing the angel, just blinked and found his hands on his lapels. “No!” he hissed quietly, terribly aware the man had escaped into darkness again. He shook the stone mountain that Aziraphale had become. “They'll do it again!”

The slow nod did nothing to appease him. “Yes, my dear, we need more information about what's been happening here, and in order to do that, you will have to be courageous and trust me, just a little longer.”

“Fine thing for you say! I'm the one they summon!” His anguish forced its way out, despite him. “Look where we are! They are getting stronger! I wouldn't have gotten out of this one on my own!” He hated the weakness in that statement, almost as much as he hated the truth in it. He felt helpless, strangled, suffocated, and only moments ago, he'd been elated, hopeful, free.

Did everything in his life have to be defined by an awful plummet into despair?

“Crowley, it's important to make sure this is really, completely, over with.”

“It could have been, but it's certainly not now! You gave my feather up once before, and I have spent the last week telling myself, ‘Oh, Crowley, he's an angel, with no sense-”,

"I have sense-"

"He didn’t understand what could happen!’ and now you've gone and done it again, in front of me, knowing!”

“Please, Crowley. I just need you to trust me. I wouldn’t put you in harm’s way deliberately.”

“You just did!”

“I didn’t, I really didn’t.” Strong hands gripped his shoulders and Crowley started struggling,
furious and afraid, and so, so wounded, right to the very heart of him. “Just trust me-"

“I don’t! I don’t right now. Not you, not anyone.” He reigned himself in, chaining himself down so he could stop shouting and perhaps, be heard. “You know why?”

“Oh, my dear-"

“Because it has always been a mistake, with one exception… and now There. Are. No. Exceptions.”

“Dear boy,” the angel sighed, “I just need you to hear me out now.”

“I have wasted more than enough time listening to you, Aziraphale.”

“You’ve not listened at all!” he protested, but Crowley was already moving. They hadn’t been gone long. Maybe he could still find the feather, burn the Blesséd thing to ashes before it could do anymore harm.

Aziraphale, still pleading, and yet, complaining, was hot on his heels.

That wasn’t going to work this time.

Crowley rapidly sketched a quick series of defensive sigils into the air.

“Ouch!” Aziraphale yelped as he slammed into the powerful ward the demon had thrown out behind him. It was quite stunning in its force, and he rocked back on his heels.

Crowley stopped. “You alright?” he muttered bitterly.

“Bit my tongue, if you must know.”

He was flummoxed when the angel suddenly pushed right through the ward, cringing under the assault before it snapped away, useless. “Whew, that was a thing.” He fluffed his wings out before resettling them. “Ah, there we are.”

“Ssssshow off,” he hissed, turning his back on Aziraphale firmly.

Until the angel appeared in front of him.

He hissed at him again.

“Look, Crowley, just look.”

Aziraphale was holding a black feather.

The demon snatched it out of his hands, gasping. “No, he took it! I saw-"

The Blessing was still intact, burning his fingers, and he quickly handed it back. It was undeniably Crowley’s own feather.

Merciless lord below all.

“Aziraphale… what did you do?”

“Oh!” he started, looking cheerful, in the way that he did before attempting something stupidly dangerous, like conspiring against Nazi’s, or a magic trick. He schooled his expression
under the Serpent's golden glare. “Right! Well, we do need to get to the bottom of things, or the
top, I suppose, and really, the best way to learn is by doing. So, I thought, and of course, I could
never just put you through that again, my dear, so-"

“Aziraphale… the feather he has? Tell me it's off a damn chicken.”

He drew himself up, all prim and offended. “Certainly not, imagine! You'd never find a
feather like that on a common barnyard fowl, Crowley. In fact, even a larger bird, like and eagle or
an ostrich, well, the texture would be all wrong-"

“Angel,” and despite the seriousness of the situation, he could not help but feel his affection
a little stirred at the rapid blinking and bright smile he was rewarded with by using the endearment,
“you gave them your feather, didn’t you?”

“I did,” he whispered conspiratorially, “quite sneaky of me, wasn’t it? I had to run it over a
cursed candle, singe it black, give it that ol’ demonic flare, but it's still very much my own.”

He seemed so charmingly excited by this unmitigated disaster. “It'll be my turn next, I
suppose, and then, well-" the sudden return of his anger caught Crowley off guard.

It was becoming a permanent state of being for him these days.

“Then we'll just have to sort out whoever thought this was a good thing to plague humanity
with in the first place.”

“Uhh, wuuhh, ye-yeeah?” he managed. “Have you even thought about what all that dark
power will do to you when they summon you?”

“Oh, I've no idea at all. I’m certainly very curious to find out.”

Crowley was tired, and angry, and afraid, and really very extra tired of being all three at
once.

Aziraphale was completely out of his mind.

You'd think he'd have seen that coming.

Chapter End Notes

¹ Using an extremely broad definition of nice, including, “not nice at all,” “rather
nasty,” and “Michael Vicks.”
Aziraphale had settled himself on a swing, commenting about watching the sunrise, and leaving Crowley to uneasily orbit around him, badly wanting to put this cursed place to his back forever. They had a bit to go, the sky was still painted in black and deep purples, though there was a faint promise of red.

“So, this is the place, then.” He looked odd like that, all innocuous human, dressed for 18th century polite society, and not for a children’s playground.

Although, Aziraphale would have looked odder, dressed for a playground.

“Yeah.” Crowley extended a hand to one of the posts and swung himself around it, feeling the soothing pressure as his muscles stretched. He had always needed to move, could never just be, unless he was sleeping.

“Must have been lovely once.” He bit back an urge to groan at the empty words. Could they not just go?

“Dunno. Never saw it before it went up. Not sure an orphanage is ever lovely.”

“They do tend to be lonely places. Thank you, for talking to me earlier. You were right. I’m glad I didn’t- I’m grateful to you.”

Crowley could resist only so long. “Do we have to talk about this? Can we please- ergh just go?”

Aziraphale had the nerve to look surprised. “If you like. I just wanted to… take it all in.”

Something was making noise in the grass, hidden, but everywhere. Some sort of creature. Crickets? Frogs? The sound resonated all the way through him.

“Not much left to take in.”

Nothing he wanted to take in. Hell was less oppressive than his own memory.

“Not physically, no. But there’s so much feeling here, in laid in the bricks and the wood, the earth and the air. Power,” he added quietly, “You.”
Crowley kicked a particularly annoying rock away, flinching when it hurt. “Yeah, well, I’m really not up for rolling around in pain and fear and misery right now, angel.”

Aziraphale looked up at him, confusion mixing sweetly with surprise. “That’s not what I’m talking- do you always dwell on the worst of things?”

“You tell me; you’ve known me halfway to forever.” Aziraphale shook his head at the sniping and sighed. He relented. “Fine. What am I supposed to be noticing?”

“It's the love, Crowley. Yes, the pain is here too, but the love, my dear. It's all over. Bittersweet, but strong.”

Someone had started a memorial for the fire victims. Drying, dead flowers, teddy bears and damp, fading cards were gathered around an gnarled old apple tree. Signs and temporary fencing outlined the property, warning humans to stay away. There was a mat thrown over the top in one place, probably where they'd broken in on arrival. The padlock to the gate had been cut from the inside. He hoped they'd scratched the Hell into themselves fleeing.

**Fire Damaged Structure**

**Public Property**

**Keep Out**

Keep out. He had never thought a sign like that would apply to him. Signs, as a general rule, did not, but Crowley knew he shouldn’t be here.

Love all over? Hardly.

“I suppose you would know. You're like a, love-detector, thing.” He sketched a straight line across, mere inches from the angel’s nose. “Beeeeeeep. Love.”

Aziraphale let it pass, as he did most things.

“That is a little bit true, actually, without the sound effects, and it runs deep in this place. I can tell you from my own, profession, so to speak, that is, unfortunately, a rarity. However, it has been beautiful here.”

“Yeah, but angel,” he dropped into the neighbouring swing, kicking up his feet and turning immediately, twisting the chains up as he began to wind it up. “It's all gone now. How can you look at these ruins and still see good. Even if you’re right and it was a good place, it’s good that's been stolen away. There's nothing left.”

Ashes, ashes, we all fall down…

“It is *terrible* to lose so much, Crowley. I do know that, but the humans will rebuild. They never stop trying.”

Affection for humanity. He was just a little too relieved to hear that from the angel. His own heart was running darker this morning.

“If not here,” the angel went on, “then somewhere else. Love never ends. It's like energy, like that math stuff, by that physics person. Someone. It can’t be destroyed, just changed, moved, shifted.”
“Love can definitely end, angel.” The chains rattled as he rose higher that his feet could touch. He continued the slow rotation unhindered.

The resulting huff made his lips curl softly. “Sometimes you have no idea how wrong you are.”

“I was thinking the same thing about you.”

The tension in the chains was near its easy limit.

“Hmm… well, I suppose that makes us perfectly matched then.” He was looking at him now, serious, measuring, questioning…

Hopeful.

Crowley tucked his feet on to the leather strap and let himself spin and spin and spin. Too much thinking to do. Too much to worry over. Better to spin.

“Meh, sentimental dreck. Speaking of which, give me the feather.”

He reached out dizzily, enjoying the disorienting sensation, the lack of control.

“It'll burn you,” but Aziraphale produced it immediately.

“Just lay it on the ground here. I don’t want to send you up along with it.”

Aziraphale had been about to lay the feather in the pebbles surrounding the swing set when he yanked it back protectively. “You can’t burn the feather! It's mine!”

“No, it's mine,” he said stiffly, dragging his feet to still the swing, deciding to leave out the whole hornet’s nest of its tangled origins. “Grew it myself, didn’t I? Lay it down. I’m going to get rid of it. Don’t want it getting in to the wrong hands again.” He frowned at the dust on his snakeskin boots, and it helpfully returned to the earth.

Aziraphale pouted at him like he would a customer trying to buy a book. “You gave it to me, and I’m keeping it.”

“You gave it to Her, and She apparently felt the need to give it to a bunch of malevolent humans.” He made no effort to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but regretted it when Aziraphale cringed. “We got it back, and that means it's mine again.”

He wasn’t going to argue the point.

“She clearly saw fit to give it back to me, since, voila, here it is, and I’m never letting it go again.”

Apparently, Aziraphale was.

He considered arguing with that logic, but settled on, “You aren’t?”

“Just so.”

“So, after all this, now you want it?”

“Yes,” the blond fidgeted awkwardly, still holding it close to his chest like he thought Crowley might make a grab for it.
The thought had occurred.

“I do, very much. I’m much less torn in two than I used to be.”

Crowley raised his eyebrows, considering that. “Really?”

“Absolutely.”

“So… you’re choosing me over Her?” He was a bit afraid to voice the question out loud, but as always, he couldn’t help himself. He started to twist again. The sun was coming up, purples surrendering to the kind of red which gave sailor’s pause.

“Oh, no, not at all.” It was spoken so lightly, breezily, and it **killed** him.

If Aziraphale ever did Fall, he was going to recommend him for the psychological torture division.

“But you can’t, angel, you can’t be all about Her and still be, important, something, whatever, to me. She didn’t leave that option on the table.”

“Of course I can, and certainly She did. We’d have been in trouble ages before if not. Why, you reminded me of it all just now, anyway.”

“Reminded you- Aziraphale, we’re on opposite sides.” He opened and closed his mouth a few times. Something tasted funny in those words. Wait- how did he end up on this side of their old argument?

“You know, I’m really feeling very sympathetic to how unhappy you must have been to hear me say that, over and over, my dear. I do apologize. I can be very foolish.”

This was safer ground, and Crowley dove in with confidence. “And reckless, and impulsive, and natty-”

“All of that and more, I’m sure.”

“You're sure?” He was being far too cooperative.

“Well, who knows me like you do, dear boy?” He wanted to argue that, but couldn’t find a leg to stand on, which must be why the world had started wobbling so.

Alright, press on, press on, Serpent of Eden.

“And you suddenly feel like you don’t have to choose between us now?”

He smiled far too brightly. “Oh, it’s not sudden. I suppose I’m just learning how to voice it.”

“Voice…what?”

“Love, my dear, just what you reminded me of.”

“I remind you of love? You are living proof angels can be daft. You’ll be confusing up from down, next.” He let himself go in another spin. Maybe the universe would land right way round this time.

“Not at all. I have it all sorted out now. Just took me a while.”
“So do canyons.”

“Yes, like all profundities.”

Crowley wondered how he could have possibly forgotten how maddening talking to angels could be. Not that he really talked to any others. Not that he wanted to.

He spread his arms wide as he spun out on the swing again, just a little one, for effect. “Enlighten me then, as to your enlightenment.”

“It’s just as I said before. Love doesn’t cease to exist. She created you out of love,—”

“Gffthhhhh…”

“And all that love, it still exists.”

“Mmmvff… You think She still loves me?” If he needed to breathe, he’d have been hyperventilating, but he didn’t, so this couldn’t be hyperventilating.

He did need to drink. A lot. Soon.

“And you, Her.” Aziraphale, he decided spitefully, was also proof, like all the others, that angels could be insufferably smug.

“Gggggghhh! I can’t keep up with you sometimes.” He put on his second best Aziraphale impression¹. “I’m a demon. You’re an angel. I don’t want the feather. I want the feather. I don’t even like you. You’re really rather nice-gghh. We’re on opposite sides, Crowley. She still l-oves you, Crowley.”

Ooh, that was starting to get away from him. Breathing was principally useful for halting a runaway train of thought, and so he applied it liberally. “You really are one mixed up angel. I don’t even know where to begin to tell you what’s wrong with all that.”

“That’s because I’m perfectly right.” He could give Gabriel a run for smug right now, in a contest no one would want to see, in which a certain American President would still walk away undefeated.

“And you're keeping my feather?”

“What is that they say in America? You'd have to pry it out of my cold, dead, fingers?”

“First of all, you can’t die, secondly, they're talking about guns, and thirdly, it was hands-”

“I would die for you, you know.”

“Angel!” He hissed in pain as his inattention caused the chain to bite painfully into his palm. It had nothing on the fresh startling agony writhing in his soul.

Things were just starting to feel like normal again, like they could go drink themselves stupid and chat about the mating practices of platypusses, playtupi, plassiputs, and the blessed angel had to go say something like that! It was all too much.

He slipped off the swing and began walking quickly on the little wooden boundary around the swing set. For a moment, it was just crickets and agitated footsteps.

“I suppose it doesn't mean all that much,” Aziraphale continued uncertainly, “since it's
extremely unlikely, but I, I should like for you to know that.”

Angel. Angel. Angel! You just gave those psychotic sons of bitches your feather, and we don’t know what in Satan’s unholy name is going to happen to you if they try to use it, and now you’re talking to me about dying?!

“You, you can’t just go around saying things like that,” he muttered, keeping the screaming internal, not looking at him.


Why in Her own name was he talking like that? Did he think something would happen, with his feather out there in enemy hands?

He cursed softly. Of course he didn’t.

That fell entirely to Crowley.

“Certainly, I can. I just did, didn’t I?” A trickle of concern entered the gentle voice, in ridiculously understated contrast to the torrential panic raging through the demon.

He turned back to look at him and tipped off the edge.

Into the lava.

“No, you can’t!” he snarled back at Aziraphale.

“Why, because I can’t die?” came the exasperated challenge. He was floored nine circles down and struggled to get his lips working again.

“Wuh, yuh, yeah, for a start!”

Remember that. Angels don’t die. Okay? Okay? He wasn’t sure where he was sending that thought, but he was willing to send it anywhere it needed to be.

“Well, I certainly could die. Would have, if we hadn’t switched places. We both would have. Imagine how terrible that would have been.”

Crowley wanted to pull his hair out in frustration. He started pacing again.

I did imagine. Every minute from when we realised they were coming for us until I saw you again on that bench. The whole 3D, D-Box, Ultra AVX, surround sound experience. And I didn’t even have to imagine then, because I already lived it. I thought I lived it.

Smoke and fire, and all those burning books.

“Aziraphale, stop. We are not talking about you dying.”

“The incredibly unlikely possibility of me dying. Why ever not? We talk about everything, Crowley. Especially after a few bottles of wine.”

“I have not had nearly enough wine, ever to talk about you dying, for me.” He swallowed a few times and managed to work his way up to looking at him.

Aziraphale was all wide-eyed dismay and concern. Crowley put a wary hand up, half-
expecting to be assaulted with a feathery hug.

More likely than not, the thought had occurred.

“Ah, well, I apologize for bringing it up then. I didn’t mean to cause you any distress. I suppose I would be very upset, thinking of you dying. I have been.”

He stopped entirely. “…you’ve been thinking of me dying?”

“Not lately, well, mmm, Armageddon, but, I can’t say it's never crossed my mind.” Crowley didn’t miss his shudder. “It’s just that it has always seemed to me like you have the most to lose, my dear. The Arrangement was such a risk to you. I did worry.”

“I don’t see that I had anything to lose. Nowhere else to Fall.”

“Which is exactly the problem. You are far too willing to put yourself in harm's way.”

“Oh, I,” something like righteous outrage rushed through him and it was very off putting. He made a note to arrange an increase in the price of petrol to balance things out. “*I* put *myself* in harm's way? Are you serious? Did you really just say that to me?!”

He stomped sloppily across the pebbles, nearly hip-rolling right off his feet, grabbing the chains of Aziraphale’s swing to lean over him, yank off his sunglasses and demonically glower into his very soul.

“Yes, dear, I did,” he replied patiently, unperturbed. “You did get the ball rolling, after all.”

“In Eden,” he clarified, while Crowley tried to produce conscious thought.

“4004 BCE? Nice day? Well, it did rain later-”

“Are you saying, I started-”

“Everything?” he waved around randomly, indicating them and, apparently, everything. “Naturally. You were the one who popped up to visit me at my post.”

“Well, you were the one who didn't start smiting.”

“But that would have been so rude, and I was already feeling terribly guilty-”

He let go of the chains, noting the sheen of sunrise gold that was just beginning to kiss the world in light.

“And then you shielded me from the rain-”

“It was the neighbourly thing to do, and you’d made me feel so much better-”

“The mob in Tyre-”

“Well, I did start that-”

“The discorporation in Bethlehem-” Crowley returned.

“You got me moving, so we could save the boys, and what about the plague? You... you were so-”
“You started that riot in Constantinople to get me out of that fight-”

“Well, if you hadn’t sworn that foolish oath-” Aziraphale chided.

“Foolisssssh!”

“Shortsighted! Don’t get upset. It was, but I’ve been shortsighted too. Remember the crepes during the French Revolution?”

“Now that was absolutely stupid. And those church Nazi’s?” Despite himself, a smile creeped it’s way on to his face.

“That did not go the way I planned, but you! What about the Holy Water?!”

“That came in handy. Not my fault you overreacted. Plus, the whole Armeggeddon thing-”

“I’m not the one who lost the Antichrist in the first place! And that plan of yours to raise him!”

“That was our plan! Some credit to the wine-” Crowley added, tipping an imaginary hat.

“And oh, what a well thought out plan it was!” Aziraphale laughed breathlessly.

“We two, angel, we two, should not be involved in anymore plans. Of any scope, or, level of inefficiency.”

“Ineffability.”

“Same thing.”

“It might be. Who can say? It's ineffable.”

“Quite a caveat She laid out there.”

“Covers a multitude of sins.” He sighed, pressing flushed cheeks to the cold metal of the chains. Crowley dropped to the ground at his feet, digging into the pea gravel with long fingers. "Just like love.”

“The two of us-”

“I know, I know.”

“Why are we even still here? I'd have locked us up for reprogramming ages ago. Save some trouble. A lot of trouble!”

“I already told you why.”

“Yeah, I know that's what you think.”

Stalemate again.

“I don’t like this plan of yours now either. Ssss'dangerous, maybe.”

“Possibly. It's important though. Humans risk their lives all the time.”

“They aren't y-” He swallowed what he'd been about to say, “-like us. Even when they die, they don’t die. They just move, wherever they're supposed to be. It's not… extinction.”
“But they don’t know that, do they? They hope or they fear, and in the end they all have to just… step off the ledge and see, don’t they?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Must be scary for them.”

“For us though, do you think we're really just… gone? If it was one of us, Holy Water or Hellfire. Do we even know?”

“Of course we know, that's what it’s for. Scream, yell, no more us. Right?”

“… I’m not sure, Crowley. No one really died in the War, after all. You're all still there, just changed. Seems like She didn’t want to lose anyone, although… I suppose, it has happened. Something could happen. Certainly, they meant for us to die. The question is, is that all that happens?” He gave his head a little shake before smiling at Crowley and breaking his heart. “Death is ineffable, even for us.”

“That's why I don’t like this plan. I can’t, I can't... have anything bad happen to you.” He pushed the words out fast and hushed, a secret, a sign of trust.

Step off the ledge and see.

“I feel the same about you, dearest, but I have, worse than just allowing, caused terrible things to happen to you, and now it is my duty to make that right, come what may.”

“You don’t owe me anything, angel.” Debt forgiven, as it always would be.

“My duty is always to Her in the end. I won’t shirk it, including my duty to you, my dear.”

“You're playing awfully high and mighty on that 'This is my duty' horse for someone who lied straight to her face. And I'd get someone else to lay odds that you were never actually going to let me in on the feather switch.”

“Ah! Well…” Now, there was an red-handed expression Crowley knew very well indeed.

“I knew it! You wouldn’t have told me!”

“I would have, eventually,” he hedged.

“Angel, don’t lie to me, when were you going to tell me?”

“Um, well, I didn’t want to upset you of course, so I was thinking, maybe…after the summoning?”

"So, you were going to let me possibly witness you vanishing away, without telling me?!"

"Well, you didn't tell me, for how many thousand years?"

“Angel?”

“Yes, dear?” Crowley slowly and deliberately flicked up his middle finger and let it pass in front of Aziraphale’s face before sliding it casually over his snake tattoo as if to scratch it.

“So crass,” Aziraphale scolded, not nearly as scandalized as he pretended to be.

“Absolutely. Got some catching up to do. Talking a mad angel down from the edge swings me far too far on the right side of things. I'm gonna reset every password in London next week.
“What will I ever do with you?”

“I don’t know.” He sent a little breeze to flutter the feather out of his hand and Aziraphale grabbed at it frantically before sending him an accusing glare. “Keep me?”

His expression melted into that dreamy look that made him squirm all snakish inside.

“Yes, of course,” he agreed, tenderly.

“Your problem, then.”

The sun broke in full golden glory over them at last, and yes, it brought painful memory to the surface, but it wasn’t quite the same. There was a difference between sunrise and sunset, beyond the sheer directionality of the light. Darkness was passing, light was coming, and even in a moment stilled in time, his celestial spirit knew beyond knowing, where things were headed.

“Crowley?”

“What?”

“Beeeeeeeep,” he traced a line between them. “Love.”

“Shut up.”

But he was pleased.

Chapter End Notes

¹ His first best was in Heaven, of course, and he still managed to look a bit bitchy. When in Rome.
Crowley had quieted, and it was so unusual to see it, that Aziraphale put off their departure for nearly an hour after the sun had risen and the magical atmosphere had let go of the lovely, if solemn place.

What a privilege to exist, to have moments like this, to bask in kind and generous forgiveness from a wry and weary soul, who would deny the underlying sweetness of his personality to the bitter end. Aziraphale wondered what he had ever done right, in his clumsy, stumbling steps through the sands of time, to have merited such a humble companion, who could sing his own praises to anyone who would tolerate him and yet, never believe a word of it.

Oh, my friend, you don’t have a clue about you.

Crowley was managing a delicate feat of balance, back curved against the seat of the swing, feet propped, one above the other against the chain, head resting on the other side, somewhat daringly, risking his hair getting snagged, if he forgot to disallow it, swinging idly under the power of his will. One hand extended lazily down to rustle the little pebbles beneath as he swung. He wasn’t sleeping, as quiet as he was, eyes running up and down the links as though he was counting them.

Vengeance could never be the answer for such incurable hurts, but justice was a noble and virtuous thing, and his soul longed to see it done.

The humans involved were not his targets, should never have been, despite their despicable actions. They had their own laws, and justice would find them in the end, here or elsewhere. Someone else had spun the webbing under this, provided what they needed, taught them the steps, and he was close, so close to being able to follow those delicate strands to the perpetrator, or
perpetrators.

He would know, surely, if he could just feel it himself. The five basic questions had begun to coalesce in his mind, and the answers were more tangible than they had been. What, had been answered, and Where, Anathema had sought and found, it would be their next destination. As for the When, the sheer number of abductions and millennia counted troubled him deeply, and he intended to cut When off completely, wrap it up in Never Again.


The Why, he left, as he always did, to Her. Curiosity Felled the angel, or so Crowley liked to claim.


Who?

The sheer scale of time involved left the options limited, though Crowley was quick to deny any demonic interest in such a dastardly cause and he himself could hardly imagine an angelic one.

Was there a third option?

Pebbles began orbiting Crowley's head, a children's model of the solar system springing up. He abruptly rejected Pluto, then brought up a smaller, oddly shaped pebble to replace it.

Crowley was being so patient, for Aziraphale's sake, and the angel stood up, suddenly unwilling to impose on him a moment longer.

“Breakfast, my dear? And then back to the bookshop, if you'd like?”

Please. Please say yes.

Crowley was up beside him in an instant, doing something tricky with his spine to manage it so gracefully. The angel was delighted by the ready acceptance, his forgiveness sketched out with an easy and astonishing Grace: mercy without cost, demand, or expectation. Oh, he was grateful.

“Yeah, alright the- wha?”

Delight sprung merrily, all the more, with Crowley's reaction to his little surprise.

The Bentley was in the parking lot. “That'ssss my car!” he crowed, all but radiating driver's pride and joy. “You did that!”

Well, honestly, who else was there? But he smiled at his friend. It hadn't been an easy one.

“I was aiming for Tanzania. Seems like I missed,” he replied dryly, eyes sparkling.

Crowley gave him a long, fond look, before heading for the car. “Lucky for you, then.” Aziraphale trailed after, enjoying his exuberance.

“I'm not so sure about that,” he said primly, bracing himself for a ride that would have
turned his feathers lily-white, if they hadn't been already.

“Oh, hello, baby,” he crooned affectionately, running his hands over the hood as he made for the door. “I’m sorry I’ve been so distant. We're gonna go for a long, long drive, first chance. Gotta feed this one first, though, you understand, otherwise he gets fussy. Fussier. What’s the word? Hangry. No Good comes from having a hangry angel around, and without Good, I've got nothing to thwart. Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold. Disaster.”

“Get in, you!” He laughed, disrupting the demon's soliloquy.

“See what I mean?”

Breakfast was both hearty and companionable, and Aziraphale was brimming with good spirits by the time they'd returned to the bookshop. And, if Mrs. Johnson’s son called her to reconcile after twenty years apart and Mr. Wellstone found his lost cat Muffin Top safe and sound, what harm was in that anyway?

Crowley had looked more than a little weary at breakfast and all the more now, as they entered the backroom of the bookshop. He flopped down on the couch almost immediately. Aziraphale kept the sign firmly flipped to closed, adding a little skull and cross bones for good measure.

Hmm. That seemed a little dark.

He changed it quickly to a hissing snake.

“Sure, blame the snakes.” Crowley wriggled a bit, getting comfortable. It didn’t look all that comfortable to Aziraphale, but he made the assumption that it was.

“Actually, Matilda’s got quite a few admirers, but I've made it quite clear that she needs her rest. Frequently, suddenly, and at odd hours.”

“Pinning the blame on her for your lousy business acumen, then?”

He couldn’t fight off the mischievous grin. “She's a godsend.”

“Send back, in fact. I remember, I was there. Why didn’t you just drop her off the nearest pet shop?”

Aziraphale frowned at him much as he had when the demon suggested burning his feather. “I couldn’t! She's a very special snake! Coming back from the dead and all.” He peered down at her affectionately. “She's marvellous, and mighty.”

“So I heard, on your message.”

“On my, oh…”

“First one was the keeper, although I’m keeping them all.”
“Oh! Keeping, you say-”

“I’m thinking of having them played on the radio, all the major stations.”

Aziraphale flushed pink and settled himself quickly into an armchair. Something must have gone wrong with the climate control, which was generally him. It was terribly warm all of a sudden.

Without moving an inch out of his languid sprawl, Crowley lifted a …dictaphone thing, out of the ether and pressed play.

“Crrrrrrrooooowwley… Crowley? Are you there, m’dear, dearest demon friend? M’only one. I just have the one demon. Just the one friend too. That’s you. You there. Are you there? Hello. Oh. Maybe none now.”

He was frozen, and mortified, and recorded him was absolutely pathetic. Crowley’s expression was unreadable.

“Oh, Crowley. I made a bad mistake. Mmm'sorry. So sorry. Oops! I spilled my wine. All better now. Gotta new snake, Crowley. Shhe’s good. She's a good snake. No tempting anyone, but thassalright. Wish you were here, being a snake. Then I'd have two snakes, nice ones. Wait, not nice. Youdonlikethat.”

Crowley nodded in approval as the recording went on. “Two devilishhh snakies. No, she's not devilish. She's… mighty… mag-mag-magni- marvelous. She's good. A good one. Did I say that already? I miss my snakes. Not her. The other one, you. Don’be mad anymore. Not forever, m’kay? I’m so sad now. Gonna quit bein' a angel. I’m a rubbish angel anyway. Everyone says so-”

He clicked it off. “You’re not though. Little bit. Sometimes, but they kicked me out from the club entirely, so who am I to judge?”

“Oh, good Heavens. Ah, sorry.” Aziraphale wondered when his hands wound up on his face. Seemed like a human instinct, basic shame response. He wasn’t supposed to have human instincts, or shame, really. He was supposed to be Good. Must be a hold over from his cherub days, wings over the face. Faces. All four. He wasn’t really remotely human. They usually kept it to one. This one felt near to imploding.

“YouTube could be a fun option. I've got loads of funny pictures of you. Might have to edit a bit. It's forty-two minutes long.”

He had clearly overestimated Crowley’s own sense of shame.

“Oh, maybe I won’t. Maybe I'll just pull it out at opportune times to see what colors you turn.”

Aziraphale knew he was being teased, and part of him was relieved they came back so easily, their little ways. “Crowley, please, I was very upset-

“And smashed. Beat me to it, actually. I wasn’t quite drunk, or sober, enough to call you back and return the favour.” He waggled it teasingly at Aziraphale. “Thank you for the gift.”
“Oh, well, you're very welcome, I’m sure,” he muttered, annoyed. Crowley smiled brightly and the device was gone once more. Aziraphale resolutely steered the conversation in a more productive direction.

“Come say hello to Matilda.”

“Meh.”

He paused. “You don’t want to see her? But you were so taken with her earlier.”

“Busy day. Got summoned. Wanna sleep.”

“Oh,” he tried to master his disappointment, “Well, it would only take a minute. I could bring her to you.”

He didn’t answer for a moment. Aziraphale took a few steps towards Matilda's terrarium and then-

“She's just a snake, you know. A regular ball python. Not actually miraculous. That part was all you.”

He held still, mind turning over words and tone. “Crowley, are you jealous of Matilda?”

Crowley scoffed and flipped himself roughly so his face was buried in the back of the couch and his back squarely pointed at Aziraphale. “Nnggh.”

Surprise gave way quickly to blossoming affection and amusement. “You are!”

“Nggeggk. Am not.”

“You ‘am’ too,” he teased, certainty not enjoying the chance to get back at him a touch for carrying that blasted recording around. “You are such an old silly, sometimes! A silly serpent.”

Crowley flipped back over, knocking his glasses askew. He gave him a very dignified look as he corrected them while Aziraphale fought back a giggle. Well, he tried for dignity anyway, bless his heart. Or rather, don’t. Bad idea, that. “I have absolutely no reason to be jealous of a very mortal snake.” He glared menacingly in the direction of the terrarium, and Aziraphale scooted between them protectively.

“Oh, I quite agree.” He allowed himself to scold a little. “And don’t speak to her like that please, she's my guest, not a willful geranium, and I won’t have you speaking to her in that manner.”

“So sorry to offend your new best friend,” he groused moodily, crossing arms and legs in a huff.

Aziraphale glanced upward looking fruitlessly for support. Shaking his head, he answered with the kind of infinite patience that came with the wings and the halo. If Crowley was looking for reassurance, he could have it in spades.

“She is not my new best friend. She is my lovely, well-mannered, possibly immortal houseguest. You, my dear, are my one and only, true blue, bestest friend in ALL Creation,
“Well, you don’t have to say it like that.”

Matilda was easier to get along with however, by wide margin.

“Honestly-“

Crowley sat up again abruptly, cocking his head curiously. “What d’you mean, possibly immortal?”

He couldn’t quite repress the cringe, and Crowley would have seen the subtle expression from space anyway. “Ah, well… I do tend to get a bit… enthusiastic-“

“Carried away!” His face lit up under his messy red hair, making him look very young. He removed his glasses entirely letting him see the wonder and amusement. If he had to describe him, he would have said Crowley looked positively tickled pink. “You made her immortal?”

“Yes, I-, no, not quite certain. Long lived, very long lived, at least, I expect. I just,” he gestured vaguely, “overshot the mark a bit. I didn’t expect quite as much help from above that I got.” He pulled himself out of his fluster long enough to turn it on Crowley. “I believe She has a soft spot for snakes.”

Golden eyes widened, then narrowed skeptically. Finally, he shrugged and stood, sashaying his way over to Matilda’s habitat.

“You and your over-the-top blessings. You’ve gotten in more trouble for those than anything you ever did for the Arrangement. Bunnies was you, wasn’t it?” He pressed fluttering fingers to his cheeks, feigning delight, in what Aziraphale was sure was a terrible impersonation of himself. "Oh, Crowley, these are so cute. We should have more of these."

“You promised never to bring that up again.”

“And that thing with making dolphins intelligent. Damn big brains, now-“

“That one was you.”

“Wasn’t. It was a blessing.”

“Yes, you did that one in exchange for my introducing Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra. Went rather south, in the end. I suppose that was the point.”

Crowley turned his attention to Matilda and Aziraphale counted it a win.

“You’ve really gone all out for her,” he muttered, brushing her little Matilda sign curiously.

“Yes, well, I had quite a lot of doting to do and nowhere else to put it, besides an angry, drunk, brick wall screening my calls.”

“Hey, I had every right-”

“You did, you did. No argument here.”
Mollified, Crowley nodded and slipped a hand inside to give her a gentle stroke. “So you fuss over her instead of me?”

Aziraphale planted his hands on his hips. “Would you like me to fuss over you, dear?” he replied easily, raising one eyebrow, receiving the answer he expected.

“No! No fussing required. Demons do not get fuss over. We are terrifying, dangerous—”

“Of course you are. Alright, as you like then. I could though.” He bit his lip, trying to hide the cheeky smile.

“No.”

“But I would be quite delighted, to lavish attention on you.”

“Nooo…” After a beat, Crowley hissed at him for good measure. Oh, this was sinfully fun. Not sinful. No. Just fun.

“Wash your feet, maybe?” Aziraphale suggested, “Something suitably servant-like, or brush your hair? Could use it. It’s everywhere, and you need only to ask.”

“I’m sorry to have brought it up in the first place.” The demon pulled at his hair, frowning.

Satisfied that he had made his point successfully, Aziraphale scooped Matilda up and handed her over to Crowley, who accepted her immediately, wrapping her around his shoulder and carefully supporting her head. She flicked her tongue out at him. He wriggled his own in return, melting immediately.

“See, you should be grateful to have little Matilda here, to prevent me from annoying you with all my angelic instincts.”

“She is on my side,” he hummed, ready to do a little fussing of his own, evidently.

“We’re on the same side, Crowley,” he replied tiredly, wondering if he would ever be able to stop having this particular conversation.

Still, it held so much meaning for Crowley. Loyalty in general did. He wondered if the demon had felt alone previously, unique being that he was, and then regretted his impatience, regretted again, every moment he hadn’t made his friend feel secure in their attachment.

“No those sides.”

Oh.

“She says you fuss too much, and she loves her devious uncle Crowley, and she wants epipremnum aureum for her flat.”

Flat? Was he about to be investing in a flat for her?

“Epipremnum aureum? That’s a plant, I take it?”
“It's a vine, commonly known as the devil's ivy.”

“I might have known.”

“You might have, if you put some effort into plants.”

“I will leave that to you, my dear.”

He gave Matilda a little stroke on the forehead before deciding to broach his own insecurity.

“You broke through the hedge of protection then?”

“Hmm,” he blinked a little at the sudden topic change. “Oh, yeah. Had to, to get out the summoning circle. Clashing power, light and dark, pushed it too hard. All back to normal now. 100 percent pure Crowley.” He rubbed noses with the little python. “Yes, I is, isn’t I?”

“Oh… so, I don’t suppose you might allow-"

Crowley’s expression flashed somewhere between knowing and guarded. “Hardly seems necessary, now that you've got the feather back. Oh!” His eyes shifted back to Matilda, surprise and hope mingling.

“Pardon?”

“Oh,” he repeated, more buttoned down, perhaps a bit sheepish. “Just occurred to me that I might not have to worry about getting summoned anymore, at least not for a while. There's a thought.”

Aziraphale didn’t like that confidence. Confidence fell too close to reckless, especially in Crowley. “I’m just wondering if that's too optimistic, dear boy. You were being summoned before I ever gave away the feather, before it ever left your wing.”

The demon tutted softly to the snake, gently setting her back in her efforts to get under his collar. “That's true… but it wasn’t so frequent, or so strong. This last one, it was bad, Aziraphale. Like… drowning in mud.”

Aziraphale found himself hoping Crowley had never actually experienced such a fate. He looked over just in time to see open worry directed towards him on Crowley’s face. It was very expressive face, when he forgot to keep it under glass-es. “I'll be alright, my dear. Don’t fret on my account.”

“Perish the thought,” he muttered, reclaiming the couch, carefully shifting Matilda to rest on his chest. She began coiling herself up almost immediately and the demon made little shushing sounds at her.

Well, he was relaxed as he was ever going to be, awake and sober.
“I’m just wondering, if, you would be willing to let me try to shield you again, just in case?”

Crowley didn’t look up. “I don’t think so.”

A wave of dismay ran over him as he was thwarted immediately. “Ah, well, certainly it is up to you. I should have asked your permission in the first place.”

An apology of sorts, but he wasn’t really sorry for his decision.

Crowley would almost certainly never have given him permission, and if he hadn’t gone ahead with it, this last summoning would have gone very differently. The weariness written all over his friend was no simple desire to nap. He was drained, even with Aziraphale’s shield over him, and the angel was unsettled by the thought of the power involved in putting Crowley in such a state.

“S’allright. Easier to get forgiveness that permission, after all.” His smile was sly.

“I may not have found you without it,” Aziraphale gave voice to his concern. “With it, I could tell right away when they took you, and swept off to your rescue.”

Crowley rolled his eyes dramatically. “The way you say things. Besides, all water under the bridge now, isn’t it?”

Except it wasn’t, and Crowley knew that as well as he did.

Aziraphale didn’t like the thought of deliberately manipulating his friend, but when he suddenly knew what to say to give him the best chance of persuading him, he took it.

“I might need you.”

Crowley rubbed his face and sat up, cradling Matilda close. “Yeah, you might.”

“I’m not sure what will happen, if I can be bound in darkness at all, and if I can…” he let the thought trail off.

“I don’t know either. We were all bound, when we Fell, but we had to be stripped of our Grace first.”

He spoke of it with laboured carelessness, but it was a heavy feeling, to think of Crowley suffering so, and he really couldn’t fathom experiencing it himself. Grace was woven into every fiber of his immortal being. It made him an angel. It defined him as Aziraphale. How did you begin to remake yourself having been robbed of something so inherently you?

Not robbed, not exactly.

“You still being in a state of Grace, I’m not sure they’ll even be able to summon you at all.”

It had been justice too, hadn’t it?

God had taken whoever the angel used to be from him, letting him Fall, leaving Crowley to figure out whom Crowley would be. It couldn’t have been quick, or easy. It had to have hurt, badly.
Aziraphale politely pretended he didn’t see the subtle kiss pressed to Matilda's delicate patterning.

“But you don’t do much better with curses than I do with blessings…” He ached with the disquiet there in Crowley’s softest voice. How had he found a way to make himself this?

Crowley had been to Hell and back, but not quite back, and yet so much further than any of the others. Where had he ever kept the Good still in him? Where had he hidden it away to survive the purge before the Fall?

Had he just chosen to rebuild it? Kindness and love, baked from scratch, compassion relearned from misery and pain?

“Maybe,” something about his tone drew Aziraphale away from his introspection, “Maybe, trying that sparkly thing again isn’t such a bad idea.”

He wasn’t about to argue as his hopes bore fruit. “Are you sure?”

A long, slow nod. “Yeah, if it'll stop you from pestering. Maybe I'll even go to the nearest church, splash around in some Holy Water, see what happens.”

“Crowley, no!” He leapt to his feet in shuddering panic, but Crowley just kept rubbing Matilda’s little head.

“You're so easy sometimes.”

“That is not funny,” he growled, feeling his cheeks flush as his heart began to slow. Crowley was smiling faintly, like he'd gotten something he was looking for, but it wasn't mocking.

“It is to me, angel. Gallows humour. Very popular in Hell, you know.”

It would have to be.

Aziraphale took a steadying breath. “Shall we?” He didn’t want to give Crowley a chance to reconsider. He gently scooped up Matilda and returned her to bask in the warmth of her heat lamp.

“Yeah, alright. What do I do?” Aziraphale scooted his chair close by.

“Nothing, relax. Don’t distract me.”

“You love to order me about.”

“You asked.”

Crowley shifted a little and let his eyes close. “Can never seem to stop. Always gets me into trouble.”

“Yes, and you love it. Now hush.”

The first time, he was uncertain it was even possible, and though he knew now that it was, and quite effective at that, he found it quite nerve wracking to work this sort of a miracle, on his friend, under Crowley's curious gaze. Performance anxiety, of a kind. Angels were apparently not immune. Another thing he was probably supposed to be unaffected by, that he was very much,
He breathed out slowly, carefully gathering up the threads necessary for the task, bright, beautiful, Holy, and beyond mortal sight. Crowley made an entranced sound and reached up to touch it.

“No, don’t-” The strand snapped in an instant, lashing out at them both painfully.

“Ow!”

“I told you!

“You didn’t say not to touch it. Touched the last one-”

“I said not to distract me! Don’t do anything!”

Crowley shut himself up, looking away, expression unreadable. Guilt washed over the angel.

“I’m sorry. It’s very difficult.” He managed a small smile, touching his shoulder so Crowley would turn back and look. “I’m not as good at breaking all the rules as you are.”

Crowley sighed and relaxed again. “You break rules I don’t even know about, angel.” Aziraphale flicked his shoulder lightly in reproach before starting again.

It was different with Crowley awake for other reasons too. Though he knew the demon was genuinely trying to be still, calm, relaxed, the natural restless quality of his ever questioning soul was a lively thing, and it caused ripples and shivers through the world, despite his best efforts. He had managed a first delicate layer as a base, when a lick of demonic energy shattered it again.

He bit down on a frustrated cry at the sting of it.

Crowley didn’t bother. “Damn it! Ah, sorry, sorry.”

“It’s fine. Try concentrating on something, anything. I need you to be stable.”

"Good luck. I have a Hell of a case of PTSD.” He grinned, eyes still closed, obviously pleased with his own joke. Aziraphale ignored him like the practiced professional he was.

"You're like a candle, flickering, shifting. I can’t get too close, but it needs to be tight or it’s useless. Steady now. Think about whatever you like best.”

His third attempt failed almost immediately as Crowley chose him and his energy surged out to wrap around him like a dark caress.
“Not me!” he yelped as it cracked and dissolved again. Aziraphale sighed. Not that it wasn't flattering, but it certainly wasn't helpful.

“Ah, sorry.” Crowley’s cheeks flushed and Aziraphale felt a wave of sympathy for his embarrassment. He ran his fingers through the red hair in a gesture he hoped would soothe.

“Not at all, my dear. I’m not surprised it's difficult. Maybe see if you can sleep?”

For more than an hour, Crowley tried to sleep and Aziraphale struggled to weave a new hedge of protection around him. He felt on the verge of success when the demon, finally truly drifting off, jerked awake with a gasp and a surge of force that knocked Aziraphale out of his chair.

He buried the desire to complain; Crowley was already obviously furious with himself, eyes red-rimmed from unsettled sleep, and maybe more. He gathered himself up, feeling serpentine eyes rest on his trembling hands.

“You’re exhausted.”

“It's not fatal,” he replied lightly.

“This isn’t going to work again, is it?” Crowley seemed discouraged, and he rushed to reassure him.

“It has been done. It can be done,” he insisted, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

“Bless it all. I don’t want you to face this alone.”

Crowley had his head in his hands and sounded so despondent. Aziraphale was moved to pity, which moved the rest of him immediately afterwards.

“Sit up a bit,” he shooed, half lifting the protesting demon in his haste before sliding in behind him. A rustle of awkward squirming and then they both settled, Aziraphale resuming his stroking of Crowley’s hair, running pinched fingers daintily along the short, messy locks, as free-spirited as their source. “Don’t lose heart,” he encouraged quietly, breathing through his own weary disappointment, gentling his own urgency.

“Haven’t got one,” he muttered, a token protest if ever there was one. Aziraphale let it lie, and they passed a few minutes together in quiet contemplation.

A glint of gold caught his eye.
Aziraphale had been created with the signet ring, though it shifted and changed forms as he had. Its seal was meant for him, She'd said, while he was still reeling and wide-eyed from the newness of existence.

“You are not your own, Aziraphale, for you have been bought for a price. Do not forget it, my son. I have high hopes for you.”

He hadn’t forgotten it, though he had not risen to fulfill Her hopes for him, whatever they’d been.

His hand stilled momentarily, and then he was eagerly yanking off the ring. The sudden flurry startled Crowley, who caught at his wrists. “What are you doing?”

“You are not your own, Aziraphale, for you have been bought for a price. Do not forget it, my son. I have high hopes for you.”

“You are not your own, Aziraphale, for you have been bought for a price. Do not forget it, my son. I have high hopes for you.”

“Take this,” he urged, but Crowley held his hands back.

“I can feel the memory of Her all over it from here, angel, and that's plenty close enough.”

“Ah, right.” A thought, and it was dangling from a fine gold chain, just a normal, earthly chain. “Take the chain then. Hold it up before you, and concentrate on it.”

“You think that will help?”

“I know it will.”

Crowley peered at it with interest, a lion's crest, angel wings fanning out on either side and leafy pattern that almost seemed serpentine, before shrugging one shoulder.

“You are not your own, Aziraphale, for you have been bought for a price. Do not forget it, my son. I have high hopes for you.”

“Worth a shot, if you have another one in you. Could go for a shot myself, actually.”

“Hush, I’m working.”

The sun bright rays, gleaming invisibly from the ring shone almost aggressively at Crowley, piercing needles stabbing through the dark. No wonder he'd hesitated to take it.

Carefully, Aziraphale manipulated the beams, bending them around him, a barbed wire fence, a crown of thorns, then he softened it and bound it tighter, drawing deep from his soul, cords of love and hope, twined into tactile light. Crowley gasped slightly but Aziraphale let it pass by him like a breath of wind, unwilling to risk letting go. A shield, a hedge, a halo, finally, it settled into place.

“You're done it?”

It was as well he was pinned quite securely under Crowley’s head and chest, if he'd stayed in the chair, he'd be on the floor. Muscles trembled with a fatigue that had nothing to do with physical effort, though he doubted he'd be able to hold up a teacup at the moment.

Ah, well. One last effort then.
He unclasped the chain and let the ring bounce cool and friendly on the demon’s chest, feeling his breath catch in surprise and ease in relief. “There you are, dear one,” he murmured, smiling as he linked the chain again.

“I can’t. I can’t take this from you.” He touched it, held it like a lifeline. “It’s part of you.”

“Then keep it close, my dear.” Crowley made a noise of protest, reached for the clasp, but the angel pushed his hands down.

“You will have to anyway, because it’s part of the hedge of protection now. On the upside, I do think it’s stronger than the first one.”

Crowley looked up at him, seemed to look through him, very seriously. “Thank you,” he said at last. “I want to be able to help you, if it comes up.”

Aziraphale leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss to his forehead. “Don’t worry, I won’t let that particular secret get out.”

Crowley snorted, doubtlessly eager to shake off the moment. “See that you don’t, angel.”
Chapter Summary

Bit of a high-octane tribute to insanity this one, and I think the longest chapter I have posted at five thousand words.

Have a good time!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was really the maniacal laughter that put things over the top for him.

“Crowley, please! I am begging you!”

“Are you? I should write the date down then. Momentous occasion! I have a lot of them in Tadfield!”

He was having an occasion of his own.

“No writing while you're driving!” He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, but quickly decided that was scarier, as his more deeply rooted angelic senses took over, providing helpful information like how fast they were travelling, the amount of force that would be applied to their corporations if they were to slam into, say, a brick wall or a tree, and ‘oh, by the way, there is a servant of the Evil One right! next! to! you!’ He was very well aware of all three, angelic senses, and there was no need to be so judgemental about that last one.

“What are you so worked up about this time? You come driving with me all the time and you're fine.” Crowley was in good spirits, as he generally was at this velocity. He liked to feel like he was covering a lot of ground.

Well, that had really never been true, even a little bit, although relatively speaking-

“You're going one hundred and ninety miles an hour!” More or less, some fluctuation and rounding was involved.

Crowley turned the wheel a bit too sharply, nearly an inch to the right, and the Bentley skidded briefly. Aziraphale contemplated the odds of his corporation remaining intact if he bailed himself out of the Bentley and he did not care for them at all.

“It's the open road, angel! M40 to Tadfield to meet up with the humans, then on to the Enstone Airfield. Plus, I've been neglecting her.” He pressed his forehead to the steering wheel in apologetic supplication for a moment and Aziraphale couldn’t quite suppress the shriek, which wound up as a shrill and taut cry, which really would have been more fit coming out of a young puppy or a three-year old child. Crowley paid it no mind at all, and Aziraphale was simultaneously relieved and offended.
“Daddy's sorry, babe. You stretch those legs, gorgeous.” The speed edged up even farther, easily cracking more than a few records. It was quite a bit faster than should have been possible in a 1926 original model Bentley, but Crowley didn't know that, so neither did the Bentley, which is why the two of them got on so well.

Aziraphale, very quietly, but passionately, disliked the Bentley. He would disorporate before he ever said it aloud, however.

“Oh, I do heartily repent of all my sins, and snacks and getting drunk with Crowley, and lying about failing the health inspection to that one customer-"

Crowley cackled away listening to his babbling and the gleeful sound irritated him out of his panic. “You know you can’t drive like this when the humans are in the car, yes?”

“Well, I could:"

“No, you can NOT.” He put on his best Representative of the Almighty voice. It wasn’t quite as good as Gabriel’s, but he'd been reliably informed it still packed a wallop.

Gabriel’s voice probably wouldn’t have been any more effective on Crowley either.

“You should be pleased I’m getting it out of her system then.” Crowley was absolutely maddening when he used his ‘I’m a perfectly reasonable demon voice.’

“Pleased is not at all what jumps first to mind! The traffic cop we passed three minutes ago and ten miles back is very upset about the sudden flat.”

“Couldn’t have her getting hurt trying to keep up, now could I?” He cranked he radio up a little as “Don’t Stop Me Now” really got going. “Honesty, Aziraphale, there’s no satisfying you sometimes. Try to be very un-demonically charitable by giving her a puncture to save her skin, and it’s all, ‘She's very upset, Crowley.’ 'Respect the law, Crowley. Don’t break the sound barrier, Crowley.’ We're nowhere near that by the way, although, could be a lark to try-"

“Don’t even think it!”

“I keep telling you, thinking isn’t doing-"

 Except that it is for us, oftentimes-"

“And,” he continued, as if Aziraphale hadn’t spoken, “it's very dismissive to my line of work when you say that. Besides, it would definitely be too much for the old girl, new girl, sort of, post Adam.” He tilted his head, apparently having confused himself. “Not your fault, my dear,” he said, giving the dashboard a little pat, eyes meeting Aziraphale’s quite deliberately as he used the term of endearment, and clearly amused at the affronted look Aziraphale was all too aware he was sporting. “You do have to keep wheels on the ground, after all.”

“Thank all that is Good and Holy!”

“Pass. Now, once I’m flying the plane, that’s a different story, isn’t it?”

“Which is precisely why you are not flying the plane.”

“Whuh, am I not?” He pouted momentarily then grinned. “You want to fly the plane!”

“Oh, I do not think that is at all wise-"
“Well, you’ve honestly surprised me, angel. Doesn’t seem at all like your scene, flying. Well, I mean, with a plane. I assume you can still fly with the basic equipment you were Created with. Make sure you do some tricks. Make me proud.”

“The humans are flying the plane, Crowley,” he said firmly, though a slight twinge of guilt passed through him as he registered how grumpy he was sounding. He made an effort to modulate his tone to something a little less ‘Michael berating the soldiers whilst in a snit.’

“We’re just hitching a lift.” Crowley mouthed the words, ‘Hitching a lift?’ with far more animation than strictly necessary, and raised an eyebrow; he could see it peeking at him from above the sunglasses. Suddenly the demon became frighteningly co-operative.

“Oh… is that the plan then? Hop a commercial flight to Orkney?”

“Yes…” he said cautiously, on high alert.

“From Enstone?”

“Well, it’s the closest airport to Tadfield that isn’t The airfield. Not in any hurry to visit that one again. Also, it’s military.”

“Whatever you say, angel,” he said with the sweetness that foretold trouble as nicely and accurately as Agnes had.

“What?” he demanded testily. “What is it?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all, angel.” He actually slowed down, just a touch, and started humming along with Freddie. “Sometimes I like it when you don’t think ahead.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just what I said.”

Try as he might, Aziraphale couldn’t suss out whatever had put Crowley in such a suspiciously ebullient mood.

Aziraphale had expected to see Newt and Anathema, holding overnight bags and waiting eagerly on the front stoop, horseshoe conspicuous in its absence. It was the other two, he did not expect.

“You could have warned me,” Crowley growled, internal, infernal, snake coiling defensively, threatening to strike. “Nobody warned me, either, my dear.”

“Demon!” Sergeant Shadwell, Witchfinder at large, one of two not also busy with being an inanimate object, and the only one out there with any real passion remaining for the occupation¹, scuttled towards them, pointing menacingly.

“I told you, dear, he's not a demon, he's a gentleman.”

“Uh, not a discerning one, is he?”

“Never one of mine,” came the smooth answered from the woman with a personality, and personal history, as colourful as the outfit she wore.

Despite the unfriendly look Shadwell was giving him, Aziraphale felt his polite smile warm up
several degrees as Madame Tracey took his hand with obvious affection.

“How lovely to see you again, dear lady. I trust you are well?”

“Oh, yes, marvelous, and you and your fellow, I take it-”

“I know what I saw, Jezeb-, m’love,” he corrected quickly under her gaze, and was rewarded with a sassy wink from the uh, entrepreneuse.

“They may be sayin’ mass hallucinations on the news, but you, demon, don’t ye be forgettin’ I still have mah finger.” He shook the digit in a manner the decidedly non-demonic being supposed was threatening.

Aziraphale flicked a glance over to Crowley, who looked highly conflicted between laughing at the angel’s discomfiture,² snarling at him for certain events, pre- apocalypse.

“So glad to hear it, Sergeant.” Aziraphale replied mildly, reminding himself that he had forgiven Shadwell the particularly inconvenient, sort of, kind of, accidental discorporation that had given Crowley such a bad fright, and had him ending up spending several interesting hours inhabiting the well-traveled body of the very accommodating Madame Tracey.

He felt quite close to her, as humans went, as she'd come through for him when he was in dire straits, and possessing someone did rather bring you closer, so long as it was an amicable experience.

Anathema and Newt approached them as well, smiling very awkwardly. Aziraphale returned it in kind. Crowley declined smile, awkwardness, and kindness too, just on general principle, unless no one was looking.

“Oh, so, we were just heading out on a bit of a day trip then-"

“Ta find out where they’ve been summoning demons, I hear. Young Pulsifer here told me all about it.” All eyes turned to Newt, who managed to convey cringy terror with his pasted- on smile.

He took a step back as Crowley sauntered forward. “Did you now? How nice. That's the word I’m looking for, right angel?”

“Uh, whuh, I'll just get the bags then, shall I?” Newt scrambled for them quickly, and Aziraphale quickly opened the trunk for him with a quick miracle when Crowley seemed disinclined to help.

“Toss him in there with them,” he muttered.

“Company rules, Crowley,” he reminded the demon stiffly.

Anathema mouthed “I’m so sorry!” to them when Shadwell and Tracey were distracted. Aziraphale smiled wanly, subtly hooking a hand into Crowley’s belt to hold him place as Newt returned. He ignored the murderous glare, like he had ignored a great many gone before.

“Oh, yer quite welcome, a’course. Why my lady here and I came right out when we heard about you taking on such a dangerous undertaking. He leaned in conspiratorially to Crowley as Aziraphale tightened his grip. “You've done the right thing, looking for m'help, laddie.”

“Say thank you, Crowley,” Aziraphale prompted, risking spontaneous angelic combustion.
“Thank you, Crowley,” Crowley replied venomously.

“Quite the thing, summonses. I blame the witches, myself.”

They all gasped in shock. No wait, the other thing. No one batted an eye.

Anathema, set her bag down, and said tiredly, “You remember I’m a witch, right?”

Shadwell patted her arm pitifully. “Now, I know ya think it so, lass, and there was a time, I was ready to stand up and stop the weddin’ in my great concern.”

Anathema’s eyes widened dramatically. Newt looked like he wished a Newt-sized hole would open up and swallow him, uh, whole.

“But m’private here assured me, that ya'only have the two nipples, so I was able ta hold m’peace.”

Anathema raised an eyebrow at Newt who offered a desperate shrug, hissing “He was going to jab you with a pin during the vows!”

“Why did you even invite him?!”

Newt shrugged sheepishly. “He’s the only one who’d ever given me a good job performance review. I have a soft spot for him. Plus, we could use an expert on witchcraft, right? Oh, uh, I didn’t mean that. I meant, like, bad witches. Not the beautiful ones I married.”

She held him in her gaze for a moment. “Nice save.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, she smiled at him. “Guess you'll do for another day.”

Newt grinned at her. “Couldn’t ask for more than that. Oh.” He rubbed his neck nervously as he became aware of all eyes upon him.

Aziraphale was simply glad they weren’t all on him or Crowley, who was quietly threatening to bite him. There were four overnight bags, scattered around.

“Ah, am I to understand you're… all, planning on coming to Skara Brae with us?”

“You have the facts right! I insist upon it! I cannae leave the young'uns to such dangerous work, especially when there are demons about!” He waved his finger at Aziraphale again to make his point.

He tried again, unable to help himself. “You know, sergeant, you really do have it all quite wrong. I’m most certainly not-”

“To be trusted? Ay, I know it. Plus, m'lady here also wants to come, and she'll have me here to protect her from yer infernal doings.”

Crowley snorted in amusement, mood visibly improving.

“It's just so nice to get out of the house for a while,” Tracey crooned sweetly, giving Aziraphale’s arm a fond pat. The angel found himself hoping Shadwell didn’t carry any Holy Water on him. While he would certainly be the primary target, he couldn’t have Crowley getting caught in the crossfire. He quietly debated the merits of releasing Crowley, and the relative safety
of all involved parties.

He let go of the belt. At least Crowley was relatively predictable, after six thousand years of association with all of his moods. The hiss was fairly predictable, for a start. He stared hard at him, trying to communicate the importance of manners. Crowley glared back at him, communicating the importance of homicide.

At least they knew where the lines were drawn.

Aziraphale relaxed microscopically when Tracey led Shadwell to the Bentley, until he heard the sound that came out Crowley at the sight. The Witchfinder surprised him by opening the door for her³ and offering her a courtly bow as she settled herself in, sliding over a bit so he could clamber in after her.

“This is a bad plan, angel”, he sing-songed.

“It really is, Anathema sighed. “I’m sorry about that. If it helps, Skara Brae is a tourist site, so if we go in daylight, nothing should go amiss.”

“Because everything has being going so well, so far,” Crowley muttered, eyes on the Bentley.

“Try to relax. It's only twenty minutes or so to the airfield, and then we can book the flight.”

Newt and Anathema stilled, and Crowley let out a little whoop of malevolent delight.

“The plane!”

“What? What is it?”

The demon gave him a look of innocence, pure as the driven mud puddle.

“Oh… you, uh, didn’t look into a private plane then?”

“It's a private airfield,” Newt clarified. “No commercial flights.”

“Oh, I see.” He glared at the demon. “You could have said something.”

“And spoil my upcoming fun?” He abruptly shook Aziraphale's hand. “Anthony J Crowley, dastardly fiend, pleasure to meet you.”

Anathema and Newton exchanged worried glances. “So sorry,” she began. “When you said you'd handle the flight arrangements-”

“Oh, no, no. My fault entirely. I just assumed-” How to explain ‘Reservations were something that happened to other people,’ without sounding like three kinds of fool…

Crowley, grinning fit to burst, slung an arm roughly around his shoulders. “You assumed your fantastic friend, Crowley was going to finagle you a plane, and you are so, so right about that.”

Aziraphale felt his jaw drop and for a moment he couldn’t see anything but Crowley, near to dancing in glee. “You mean steal a plane. You can’t just steal a plane!”

“Can and will, I have to now,” he replied with a sad shake his head that was anything but. “My lovely angel friend forgot to plan ahead, and I could never let him down. ‘Sides, my buddy Newt here is going to help me.”
All three began protesting in panic.

“You are not going to corrupt our human friends!”

“That's uh, not exactly my area of expertise-

“-fiery, fiery death, and I haven’t finished my will-”

Crowley let them go a bit, basking in the sun lamp of their cacophony. Finally, he spread his hands calmly and waiting with the supreme patience of the victor for their silence. Aziraphale tried to stop thinking such un-angelic thoughts. Maybe he should just stop thinking altogether.

He rounded on Aziraphale first. “First of all, angel, what's the phrase? Beggars can’t be choosers? You made the mistake, and I am all too happy-

“I can see-

“Hush, friend. You made the mistake, and I am too happy to bail you out. Having the human along just makes it more fun for me.”

“I’m not going to stand by and let-

“Okay, okay, would it help you to shamelessly justify this if I use the phrase “borrow”? Because I know you're itching to.”

“…maybe.”

“Right! Good! Newton and I will “borrow” the plane, and we can return it after we’re done visiting this mystical hole in the ground.”

Anathema frowned at the description. “It's so much more than that. Tradition states that for millenia, those who sought out power over the darkness-

“Bleah, bleah, mystical nonsense, got it, and since you've got my attention, on to your point. Newt is not going to fly the plane, because I, myself, am in no hurry to discorporate today.”

“Because you want to fly-

“You love to question my entirely innocent,” he paused and clicked his tongue, pointing a finger gun at Newt, “motivations, angel, but this is the best solution for everyone.” He turned his attention to Newt, who delighted him by whimpering a little and stepping back.

Sometimes it was fun to be Crowley.

“Thirdly, you are going to help me,” and smile dropped off entirely as he looked back at the Bentley, “Because it is entirely your fault what is happening inside my car right now!”

“Oh, ah, well, that's uh-” Educational, was the word that he landed on, but he felt it best left unsaid.

“Wow. Right there and all,” Anathema murmured, cheeks flushing.

Newt tilted his head curiously, “What's she doing with that cell phone?”

“I don’t think that's a cell phone, hon.”
Newt let out a soft, impressed whistle as Crowley hauled Shadwell bodily out of the backseat and threatened to turn a hose on him.

“You know,” Aziraphale began conversationally, “I rather think he’d be better off using the hose on Madame Tracey.”

The humans nodded in awed silence.

It was a long, awkward, twenty minute car ride to the air field, with the humans packed in the backseat like sardines. Crowley ignored the occasional whimper as he gripped the wheel like he was driving through the burning M25 all over again.

Ten minutes or so in, Aziraphale made an effort.⁴

“You could, do a little miracle, give them some breathing room?” “
What, make it bigger on the inside? Who do I look like?”

“Alright, alright. Just a suggestion.”

His eyes lingered over Newton Pulsifer, anxiously awaiting his role in Crowley’s scheming.

His totally unnecessary role.

“You know, you could just wait here,” Crowley suggested, surveying the field and hangars, waiting for the sun to dip below the horizon.

“Sit here in the car while you cause trouble? I should be thwarting you.”

“Thwarting me means thwarting you this time, angel.”

“I know,” he replied miserably.

Crowley’s lips twisted oddly. “What’s going on with you then?”

They watched the human couples interacting as they had always watched. Madame Tracey and Sergeant Shadwell were excited for their adventure, involved in an animated conversation, peppered with little exclamations and flirtatious laughs.

Heedless of the stakes. He could understand that. If Armageddon worked out after all, why would this be any different?

In contrast, Anathema paced with nervous energy, arms wrapped around herself protectively. Newton followed along behind her, casting anxious glances back at Crowley.

“I’m just- I worry about them.”

“These four humans, or humanity in general?” he asked with the air of someone who already
knew the answer.

“Both… Newton in particular, at the moment.”

“Because of me.”

He wanted to say no.

“Not sure why now, in particular.”

A strange sense of foreboding had begun dragging at him, and he wanted to sink down with it. He sat down in the grass, letting the wheelhouse of the Bentley prop him up.

Crowley hesitated, then joined him. “’Cause I’m tempting him?”

“He’s our friend, Crowley, in a human way. He trusts you. He asked about you, when we weren’t speaking.”

“You think I’m going to let him get hurt?”

“No, no,” he sighed, giving Crowley a fond pat on the knee. “Not purposefully. Not…now.”

The demon tipped his head back, inhaling in sudden understanding. “Think I’m going to wreck his innocent soul?”

“It’s a bit your job, right?”

“It’s entirely my job. A job I have largely put by the wayside since the end of the world decided to have a do-over.”

“Largely thanks to Newton Pulsifer.”

“More him than us,” Crowley agreed readily.

Aziraphale was surprised by the quick squeeze of his hand. “We're borrowing the plane, angel. I'll bring it back. Pinky swear.” He waggled a pinky in front of him, waiting him out until he finally accepted it with a little laugh, worry teasing off a bit. “Newt will be fine. He's a good one. Satan has no claim on this one, you know that.”

Lifting his glasses with one hand, Crowley reached over with the other and tipped his chin so their eyes met. “Aziraphale, you know that.”

“Yes, yes, I do,” but his heart had settled uneasy, unexpectedly, and he wasn’t sure why.

Crowley turned to face him, one hand bracing on the wheel of the Bentley, balancing on his feet in a crouch that seemed almost protective. He glanced around quickly before dropping his voice to a level near noiseless. “I wouldn’t play with him if he was on the edge, angel. You have to know that.”

He was struck by the anxiety there, not about Newton’s fate, but about Aziraphale’s opinion of him. A fleeting rush of power came with the understanding, and a little shiver went through him.

“I know, dear,” he assured him quickly, mood lifting. “I really do.”

A tight little nod was the only response as Crowley stood and the last rays of light died away.
“Showtime?” he asked, gathering himself up as the humans wandered over.

“Showtime,” Crowley grinned.

“So, I uh, go and-” Newt gestured nervously at the twin engine Learjet 35 they’d chosen as their target… to borrow.

“Change of plans, actually, Private Pulsifer. I need you to do something even more daring.”

Shadwell nodded in approval at Crowley’s use of the title.

The resulting swallow was clear as a bell.

Crowley held up a set of keys.

His keys.

“Gonna need you to drive the Bentley, Newt.”

For a moment, even the more sensible crickets went silent.

“Uh, probably safer if I steal the plane, yeah?”

“Probably,” the demon grinned, dropping the keys in hand. “Meet you yonder,” he pointed to a distant location near the main runway. “Look after her.” He ran his hands over the sleek frame. “Look after them.”

“Weh, um, I… have you seen Dick Turpin, my car? It has three wheels. Three. You know? And probably we should talk insurance-”

Crowley gave his shoulder a friendly, yet vaguely threatening punch, but he was looking past him to Aziraphale, whose eyes had gotten very wet without anything like permission.

Newt attempted to give the keys to Aziraphale. “Probably you would be better-”

“No!” angel and demon exclaimed simultaneously. “No, no, no, Heavens, no.”

“He's still wondering when horse and buggy is coming back.”

“I like horses. Mostly.”

“Course you do, they’re all over you. Throw me off with extreme prejudice.”

“I don’t like when they drool on me.”

“Think you're spun sugar.”

“I can hardly help it if they think me attractive. He turned back to Newt.

"They do not like Crowley.”

“Feeling's mutual, and being attractive to barnyard animals is hardly a selling point, angel.”

Aziraphale huffed at him and Crowley, magnanimous in victory, turned his attention back to current concerns. He pressed Newt’s fingers tightly closed around the ignition key. The black winged key chain that Aziraphale had given him in celebration of the Creation of the world two years ago dangled freely. They were supposed to be crow's wings, apparently, but demon and angel
knew better. They had thought it would be the world's last birthday.

“You'll be fine, Newt. Have some fun, put on a good show. Drive like a damned maniac.” He opened the door to the back seat and pointed to the other humans in turn. “In you go, humans. Have a good time being the distraction. Newt's got this.”

“Have you met my husband? Or his car?”

Crowley shut the door behind her before turning a pleading look on Aziraphale. He didn’t need to see his eyes to know there was begging imminent. “Angel, front seat. One piece, yeah? The humans too, if you want, I guess.”

“You don’t fool me for a second, you know!” he cried in a hushed tone, yanking him for a misty-eyed, spine-cracking, nigh-on violent hug.

“Gakkhh, bad angel, lemme go.” He shook him off, before yanking open the door and shooing him. “C'mon, I gotta go commit grand theft airplane.”

“Borrow,” he reminded him primly.

“You're killing me, angel, seriously.”

He vanished in the direction of the Learjet, and Newt gunned the engine with wide eyes. The radio sprang to life with “Keep Yourself Alive,” which Aziraphale thought was rather a good idea.

“Geromimo!!” Tracey yelled as Newt hit the gas like a man possessed.

Maybe the Bentley was more than a demon's car, maybe it was a *demon car.* Aziraphale turned over the possibilities, while hanging on for dear life as Newt screamed his head off in excitement while they veered wildly through the airfield.

Flood lights popped on and four astonished security guards rushed out of the hanger to take in the sight.

Crowley could have been doing a naked fan dance under the full light of day and they'd never have noticed it.

“Aaah!! Left!” the angel screamed amongst the chorus screaming and laughing along in the backseat. Newt obeyed with a little physics-bending angelic assistance and they narrowly missed being decapitated by the wing of a small passenger plane. He could almost swear the Bentley was laughing too as Newt began spinning doughnut after doughnut.

“I'm goin' ta be sick!” Shadwell yelled.

“Not in *this* car!” Aziraphale hollered back, stabbing a wild finger right back at him and forcibly shutting down his motion sickness.

“Stoooppppp, Newt!!” Anathema shrieked, pointing at something Aziraphale couldn’t make out until it was nearly too late. They were heading straight for one of the guards, who upon sight of the Bentley bearing down on him froze, and contemplated all the terrible decisions he made in his life, especially not taking tonight off. That was the big one.

Aziraphale yelped and threw his hands up wildly, without a clear plan. The Bentley’s atoms did a slip-slidey thing with the guard's and he passed straight through lights, chassis, engine, and dash until he solidly connected with Aziraphale, who frantically tried to watch where they were
going over the man's shoulder, which was as flabbergasted as the rest of him.

“What the hell is going on here! Am I dead? I’m dead, aren’t I?”

“Not yet, do stop squirming, please! I’m trying to keep things that way!!”

“You'll be fine, dear. I’m Madame Tracey, and I can see you have a bright futur-"

“Right!! Newt! Right!” The crazed wannabe computer engineer would have been a safer choice to run a nuclear power plant cooling system than to drive the mad devil car. He went left instead of right and both left side wheels went right over a six feet deep drainage ditch. Aziraphale frantically imagined gravity going offline in that ditch, and helpfully, it went along with him as the car flew, actually flew to an extent, rather than careening into the ditch and killing them.

“Ouch! Now, really, I asked you nicely not to squirm!”

“Get me out of this car now!” The guard screamed quite impolitely in the angel’s face. He could hear Tracey tutting at his rudeness and he felt a bit better about the whole situation.

“Fine then, off you pop!” he sighed in relief as the man vanished from scrambling around on the angel’s lap. He hoped it was somewhere nice.5

“Lights! New lights!” Newt yelled gleefully, pealing off towards them as the roar of a plane engine sprang into life.

“Ohh, no, please don’t let Crowley fly the plane,” he pleaded, still desperately flinging them out of the way of planes and apparently suicidal guards. He briefly heard gunshots and put a stop to that lickety-split! “I don’t want to break the sound barrier! You know it will only encourage him-"

The Bentley skidded to a stop and they piled out on to the tarmac. A quick, yet vigorous miracle sent the car into the nearby brush and hid it neatly from human detection. Crowley would like knowing it would be safe for the duration of their trip. The demon was waving exuberantly from the window of the plane looking pleased as punch.

Aziraphale ushered the humans ahead of him on to the plane, watchful to make sure they were defended to the last.

“C'mon, angel. We've gotta make tracks!”

Aziraphale took a deep steadying breath before jogging up the stairs after them. Crowley did something mechanical to shut the door before he could go ahead with yet another miracle.

He sunk into the first available chair and listened to the exuberant voices of his charges and Crowley play acting as an airline captain, advising them to enjoy the flight and to feel free to drop him off any booze that they could find lying around. He should probably have put a stop to that, but the feeling of trepidation washing over him was so strong, it was all he could do just to stay quiet.

Breathing.

In and out. In and out.

Steady on.

Kind of tedious, really.
Kind of soothing.

Aziraphale did a thing he almost never did, and fell asleep.

Still frightened.

Chapter End Notes

¹ How many nipples have *you* got?

² Shadwell *never* called Crowley a demon. Ever. Shadwell thought he was mafia, which was as respectable a line of work as any of the others in their association had, and in his opinion, nearly as respectable as his own.

³ Crowley surprised him by letting Shadwell open the door.

⁴ No.

⁵ He wound up with a tour group in New Zealand. He had always wanted to visit the Weta Workshop. It was a dream come true, until he had to call his mother to get him a very expensive flight home.
Army of Darkness, Yet So Far Away

Chapter Summary

Aziraphale dreams.

So does Crowley.

But shhhh...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cold chills gripped him like iron fingers pressing painfully into his arms. He struggled, but couldn’t move, couldn’t see, couldn’t think.

No, no, no, no!

“Courage, my love. It will be difficult.”

Please.

“I know.”

He tried to spread his wings, to find a way to break free but he was sluggish and tangled. Nothing felt quite right.

"Are you certain?"

“Yes... yes, but I’m afraid.”

“Yes. And so I have given you great courage.”

“Will that be enough?”

He whimpered and thrashed in increasing desperation.

“Is it?”

“Aziraphale?”

Reality crashed hard over him as the voices floated away. Something was dreadfully wrong. He felt strangely disconnected from his arms and legs, even given they were something of optional accessories, like the rest of his corporation. The angel tossed in gasping panic, trying to understand what was weighing him down.

“Hey! Aziraphale, wake up!” Long fingers closed down on one shoulder and he returned to full consciousness with an inarticulate cry, grabbing at someone, Crowley, fortunately, as it turned
out, for he was not gentle in his disorientation, and the demon began shushing him roughly.

"Whoa, take it easy. You're alright."

"Nightmare, is it? Well, sure enough, straight from Hell, a'course he'd be given torments-"

"Shut up," Crowley snapped over his shoulder, glowering at Shadwell from behind his sunglasses, annoyed, "He's not a demon. He's just out of practice. Why don't you get some?" He snapped his fingers and Shadwell's head lolled back in sleep.

"Oh! Sergeant? Is he, uh-" Newt scrambled up groggily to his feet but sat down again when Crowley waved him off.

"He's fine. Sleeping, just like Aziraphale." But there was uncertainty in his expression. "Aziraphale, you were just sleeping, right?"

"Sleeping?" Surprise washed over him along with understanding. "What, really?" He pushed the heavy blanket off, before righting himself, hands flying to his lapels in search of security through routine. Settling down, Aziraphale wondered who had thought to drape the blanket over him, quite astonished they'd managed to do it without him being aware of it. He'd been quite aware of just about everything around him for the vast majority of... always, more or less, as he knew it. "Imagine that. Never had much success with sleeping...or interest."

"You don't sleep?" Anathema asked, exchanging a glance with Newt from where they were snuggled up together.

"I never really understood the point of it," he replied absently, wondering if Crowley thought he was being prissy again.

"You never did give sleeping a fair shake," the redhead offered, popping into the chair beside him. "What's the matter? Too much excitement in the Bentley?"

"That was the best experience of my entire life," Newt exclaimed, eyes squeezed shut and a goofy grin on his face.

"Yeah, she's great, isn't she?" Crowley sighed happily, before catching their eyes, then straightened up and hissed, adding a little extra something to Shadwell's sleeping form.

"What about the, uh, tornado?" Anathema asked slyly, pulling idly at her husband's blanket.

Newt opened his eyes and yawned before asking, "What tornado?"

"You know, the tornado. The one in Tadfield? The only one, ever?" Aziraphale wasn't always quick to take a hint,¹ but he was far more adept at it than Newt, though he was a nice enough fellow. "Remember? You'd never." ¹

"Ohhhh... our* tornado." He sat up and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "Second best. Definitely second best."

"Sex in a tornado. There's a really specific kink."

Aziraphale shot Crowley a mildly perturbed glance as he cheerfully murdered their moment,
before putting it aside. The humans were giggling at each other anyway, so evidently not too
offended.

“I believe I will leave sleeping to you in future. I don’t think I care for it.”

“Seems like you were dreaming.” Crowley’s expression was cautious, searching, and
Aziraphale mutely reassured him with a tight smile.

“Ah, well, there were… images? Voices. I was somewhere else?” he looked around the
plane’s cabin, done up comfortably to spoil business executives, apparently.

“Sleeping and dreaming. How interesting…”

“I do enjoy it. What’d’you dream about?” Crowley’s tone was carefully casual.

The angel opened his mouth to answer but the harder he tried to recall the images, the further
they slipped away, like grasping into a stream. “I… I don’t know. Memories, maybe? No…
nothing that I remember, actually happening. Someone was talking.” He shifted uneasily,
remembering the feeling of dread. “I usually have an excellent memory-"

“S'normal.” A friendly pat on his leg did more to stabilize him than mere words ever could.
Dreams are like that. Just,” he wiggled his fingers, “fly away when they're over. That's why I like
them. No commitment.”

Aziraphale moved to sit on the edge of the chair, then fussed at his clothes, finally
abandoning the attempt to remember. “Speaking of flying, shouldn’t you be flying the plane?”

Crowley grabbed his chest in alarm. “Ooh! I knew I forgot something!”

Aziraphale raised his eyebrows at him, refusing to take the bait.

“You're less fun when you're on your guard against me,” the bane and delight of his long
existence complained with an easy grin. “As for the plane, look around.”
Shadwell was still out like a light, sprawled out in a chair that had folded horizontally into a bed,
bright pink neck pillow, dusted with sequins, faithfully serving its purpose. He'd probably be put
out by that when he woke up to see it, Aziraphale reflected.

Farther back, Newt and Anathema were side by side in their own chairs, her eyes fluttering as
she fought sleep, Newt watching her with a sleepy smile.

They had lost one.

“Madame Tracey?” he asked, baffled.

“It's interesting, isn’t it? Humans are always doing such unexpected things. It’s what makes
them fun.”

“They're all special creatures, and their value is not dependent on how well they amuse you,”
he chided lightly, more out of habit than anything else.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy being surprised by them, and she's quite good at surprises.”
“Is she actually qualified to fly a plane?” He didn’t mean to sound doubtful, but he didn’t want a heart stopping plummet to be one of the surprises.

Crowley laughed softly. “She’s been at it an hour now. Technically speaking, she’s got to be more qualified than I am. Not like I’ve got a license, not that I’d bother about getting one if I wanted one. Cheated like Beelzebub on that take off.” He was so terribly pleased with himself, Aziraphale could not help but smile. “Apparently, she spent quite a lot of time with pilots in her youth. Told me some stories.”

The angel didn’t much like the mischief interspersing Crowley’s usual gangle. Madame Tracey was above his lascivious insinuation. Well… she probably was not, to be honest, but Mrs. Marjorie Potts was a good sort, all the same, and he wouldn’t have her character made a mockery.

“Never you mind about her stories. Just because she… flew with pilots, doesn’t mean she can fly a plane.”

“D’you know, for an angel, you’re always seeing the worst in people.”

“I most certainly am not!”

“Yes, you are, angel.”

“I’m rising to her defense! You’re the bleak one.”

“Yeah, well, there are reasons for that, and the first five start with screaming.” Aziraphale snippily rolled his eyes.³ “Fine. You assume the worst in everything I say, then.”

“And there are perfectly valid reasons for that, which would hold up in any court of law. Look where listening to you got Eve. Cast out into-"

“Knowledge! Progress! And don’t you think it’s time you let that go? It was literally the first tempting on Earth.” Aziraphale wondered how Crowley had developed the talent to look so innocent and so guilty at the very same time. “What I was going to say was that, inspired by the company she kept, the good madam went and got her pilot’s license.”

Really?"

“Emmmm, yeah.”

Well, that wasn’t convincing.

“What aren’t you telling me this time?” he asked knowingly.

“Sss'a little bit expired. Twenty years or so.”

“What?!”

Crowley rolled his eyes with more drama than was strictly necessary.

Par for the course then.
“Oh, wait, someone’s just renewed it for her.”

“I’m quite sure the technology has progressed in the years between, Crowley.”

“You worry about all the wrong things, angel. There are much better-worse-other! things to worry about. She’s doing fine. No loop de loops, but you probably wouldn’t like that anyhow. Keep your feet on the ground, for a change.”

“Keep my feet on the ground? You’re one to talk. ‘Aziraphale! Let’s go off together!’” He spread his hands wide in a dramatic gesture Crowley positively swore by. “Alpha Centauri!”

He found a little satisfaction as Crowley crossed his arms, as per usual, it slick-shifted to guilt. “Desperate times call for desperate measures, angel.”

“On that, we're agreed.”

“Yeah, and haven’t you noticed? It’s usually a bad sign when we agree.”

“Not always. You and your mad plans. Let’s just go tromping off into deep space.”

“Let me just give my enemies the power to bind me, deliberately-”

“Demon calling the kettle black?” Aziraphale suggested quickly. He didn’t want Crowley dwelling on his plan.

“Oh, am I the demon?” He shot a quick glance at Shadwell, dead to the world. “If I don’t write that down, I forget. Doesn’t help that you’ve got the Witchfinder over there quite convinced of it.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I don’t like it when he calls me a demon.”

“I love it.”

“Of course you do. It’s very offensive to imply an angel has Fallen, and you know that.”

“It’s very offensive to imply to a demon that Falling is a bad thing.” He pressed the back of his hand to his forehead in implied wretchedness. “I’m stunned by your insensitivity.”

“Cheeky demon. And Alpha Centauri was a mad plan. Did you really think we could have just hid out there, missed out on the whole war?”

“Thought it was worth a try. You can’t tell me you wanted to watch it all burn.”

His breath caught. Pesky things, lungs.

“No, I certainly did not.”

The very thought burned in his chest. This whole beautiful world, ablaze, collateral damage, Crowley and Aziraphale the only ones left to care enough to mourn its destruction, assuming either or both of them survived it themselves. Crowley’s mood shifted right along with his.

“Do you ever wish you’d just gone?” He didn’t say, "with me," but Aziraphale heard it all the
“To Alpha Centauri?”

“Out among the stars, angel, no one to bother with us? Could have been ni-alright.”

He considered it, but found no comfort in the thought of escaping there, only the thought of profound loss. Crowley and Aziraphale like ragged survivors, six sextillion tonnes of Earth become molten glass and no hope of better days to come, or any days to come.

“No one to surprise us either, my dear. No one to bake or sing songs or write poetry. All of them dying behind us.” He turned away to look out into the clear night sky. It's empty out there, Crowley. Pretty, but empty. Stars and rocks aren’t people. It's not… life. Why do the stars draw you so?”

“I don’t know,” he answered, in that quiet way he used when something hit too close to home for him to go into, “But when I dream, angel, I, I usually dream about stars.”

He settled himself deeper into the chair, kicking it back and drawing Aziraphale’s discarded blanket up and around him. “Uck, wool.”

The angel tapped the edge of the fabric like a benediction and it shifted to tartan flannel. Crowley frowned at him and it shifted to a solid burgundy. “I have standards, angel.”

“I've seen very little evidence of that.”

Crowley snorted and snuggled out of sight under the fabric.

“You don’t want to stay up and watch the stars with me?” He was a little surprised… and maybe, still, a little lonely. Perhaps if Crowley dropped off, he'd visit with their new captain, hear some of her stories, and make a point of remembering them.

“I can always see them, same as you can, if you look,” came the muffled response.

“Maybe I will then.” He had the sense it was something Crowley wanted him to appreciate, and then it was confirmed.

The soft strains of a harmonica caught his attention, music floating from straight from the ether, straight from the heart of his fellow traveler.

“Crowley?”

“Music for star watching,” he answered simply.

*This looks familiar, vaguely familiar, Almost unreal, yet, it's too soon to feel yet. Close to my soul, and yet so far away. I'm going to go back there someday."

“What a lovely melody. Simple, but the poetry-"

“Shhh…”
Sun rises, night falls, sometimes the sky calls.  
Is that a song there, and do I belong there?  
I've never been there, but I know the way.  
I'm going to go back there someday.

A cool swell of yearning rose in him along with the delicate tune. Heaven was so much farther away than those stars, and even further away from what it was supposed to be. Heaven was supposed to be good too, but like Aziraphale, it oft times failed to live up to expectations, at least on the side of angels.

Come and go with me, it's more fun to share,  
We'll both be completely at home in midair.  
We're flyin', not walkin', on featherless wings.  
We can hold onto love like invisible strings.

If he hadn’t already been totally enamoured of his longstanding, longsuffering friend, the little sigh from the blanket would have done him in for sure.

There's not a word yet for old friends who've just met.  
Part heaven, part space, or have I found my place?  
You can just visit, but I plan to stay.  
I'm going to go back there someday.

Aziraphale looked over at the Crowley-shaped lump under the blanket, a lump gathering in his own throat.

I'm going to go back there someday.

The demon could never go back.

But the longing, the longing for home was the most human thing about Crowley, and so rarely shared, so openly, even with his once lost, best friend.

When Aziraphale finally spoke, it was with the softest of tones, in case Crowley had dropped off altogether.

“I think I know why you love the stars.”

“I didn’t say love,” the correction came, sleepy but immediate, Crowley flipping the edge of the blanket off his face, still ridiculously bespectacled, “but let's hear the theory.”

He nearly lost his nerve, but they'd been through everything, so he persevered. “What could more precious, than a little light in a dark place?”

Aziraphale gazed at Crowley, soft-eyed and tender as he’d always been, awaiting his reaction, and Crowley determinedly refused to look back for long moments, the stars gleaming, steadfast, millennial old light carrying on, though many of the stars themselves were long gone.

But the light just kept traveling on, even with the fire gone out.

“Shut up.”
“I didn’t say anything.”

“You're thinking too loud.”

Aziraphale scoffed lightly, shaking his head. “You've done a marvelous job of it, my dear.”

“I know. With what?”

“The humans think I’m the soft one.”

“Keep it up and I'll get Shadwell to exorcise you again.”

“You can’t exorcise an angel. I’m not evil.”

“I can still get him to try. It would hardly even count as a temptation.”

“And if he misses me and gets you-”

“Shh… I’m sleeping.”

“You aren’t sleeping. You're pestering.”

Aziraphale felt the sudden onset of fake snoring was rather much.

“Honestly.”

Chapter End Notes

¹ He would have been loath to admit it, but Crowley teased him so often about not seeing what was right in front of him, that he was quite at peace with that particular flaw.

² There ya go, shippers. Wasn't that fun? Plus, a footnote in a footnote. Bugger Alle This.

³ 'Cause angels can. Gabriel does it once a day and twice on Sundays.

The song is 'I'm Going to Go Back There Someday," by Paul Williams, and it is, of all things, a muppet song, but a haunting beautiful one.

Here, have a link.

I'm Going to Go Back There Someday
Sorry if I tricked you. We are being hit directly by hurricane Dorian and though landfall isn't for about 8 hours, the weather has gotten fierce and people are losing power.

I was hoping to get this chapter out before the storm hit, but it's rolling in faster than anticipated. I'm not sure what's going to happen, but my hatches are battened so much as I can, and I'll be back with the next chapter as soon as I can be.

Thank you for all your support. ♡

Marabelle
Revelation

Chapter Summary

Thanks for all the well wishes. I'll always remember this is the chapter I posted with the power out for two days, sleeping over in my neighbours house.

I hope you enjoy it!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After a one hour power nap, and some not so subtle prompting from Aziraphale, who had apparently come around on unlicensed demons¹ flying planes, Crowley spelled Madame Tracey from the cockpit so she could get some sleep.

“I could do with a rest,” she sighed, giving the controls to him.

“A little sloth never hurt anyone,” he agreed cheerfully, shooing her towards the cabin.

“Wake me to give me the heads up before you start doing any fancy maneuvering,” she tittered at him, giving his shoulder a squeeze with disconcerting familiarity. He shrugged off the odd feeling of clingy human, feeling an unwelcome twinge of understanding for the occasions when Aziraphale complained of excessive human affection.

For her part, the flamboyant woman took his low grade hostility as some sort of cosmic joke, reminding him of Someone entirely else.

He'd dutifully resisted the urge to do any barrel rolls, despite her daring him to, and she gave him another squeeze before finally leaving him in relative peace.

“By the way,” he spoke out loud, though he was alone in the cockpit. “My resisting that temptation had nothing to do with Aziraphale’s threatening to tell the plants about my playing sappy love songs for stars. Not that I would do such a thing.”

He drummed his fingers irritably.

“Which was really uncalled for,” he muttered a moment later. “I hadn’t even done anything yet.”

Most people took silence as assent.

Crowley took it as argument.

“And it would have definitely been a disproportionate response! Their already shoddy
discipline would have gone to pot! It's the Flood all over again, you know, but, with smart ass geraniums instead of all that death and destruction.”

Well, perhaps it was marginally less dire.

He raised his voice a little, giving it a little “push” to ensure Aziraphale would hear it.

“I’d better not be coming back home to deal with plants licking my damned walls!”

Aziraphale did not respond, but Crowley knew the angel heard him.

He was just being stubborn.

“Where does he get off anyway, calling himself an angel, making threats like that about a fellow's plants, that’s what I want to know.”

The demon mentally added that to his list of complaints to take up to the management, if She ever took his calls again.

He wasn’t holding his breath.

Although, he could.

Crowley had once spent about six months in a traveling freak show, before such things became passé. It was a good way to get a lot of attention from a lot of people, and the demon could do a lot of temptation with a little attention. It was a wild, exciting corner of human life, and he suspected Madame Tracey would have done quite well for herself in that era, had she not come around so late in the game.

He'd done a little contortion work and silly games, including breath holding contests. Humans rarely had the strength of will to hold their breaths until they passed out. Naturally, as proof as Her continuing interest in making him miserable, Aziraphale had shown up to that particular show, revived the genius, limp as a wet noodle on the ground, and had it out with him about endangering human lives.

It's not like he'd held his head underwater or anything.

Crowley sometimes felt unappreciated by the angel, just a titch. Give him a week having to thwart Hastur, then he'd get a little respect. Sure, Hastur was nasty, but he wasn’t clever.

Five hours later, they arrived at the Kirkland Airport with Crowley smoothly lying through his teeth to flight control about His Holiness’s unexpected trip to visit the faithful Catholics of Scotland, and Aziraphale tetchily miracling up some helpful paperwork to back him up.

“I don’see any- oh. Oh, here i’ tis!” the air traffic controller sounded very impressed.

“Joseph, look here!”

“Wow, really? The Pope himself come to Orkney? You don'say!”

“Well, an’ they didnae say, did they? You'd think a visit a' this magnitude woulda warranted a bit more time on the telly!”
“I am not disguising myself as the Pope!” Aziraphale hissed as Crowley hastily muted the radio.

“Shh! We'll throw a coat over Shadwell. Same difference.” Next to the stewing angel, Crowley cut into the chatter. “We have permission to land then?”

“Oh, yes, a’course ye can!”

“Me mom'll never believe this!”

Using his best intimidating voice, Crowley poured a little cold water on their enthusiasm. “Now, you are clear that this is strictly top secret, right? That's why we chose Kirkland for His Holiness' arrival, and he's a very important huma-man.”

Aziraphale was turning some very interesting colours. He made a note to get more pictures of the colours for comparison to the drunk dialing colours.²

“And we won’t be having any fuss made, clear?”

The disappointment in the young man's voice was palpable. “Ah, yes, sir, a'course we do understand.”

“Perfect!” Crowley chirped. “Now with that out of the way, I’m sure we can get his Holiness to do some blessings for you while he's on the ground.”

Crowley clicked off to the somewhat revolting display of glee. The display Aziraphale was putting on, now that was something he could get behind.

Hmm… purple. That was probably new.

Crowley liked new.

“You want Shadwell to steal the Pope's identity?!”

“Sure, why not?”

“You said he would do blessings! He can’t really do blessings, and if he could, I shudder to think what he'd get up to with people's nipples!”

Crowley cracked up laughing, and though Aziraphale put up a fight, it wasn’t long before he broke and laughed along.

“You are a snake! And not a lovely one like Matilda!”

“What, you don’t think I’m lovely?” He pouted at him for almost a second before the grin cracked free.

“You knew I would have to do it, with people needing blessings!”

“No, I knew you'd want to do it. You love all that angelic hoohah. Think of it as my thoughtful little gift to you.”

Aziraphale didn't look remotely appreciative. “It's not 'Hoohah.' I really don’t like you.”
“Aziraphale?” Crowley waited for a moment until he knew he had the angel's undivided attention.

“Hmm?”

“Beeeeep. Like.”

“You’re positively incorrigible.”

“Oh, yeah,” he tossed a grin over his shoulder as they touched down. “Thanks, angel.”

The humans had woken up during the landing and after Shadwell’s pink pillow induced tantrum was neatly headed off with a saucy wink and a giggle from his lady, Aziraphale encouraged them all back to sleep for a few hours. He had no desire to bring them to the site in full dark.

Best wait.

He was surprised when Anathema padded silently over and settled cross-legged at his snakeskin feet-boots, whatever. He glanced down at her and raised an eyebrow, then over at Aziraphale, who peeked at her from over the pages of Utopia.

“We have about three hours til the café opens, dear lady. You should try to sleep if you can.”

She smiled and tucked an errant strand of dark hair behind her ear. “Once I’m up, I’m up.”

“How interesting. Once I was Down, I was Down,” he winked at the angel.

“Seems to me like you’ve been sauntering vaguely upwards,” he replied, flipping a page.

Crowley yanked the book from his hands, enjoying the offended sound spilling out of the passionate bibliophile. “That is shameless slander, and I'll see you in the Lower Courts.”

“Crowley, that is my book.” He made a grab for it, and when it was tossed playfully at Anathema, Aziraphale frowned at him.

She gasped a little as the book reappeared in his hands, but Crowley recognized the startled pleasure in the sound. He was made for noticing that sort of thing, after all.

He supposed it made sense; she was obviously drawn to the occult. Well, ethereal, same difference, in terms of miracling, anyway, but the angel would bite his head off for saying so.

Alright, nothing so gory. He would sulk, which was twice as annoying.

“So… I, have a question.”

Crowley had liked Newt’s questions. They were usually guileless, open and free, like his own tended to be. Questions flocked to his mind constantly, flitting in and out in a busy whirlwind of activity that kept Crowley engaged with the world around him.

But she wasn’t Newt.

Anathema was a different kind altogether, intelligent, as far as humans went, and more perceptive than most. Eyes to the dark and the light. Caution, perhaps, was called for.
He plucked a bottle of red wine from the plane's own stash, only miracleing the distance traveled to his hand, and two glasses appeared in similar fashion. He filled them the slow way, and teased handing one to Aziraphale before handing it off to Anathema, and kept the other for himself.

The angel appeared to be absorbed completely in his book anyway, but things were rarely completely as they appeared with either of them.

“Questions at this hour of the night tend to need a little wine.”

“Closer to early, than late,” she noted, but sipped at it all the same. “So, I can ask?”

“You can ask. Doesn't mean I’m going to answer you. Also doesn’t mean I’m not going to turn you into something crawly.” He imbibed deeply, pleased with himself.

“Newton and I were speculating on something I noticed, but I don’t really know how it all works for you, so I thought I would ask.” Her nervousness put him more at ease, and he felt decidedly more cooperative.

Beside him, Aziraphale was radiating interest, but he doubted Anathema knew it.

“Go on with it then. We have to feed him soon enough, so there's a time budget you're working on.”

Aziraphale managed to telegraph annoyance with a flipped page. That would serve him for eavesdropping.

“We get the impression you want to keep your… natures? quiet from those two.”

“Just Shadwell, really,” Aziraphale blurted out, giving himself away to Anathema and amusing Crowley who could all but hear him scolding himself internally. “Mrs. Potts and I are quite well acquainted, in our way. And he has some idea. Just a bit… in reverse. Best kept between us, you do understand, to keep the road easy?”

“Oh, I do! And no one would believe me anyway. Besides, I’m not so typical of my species anyway.”

“Oh, but of course you are!” Her face fell and Aziraphale, nose in the book as well as their business, despite having just the one that Crowley knew about, missed her reaction to his words entirely. He contemplated dumping the rest of his glass on the angel, just to call his attention to Anathema’s dismay, but it wasn’t worth that amount of drama.³

“It’s high praise, bike girl. He likes humans far better than angels. So do I, for that matter. So would you.”

He made a disgusted face, and registered Aziraphale making the same face only when he saw Anthema’s eyes dart between them. They relaxed their expressions at the same time, much to their mutual annoyance.

“Ah, well… thank you.”

Good manners won out over all, even books, if their safety wasn’t in jeopardy. The angel lifted his head and beamed at her. “That is entirely correct, and you are quite welcome.”

“Can you see auras too?” she asked, and they looked at each other in surprise, a moment of
unspoken communication between them.

“Oh, not in the way you do, so far as I understand what I’ve read about it. We do... feel each other, if we're looking.” He gestured with his hands trying to find words humans had never needed and so never created.

“Sort of a... weight, in reality. Threads and...symbols? Signatures?”

He sent a beseeching look Crowley’s way. “Oh, me. Right. Uh, well, I mean, I can smell another demon a mile away-”

“Well, that's the brimstone,” Aziraphale said primly, sniffing at Crowley and then winking at Anathema.

He took it in stride, amused by her uncertainty in how to react to the Angel’s teasing. “It's not always brimstone, but yeah, sort of. Why?”

“Ah... well, yours are the same.” That struck him a bit strangely, and before he could formulate a response, she was rushing on. “When I saw those... creatures, at the airstrip, before the end of the world, the prophesied end, that is, and they were so... dark. Black holes. Evil. So,” she looked at him straight on, bravely, he rather thought, ignoring the part of him that chased ‘bravery’ with the word ‘foolish’, and he nudged down his glasses to challenge her gaze with his own. Her breath caught a little, but she forged on. “So, I would expect a demon to have a dark aura too, right?”

Crowley frowned, leaning back and resetting his glasses, not liking the way this uppity human was trying to get a peek at his inner workings. Surely that had to count against company rules too.

Why was he the only one with rules?

Aziraphale, maddeningly, was giving him the same searching look... more than a look, and, annoyed, he shoved back against the curious probing, seeing the invisible shield flare and shimmer when he did. “Beg pardon,” the angel said quickly, moving on before Anathema grew too curious. “Well, he certainly feels demonic to me.” It was the apology in the look that made Crowley want to bite something. “I mean, my demon, but still-"

He was aware he made some sort of noise thing. He had no idea of what it meant either, and when nothing more was forthcoming, Anathema continued. “I don’t mean to offend you, Mr. Crowley.” It was the assumption of offense that offended him, really. “But, I was just curious about why that would be.”

Aziraphale shifted in the way he did when he was going to give a lesson, and Crowley disliked the way tension coiled heavily in his body as he prepared to hear the angel explain to Anathema what a nice demon he really was at heart. Ggfh.

“Oh, I imagine that's genetic, if genetic is really the word for us,” he answered delicately, and unexpectedly. “We're of common origin, would have been similar in nature, if not personality, before the Fall.”

“What happened then?” came the soft question. “What was the Fall, exactly?”

Now, it was Aziraphale who was tense. “Oh, the Fall? I don’t think we should get into that.”
“No, let her ask. S’fine.” He swallowed hard, uncertain of why swallowing had become such a pressing need. Maybe this was a good time to talk it over, a human around to keep things low key. “It’s why I’m Crowley.”

“It was punishment, I suppose,” Aziraphale began at the same time, cringing as their words tangled messily from the start.

“Punishment or problem-solving, really,” Crowley suggested, somewhat coolly. “Casting us out stopped the War, protected the rest from Falling too, by getting rid of our corrupting influence.”

“It wasn’t like that!” Aziraphale cried, then slapped his hands over his mouth. Newt turned over in his sleep, but no one else stirred. “Oh, I do apologise, it’s… a delicate matter, even amongst friends, we don’t speak of it often.”

“Only when we need to redraw the lines in the sand,” Crowley agreed, remembering an argument fractured and spread scattershot through all their long history. “It was war, full on, full out, and nasty,” he told her quietly.

“The war in Heaven,” Aziraphale launched into the explanation like a guest lecturer on the subject, but his eyes were carefully on Crowley’s face. He rolled some of the tension out of his shoulders and tried to look unconcerned. “When Heaven was all there was and we had no concept of anything different, in eternity before, or after. We were unified,” Crowley was surprised to have his hand caught up, fingers entwined in an mute object lesson, “as kin, as choirmates, serving our purpose as we were meant to.”

Unsettled, he wanted his fingers back.

“It was Earth, before the apple, angel. It was dull and unchanging, ignorant, and cold.”

Their eyes locked hard in unfathomably old, comfortable, but never quite resolved, conflict and Aziraphale gave his hand a soft squeeze before releasing it entirely. “It was a civil war, Anathema, and even on earth, they are always the ugliest kind of war there can be. “Kin against kin,” he sighed, “Brother against brothers.”

It was an aching thought, and Crowley squirmed internally, trying to keep his cool exterior.

“It’s like when police are out there, breaking up domestics, they treat them very carefully, because they’re the most dangerous type of conflict.” Aziraphale splayed his fingers out to illustrate conflict, before clenching them tightly in faded distress. “There’s just so much *feeling* on both sides. All that love just snap, turns to hate in a second, and there’s never been anything like it since. I suppose Armageddon would have been round two, really.”

Crowley let his eyes shutter behind the glasses. They’d come so close to losing everything then. The humans had been the real miracle on the Last Day. “And both sides were for it, because both sides still have scores to settle.”

“They certainly haven’t forgiven,” Aziraphale admitted quietly. “And actually, just suggesting such a thing could be possible-”

“It isn’t possible, angel. That was a once and for all moment. It can’t be undone.” Crowley had felt the door slam personally, and it still echoed in him if he stood still too long.
“Sounds terrible,” Anathema whispered, looking at him like she could see through him. He drew his legs up and resisted the urge to hiss defensively. He was used to that kind of look from certain demons, and one particular angel, but not from humans.


“Those are our wounds, angel. We were the ones that She—” He cut himself off as ruthlessly as She had when he felt his emotions begin to spin out of control.

“I’m sure there were broken hearts on both sides, my dear,” Aziraphale said, sadness in eyes and heart both, that Crowley could feel like a knife twisting. This had been a bad idea. “But you rebelled against Her. What did you possibly think would happen?”

“She could have tried to meet us halfway!”

“I really don’t think She could have—"

“No, of course you don’t—” A flicker of movement reminded him of their audience and he reeled himself in, again. It was more difficult than usual. He’d been so raw lately. “Forget it. It’s all old wounds now.”

“Yes, and they festered and oozed poison, because it was never really dealt with, and then they, all of them.” One well-manicured hand swept up, and the other down, “pushed for another conflict that would only cause more scars.”

“And wiped out the planet,” he added, feeling darker at the thought.

“All the humans,” the angel murmured mournfully.

“It was so close, and no one really knows about it,” Anathema whispered like a confession. Her eyes swept over Newt and took on a wet shine.

Crowley wasn’t surprised when Aziraphale took the woman’s hand and pet it kindly.

“Best that way, sweet Anathema. Spare them the panic, which wouldn’t have done them any good anyway. It all worked out, thanks to you and your young man.”

She inhaled deeply and blew out between pursed lips before smiling at him as he released her. Crowley observed from darkness, as always.

“The other ones, uh, the man in the suit and the woman with the, uh, fly… thing—"

“Neither a man or a woman, technically. An angel and a demon, if you want to be particular.” He waved in a generic circle to encompass the two of them. “It’s all just window dressing.”

Aziraphale nodded in easy agreement. “Gabriel and Beelzebub, our… supervisors, for lack of a better word. What of them?”

“They seemed very determined to… end the world.”

“Oh no, not really.” Crowley rather enjoyed the look Anathema gave the angel at that. “That
would imply it's personal. It isn’t at all. You would all have, more or less, been considered, what's the phrase?"

“Collateral damage,” Crowley offered. “It wasn’t about humanity at all.”

“It really hasn’t for such a long time, but, in the Beginning, it was supposed to be, wasn’t it?” Aziraphale sounded so wistful, Crowley had to clamp down on thoughts of taking out any angel who made that unhappy sound come out of him.

Disturbing how easily that came to him. Sometimes he was more demon than he really wanted to be.

“Guess they missed that memo.”

“Sometimes I think someone needs to get going on fixing it all, but I am told I’m far too optimistic.”

Aziraphale casually rolled accusing eyes in his direction and Crowley pressed a dramatic hand to his chest as the innocent accused.

“Fixing… Heaven?” Anathema asked, eyes wide, practically drooling with wild curiosity.

“Hell too. Earth, maybe, could still use some tweaking. All of it.”

Had he not known the angel for such an epically long time he would have been as astonished as the witch was, but Crowley had known Aziraphale for the lifespan of the world, and he had known what a radical thinker the angel could be for nearly as long.

It still made him tremble sometimes.

“Playing Her, are you? I knew an angel who tried that one once. Didn’t end well at all for him, as I recall. His own son disowned him, nearly out of existence. You remember, nice little fellow. Adam something?”

Aziraphale was flustered and Crowley was glad of it. “Certainly not! I would never! Don't compare me to-”

“Then who exactly do you want to take on that suicide mission?”

“I, no one in particular-"

Crowley slammed his hand hard onto the arm of the chair and both angel and human jumped, as Newt, Shadwell and Madame Tracey gasped awake in surprise.

“What the devil?” Shadwell demanded.

“Near enough,” Crowley muttered, eyes locked on the angel, his friend, his Adversary, his whole. damn. world. “It's not safe to talk like that, angel, unless you're planning on switching sides, and you know that better than I do, or I would not be surprised if our positions had already been reversed.”

Unusually, Aziraphale backed down from the challenge, holding his hands up in surrender. “Calm yourself, that’s not what I meant. I just… is it so wrong to wish someone, anyone, could fix it?”
“I suppose that would be Her job, except that She created the problem in the first place.”

“She created everything, Crowley,” then, recovering himself enough to be snippy, added, “Though one does sometimes wonder why about certain creatures.”

Crowley raised his glass to the angel in salute to a worthy opponent in a mixed up universe. “Me too, angel. Me too.”

“He created everything, Crowley,” then, recovering himself enough to be snippy, added, “Though one does sometimes wonder why about certain creatures.”

“Me too,” Anathema admitted, almost shyly, overwhelmed confusion mixing with electric interest. Impressed with her temerity, Crowley caught her eye and held his glass high, waiting until she understood before meeting his class with a delicate ‘ting’.

After daybreak and a breakfast that Crowley, after a decidedly persuasive conversation with the cafe’s cook, insured had met with Aziraphale’s posh standards, they crammed themselves into a car that Aziraphale believed they’d rented, which was good enough really, and they struck out West for the Bay of Skaill, where Skara Brae awaited.

Anathema eagerly led the way down the road from Skara Brae to Maeshowe, the burial cairn that was their final goal. Skara Brae was once a pastoral village, thousands of years ago, but overtime it had become a haven for occult practices.

“The power you feel is immense, because of the way the ley lines are drawn along here,” she told them excitedly. “They say this is where you have to begin if you want to seek control over demonic forces. Witches have come here for thousands of years.”

“Witchcraft, private Pulsifer, an evil place and no mistaking it,” Shadwell nodded authoritatively before hooking his arm protectively around his lady.

Anathema rolled her eyes into the middle of next week, before grabbing Newt’s hand and drawing him inside after her.

Shadwell made to resist entering the ancient tomb, but Tracey asked, “Would you let your private venture into a place you would not lead him?” and he all but dragged her in as she looked back and winked at them.

Crowley hung back a bit with Aziraphale. The angel hadn’t been himself since arriving at Skara Brae, and it unsettled him to see the distraction in his normally focused friend.

“You alright there?”

“Hmm… oh yes. Yes, I believe so. Strange apprehension. Like… like a dream, I suppose.” He straightened his shoulders. “Best get on with it.”

Crowley nodded uneasily. “Right, then.”

Passing into the ancient cavern carved into the hill, both angel and demon froze.

Power was hardly the word. A wave of it hit him almost immediately, and he took longer to understand what he was feeling than he really should have.
The power here had a signature unmistakable.

Something…

Oh, no. Oh, angel.

Crowley spun to look at Aziraphale, and the look on the Principality’s face was pure anguish. Aziraphale had probably recognized the underlying power even faster than Crowley had.

“Angel?” he asked, dripping with sympathy.

The sudden anguished wail from his best friend hurt him like nothing else.

“No, no!” he choked out, hands open and grasping in the soft air, the humans spun to stare at him in shock and fear.

“Oh, angel-

Aziraphale rounded on him fiercely. “Don’t you dare make light of this, Crowley! Don’t you dare!”

It was light-years away from where the demon was, mentally, and the distance between them saddened him.

“Ah, no, angel, no, no. I am so sorry,” he reached out, but felt uncertain with what to do with his arms, so let them drop, helplessly. He was so, so far ahead of Aziraphale right now, and to watch that shock of betrayal run over him felt like watching his own Fall.

I know exactly what it feels like to be betrayed, to have your whole world turn on you. I know too much about it, Aziraphale, too much. I told you and I told you but now you know for yourself, and I’m so, so terribly sorry.

Hell needed a bigger basement. There weren’t circles low enough for someone who hurt Aziraphale like this.

“What is it?” Tracey asked softly, all motherly concern where the angel was concerned.

He knew that feeling all too well.

Aziraphale shook his head angrily, without responding to her, turning on his heels walking out of the ruins like the Wrath of God Incarnate…

It was Heaven with which he was furious. It was Her, because She would have already known, and let it happen.

“What… what’s wrong?” Anathema asked, worried.

“He’s so upset…” Newt replied unhappily. Crowley dragged a hand down over his face, turmoil churning within him, taking the time to explain to them as time to gather himself up for what must come next. He didn't have much of it.

“This haven of the occult, here? The energy running through it, it's not occult,” he explained over his shoulder, already following after Aziraphale.
“It’s ethereal.”

Chapter End Notes

¹ Pilot license, not demon license. Demons were, in fact, licenced, a little side project Dagon put together to make Downstairs a more Hellish place, and their licenses never expired, not that that stopped them from having to redo the paperwork in triplicate every six months for *ever*. One did not argue with the Lord of the Files, if one was wise.
Crowley, easily bored by tedium, had registered under nearly 1800 names over the years, exactly none of them being Crowley. Aziraphale the Sushi Queen had been a favourite, and he'd gone out of his way to make sure the angel knew about it.
In response, Aziraphale had given up sushi for nearly a year before caving like a natural disaster. Crowley had gotten a positive performance review for showing appropriate disrespect for his Adversary.

² Crowley was, by and large, a slack-off at his job as frequently and grandiosely as possible, with one exception.
He was an exceedingly diligent study of his foremost Adversary, and applied himself to the subject with absolute and unswerving dedication.
So, naturally, he was now planning to put together a photo album of Aziraphale’s many shades of pissed.

³ And Crowley *loved* drama, nearly as much as he loved Azi-the Bentl-his plants.
He would never tell them, but they always suspected anyway, between scoldings, so much as plants can suspect anything.
Aziraphale hadn’t gone as far as Crowley had feared when he’d left Maeshowe, not that he’d let him have much of a head start, but an angry angel could move faster than the Bentley if he wanted to.

Finding him perched on a small grassy hill only meters away from the cairn meant he didn’t really want to.

Crowley settled wordlessly down next to the angel, pulling off his glasses and resting them in the grass.

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Not asking you to.”

Aziraphale sat cross-legged, probably thoroughly grass-stained and Crowley made a mental note to deal with that later, before the angel noticed. A little thing, but something he could actually do.

He had learned about the value of little things from Aziraphale, who could admire the font and placement of page numbers, or the brand of sherry used in the bottom layer of an elaborate trifle, or would search high and low to find the exact, right, real wine to toast Crowley’s new flat.

Sometimes the little things were all you had to offer.

The angel stared hard over the ocean, eyes red-rimmed and telegraphing hurt in every minuscule movement. Crowley studied him in silence, watching rage shift to grief, then to hurt, to disbelief and back through each one all over again. He moved behind him then, bracing his back against Aziraphale’s in tacit support. On another plane altogether, great black wings swept softly along great white wings, creating soothing little eddies in a silky celestial current that no mortal soul had felt. If She had ever caressed them, it felt like that.

Crowley knew.

After awhile, Aziraphale sighed, nearly inaudibly, but heavy with misery.
“I know,” Crowley said sorrowfully.

Compassion should have been foreign to a Fallen angel, but it came all too naturally to him where Aziraphale was concerned.

A hurt to one was a hurt to the other. He wished he could miracle it away. He could only share it.

Aziraphale shifted slightly and tipped his head back to rest on Crowley’s shoulder. It was an intimate position, and he was acutely aware of the white-blond curls nestled against his own auburn strands. “You must think me quite the fool.” Crowley knew shame like he knew Queen, and the shame in Aziraphale’s voice stung like battery acid.

“You know I don’t,” he said, meaning it. “Not ever.” He reconsidered his strategy. “Maybe the crepes thing. Or the Nazi thing. Switching the feathers…”

“You're terrible at offering consolation.” The answer was dry, but solemn.

“I should quit my day job at that hotline then.” He listened to the seabirds, and watched tourists taking pictures.

They were kidding each other, in a way, but neither one was smiling. It was normal though, and sometimes you just needed a little normal.

“Why,” Aziraphale’s voice broke, and Crowley reached back and trailed gentle fingers blindly down his arm until he could take him by the hand. “Why do I just keep thinking they are better than they are, Crowley? I’d like to know why I do that. They tried to execute us, you, me… for the crime of, what, protecting humanity. For trying to live up to my purpose, and do Good. I still, even now-” He shook his head and blinked a fat tear down one pale cheek. “It’s like I can’t retain the truth of it. Heaven isn't kind. Why? Why do I still-”

The sob was silent; it could only be felt.

“Because you are Good.” He swallowed hard as he felt Aziraphale press harder into his back. “And you are kind. You're the best one of us there ever was.”

“Oh, Crowley, how can you begin to think that? I’m probably halfway to Falling, you know. I’m not even close to measuring up, and I don’t even want to live up to their expectations right now, because, because they, because Heaven is, because She-” He broke off with an anguished little cry.

Crowley turned all the way around and pulled Aziraphale against him, his heart lurching painfully and threatening to spill over like a summer rainstorm. He couldn’t bear to look at the weeping angel so he glared angrily upwards, wishing he could meet Her eyes.

How can Someone so heartless create a being with so much heart?

“Stop with that, now. You're perfect to me, and damn all the rest of them, straight to Hell,” he added viciously.

“N-no-”
“Seriously, angel, right now I’d send every last one of the bastards down myself, Her included.”

“Crowley!” Aziraphale grabbed his head and forced him to meet shocked blue eyes instead. “You mustn’t.”

“Only because I can’t,” he snarled. “If you asked me, I sure as Hell, sure as She… sure as you would try.”

Overwhelmed with the sudden feeling that his angel was the only true thing in all creation, rare tears splashed down from eyes not meant to shed them.

Aziraphale somehow managed to tut at him, even broken-hearted. “Stop that, you’re as bad as I am.”

“I could never be that Good,” he said firmly, losing the tears as quickly as he found them, feeling violently protective as Aziraphale tucked his face against his neck and clung to him with all the strength of the Serpent of Eden. Crowley clung back as fiercely as a Principality defending the gate, feeling each shudder as it passed.

“Oh, Crowley, to do this…to use the black arts to put demonic power in the hands of malicious humans, how could an angel become so corrupted?”

Crowley had a few choice things to say about corrupted angels, but he also didn’t want to make the heartbreak of betrayal any worse for Aziraphale. “I just wonder why they didn’t Fall for it. Shoddy attention to details, is what that is. I’d send Her a form letter, but it’s always ‘return to sender’.

Aziraphale started winding the end of Crowley’s fashionable scarf through his fingers anxiously. “That’s the very thing, isn’t it? I almost daren’t think it, but She’s practically an accomplice! She took your gift and delivered it into the hands of the faithless hosts of heaven.”

Shock splashed over Him like the Holiest Water. Angels did not call other angels ‘faithless’. It was tantamount to declaring Most High treason. There wasn’t a stronger insult; it was a ninth circle accusation, straight down to Judecca, where Satan dwelled, and all traitors. Crowley did not visit.

Aziraphale’s voice dropped low, soft and dangerous, causing a thrill of fear to run up his spine. “I am so angry,” he confessed, and it ran like an oath in his blood.

“I’m sorry, angel,” Crowley tried, and it was a pale sickly thing in the face of it all. “I know how much it hurts to have Her not be who you thought She was.”

The Fallen angel wanted to calm Aziraphale, but it would be like whispering into a hurricane at this point. Some things you had to fight with truth, but it was hard, so hard, to make his own confession.

Crowley was strong though, and he hadn’t yet found something he wouldn’t do for Aziraphale.

“I was hurt during the War, inside, mostly. I was hurting long before it started.” Aziraphale released his scarf and drew back enough to roll his soft eyes upward to meet Crowley’s, like some
silly painting of cherubs by Raffaello. His rapt attention didn’t make things any easier, but he pressed on, all the same.

You either trust him by now, or you don’t.

“I was wrecked, a mess, just so damn angry. Falling seemed like a good way to get back at Her.”

Damp fingers dug into his hand as Aziraphale reacted in surprise. “I decided I would spend the rest of my paltry existence living for revenge, being the opposite of everything she built me for. I was going to spit in the face of every plan She ever had for me. It was the worst thing, the only thing, I could think of to do that would actually hurt Her.”

“You wanted to Fall?” The fingers had become painful, and fear blossomed new in the angel's wide eyes.

“No, not, want. I didn’t mean to; I really didn’t,” he tried to explain. “In the end, we all had that one choice. In the last days of the war, I was already on my way out, but after everything She let happen, I was dead set against Her. I wanted to strike back. At the time, I really, I would have been relieved to see the end of Her.”

Aziraphale threw his arms around the demon like he was afraid She was going to smite him right there. He firmly detangled angelic arms and held the warm hands close to his chest.

“It cost me my soul, my Grace, being so angry, Aziraphale, so angry. For a while I didn’t even care. I just wanted Her to feel what She made me feel. I Fell like a meteor, cursing Her all the way down. My Fall was self-immolation.”

It embarrassed him, more than a little, with the benefit of hindsight, and he released Aziraphale’s hands and looked away, but a weary little sigh from the being in his arms brought him out of it.

“I can understand why you felt that way.” Crowley nodded sadly. Treachery was a vile thing, and left it’s mark branded on the aching soul. He was terribly afraid this would scar Aziraphale as little else had.

“I was dedicated to my plan, I thought, at the time. I was going to go about spreading greed where there could be generosity, suspicion instead of trust, anger instead of joy. A sea of opposites to ruin the Ineffable Plan, and any others She had going on. I hadn’t lost the innate ability to see the good things, I found them everywhere, easily enough,” he released Aziraphale's hands and they found their way back to the angel's lap. “Many demons can’t see any of that anymore, but I can. It's just that I wanted to ruin them when I found them. Earth was still just a twinkle in Her eye back then, so I targeted angels. I was more destructive, when I was young, and angry.”

“Did any of them-”

“You can’t make someone Fall, angel. It’s a decision, otherwise your lovely friends Upstairs-“

Fire blazed suddenly in the angel’s eyes. “I am in no hurry to claim kinship with any of them
right now, let alone friendship!"

"Whoa, easy. Can’t say I blame you."

He'd have toasted their Fall from Grace.

"It's a decision, yours and Hers, otherwise, the Archangels would have cast you down instead of trying to murder you."

_Bastards._

He wasn’t over it, not by a long shot. Crowley himself, had actually expected better of them, until they were there, mocking his gentle friend and impatiently waiting for him to execute himself. He supposed they'd wanted the pretense of clean hands. Only the need to protect Aziraphale, corporation and spirit both, by keeping up the charade, had stopped him from making one Hell of a scene.

“Crowley-” It was an order. An order in his name. He could resist his name, but not the anguished angel behind it. “I need to know.”

Maybe he should have kept quiet.

“I didn’t push them over, but I questioned them right to the cliff.” Aziraphale’s eyes were on him, the patience of the tides grinding rocks to sand. “Yeah,” he whispered at last, “Some Fell.”

_Don’t make me name them._

Their faces marched through his mind's eye like a parade of accusation. The poor bastards still thanked him for his help now and again.

Aziraphale was quietly seething. Crowley waited to become a target of his wrath, but he didn’t. The angel had always had more self-control than he had, at least outside the culinary world.

_Don’t hate me for this._

When Aziraphale finally spoke, he made a visible effort to keep his voice calm. “You don’t seem like that, anymore.” The kind little pat on his hand nearly had him weeping again.

No, no… nothing would change his angel; She had made him perfectly and set him in stone.

“Euhh, Can’t really say that. I still live my life lashing out at my Creator, trying to bring down as many humans as possible with me, all because She let me down.”

It wasn’t exactly a noble pursuit, was it? his cosmic temper tantrum.

“You just don’t seem so angry as all that.” He let Crowley go and sat up a bit. With grass flecked over his clothing wherever it had the opportunity and cheeks flushed red and damp from tears, Aziraphale was a mess, but if he noticed the state he was in, the angel gave no sign. “I hesitate to say this, because sometimes you overreact, but since you have apparently settled on hard honesty today, I will dare to suggest you’ve become more merciful over the course of your existence.”

_Euk._

This honesty thing made him feel like a glass house being pelted with rocks… but Aziraphale would never hurt him deliberately. A brief, rather suicidal impulse flooded him, to wage his own
personal war on the cold, smiling archangels, who no longer had any conception of Mercy.

Crowley could at least have wiped the smiles off their faces before they reduced him to a memory and a broken chain.

Merciful.

“Yeah, well, turns out you don’t set yourself against everything you are without tasting how painful bitterness turns out in the end.”

“Oh, my dear,” Aziraphale murmured, eyes touching his for a sorrowful moment, before drifting out to see again.

He plucked a thick blade of grass and pressed his thumbs together around it, blowing through it and producing a sound that made Aziraphale nearly jump out of his skin. “Sorry,” he said, smiling just a little. “Every generation of kids think they’re the first to do that, but it was Eve who came up with it first.” He slid the grass against the fragile skin at the joint of his thumb a little too quickly as he discarded it and hissed a little at the ridiculously dramatic level of pain that the tiny cut produced. “She didn’t invent that one. That was Abel. First blood.”

“First death too,” Aziraphale remembered quietly.

“Yep. This,” he waved his thumb in front of Aziraphale, “Hurts like a crucifixion nail.”

A flicker of annoyance gave way almost immediately to concern. “Oh, dear, just let me-”

He tugged his hand back. “It's also an object lesson. Don’t you think it's bizarre that something so insignificant causes so much pain? I mean, we've got a whole division Downstairs for paper cuts.”

“Your idea, I assume.”

“No, actually,” he held his hands wide in genuine innocence, not that the gesture was any more convincing for being honest. “I’m, wha'd'you say? Merciful.” Aziraphale snorted under his impish smile and Crowley squeezed his fingers around the injured thumb, giving him a little bump on the knee.

“Anyway, seems a little cruel, all this pain, and no one knows why.”

Aziraphale looked back out to see. “It's ineffable, like the sea, like space, like Her. Too wondrous for words. Inexpressible.”

He had the heard the angel say that particular word, many, many, many times. He held to it like a talisman against the hardest days, but he’d never used it with so little hope.

Oh, my friend.

“I don’t know about wondrous, but it’s certainly incomprehensible.” He gave his hand a little shake and Aziraphale caught it. For a moment, the pain grew worse, their natures still warring, then it eased altogether, and the Angel’s expression with it.

Little things.

“I liked Eve, Aziraphale, she was so new, and interesting. She and Adam, they were like nothing that had ever been.”
Aziraphale’s face brightened a bit, before darkening. “Oh, yes, they were. I was so honoured to protect them. Guess I failed at that.”

The Garden was 6000 years ago. Crowley rarely had a thought that was new about those days, so this one felt like being struck by lightning.¹

“It's not the sword.”

“What sword?”

“Wha’d’you mean ‘what sword?’ The sword! Your sword. Bursts into flames?” he struggled briefly to tamp down on the sarcasm, but he did like the reproving look Aziraphale sent him response. “You don’t feel guilty about giving it away!”

The angel's eyes widened in surprise before collapsing into the look of someone who’d been caught fraternizing with a wily demon. “Well, I do, a bit.”

“No, you feel guilty for letting me get to Eve!”

“…Ah, yes. That.”

He twisted uncomfortably, all the fun of his discovery evaporating at the way Aziraphale's guilt revealed itself in furtive glances. “You do.”

Crowley had done that.

“Well, I was supposed to be watching for threats, from the outside, I rather thought, not that there was much outside the Garden at the time.

The demon felt a sadness try to drag him down. Regret? Maybe, not exactly, not from him. Unpleasant, though. “But it was the threat from the inside you really needed to watch for.”

“I should have been watching. I was off listening to Adam name things, maybe making a few suggestions, while you were busy with Eve. I should have protected them.”

Crowley took a deep breath and blew some frustration out with it. Blaming himself, right to the Original Tempter. Just like the angel.

“You did, angel, with the sword, for all the dangers to come. Just… not so much from me.”

He didn’t apologize for it. Never had, but, sometimes, like now, he wanted to. “They didn’t stand a chance, you know. They didn’t even know danger was a thing! That wasn’t your doing, no more than whatever Above has been up to with all this,” he gestured to Maeshowe, just in time to see Newt poke his head out looking anxious, only for Anathema to drag him back inside.

Humans. Such fun.

Slowly, Aziraphale nodded, releasing the burden.
“That was Her doing, ultimately, in Eden.” A spark of old anger bloomed. “How could She set them up like that, Aziraphale, with that apple tree, and letting me in the garden? She knew where I was. Four guardians and She didn’t get any of you to clear the demon from the grounds?” He swept his arm back and forth in imitation of a sword. “I still wonder about that to this day. None of you came after me, because She chose not to send you. Don’t you dare blame yourself for that.”

Aziraphale shook his head, looking troubled, and Crowley relented, annoyed with himself for adding to his upset.

“So you tempted her.”

The angel plucked miserably at the grass, and a nervous flutter went through Crowley. With a will, he stayed where he was, leaning against his friend. “I did, and because of my tempting, She and Adam lost everything, except the knowledge they gained.” He smiled hollowly. "What knowledge it was, too. I taught them what suffering was, because I had suffered. I taught them anger and sin, and death. Eve followed me and she learned what it was like to feel pain, feel fear, struggle with hunger, have your child murder your other child. All the most terrible things on Earth.”

Why had he thought talking about the Beginning was a good idea?

"You may have led her to the cliff, my dear, but you didn't push her off."

“Adam and Eve went through human life first, the blessings and the pain of it, and I set it all into motion, because I was so hurt myself. Humans still do it today, many of them. There's an ugly logic to it."

“How did it feel? Did you, did you enjoy it, at the time?” His tone was light and conversational. Crowley's breathing sped up and annoyed him. Kindness, forgiveness, understanding, like hydrochloric acid on his carefully maintained defenses.

It was hard. It was so hard to admit, even to Aziraphale, the impact of the Fall of humanity in him. It was the little, guarded secret he carried always, too close to home. “Tempting the humans hurt worse than Her rejection, Aziraphale.”

A gentle arm wound around his waist, and Crowley let it pass by, unremarked upon, feeling the warmth seeping into his skin.

“Angels, at least, knew what they were getting into, listening to me. The humans hadn’t done a thing. Innocent creatures, entirely, back then. It felt worse than plunging into the pool of sulfur. The shame of it. Not that I’m sorry,” he added hastily.

“Oh, certainly not.” Eyes met, and smiles too.

“I was just like them though, it hit me immediately, they saw they were naked, and I saw what I had done to them.” Soft curls did little to cushion the bump of a warm head against his own.

“All I could think of, was that deep down inside of me, there must be some tiny bit of who I used to be, that didn’t quite die, and it just… screams at me sometimes, for the things I have done, and still do, and will do again; I can’t even tell you the full extent of it, inexpressible, ineffable?”

"Sounds like it." A little squeeze and Aziraphale released him to pluck a dandelion. He blew the seeds free, and they scattered over both of them, some to stay, some to go, some to be missed entirely.

"Sss'weird, feeling guilty. Pretty sure I’m not supposed to. There was a long time, in early
days, I'd have given anything to carve out that aching part of my leftover soul and leave it in the
desert to die.”

Aziraphale made a distraught little noise. “Not anymore?”

It was a plea.

Crowley turned to face him, pulling back to look at him properly, and it hurt, but if it helped
Aziraphale, he'd bear this and worse. He managed to meet wet, angelic eyes. “It's the same part of
me that still loves—anything, everything,” he plucked a leaf up and began shredding it, “the Good,
the Good that I love.

“Too precious a thing to carve out of you, my dear. Keep your treasure.”

It was much too much. He jabbed him lightly with an elbow, and Aziraphale grunted in
surprise.

“So then, I started hanging out with this angel, who was just bursting out all over with love,”
he waved his hands in the air in mockery of the concept, but the hedge of protection flickered
against him and knocked the insouciance right out of him. “Love,” he managed, “but not just
something, I don't know, bubbly and too sweet. Radical love, a love that can be defiant sometimes,
love that fights like a soldier, love that lies to the face of God, and… I started to value it.”

“Love?” Aziraphale's surprise was touched with a little touch of delight, and Crowley felt
relief at seeing the Principality find his footing again.

“Ghhk, not- the little part of me that survived the Fall.”

He dared to meet Aziraphale’s eyes, and there was peace there, pain too, but peace.

“Did you start that first little chat because you wanted me to Fall?” There was mischief, and
challenge there, almost imperceptible.

Crowley squirmed, and tried very hard not to snake. “I was on the fence. I didn’t want to go
after the humans anymore. You seemed a more worthy opponent.”

“It seemed more fair to go after me?”

He shrugged helplessly at his mindset, so long ago. “Angel, we weren’t five minutes in to that
conversation before I didn’t even want to be a demon anymore.” He couldn’t hold his head up
under the power of that gaze. “Which is, stupid really, just a passing fancy, what's done is done, but
I think sometimes, in quiet moments, that if I had known—”

“You can’t put that on me—” Aziraphale snapped defensively.

“No, no, not on you. I think if I had known an angel could actually be compassionate, even
in the face of a wrathful God, maybe I would have thought staying was an option.”

There was something… intense and calculating in Aziraphale’s face, tempering the betrayal of
Heaven. He watched, fascinated as the angel processed what he had said, and had a brief insane
image of Aziraphale asking him to say 6000 rosaries so he could be forgiven.

He loved that face.

“Fair to say, you beat me blind, yeah? But look at you, Principality Aziraphale, kindest and
best of all the angels,” He held up a hand to forestall the incoming protest, “Deny it if you want, but you'll never convince me otherwise, because I have watched you finding hate and turning it to love, hurt into kindness, pain into peace, uncountable times, despite all the ugly things Her abandoned bureaucrats have been saying to you.” He offered a smile of his own. “She must be very proud of you, considering you're the only one She got right, which is an appalling track record, when you think of it."

Aziraphale scoffed lightly, and he didn’t have to say the word, ‘incorrigible’ for Crowley to hear it.

“You talk like you know Her sometimes; like, you really know Her, *Seraph* Crowley,” and the pointed teasing was a welcome relief for the worry worrying away at him in waves.

“Oh, first of all, *never* call me that again. Secondly, I was never Crowley up there, and you know it-"

“What was you real name?”


For a moment he thought he was going to get a slap.

“That was shameless,” Fortunately, Aziraphale used his words instead. I'd like to say beneath you, however... most of the time, you're properly awful at being a demon, but there are times when you go down the path of evil, puns and wordplay-"

“I'm not, actually, awful at being a demon, Aziraphale. I'm one of the best at being the worst, when the mood strikes, it's just that when I see you, I start believing crazy things, like maybe if an angel can be a little bit bad, maybe a demon can be good.”

That tender look Aziraphale sometimes assaulted him with had lost none of it's power. “I'd trade you back up to Heaven in a minute if it were up to me. The way they've been, you'd best them all.”

Nigh unbearable, he could be at times.

“What evil have I done you that you'd inflict Gabe and the rest of them on me? No, just no. Now, before I forget, third thing, no more talking our stuff in front of the humans. They make me start running on at the mouth, giving away state secrets like what choir I was in. I have a nightmarish reputation to maintain.”

“Of course you do. You know, if you hadn’t Fallen we would probably never have been friends. A mighty Seraph would never have spoken to a lowly Principality.”

Bad angel. In a good way.

“Sure, I would have, if I ever got time off. I was a *terrible* Seraph, angel. Kept changing the words to all the songs. Got bored singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy!’ day and night.”

“You spent a lot of time with Her.”

“...yeah, back then.” He didn’t like to remember those days when he had no concept of Good or Evil. It was all just Her, and them. His own garden of Eden.
“I know She's ineffable…but do you think She's Good?”

How could he answer that?

How could he not?

“I don’t know.”

He watched the angel swallow. “I’m not sure I do, either right now.”

The uncertainty there scared him and he rushed to play God's advocate, despite the nausea involved. “I’m sorry She disappointed you, angel. I really am, but you need to have a chat with Her and crush out that doubt fast. S'risky business.” He plucked idly at the grass. “And, maybe it's not really Her; maybe, it's them. They're not exactly paragons of virtue are they?” Aziraphale ran a hand through the grass before giving it a hard tug, tension returning. “I’m sorry it's so hard to look at how far Heaven has sunk since She left us alone.”

Aziraphale was silent a long time, and he could all but hear the wheels turning, spinning, and burning as he thought.

“She's still here, Crowley. Just… quiet.”

“I think it makes it worse, not better, if that's true. It means She knows what they've done, both our sides, and She just doesn’t care.”

“I… I would like to think She still cares. I just don’t understand why She would let this happen.”

“Me neither. Never did figure Her out. Can’t seem to stop trying though, even now. I- talk to Her still, just about everyday. Never talks back. I’m not even sure She chooses to hear me.”

“Do you really think I should talk to her? Maybe it's strange, but I rarely do, not like the humans do… or you.”

“You might actually get an answer. Better odds then mine, anyway, and even if She doesn’t, I don’t know, at least it's an outlet. If She cares to know what I think, I'll give her every opportunity.” He spread his hands wide, glaring upwards in challenge, grinning a little as Aziraphale let out a put upon sigh.

“Thank you,” he said seriously, getting to his feet. “I will certainly consider it carefully.”

Crowley took the offered hand, feeling the strength underlying the softness, the inherent contrasting conflict that defined Aziraphale’s nature as much as ‘old bookshops' and ‘gourmet meals.'

Oh, and kindness. Plenty of that in the mix as well.

Aziraphale had looked away from the sea and back to the burial cairn, setting his jaw as Adam once had, before starting to move, and like Eve, Crowley followed faithfully after.

Chapter End Notes
Crowley had, in fact been struck by lightning, willingly, in order to convince Hastur and Lidur that it was a great way of getting a look at what they were up to Upstairs. He'd persuaded them it took a few tries, and not being the sharpest pitchforks in the Pit, they'd been struck five separate times before they'd clued in. They'd spent the next decade trying to skin him alive, until he'd swung a favour for Beez and she'd ordered him left intact. Totally worth it.
Stepping Off

Chapter Summary

This one took off on me a bit. I was having a great time until the end got all dramatic.

So, consider yourself fairly warned, drama.

Summary: They do a little exploring, and find some clues, Aziraphale remembers Apple Tree Duty and Crowley has an an incident.

Then Aziraphale gets impulsive and all Heaven breaks loose.

As they tracked across the grass towards the cairn, Aziraphale felt the strange shiver of a demonic miracle brush over him. He glanced back curiously.

“Grass stains,” Crowley admitted when the angel waited stubbornly, eyebrow raised.

Oh, he thought, charmed. He only realised he was making a face when the demon hissed uncomfortably.

“Are you ready for this?” Crowley asked.

He shook his head with a sigh. “Crowley, my dear, I’m not sure I have ever been ready for anything.”

The demon nodded in apparent thought. “A case could be made.”

Serpent.

“Hush, you.” He felt a little of his burden lift.

Aziraphale hesitated at the entrance, and it was as though he was standing on the precarious edge of a high cliff, wind whistling by, promising terror, a stomach drop, a chill up the spine, a dreadful plummet.

At least, if one had no wings to rely on.

Crowley swaggered past him with exaggerated confidence, and Aziraphale swallowed against sudden feeling, stepping in, stepping off.

The place practically pulsed with Holy power, dark tunnel shining like the sun if you had the eyes to see and were putting them to use. For those without, aging kerosene lanterns lit the way into Maeshowe.

Aziraphale ran his hand along the cool sandstone of the walls. Ancient by human standards, but that was a relative term when you'd been on Earth since the original apple tree was a sapling.

He'd been very diligent about watering it at the time. It was clear enough now that he had
never had any idea of what Apple Tree Duty had really been all about.

Aziraphale, my servant, behold what I have created. Bless this tree with the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Guard it carefully unto maturity.

Oh! The knowledge of Good and Evil! That’s a big one! Uh, but whatever you'd like, of course. This little one here then? It's lovely.

Yes.

You must have big plans for it? Seems a bit odd to Bless a tree with knowledge. Is it going to become a talking tree then? That would be quite the sight, really.

She hadn’t answered. God had been a lot more talkative before the Fall. She had seemed so happy with them then. The Principality had wondered if She were angry, or even grieving.

…oh, um, no disrespect intended, Lord. It's a marvellous idea. Very new. Very You!

The human project She had quite a bit of interest in, however. Such fragile creatures, but so creative and full of life. Eternal of spirit, fleeting of corporation. He had thought it quite an intriguing proposition.

And when She proposed something, it got done.

I'd just like to say how glad I am to be part of your Plan, Lord, he offered hopefully, concerned he'd offended.

She didn’t answer him in words, but a sudden burst of affection suffused him and he blinked back tears from these odd corporeal eyes. They did have the strangest tendency to leak at times. Her approval was better than life. He wished She would spend more time with them again, then shook the thought away almost violently.

It wasn’t for him to question Her ways. She was mighty, Almighty. Right there on the tin. She was the Master Painter, the Great Artist, the Author of all things, and Aziraphale was a mere handful of words on Her Blesséd page.

He stroked the leaves gently, pouring the Blessing into it, one kindly caress at a time. It had so far to grow, he thought, and only She knew the impact of this little tree on the great world she had Created.

He was certain it would be amazing, beyond words, beyond understanding.

As She was:

Ineffable.

His memory being as largely impervious as the rest of him, the Garden usually felt like yesterday, but today, he felt the long, long years between then and now.

I miss You, he thought in Her general direction, not that he knew Her general direction.

It wasn’t Heaven. He dared not send anything of himself up there.

Faint voices bounced off the walls from up ahead, fluttering with nervous concern. He found
himself quite touched by the display. Humans were more vulnerable and fleeting in their Earthbound existences that he had ever been, yet here they were, fretting on his behalf.

He quietly recommitted himself to their protection. It was one of his favourite promises, his *raison d'être*.

One of them.

Aziraphale had stopped, lost in his wool gathering, and Crowley had stopped too, trying, without much success, to look interested in the old stonework.

“You good, angel?” he asked with a casualness that shone with concern, if you had eyes to see.

“Always,” he managed, then upon reflection. “Sometimes. Mostly. I do *try*.”

He didn’t miss the flicker of anger in the demon's expression, but it was gone in an instant, and Aziraphale knew it wasn’t directed at him.

With all the angelic presence soaked into the walls, he should have felt at home here.

Heaven was still home, right?

It all felt like ashes to him anyway now. Memory gone to mothballs. He missed the bookshop, Saint James’ park, even the bandstand where they’d fought.

Why did they always fight at the bandstand?

Crowley stopped suddenly, peering closely at one of the walls. Sympathy washed over the storm-beaten angel. If he was uncomfortable in this place, soaked in holiness, Crowley had to be miserable.

He didn’t expect to see his friend throw back his head and laugh, giving the wall a fond pat.

“Crowley?”

“I had forgotten how much fun the Vikings were.”

He took a closer look at the runes carved in the sandstone. “Oh, I see. Bit racy, yes?”

“For a good time, send a missive to Erik the Red,” he chuckled. “More or less.”

“Somethings never change, I suppose.” He had to ask. “What about you; are you, alright? It must feel like a monastery in here.”

“Your little side project,” he held up the ring, still on it's chain, “seems to be holding up alright.” He let the ring drop down and it shifted naturally beneath his scarf and out of sight.

He noticed what wasn't said, and pursued it.

“You can still feel it?”

“Yeah,” the demon admitted uneasily. “It's buzzing at me. I'm not loving it, but one of us has to keep it together.”
For a tiny moment, Aziraphale was offended at the implication, but quickly restructured it to see the protective nature underlying the words.

Crowley may have been an unusual and unexpected blessing, but a blessing he was nonetheless, not that Aziraphale dared tell him that in so many words.

“Oh, there you are,” Madame Tracey was on him almost immediately as they arrived in the main chamber. “Now, now, dear, I don’t what’s got into you, but—”

“Tis only ta be expected, woman. What with him consorting with the devil.”

“Oh, he’s not the consorting type,” Crowley said cheerfully. “All in all, a positive for all concerned.”

“Oh, he’s not, is he?” Shadwell replied, striding brazenly up to the angel, who, under his eyes, apparently went about in demonic clothing. They were decidedly not referring to the same ‘he’. He gave Aziraphale a long look. “Well, I cannae say I’m entirely surprised.”

Crowley snorted, and but Aziraphale gave Madame Tracey a comforting pat on the arm. “I’m quite alright now, my apologies.”

“This is a very powerful place,” Anathema broke in softly. “We've been looking at the artifacts left on display… and we found a loose stone with some very interesting objects hidden away as well, if you'd like to take a look.

The angel smiled weakly and allowed her to lead him through each of the three small rooms that join to the main chamber, pointing out the objects with occult significance. There were a fair few, among ordinary human-made historical doodads.

“It’s said if you want to summon demons, this is where you can find powerful talismans to help draw them in and control them.”

It was terribly disturbing. Heavenly objects cloaked in deceptive darkness. A sheep in wolf’s clothing had clearly been a wolf at heart, all along. “Yes, it seems well supplied.”

He felt for, and detected some genuine demonic darkness, and in a moment pulled out a loose stone where a dagger was hidden. It bore a striking resemblance to the blade the summoner had wielded in his attempt to slay young Mark.

They were all of them young, and corrupted. What chance had they had against Heaven and Hell?

His pity would not have gone over well with Crowley.

He wondered how it had wound up in angelic hands, if it was the result of some vile bargain struck, or captured in a battle long ago. The twin blades were meant for fighting, not sacrifice, whatever the humans had made of it.

He tucked it into the ethereal plan to ask Crowley about later. It certainly wasn’t safe to leave on Earth.

Anathema leaned in, dropping her voice slightly. “Your friend says it's ethereal, and not occult?”
Grief and shame washed over him anew. “Yes, it is.”

“I don’t understand… why would we be led to believe it’s occult then? It’s not accidental.”

“Someone, my own people, I’m not sure yet of the specifics, I’m afraid,”

And oh, he was afraid to know.

“But, the long and the short of it is that angels have been acting wickedly. Using your people as pawns, against Crowley, and perhaps against others of his people as well. It’s quite shockingly underhanded.”

“I’m… very sorry,” she said with sympathetic eyes, kindness threatening to undo him. Was this very feeling why Crowley got so upset with him at times? It really was difficult to bear. “It doesn’t seem like something an angel would do.”

“Yes, well, Crowley says we have excellent public relations.”

Anathama gave him a long look, and he wondered if she was looking at his aura. It felt like she was looking at his soul, laid bare, raw and aching, injured. “Is that your…department then?”

“Ah, no, certainly not. They none of them would love having me be the Earthly representation of angels.”

The very thought made him want to laugh.

That was laughter, yes?

Something wanted to bubble out of him anyway.

“But you are,” she insisted, boldly catching at a sleeve to keep him from turning away. The best of humanity shone in her lovely human eyes and he quite fell in love with the world all over again. “Aziraphale, from what little you’ve told me, when we think of angels, we’re all of us thinking of you.”

Crowley complained sometimes that Aziraphale made him want to shift into his natural form when he praised him.

He had no desire to inflict such a terrifying sight on sweet Anathema… but he understood the compulsion.

“Ah, how kind of you to say-"

“Please don’t dismiss what I’m saying to you,” she scolded, startling him with her fervent words. “If your people are doing wrong, you don’t have to beat yourself down for that. It isn’t your sin to atone for.”

Unusual feeling, to be seen so clearly by a human being. It was exceedingly a rare thing, for Aziraphale and Crowley lived their long lives in relative obscurity, shielded from prying eyes by their human costumes, documentary film makers, hiding in their blinds.

Well, in theory. In practicality, they both had to struggle with excessive attachment. Aziraphale would much prefer to be more hands-on, given the chance. Crowley, by dint of having a heart he wasn’t meant to, tried to keep his work as broad and impersonal as possible.

Just to live with it.
It didn’t matter if Crowley would say it; Aziraphale knew.

“I… I have a duty here as well, dear lady, a duty of care, for all of humanity. Humans have died before their time because of these actions.” He brought up her hand and gave it a soft kiss, blessing her with health and joy while his mind drifted to more grave matters. “Don’t fret about me, my dear. It isn’t all shame. I’m fretting about you, every last one of you.”

“And one more?” she asked, eyes flicking behind him.

He turned, expecting to see Crowley, but only heard him spinning some outlandish tale of being a, “mafioso” for Shadwell.

“Yes, and one more.”

He had been the one to leave the demon so vulnerable in the first place, after all.

They returned to the main cavern to find Tracey and Shadwell listening with animated pleasure to the tempter’s tale. Crowley was quite good at the oral tradition, having always preferred it as more passionate than the written word. There was a difference, Aziraphale had maintained, between lively and passion.

Newton Pulsifer was knelt down, looking closely at the place where the wall met the floor.

“And that's when the Don realised you had delivered his son to the farm couple instead of the Italian Embassy? Oh, you must have caught it hot for that!”

“Hotter than you can imagine.”

“Well, they must’a wanted to skin y'alive for that kind of a mix up!”

“Oh, they did. He was furious. You wouldn't have believed it if you'd been right there with us when it all went down. Came up.” He shrugged, his smile mischief all the way through, “Matter of perspective. I honestly thought it would be the end of the world.”

“Up to no good, I see,” Aziraphale asked him like a parent who'd caught their toddler in the biscuit tin.

“I do try,” Crowley teased, turning to face him. He tipped his glasses down the end of his nose, to look pointedly in the angel's eyes. “Find anything interesting?”

“Oh, indeed. Something in particular I’d like to get your opinion on a bit later, perhaps back at the bookshop.”

A turbulent stream of shifting emotions churned across his face before settling on his normal, cool, casual, ‘don’t mess with me, darling, I've seen Satan pull up his socks,’ expression. “I look forward to it.”

“Hey, is this something?” Newt asked standing up abruptly.

In a fraction of a instant, a flurry of actions took place.

Firstly, Newt drew out an elaborate Celtic cross, carved out of stone, yet shining with gold filigree, pulsing with power. He turned with it towards Anathema, and in course of doing so, waved
it inches from Crowley's face.

Secondly, with a near audible flash of light, the hedge of protection slammed into the visual spectrum, startling the humans, who perceived it as Crowley being enveloped in a radiant explosion, which was more or less the case, and very fortunate for Crowley as well.

Thirdly, without thinking, Aziraphale grabbed Newt’s wrist with more strength than he ought use on a delicate human and nearly dragged the stunned man off his feet, yanking the cross away from the demon first, then away from the stumbling human.

Fourthly, Crowley dropped like a stone.

“Get this away from him!” Aziraphale cried, thrusting it towards Anathema who froze, still transfixed by the shuddering shield. It was Shadwell, of all people, who took it without hesitation, disappearing down the tunnel with it.

“Crowley, my dearest!” Aziraphale knelt beside the demon, who was already trying to stand. He insistently batted away Aziraphale’s hands until the angel stopped trying to lay him down and hauled him up beside him. “Crowley, are you hurt?!”

He cursed in a language long dead before pulling himself back into the present. “No, no, no. Stop fussing.” He smacked at the angel’s hand hard enough to sting.

“Ouch! Fine, then,” Aziraphale released him only to catch him a moment later as the obstinate creature listed hard to starboard. Their eyes met, and the vulnerability there struck at his heart like an arrow, piercing him through.

“Just take a minute now. Get your feet under you.” He whispered, “You’re safe now, love,” without sound, unnecessary between them anyway.

“Ngk.” Ice cold fingers dug hard into his skin, bruising and painful, but Aziraphale paid it no mind, sure he was gripping Crowley just as hard.

He hoped he hadn’t broken Newt's wrist. Someone was whimpering in that direction.

Oh dear, oh dear.

“Oh dear, what was all that about then?” Madame Tracey asked, taking Crowley by the hand and starting to fuss over him. Addled and none to pleased about it, he made as if to bite her, and without blinking, she bopped him sharply on the nose.

Crowley subsided and she resumed mother henning.

“It’s a relic from an old war,” Aziraphale said tiredly. Anathema inhaled sharply, staring at him with wide eyes. He nodded confirmation in return and she grabbed Newt's hand, looking him over. “Newt will be fine, Anathema. It's very specifically targeted. No danger to humans. I do apologize for my part, however. Do let me see to your wrist.”

Cautiously releasing Crowley, who was still subtly swaying, but did not collapse again, Aziraphale moved towards Newt, unable to stop silent tears from spilling. He had indeed broken the wrist.

Anathema clearly remembered at least some of their first meeting, as she allowed him access to her husband, whose eyes were scrunched up with pain. A quick miracle and Newt sighed in relief before opening his eyes.
They spoke in random misery.

“I am so dreadfully sorry-”

“I didn’t mean to cause any harm-”

An inhaled breath, shared in remorse.

“I lost all measure of restraint-”

“I had no idea it was dangerous-”

Anathema glanced from one to the other.

“But, that is no excuse, to harm you like that-”

“Anathema is right. I should stop touching anything-”

Her shoulders slumped, and Aziraphale felt her forgiveness like a balm to his soul.

“Oh no, you had no way of knowing-”

“Oh, you didn’t mean to-”

Pale as water, Crowley managed to shake off Madame Tracey’s attentions.

“And certainly, it is good that you found the vile thing-”

“Honestly, it feels better than it did before-”

They both paused.

“What I’m trying to say is that I’m very sorry.”

“What I’m trying to say is that I’m very sorry.”

He was normally so careful.

“You are certainly forgiven.”

“Apology accepted, naturally.”

Mutual anxiety eased respectively from Newt’s face, and, to an extent, from Aziraphale’s heart.

He would be longer in forgiving himself.

Crowley had restarted his cursing, quietly working his way through the centuries, when Aziraphale identified the weapon’s source, although sticking with English standard this time. Madame Tracey looked like she was trying to remember the more esoteric ones.

“I know how you feel, my dear. I’d best fetch it back from Sergeant Shadwell. It should have been long ago destroyed.”

Without waiting for a response, he teetered towards the exit, none took steady on his own feet.

Alone in the dark tunnel, he became suddenly and intensely aware of his trembling hands. Disguised as a cross to human eyes, the celestial dagger was a Righteous weapon, and Crowley,
more dear to him than life, was not a Righteous being.

Too close. Much too close.

And the humans too. So fragile. What madness had taken him, that he thought he had the right to put them in danger?

Crowley was absolutely right. He was reckless, and it was one thing to risk his own existence to confront this villainy, but it was another thing entirely to risk the others.

Not inclined to snap judgements, but capable of them in the hour of need,

Aziraphale made one.

“Ah, demon. I might have known you'd be the one to come for this evil thing. I’d half a mind ta toss it in the sea, let the fishes deal with it.”

“Yes, Sergeant, and it would no doubt find it's way back to shore and into evil hands once more.” The words came out with more tension than he intended, and he took a stabilizing breath. “My apologies, what I mean to say, is that it was great judgement when you acted so swiftly to remove the thing from those who would be harmed by it. I am heartily grateful.”

Shadwell surveyed him as though debating whether he needed his bell, book, and candle.

“I take it you're here ta collect it, then?”

He bit back a mild profanity. Crowley would be on to him soon enough and his time grew short. “Yes, indeed, Sergeant, as a-a demon, I’m the only one who can safely handle it, long enough to see it out of this world.”

He closed his eyes regretfully, feeling the outright lie burning through him, not for nearly the first time. When he opened them, he was nearly nose to nose with Shadwell.

“Eep!”

“You're a demon, then? Y’admit to it? You've never admitted to it, before. Tha'ss interesting.”

“Well, I've decided to become a more honest, ah, demon. Time to embrace, who I am, down at the core.”

He wished he had just snatched it, but would that count as theft, not to mention the appalling rudeness of such an act.

“D’you know, that you flinch every time you say the word, ‘Demon’, demon? Not when I say it, but when *you* do? Now, why would that be?”

“Sergeant Shadwell, I really, very much need to get that object and be on my way.”

Shadwell leaned suddenly back as though Aziraphale had deeply offended him. “You're not a demon at all, are ya?”

If things weren’t so desperate, he would have launched into an angelic solo of the Hallelujah Chorus, and even all by his lonesome, it would have triumphed over the best human
chorales in the world.

But there simply wasn’t time.

“Shadwell, please, I really have to go.”

“What are ye off to, in such a rush all of a sudden?”

“Yeah, angel, I’d like to know that one too.”

Muttering impatient apologies, Aziraphale took the cross, which shifted and revealed its true nature. “You are really very difficult, for a human,” he added, backing up well away from Crowley.

“Sergeant, if you could go see to the others, while I deal with this one?”

“He’s not a demon, you know.”

“Fancy that,” Crowley said, holding Aziraphale frozen.

“We should’ve known, really. He’s a terrible liar.”

Crowley smiled, like a snake.

“You are so right about that. Off you pop.”

In a rare display of basic intelligence, Shadwell disappeared back into Maeshowe. He was having quite a good hour.

“Where are you going?” Crowley asked softly, dangerously.

Aziraphale dipped his head sideways in challenge. “Seems like you’ve guessed.”

“Need to hear you say it.”

“Crowley-” he turned away and the demon was already waiting for him. Teleportation was draining and it said much about Crowley’s state of mind that he was willing to do it so lightly.

“Tell me.”

“I don’t want you to worry-“

“Too late. Tell me!”

“Heaven!” he shouted back, desperation forcing the words out of him. “I’m going to march straight up to Gabriel’s office and slam this wretched thing on his desk, and demand they do something about it!”

Crowley’s mouth hung open in abject horror. He licked his lips, anger evaporating into visible fear. “You can’t, possibly, think that is going to do anything but get you killed.”

“That doesn’t matter!”

“It sure as Hell does!”
“Crowley, I need to clean house,” he said, angrily, almost feral.

The demon threw his hands up in exasperation. “Oh, how ambitious of you! She ‘cleaned house’ once too, Aziraphale, and look at all the Good that did!”

Aziraphale stood stiffly, trying to find some semblance of self-control, while Crowley circled him, continuing.

“But now, the idiot Guardian of the Eastern Gate thinks he's going to take it on all by himself?! You'll die, Aziraphale! Can you really believe there's an ounce of mercy left in any of those soulless bastards?”

He managed to muster something like dignity. “I will die trying to do the right thing.”

“You'll die for nothing! For no reason! You didn’t see them, angel, smirking at you up there, and you didn’t feel how empty your damned bookshop was, filled with flame, and after you've gone, you won’t be around to feel my world end without you in it.”

The hiccuping sob brought Aziraphale crashing down and he threw his hands over his face, just breathing.

The dagger was thirsty in his hand, and the demonic blade pinged softly in his mind. The promise of blood and destruction was suffocating, and it had to be stopped.

Whatever the cost.

He was only a handful of words in Her ineffable plan, but maybe he could make them count for something before She turned the page.

But how to make Crowley understand that?

When he thought he could manage it, Aziraphale spoke softly, heavily, pain pouring out of him like he was sweating blood. “You have to try to understand, Crowley, please?”

His friend stood there, dangling from his shoulders, defeat written over him, as despair painted itself on Aziraphale. Finally, he nodded.

“All this time, I thought it was me. Just me. I was on earth, out on the lonely outpost, changing slowly, by millimeters, by ounces, maybe even ‘sauntering vaguely downward’ as you like name it for yourself. Sometimes I thought…if that’s how it was for you, Crowley, then maybe I was Falling, but it didn’t matter. Heaven was still there, and if I failed, surely they’d send someone better to do things right.”

“Aziraphale, no,” he choked out, starting to move towards him, but shuddering to a stop when he held a hand out between them, gesturing with the celestial weapon.

“I see what you have seen now, my dear, that it isn’t just me, Crowley, it's them. They are the ones who have changed. They are the ones who forgot how to be angels. They, some of them anyway, have been conspiring against Her Will, against the Plan, determine corrupt the humans with power they weren’t meant to have, and they and enslaved you to do it.”

“It's not worth your life, Aziraphale,” he nearly moaned the words.

“It wasn’t worth the human lives they stole either, my dear.” He cringed as he said it, knowing it would cut deeply, and it did. “It has to be stopped. I do have to, to try and fix this, stop
them, whether it's one angel, or a thousand, or a million.”

“You can’t take on all of Heaven, angel!”

“I can’t let this stand, Crowley.”

The very picture of wretchedness, Crowley lurched forward again, pleading, staggering over into begging.

“Just… just think on it first, angel. Research, plan, find out who specifically, who is doing this, before you go charging up there all Hellfire and Brimstone.”

The word choice evidently startled Crowley out of his own thoughts.

“I don’t want you to get cast out, angel.”

“Maybe it's worth it. Maybe it's the right thing to do now.” He felt strangely detached from the thought that had kept him terror for so long. “Maybe I could best serve Her by stepping off the edge at last.”

Crowley didn’t share this disorienting peacefulness. He was in full on panic, bordering on hysteric. “No, no, no, that isn’t serving Her! Falling is rejecting Her! She, She'll be devastated to lose you, Aziraphale, the only Good one! You can’t let Her down like that, okay? You know that.”

“Maybe I have been wrong about everything I thought I knew. Maybe She isn't-"

“Stop!! Stop. I told you before, that is not a safe way to think. You can’t keep walking to that cliff. I can feel it, angel! Please, please stop. I can’t see this.”

“Shh, shh… Crowley,” the peace abandoned him abruptly and all he could feel was the demon's anguish. “I haven’t decided anything yet, except that that I can’t let this stay a human problem. I need to go to the source.”

Crowley trembled like a red in the face of his determination, and watching such stark pain in his normally careful expression was a terrible hardship for the angel to bear. “Not now, okay? Not just yet. Research, find allies. We have to get the humans home safe anyway, okay?”

There was a time once, when he could deny that sort of a plea from his dearest friend, but that time was long since gone. It wasn’t such a large request. Maybe even sensible. “Alright, alright. We'll get the humans home first.”

Crowley nodded, nearly wobbling himself off his feet again.

Too, too close.
Free Falling

Chapter Summary

Well... ah, sometime ago I warned you about emotional whiplash.

This chapter is definitely guilty of that. My apologies. Not in my usual direct though, so perhaps that's something.

Insanity. By all concerned, and especially me. I hope it isn't awful. I suspect it is mostly entertaining.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In a word, tense.

At Madame Tracey's insistence that they had a come a long way and deserved a nice holiday, and with Aziraphale and Crowley too preoccupied to put up more than a token protest against her unconquerable will, they spent the day in Orkney. They left the ruins, and ended up visiting the nearby village to tour the historic sites and visit quaint little shops for scented candles, though Shadwell insisted Pumpkin Spice was a tool of the devil, and useless for dispensing with witches. Seemed true enough, Anathema bought six of them. Always on the cutting edge of modern, Crowley preferred electricity himself. There was no point in going backwards.

Normally, Aziraphale would have been delighted at the excursion, and Crowley would have been pleased enough to watch Aziraphale being pleased, but their minds were on the turbulent waters of the wider world, and so they puttered along behind the humans, silent as newborn lambs before their first gasping breath.

At nightfall, they holed up in a bed and breakfast with flower-print on everything and not an actual living flower to be seen on the premises, inside or out.

Aziraphale didn’t call it charming and Crowley didn’t complain. They were there, but nowhere near it in spirit.

Nowhere near each other either.

Crowley laid claim to the first bed they were shown by flopping down face first on it after a vague threat about not waking him suddenly, or, in fact, at all.

“I imagine he sleeps well armed,” Shadwell said knowledgeably before Tracey could shoo him out of striking distance. “They would, in his organization.”

He didn’t know anything, Crowley thought, annoyed, and nearly said as much to his retreating form, but he deemed it a worthless endeavor, and instead, threw himself aggressively into sleep, with one little tendril of awareness firmly attached to Aziraphale’s presence.

He didn’t need eyes to keep his eyes on the angel.
They'd reclaimed the plane first thing after a breakfast where Aziraphale didn’t eat and Crowley didn’t drink. The humans too, were becoming a bit subdued in the face of the underlying pressure.

Tense.

He wondered which of them would snap first.

Crowley handled the take off, waving away the request for a flight plan with a lazy miracle and lifting off so quickly, it required another one to prevent a stall. Madame Tracey, witnessing it with a breathless little squeak that had likely served her well in her former profession, had immediately offered to take over for him.

“No fancy stuff. He's in enough of a mood as is.”

“Wasn’t it you who told me on the way out barrel rolls should come standard?”

Satan’s left pinky, she was good at tempting, which was also probably very helpful in her former career.

He held his ground, and a shakey, unstable, sinkhole of a field it was at the moment, “No barrel rolls.”

He glanced back as Shadwell slid into the co-pilot's chair with a smug grin and a semblance of a salute.

“And no rolling him either.”

Madame Tracey gave him a look of such scandalized innocence that Crowley made a note to copy it for future use. “Oh, my, the places your mind goes, dear.

He held up a warning finger that he was certain came straight off of Aziraphale’s hand, only to have Shadwell toss a wink at him and hold up his own.

“Ay, I've got a finger too, laddie, and they're not to be trifled with, are they?”

What had he ever done wrong in his life to deserve—

Nevermind.

Crowley left them to it and stomped back into the cabin, attracting every pair of eyes except the set he was most concerned with. Aziraphale did not so much as look up from his book.

Grumpily, the demon slung himself over a chair where he could keep his steadfast watch on the angel, in case Aziraphale decided to make a break for it, and this time, simply feigned sleep.

It didn’t take much to realise he wasn’t the only one playacting.

Aziraphale was putting on some sort of basic civility show for the humans, who were not remotely fooled, and Crowley knew that because he had done a lot of human fooling.

The angel couldn’t hold a candle to him in that area, anyway. He was usually the one made the fool.

Crowley had never been fooled by humans.
Well, Shadwell.

And that telemarketer.

The woman selling the time share.

The kid with the wooden nickel… but Aziraphale had had a wing in that one, so it hardly counted.

Though it would have been a touch embarrassing if Crowley was less of a smooth operator than he was.

Fine.

Mostly. Mostly, he was not fooled by humans, and mostly, Aziraphale was, which made this little charade all the more irritating.

_Everything's fine? Lovely morning? Oh, no thank you, I'm not hungry this morning?_

_Nothing is fine._

The angel wasn’t even truly reading, or at least, not successfully anyway. He had been staring at the same page on his book for more than an hour. Sometimes, with a bit of focus, Crowley could track the subtle movements of his eyes tracing over the words. They slipped down a few lines, then inevitably returned to the top of the page. Sometimes, the apparently studious angel wasn’t even looking at the book at all, eyes focused on another place entirely, sorrowful, grim and terribly determined.

_Hell bent for leather, as the humans said these days._

Crowley hated that face, though he had seldom seen it so genuine over the slow tread of their shared walk through time. Aziraphale was _wrong, wrong, wrong_, and dead certain he was right.

It was terrifying.

The angel blinked suddenly, Crowley automatically alert to the sudden movement as he flipped the page, then flipped it back with a sigh.

Uncertain of his book, his page, his place in life, but certain of his decision to confront Heaven.

It did nothing to quell Crowley’s urge to chain him up in his bookshop until some semblance of sanity returned.

Madness, it had to be. That was the only answer for it. The wankers upstairs had done it to him, of course, pushing at him, harassing and haranguing his angel to be their ideation of a perfect example of the Host, browbeating and shaming him for his warm and humanish quirks while he smiled kindly at his abusers.

At least in Hell you knew it was coming.
Not big on false niceties, demons, in what was, perhaps, their only good quality.

_Shut your stupid mouth and die already._

As though Aziraphale’s mere existence meant so little, and caused the Archangel so much difficulty, as to not be worth the time it took for him to offer pleasantry to his executioners.
Crowley wouldn’t bat an eye to see the lot of them go up screaming in Hellfire. That would probably be too quick, though, even if it was justice done.

Being cast down, that was a fate that lingered. New angels in the Lake would garner a lot of attention they would not enjoy in the least, and that particular lot had never won any friends down Below.

Well, perhaps Michael. She’d done well enough, carting the Holy Water down for his execution, but their feud went back a long way and he wasn’t surprised she’d want a hand in it.

Gabriel was a tool, and no mistake. Crowley had never been a fan, even back before he was Crowley. Confidence had become toxic arrogance and that had led him straight to contempt. He likely wasn’t far off from Pride, which was risky in an angel, or anyone else. It often went before a Fall.

One could only hope.

Unfortunately, Her standards seemed to have fallen considerably, along with her rejected children.

Sandalphon hardly counted as an angel at all, in Crowley’s books, not that anyone paid attention to his books. He had started life as a human, and the demon thought he should have finished things that way. The strange being took more pleasure from smiting Sodom and Gomorrah into the ground than Hastur would have and not for the first time, he wondered why off Earth Heaven had recruited him before Hell had.

Uriel had been alright, back in the day. A profoundly talented poet, but intensely devout and unyielding in her decisions. Ruthless and cold now, according to what passed for intelligence Downstairs. With her having never Fallen, he wondered what had gone on to freeze the lyricism out of her spirit.

He mulled them over in his mind, wondering if any or all of them had had a hand in the summoning, and what the ultimate purpose of it was. They’d all had more frequent contact with Earth than the average angel, who might pop down for an hour to do a little rescue work and make people believe She was still listening, but what was the benefit to them if Crowley was miserable or a handful of humans met early deaths.

Three little tally marks in Heaven’s Good Books, perhaps, and the thought brought up a fresh swell of remorse and grief, but the fallout of the pain and suspicion it would have caused amongst the living humans involved would likely tip the scale in the other direction.

It did give Death something to do, not that he was ever without.

Azrael had always been different, it was probably a necessity in his occupation. He claimed allegiance to neither Heaven or Hell, though he had ridden with the other spectres to bring about Armageddon. No allegiance save to themselves, himself and his chief source of aggravation, seemed the best option to him as well, but Crowley didn’t understand the Angel of Death anymore than he understood the Creator of Life.

Toss them all down.

It would be a veritable feeding frenzy of revenge, paying the price of their failing to Fall during the War, all those years in Grace the tormentors and tormented had not had. Crowley wasn’t quite sadistic enough to enjoy watching or participating, but he wouldn’t mind knowing they’d gotten
back a little of what they'd given to his gentle-natured friend.

Crowley was dismayed to find fear and grief had again shook his tenuous grasp on wrath.

_Oh, Aziraphale, how can you think talking to them will do any good at all? Righteousness isn’t even real anymore, if it had ever been. It's not a thing anyone can claim._

Aziraphale shut the book abruptly as though he had detected the shift in Crowley's mood.

_**Probably keeping tabs on me, the bastard.** Why am I the only one he lets that side loose on?_

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told you.”

_**Hello, anger, my old friend.** Aziraphale should have had a commendation for driving demons up the metaphysical wall with offensive apologies._

He probably _did_. Big ones.

“Ohh, yes, you blessed well should have! Because now at least I have a fair shot at stopping you!”

Aziraphale had the grace to look dismayed. “Crowley, please, you'll upset the humans.”

The humans involved had found a deck of cards and had been involved in an animated game of ‘Go Fish’ when his outburst took them completely out of the mood.

Crowley could work with that.

He leaned back into his war sprawl. “Well, let's just see about that, shall we?” He turned his gaze to Newt and Anathema. “Humans! What upsets you more, the two of us arguing and perhaps making you feel a bit uncomfortable, or, the thought of dear Aziraphale here going cheerfully to his fiery death?” The angel concerned balled his hands into fists. Good, maybe he was getting his point across. “Do you think they'll need some time to think it over? Or is the expression on their faces right now answer enough?”

“I have a duty—“

“Yeah, yeah, protect the humans. How are you planning to protect them after you’re dead, Aziraphale?”

“Oh no,” Anathema breathed in dismay; a quiet sound that felt like a punch to his solar plexus. Too much time with humans, making him soft.

“She won’t let them go unguarded,” Aziraphale insisted, looking for all the world and Above and Below like he thought that was their objection. “She'll send someone else, I’m sure, better at it.”

That wasn’t the answered he wanted. He wanted something like, ‘Oh, you're overreacting, of course I’m not going to die. There's this charming new buffet open in Central London I've been looking forward to.’ What the Heaven, if he was aiming high, he might as well hope for, ‘You know, Crowley, you are completely right. I can’t believe how ridiculous I am for even considering charging up to Heaven so they can toast me like the celestial marshmallow I am.’
Newton’s interruption of his thoughts was a relief, but a short-lived one.

“Um… are you, I mean I really don’t know, but can angels suffer from depression? Because you sound rather fatalistic, and I’m given to understand that you've had some hard news-”

His stomach, largely optional, plummeted 10 000 feet.

Humans had a nasty habit of being perceptive… well, on occasion. Was this more than angelic devotion to Her? Did he not want to live in the universe that had so disappointed him?

They'll send someone better… because he hadn't prevented this, or seen it coming? Were the kids haunting him too?


Aziraphale shook his head violently like he'd never heard such a preposterous notion! “Being willing to make a sacrifice to do the right thing is not the same as, as you and your Holy Water, Crowley!”

His mouth fell open. Oh. Oh, oh, oh, he was not dredging up that old argument again. “I told you, that wasn’t what I wanted it for! I knew-"

“I didn’t know that! You’re so good at pretending to be fine-"

“I am fine! You're the one who’s pretending-"

“I am not pretending anything, Crowley!"

Anathema and Newt awkwardly watched the back and forth for a moment. “Oops,” he said quietly.

She scooped up her cards again.

“Probably for the best. They’ll work it out. Got any threes?”

“Go fish.”

“You are too! And not just to me, but to yourself! Thinking you'll be fine, that you can somehow sway them-"

Aziraphale was kneeling beside him in an instant, catching Crowley’s flailing hands, holding fast when he resisted. The demon didn’t like the inherent supplication in the Angel’s pose as he briefly pressed his forehead to their trembling hands. “No, no,” he said quietly, “I don’t think I can sway them, dear heart.”

Cold sweat dripped down his all too corporal back. “So, you just wanna go up there and, and-”

“I don’t want to die, Crowley, it's just-"

Those devastating, pleading eyes, screwing him over yet again.

“What would you have me do, my dear? Nothing? Alpha Centauri? Putter around in my bookshop while Heaven is ever more corrupted?”
He tried to reply, but his clever mouth had treacherously abandoned him too.

“I can’t bear it,” Aziraphale whispered in a shattered voice that echoed up from the depths of his soul. “I have already been derelict, leaving them up there to grow cold and isolated. I didn’t want to work for it. Coax them down from the Highest Places to see what it was all for. I was possessive of this world, the humans, possessive and protective of you. If they only understood—"

“They know not what they do?” Crowley choked out. “Pretty sure they know, angel.”

“I have to do something, my friend.”

“Leave them rot, angel. They don’t deserve you. They won’t care.”

“What would you have me do?” A ghost of a smile touched his lips in parting. “Have you got one, single, better idea?”

He tried, desperately, to find one. Crowley felt the inescapable ‘No' burning in his mouth, and he tried to keep himself together by imagining it so.

One tight squeeze of his hands and Aziraphale let go, and it was all Crowley could do to let him.

They’d retired miserably to their corners once again. Crowley pretending to sleep, Aziraphale hiding in his book.

Towards the end of the flight, the intercom sprung to life, flooded with Shadwell’s thick accent. “I think that's got it.”

“No, no, you don’t. It’s the blue one. The blue one.”

A frightened squeak, and the plane dipped a wing briefly. The human's increasingly competitive game of Snap was abandoned in an instant.

“It's not the blue one. It's on now. Ya just have ta start talkin’, woman!”

“Why don’t you just go back there and- whoah!”

The astonishingly loud sound of a jet engine rushed at them, several seconds behind the actual jet which had missed them by feet.

“Take evasive action! Ready the guns!”

“We aren’t shooting anyone! You men and your guns We're English! We don’t have so much as a potato gun.”

Angel and demon took a brief moment to stare at the other, to see if this was registering correctly. Crowley made a beeline for the cockpit and Aziraphale ran for the slightly larger window in the frame of the door.

“Forget the intercom. Get the radio working!” Madame Tracey yelled abruptly as the plane banked hard and sent Newt and Anathema flying. “God's wounds! What do they think they're doing?”
Shocked at the language, the angel missed a step and crashed solidly into the door. Crowley glanced back, unable to help a giddy little titter. Tracey had been paying attention to him earlier. The small plane continued to dip and weave through the sky as the intercom carried each word back to them.

“I just wanted ta tell ya, I’ve loved ya very much, Jezebel.”

“Oh, Mr. Shadwell!”

Crowley plunged into the cockpit. “What the Heaven is going on?!?”

Tracey had apparently gotten the radio up and running, headphones on, listening to a frantic voice on the other end.

“Yes, yes, we're in the Learjet! Heading in to Enstone, what is with all these- say that again? Oh, well, that's a pickle isn’t it? Well, of course I am trying to get out of your airspace! Honestly, dear, if you could just ask the Blue Angels to take a breather, I think we’d all be having a much nicer time of it. I beg your pardon! Do you kiss your mum with that mouth?”

“What kind of angels? What's going on?” Crowley demanded, suggesting centrifugal motion give him a break for a while so he could stop fighting for balance.

A pre-collision warning went off and they looked up to see the blue and yellow fighter careening towards them. If they’d had horns to beep, they’d be singing. He flung his hands up and sent the jet screaming above their plane while dropping theirs a heart-stopping thirty feet in an instant.

Madame Tracey yanked off the headphones, facing him with one dangerously raised eyebrow.

He took a little step back, since the angel wasn’t around to see.

“The South England International Airshow! Didn’t you file a flight plan? Why would no one have mentioned this?!” The humans screamed and ducked reflexively as an upside down jet streaked over head.

“We’re going to get killed up here!”

“Right, right, I’m on it!” he muttered, waving vaguely at them as he spun on his heels. Crowley ducked back into the cabin, but not before he heard:

“What does he think he’ll be doing back there? Everthing’s up here!”

“Ah, no need to worry, m'pet. Those mobsters know what they're doing,” Shadwell replied with perfect confidence. “It's the business.”

Aziraphale had, not unexpectedly, buckled Next and Anathema into their seats.

Also, not unexpectedly, he had gone way overboard, trussing them up in a variety of belts and straps, capping them off, quite literally, in helmets that would have befit the brave humans sent off on the first shuttle to Mars.

The angel seemed not to have noticed their muffled protests or flailing fingers², or, much more
likely, had simply decided he knew best, again.

“Where have all these aeroplanes come from?” he demanded, anxiously pressed against the glass, deflecting near misses. “It was bad enough doing this in the Bentley-”

“Leave her out of this,” he snapped. “It’s a bloody airshow, we’ve gone and baptized ourselves right into it.”

“You leave baptism out of it. No one objected to the flight plan? Did you really aggravate them enough that they’d want to murder us?”

“No, for your information, I didn’t- nothing.”

Shadwell staggered into the cabin, lacking Crowley’s affinity, and more importantly, ability, to scold physics into submission. “Uh, the missus thinks ye should get the hell back in there, ya ‘churlish, crooked-nosed knave’.

Crowley turned towards Shadwell, thrilled with both the interruption and the progress his student was making in her medieval swearing, but Aziraphale spun him back.

Aziraphale was like a dog with a bone, clinging to his shoulders to address Crowley head on. “You didn’t nothing. Why do I find that so remarkably easy to believe? Go on then, what, specifically didn’t you nothing?”

Whether he was going to tell him the truth or not, always a somewhat dubious proposition, was not answered, because Aziraphale had been distracted from his duties to lambaste Crowley.

The side of the plane vanished in an instant as one of the jets clipped into it with a wing. Aziraphale too, vanished in an instant, and Crowley caught a quick glimpse of him plunging towards the Earth.

That could wait.

Shadwell had gone down hard and Newt and Anathema’s muffled screams mixed with the chaos. Crowley released them from their mummifying restraints, which did not help calm them at all, but did free them to see to Shadwell.

“Aziraphale!”

“He’ll be killed!”

“Gotta blow this pop stand,” Crowley waved brightly, before leaping out of the plane, imagining it back to wholeness as he fell.

Saving the multimillion dollar fighter jet was the work of another quick miracle, though putting the astonished pilot back in the thing to see to its landing having already bailed out was a bit of a bother.

It would have made a Hell of a crash.
Well. This was lovely.

Aziraphale plummeted from the plane, distantly aware of young Pulsifer's hysterical shriek about him being killed. There was a second shriek, and a suddenly whole plane, then a dark figure, defying physics to fall faster than terminal velocity, caught up to him in his own plunge.

"Well, this brings back memories," Crowley offered conversationally. "Oh, does it?" Despite the circumstances, Aziraphale was instantly fascinated.

Crowley, streaking towards the earth, gave him a decidedly irritated glance. "No, angel."

"Well, but you just said-"

"No."

"We are falling rather-"

"Am I on fire? Are you?"

"Ah, no-"

"Lake of boiling sulfur down there to greet us?"

"I don't expect so."

"Eternity of damnation at the bottom?"

"Rapid discorporation, but that's really more of an inconvenience."

"Provided you don't go making any waves, sans corporation."

"Wouldn't perhaps be the ideal time, I suppose," he replied, frowning, a vague tickle at the back of his mind suggesting perhaps Crowley had arranged this on purpose.

The demon brightened considerably.

"Then this is practically a holiday. Race you back to earth, then?"

Ugh. Aziraphale really did not want to discorporate. He turned over the advisability of a miracle with such a large human audience, filling the stands below. Upstairs would give him hell for that too. So to speak.

"I'm sure you'll win that race. I'll be buried in paperwork for ages."

"I doubt it. I've got to get mine done in an environment prone to spontaneous fires. And then there's the lawyers, who are also prone to spontaneous fires."

"Penmanship counts in mine."

Crowley had seen Aziraphale's handwriting.

"I'll wait for you."

"Thoughtful of you, my dear."

"I'm not- shut up. You really going to just plunge into the ground, then?"
"They'll be questions, if we don't."

"Mm... that's what got me into trouble in the first place."

"Oh, really."

"Yeah, w- stop. I think we should miracle our way out of this. Humans will just explain it away themselves, after all. No one batted an eye when I was driving the Bentley through Soho.

"It's different for you. They're afraid to question you. Some sort of survival instinct."

"Well now, it's not my fault they just assume I'm going to do something to them."

"Demon."

"Angel," he accused in the exact same tone.

"The point is- oh dear, ground is rushing up really rather fast, isn't it"

"Not long now." He laughed a little, madly, and provided exactly zero comfort to Aziraphale.

"The point is, it isn't that way for me. They're drawn to me... I'm always being bumped on the street... or cuddled."

"This is going to be a big bump, Angel. Bit of a splat too, if memory serves."

"You go. They might forget you. They won't forget me."

Oh dear oh dear.

"Not to worry then. I have a plan for that."

"Crowley, don't-"

Almost casually, Crowley spread his wings, magnificent things, really, snapping them out of the ethereal plane and into reality, before catching Aziraphale's wrists, flipping over and whipping the angel upward. Instinct took over, and the his own wings manifested, saving him from a quick and messy discorporation.

"Demons! The both of them!" distantly echoed an outraged voice from the plane. Aziraphale closed his eyes. It had been nice while it lasted.

Nothing was going to save him from the paperwork. Still, flying, really flying. It had been ages. Even in Heaven nobody really flew anymore. It was considered rather old fashioned. He beat his wings, finding stability and then old muscle memory kicked in nicely. Some nameless tension released him as he soared up to where Crowley was swooping, happier than he'd seen him since he'd rescued little Matilda.

"Been too long!" the demon laughed.

"Well, it really has," and laughter bubbled out of him too, something joyous and pure.

Like coming home and finding it was still home. If only he could.

“Try to look pretty!”
“Pretty?!”

“Give ‘em a show!”

Three thousand camera phones were pointed squarely at them, and twice as many eyes. Crowley was laughing his head off, finally putting the pined for aerial maneuvers to good use.

“That is exactly what we’re trying not to do!”

“Live a little, angel!” Crowley grabbed him by the hands and threw them into a dive, barrel rolling them at the bottom before breaking loose. Beneath them the crowd oohed and ahhed. “Besides, I have a plan!”

“You have a plan for us falling out of a plane and fluttering around like butterflies in front of thousands of humans?! Darling, I don’t mean to be skeptical—”

“I do now! Took me a minute.”

Aziraphale laughed. He simply had to, and he let his mirth lead him into a few freewheeling maneuvers of his own. “I suppose I can make that much of an allowance.”

The two of them dipped and dived for several minutes until Aziraphale began worrying about being appropriately humble and Crowley seemed the plan ready for stage two.

They glided down to land delicately in full sight of the astonished air show crowd. Static crackled and Aziraphale glanced up at a speaker straight out of the 1940’s. An announcer, suspiciously familiar, broke in.

“Wasn’t that a sight to be seen? Let’s have a proper round of applause for this surprise visit from the “Celestial Visions” Special Effects Team, all the way from Cape Town. Out of this world, am I right? Take a bow, guys!”

Crowley sketched out a fancy little bow that made even Aziraphale want to roll his eyes, had they not been threatening to pop out of his own head.

“Take a bow, angel,” he hissed, swinging his arm high, then taking them low like Laurence Olivier accepting his due after a flawless performance of Hamlet.

Well.

Aziraphale had always loved the theatre. He sketched out his own bow with a little flourish of his own, before nearly dragging Crowley towards the landing strip where Madame Tracey was setting their ‘borrowed’ plane down at last, better than new.

Aziraphale wasn’t the only one who got a bit over enthused.

Chapter End Notes

¹ Which was blatantly ridiculous. Aziraphale was *Aziraphale*, and was rather a champion of them; he had Crowley for a best friend, (forever, really forever), who was *brilliant* at them, and there had been no scarcity of preposterous notions shared
between them after three or four bottles of helpful wine. It was a wonder they had not ended up on the news, or YouTube yet.

² The only thing they could still flail.

³ No, it was not the first time. Not by a long shot. And it generally worked out just as well for them.

⁴ Little f.

Oh, and a silly thing for those of you trying to talk Aziraphale out of his wild plans, this is what this story would look like.

Dedicated to Dangernoodle.

Aziraphale sipped his tea. "Hmm... quiet today."

Crowley sipped his wine. "Euyeah...I thought something was going to happen, what with all the feathers and summoning and things."

"Did you?"

"I did."

Long silence.

"Nice to have things work out, I suppose."

"Mmm... s'a bit dull."

"Even Matilda looks a bit bored, doesn't she."

"Maybe we should rob a bank."
"I suppose we could do."

The end.
The humans piled out of the plane as Aziraphale and Crowley ran to join them, though the angel was not at all properly attired for hoofing it across an expansive field. It wasn’t that he couldn’t be fast, but dragging this corporation and its many spiffy layers around with him was sometimes more of a burden than a blessing. Not that he wasn’t grateful, of course, but he was actually beginning to miss the Bentley, just a smidgen of a tad.

“Oh, uh… does he seem a little… aggressive to you?” Aziraphale asked uncertainly. Sergeant Shadwell was in the lead, brandishing something, his finger perhaps, both women trying to hold him back while Newt looked as lost as Waldo behind them, perhaps bit unwisely confused about his loyalties.

“Stop! Stop!” Panting breathlessly, Anathema shot a nearly violent look to her waffling husband, who found his priorities suddenly straightened.

“You may want to stay back!” he called out in warning to them, making a half-hearted attempt at getting in front of his determined superior, who dodged around him like someone who had done quite a lot of dodging in earlier days. Angel and demon slowed to an uncertain stop as the humans continued to rush at them.

“Ah…?” He shot a nervous look at Crowley born out of an instinctive urge to confirm someone else was seeing the thing he was seeing.

“This looks like fun,” the demon said, tilting his head a titch like a curious puppy.

“Must you always be sarcastic?” There was devilry in his innocent expression. There always was.

“Who says I was being sarcastic? Let the games begin, I say.”

“Now, listen, love, we’ve talked about company manners!” Tracey gasped, catching Shadwell briefly but losing him again. Crowley shot him an astonished look, not dissimilar to the one he’d received earlier.

Aziraphale didn’t take his eyes off Madame Tracey, sighing wistfully. “We understand each other so well.”

“Really?” Crowley asked, other questions nearly audibly churning behind it. He was suddenly distracted from answering it by sheer linguistic curiosity. “Don’t stand in the way of a man doing his civic duty, ya knock-need lily-livered squid puffins!” the Witchfinder Sergeant spat back at his wardens, slipping past their attempts to grasp at him with surprising nimbleness.
Well, more nimble than Aziraphale himself was, at any rate.

“See?” Crowley demanded, stabbing an unarmed finger at Shadwell. “This is what you look like to the sane, right now.”

“You’ve already made your point-” he protested, not trying as hard as he ought to resist his exasperation.

“Have I really?” Crowley demanded skeptically. "Because I doubt that; I really do." Aziraphale studiously ignored him.

Arriving in arms reach, Shadwell made a very unwise effort to stab Crowley with a pin. Aziraphale, mercifully, intervened, pulling Crowley out of harm's way, whether giver or receiver. "Now, now. Let's not be too impulsive."

“That sounds like astonishingly good advice,” the demon snipped, not distracted from their real issues by a mere maniac with a ball end pin. “Where have I been hearing that lately?”

"You are demons after all!” Shadwell accused Aziraphale, who rubbed his head with sigh, and Crowley, who nodded in cheerful agreement. “I cannae believe I allowed my head to be turned by your vile trickery, after all these years!”

He turned and jabbed the pin at Aziraphale who simply thought the pin into a pincushion on a sewing table two towns over which would no longer be one short to repair Madame Peacock's stunning Victorian quilt. He felt the delicious thrill of a job well done, two birds, one stone, as it were, but tried not to enjoy it too much, wanting to keep his conscience as clean as possible if turned out he really was counting his days on fingers and toes.

Suddenly absent his weapon, with cat-like reflexes, Shadwell reverted to his finger of mass discorporation. "Don't you go near the ladies and the lad, ya demon! I'll not be allowing the likes of ye ta-"

"Demon?" the actual demon laughed easily at uneasy Aziraphale, winking. “Why, my dear sir-" Crowley interjected, smooth as silk, having plenty of practice putting up with Shadwell. "Surely a servant of, euk, goodness such as yourself, recognizes angels when you are visited upon, uh, by them. Angels." He gestured between the two of them as Aziraphale felt the world slide somewhat off kilter.

The actual angel wanted to sputter, but a bit, a little secretively hopeful bit hiding in his soul felt stabbed by a pin after all.

"I...what...angels, you say?" Shadwell demanded, unconvinced.

"Speak truthfully, Principality Aziraphale," Crowley charged him, drudging up some of the old language, an injunction to tell the truth, God's name quietly implied in it, the tiniest shudder creeping over the demon as he did so.

The utter audacity.

"Art thou an angel of the Lord?” he asked grandly, and Aziraphale had a distinct impression Crowley was trying out his old timey Gabriel impression.

He felt a bit faint. Crowley’s plans, if that was what these were, moved too fast for him too.

"I, um, yes?” He hadn’t meant for it to sound like a question, but there was no avoiding it, when
in so many ways, he was questioning.

Crowley rolled his eyes so dramatically at his hesitation, he could have bowled a spare. "With confidence, Guardian of the Eastern Gate!"

‘Seriously?’ Crowley’s posture, hips dripping with sarcasm, demanding, clear as crystal, ‘What, angel, you aren’t sure? Should we write it on a name tag for you?’

It was extremely bizarre hearing the titles tumbling out of the old serpent’s mouth. He wanted to hide a little from it, but there wasn’t an easily accessible place, unless he wanted to toss his whole self into the ether.¹

“I am, yes. Yes, both, an angel, and in particular, the Guardian of the Eastern Gate... not that that’s been around for a while, so probably it doesn’t really matter in this day and age.”

Crowley smiled saccharinely at Shadwell. Butter would not have melted in his mouth. "And so am I, sir."

The angel became gradually aware that his mouth was open of its own accord, and not without difficulty, shut it.

Shadwell stared hard at Crowley, considering. "Is he then?" he demanded of Aziraphale, blind to the logical flaw inherent in asking one shady character to verify the other. Not that Aziraphale was shady, no matter what his competitors said.

"Uh, technically, he-" Crowley gave him a look that could have trimmed Aziraphale's hedging.²

"Uh, wuh, well, he, Crowley, he, like I myself, hails from Heaven. Originally. So, yes, angel... of a kind. Yes. Right.”

Shadwell considered this thoughtfully for a moment.

“Honestly, dear, they're both charming fellows,” Tracey tried, patting his shoulder absently, “and you should really just-” he held up a finger to silence his lady, but not the finger.

“They're letting angels join the mafia now, are they?”

Crowley grinned. “Oh, my department heads are big fans.”

“That is definitely true. Mine too, strangely enough. A lot of innocent collateral damage means more tally marks on the scoreboard, I suppose,” he added bleakly, feeling his alienation all the more keenly. Crowley frowned at him and he pretended not to notice.

Shadwell didn’t have to pretend. He had processed this revelation with his lightning quick mind and moved on to the most critical matter facing them in these tumultuous times. “How many nipples has an angel got?”


It was a wonder She didn’t strike him down with lighting sometimes, Aziraphale reflected. No wonder Crowley believed She had some mercy in Her yet.

They returned the humans to Tadfield, Aziraphale being subjected to hugs by all but Shadwell,
who settled for a farewell suspicious glare. Angels did not appear to be much higher on the totem pole for him than demons, which possibly meant he was sharper than he appeared. Newt alone had moved to shift his hug over to Crowley but wisely thought better of it, earning the man a few bonus points in the book of Crowley.

Anathema clung to the angel a little too long, looking at him like she was trying to memorize his face. Crowley suppressed a hiss, feeling squirmy as her anxiety stoked his own.

Aziraphale was no better. There was an air of finality in each parting that made him reconsider dropping back to Hell to root around in Lucifer's closet to get something that would bind an angel.

*Stop saying goodbye,* he thought miserably, preparing to get violent if the angel had the nerve to try that finality stuff on him.

Back in town, The Bentley jumped the curb and narrowly missed a pedestrian in front of the bookshop. Crowley followed Aziraphale into the bookshop without so much as a ‘by your leave’. He had never sought permission before, and he wasn’t about to start now. The angel looked a bit uncertainly at him, but didn’t say anything under his challenging gaze.

_Shoo me off. Dare ya._

But he didn’t, heading into the kitchen for some tea and leaving Crowley to his own devices, which quickly took him straight to Matilda and-

That was new, wasn’t it?

There was another terrarium. With a young gerbil, darting through the bedding. And a tiny bookshop style sign. Matilda's lunch. But lunch had been crossed out, and ‘companion’ written in its place.

_And company._

Crowley carefully scooped out the little grey gerbil. It had a slight head tilt that didn’t seem to be holding it back from enjoying life at the moment, though it was likely why someone had offered it up as snake snack. Pulling off his glasses, he peered down at the fragile creature with all the menace he could muster. It nibbled softly on his thumb, unconcerned.

“Someone has definitely been letting you rule the roost,” he informed it, voicing his supreme displeasure for its lack of appropriate cowering "And I’m certain it isn’t Matilda.”

He was a touch too tall for the couch to lie down on it totally flat, but Crowley solved that problem by scooching himself flat and kicking his feet up on the edge of the bookshelf behind it, mostly to irritate Aziraphale. Low grade hostility made the demonic world go ‘round.

He let the little gerbil run freely about his stomach. “If I'd bought you,” he informed it calmly, “you'd have been digested right now. Uh, by her, not me. Not really a food person.” He stroked its little head and looked over at Matilda. “That's right, pretty girl, Uncle Crowley has your back.”

She flicked her tongue at the gerbil. Serpentine eyes met serpentine eyes.

_Ah, kinship._

She attempted to force him to submit to her will, and he felt a surge of familial pride.

“I know, I know, but he's already in a state, and that wouldn’t go over well.”
She persisted, raising her head up in silent plea. “I hear you. Keeping you natural enemy cooped up right beside you, barbarism. Just because we pulled it off doesn’t mean you two will. I’m sure the angel would consider it torture if I put a crepe in front of him and wouldn’t let him at it.”

Ah, that sad little slither, and Aziraphale thought she was an innocent. He clucked at her in approval.

“I’ll talk to him, chiquita, but he torments me too. If the humans knew him better they’d have come up with a word for unintentional sadism.”

Aziraphale reappeared with cocoa mugs, helped along with whisky, raising an eyebrow at the daredevil gerbil attempting to chew off a button.

*Go ahead. I dare you, too.*

Tilt desisted.

When Crowley didn’t move to take the mug, he set it on the coffee table instead. “You're ridiculously soft, you know,” Crowley scolded him.

“Yes, I’ve been told.” Aziraphale replied mildly, settling across from him in the armchair. “I thought I could do things the natural way, according to Her Earthly plan, but in the end, I didn’t have the heart for it.”

“Uh huh… So now you have a gerbil.”

“Apparently.”

“This is a slippery slope, angel. I used to have one plant.”

“The ficus for your housewarming, I thought you would like it.”

“And I did, and I do, but it takes work to keep the troops in order. A ficus is the needy teenager of the plant world. This froofy little thing, is trouble.”

Tilt slipped between the buttons and under his shirt. He contained her by cupping her against him quickly enough but getting her out of there without stripping off proved awkward and more challenging than he would have liked. “Case in point,” he exclaimed, more pleased than was strictly dignified when he managed to extricate the rodent.

“She's just a temporary guest.”

“Did you name her?” He raised an eyebrow and waited expectantly.

Aziraphale looked away guiltily. “Tilt.”

Crowley shook his head, amused, always a bit comforted to have his angel being his angel. “Slippery slope. And a bit insulting as well, like if She named you Cocoa Addict.”

“Cocoa wasn’t invented when She named me, or any other kind of tangible material for that matter.”

Crowley scooped up the darting gerbil in one swoop and sat up, taking up his own mug. He took a sip and sighed in satisfaction. Aziraphale hadn’t skimped on the alcohol. “She knew it was coming.”
He made to drop Tilt in with Matilda, purely to see the frantic little flutter of Aziraphale’s hands, before releasing her back into her shavings, uneaten.

His eyes fell across the Bugger Alle This Bible as he turned, and a conflicting series of feelings sprang forth. The angel’s ecstatic delight with the original, the shocked look on his face when he’d shoved this one to the floor, the awful fear of rejection when confessing that fire to his best friend, the healing peace of working on it with Aziraphale, side by side in common purpose, restoring it to better than new.

Rather than returning to the couch, Crowley dropped himself, with his mug, at the writing desk and began idly doodling, while the pair simply existed together, one another's quiet company, as it had often been whenever their people were looking elsewhere.

First, he scrawled a handful of variations on his own claimed name, then once, quickly, the name She had given him, smudged into nothing as soon as he’d written it, soaking up the odd stability of old wounds, the comfort of familiar pain, erased on parchment as it had been in truth. Next, he scrawled “Aziraphale,” adding little flourishes and feathers around it.

“What do you suppose it does mean, anyway, Aziraphale?”

“My name?” He sipped his cocoa, eyes fluttering closed for a moment of gentle pleasure, before sliding open, dancing in amusement. “Well, assuming She peeked ahead, it must mean ‘endlessly patient with impertinent rogues’.”

Crowley snorted, “If She did peek ahead, it means ‘Ridiculously Taken with Sacrilegious Prophecy’, and mine would mean ‘Persistently Bored in a Bookshop.’”

“Well, if you are bored, my dear, this will liven up your day.”

He stood and drew something out of the ethereal plane, wrapped in a thick, grey, cloth, and the invasion of spiritual darkness into their safe place set him on edge immediately.

Why did he ever open his mouth?

It was odd to be so disturbed, really, because Crowley himself was an invasion of spiritual darkness into the angel's world, and normally, occult energy didn’t cause the Fallen angel any unease. Aziraphale set the object down on the writing desk, and Crowley flipped the cloth up to reveal the dark twin of the summoner’s sacrificial blade.

“Oh… this is old, very old.” He didn’t speak about the remnants of angelic blood on the blade, adding to its menace and power.

Wounding an angel during the war would have been a sign of pride for one of the rebels and someone had guarded this carefully at one point, although not as carefully as they should have if Aziraphale had gotten a hold of it. An angel cut by this weapon would bear the scars to this day, in their primal state.

Crowley had his scars from those days. He wondered if Aziraphale did too. Some questions, he would never ask.

“This is what you wanted to show me? From Maeshowe?”

“It certainty goes well with the occult connections of the place, but there wasn’t much demonic energy to speak of. I'd be speculating about some teamwork between our sides, a rogue angel and a demon, perhaps, but-"
“A rogue angel is a demon.”

“Not always, it seems,” Aziraphale replied quietly, “But I’m wondering now if it’s just something captured from the Enemy- ah, beg pardon.”

“No offense taken, Adversary,” he replied absently, fixated on the weapon.

He reached for it and was startled by the burst of power from the hedge of protection. Aziraphale twitched in surprise, which launched straight into alarm.

“Be careful, Crowley! It’s very dangerous!”

He made to grab it himself but the demon caught his wrist hard before letting it go.

“Yeah, to you maybe,” he protested, more shaken up than he wanted to admit, memories of his near miss in Maeshowe still very fresh. “It’s meant to kill angels, not demons.” Aziraphale’s ring was actively shining against it, even if the hedge itself remained hidden by visible light. “Your bauble is as overly keen as you are right now.”

“It’s not a bauble,” he said archly, before his face slid into something of awe and tenderness. “She gave it to me in the moment of my Creation. It’s a promise of … of something. I don’t know. But straight from Her own hands, Crowley.”

He shuddered at the thought. Anything from Her hands was no friend of his, even if Aziraphale had gone to some lengths to make it behave.

The fighting dagger was no different. Cursed and malevolent, it would always thirst for Angelic blood.

“Meant for you, not for me, angel.” He touched the ring cautiously and found it warm. “It doesn’t like the dagger much, does it?”

“Don’t anthropomorphize, my dear. It’s a ring, it doesn’t like or dislike anything.”

“I meant it figuratively. It’s making me feel like the blade is a threat.”

“It is a threat. That’s common sense you’re experiencing.”

“I told you, not to me. What happened to the other weapon from the War, your side’s? Now, that was a threat.”

“I have it still, tucked away safe. I’m not letting you anywhere near that one.”

He was looking at him like he expected an objection, but Crowley had none. “Suits me just fine. Would be plenty happy to see it merrily out of existence.”

“I may need it yet for evidence. It’s safe enough where it is.” He let his eyes wander over the blade. “But I suppose it would be well if you would see to this one’s destruction.”

He immediately did not care for the idea but wasn’t quite sure why. The friction between blade and ring was buzzing aggressively in his head and driving him to move, to do something about the immanent threat. He flipped it up in his hands, plowing through the ring’s reaction with well-refined stubbornness.

He wasn’t getting bossed around by jewelry.
Crowley began pacing as he looked it over carefully for signs of ownership, but nothing jumped out at him. “Fine craftsmanship on it. Forged in the Lake, I’d say, from the despair radiating off of it. Seems like a shame to toss out something with this kind of history.” He wondered if he was convincing.

“It’s got our kin’s blood on it, Crowley. Some history is best forgotten.” Aziraphale’s eyes flicked down to his chest and Crowley realised he was clutching the ring in his hand. He released the Holy thing quickly, disturbed that he’d sought security in something opposed to his nature in every way.

“Maybe you should keep it,” Crowley said tightly. “Just in case.” The angel gave him a long, piercing look. “Just in case, someone unfriendly comes by.”

“Like a rogue angel?” It was spoken sadly, and Crowley downed the last of his whisky laced with cocoa in one fell swoop.

“Or a demon, could be.”

“You’re the only one of your people who comes around regularly, my dear.”

“I know… wait, regularly? Who else has been by?”

“Oh, no one of importance.”

“What? What?! Have you been fraternizing with other demons?”

Aziraphale had the nerve to laugh. “My dear, no one would call it fraternizing. Some one pops in every century or two to see if I’m as terrifying in person as I apparently am in your memos.” He shook his head smiling, though it faded a bit when he realised his mug was empty. “You have been going on a bit, haven’t you?”

Crowley set the dagger back down, not trusting himself suddenly. “Well, I had to. I needed a reason why we’ve been tangling for six thousand years and nothing gets too far to the left or right, besides outright conspiracy. Failure to a bookseller would not do my reputation Downstairs any Bad at all.”

He resettled himself on the couch, staring at the blade until Aziraphale abruptly reclaimed it, banishing it into the ether, but not, Crowley could tell, destroying it. He felt a little bit of relief. If it did come down to a showdown with a rogue angel, at least Aziraphale would have something that could do a bit of real damage. “I’m sure you do the same thing anyway, in your memos.”

Aziraphale’s wink was anything but innocent, angelic or no. “You are very wily, indeed, my dear, and I have certainly warned them against your deceptive ways, so, one hopes, none of them will be inclined to drop in to trouble you.”

“Have, have demons been troubling you?”

The angel got up and headed for the kitchen to refresh his mug. “Just the usual one,” he answered cheekily as he moved out of sight.

“Who? Who is it? I’ll skewer the bastard.” Aziraphale stuck his head out from the door… and giggled. “Wait… usual demon. You’re talking about me!”

“Oh, darling, really-"
“Well, me, of course me, but who else!”

“Oh, you know, just some of the gang, up to no good. Demon stuff. Well, you know how it is.” He hummed cheerfully as the sweet smell of warm chocolate filled the air. “They never stay long, dear boy. It's just like when those gentlemen try to persuade me to sell the bookshop. A friendly chat, hello, goodbye, and I see them out. Don’t get your knickers in a twist about it. No one comes twice.”

“My knickers?! No one- what the Heaven do you do to them, angel?”

He started sketching Aziraphale, wings outstretched dramatically, standing off against Beelzebub, trying to buy Kaufman's Field Guide to Insects. How did one go about drawing Grace anyway?

“Angel? You have to tell me. I'm dying to know.” He added lines radiating outward halfway haphazardly, frowning as the angel wound up looking more porcupine than inconceivable being of light.

“Aziraphale?” he lifted his head up to look back when the angel still didn’t reply.

Aziraphale was standing utterly still, eyes wide, yet strangely lifeless. Burgeoning concern smashed into raw panic when the winged cocoa mug crashed to the floor. He was on him in a second, grabbing at his arm. “Aziraphale?! Talk to me!”

“Oh dear,” he mumbled, eyes not on the smashed cup but rather on his hands, white as a sheet and swaying. Crowley pressed frantic hands to soft cheeks, roughly guiding him in an attempt to force eye contact. He could feel it now, darkness clawing at his friend, pulling, strangling.

“You need to talk to me!” Confusion abruptly gave way to utter terror. He clung to Crowley’s arms, panicked fingers pressing bruises into his forearms.

“What does Falling feel like?” he whispered like a frightened child as tears started to gather and spill. “It’s so dark, and cold. Has She gone? I can’t feel-”

“No, no, no, you aren’t Falling!” Aziraphale looked so utterly lost, walled off from Grace as Crowley tried frantically to get through.

“I suppose I shouldn’t have had the second cup. Was a bit gluttonous of me. I’m really, very, sorry-” If he hadn’t been weeping silently, trembling, Crowley would have gone off on him in exasperation, but he was far, far, too frightened for that.

“No, listen, Aziraphale!” He shook his friend once, hard, and wet eyes finally connected with his own. “This isn’t Falling, angel. It's summoning. You're being summoned, okay? Summoned. Not Falling.”

Hell if his angelic face didn’t light up in visceral relief.

“Oh, oh! Summoning! That's alright then!”

“It's really not! Can you fight it?”

He was smiling. He was actually smiling.

Crowley shook him again. “Listen! You have to fight it!”
"Why would I want to do that? Crowley, I've been waiting for this! Now, we'll have this sorted. Tickety-boo! You'll see!"

He tossed down some language that would have earned him a full out lecture had Aziraphale been thinking clearly. "Hnnnn… no, angel," he moaned in frustrated horror. "Fight it, you have to stay with me, okay? Please, please, you can't go."

He was aware he was begging, but Aziraphale didn't seem to be, agony tracking across a face still valiantly trying to be chipper. "You know, it is a very interesting sensation, but not nearly as pleasant as I was given to believe."

Crowley had never described being summoned as anywhere near pleasant. He let go to readjust his grip and a violent shudder ran all the way through the angel. Well and truly frightened, Crowley tried frantically to wrap his arms around his friend and howled in alarm when his hands passed right through his body.

"Oh, I'm almost somewhere else now," he observed, face scrunched down in pain, tone light as if just noticing a summer shower.

Going… where?! Crowley had lost his grip and with it, all sense of where they were drawing him. "Where?! Where!" he yelled, still uselessly trying to reach for him, body, soul and all his strength. "Aziraphale, concentrate! Where are you going?! You have to tell me!"

"Not certain, really," came the airy response. "Oh, I do think I'm need of a lie down. All this evil, darling. It's a bit much."

"Angel, please… where? Tell me where?"

"Quite striking, I would say," the words faded out along with the rest of him.

Nonononononono…

Heart pounding, lungs heaving, his corporation worked feverishly to imitate life where there was none. He crumpled to the ground, hands splayed against the smooth floor, far past screaming. Aziraphale had vanished entirely, and Crowley was all alone. Worse still, he had no idea where the Angel had gone.

Heart wailing in an anguish no mere voice could express, the demon reached out to the only shred of hope he had left.

Tell me where he is! Let me find him. Just… just let me find him. Please? Please?

His pleas, as they had been for millenia, went unanswered.

Chapter End Notes

¹ He did not, again, having learned a lesson the first time. The 1974 April Fool's Day prank had gone terribly awry, and it had taken him eight months to figure out how to get himself out again. It hadn't seemed like that long on his end, and Crowley had been apoplectic when he'd popped back into his bookshop, shouting "April Fool's!" and finding the demon had all but moved in during his unexpected adventuring, and turned the place upside down looking for clues to his whereabouts. They'd had quite
the row about it, which was only resolved when he agreed to try to reunite the Beatles and Crowley treated him to lunch.

Not exactly equitable, now that he thought about it, but that's what happened when one was negotiating with a demon from a place of guilt. Fish had to swim. Birds had to fly. Matilda had to snake, and Crowley did too.

² Verbal, not herbal.

³ Angels eyes do dance, a great many, fantastical and expressive dances. Oddly enough, never, ever, the Gavotte.
Coming around was a miserable process that made one much rather stay out, Aziraphale reflected idly, totally enervated, body limp and pressed faced down against rough, hardy grass that sprouted from shallow earth over a base of solid stone. He didn’t have to open his eyes to know he was on the top of the White Cliffs of Dover, not far from the South Foreland Lighthouse, and not too terribly far from the edge of the cliff either.

Such a beautiful place.

The deepening night sky told him he had been out cold for quite some time, and being so vulnerable made him feel dreadfully uneasy. It was retroactive fear. He was at least aware now, although the awareness left much to be desired.

Aziraphale didn’t care for sleep, but unconsciousness was much worse, he decided, making a note to avoid it in future if the occasion arose.

Their voices washed over him and he held very still, cradled by the world he so loved, trying to cope with the agony that assailed him.

It was terribly lonely.

“Oh, Lord of Darkness, we gather in your unholy name,” a now familiar voice rasped heatedly, sounding more fractured than before, obsession and rampant celestial power quietly eating him alive.

“Hear us. Hear us. Hear us.”

They'd be better off if he didn’t, not that the dark Leader of the Rebellion was likely to bother with these frail creatures. Satan's eyes were fixed ever upwards, burning with the hatred and jealousy that had consumed the beautiful angel of light he had once been. His only interest in humanity was in stealing away Her children. They were just pawns to him… weapons to hurt Her, a means to an end. A terrible game of numbers, and Aziraphale wasn’t always sure She was even playing.

He wasn’t sure of anything right now.

He let the ticklish feeling of prickly blades of grass ground him against a crippling sense of
profound loss and violation. At the very least, he was outside, surrounded by the careful beauty of her workmanship.

She Herself, was gone. The thrumming heartbeat of Her Ineffable Presence was just not anywhere, not where he could feel it anyhow, and it was inconceivably devastating, a loss beyond comprehension, too terrible for tongue to tell.

“Lordship?” came a cautious voice, trembling, female, and young.

“Speak, acolyte.”

“The creature does not stir. The other one was never dormant for so long. Should we consider trying the summoning again?”

“Serving the Master requires patience and devotion. Are you questioning me?” The response was harsh and meant to criticize and shame. It worked quite well. Such things usually did.

“No, no, never, my lord.” Controlling through intimidation, that rather did sound like the malevolent being they sought to serve and draw power from, but patience and devotion had no value to the Fallen Morningstar, only to Her.

Aziraphale was left bereft and desolate without the steadfast sunshine of her Love, and immeasurable pity made heavy his heart for all of his cast-out kin.

He, at least, still had hope. Falling was a worse fate than death, sentenced to life without prospect or promise. He was so relieved he hadn’t Fallen.

A fleeting, terrifying thought swept through him, that perhaps She wasn’t merciful after all, having condemned so many of Her children to such a cruel fate. These humans thought their master was just too, though he made no pretense of that at all, anymore.

No… it was like comparing kindness and cruelty, loyalty and treachery, love and hate. They had nothing in common. He must not question Her judgement. Crowley would be upset with him, if he knew the angel had entertained such a thought, even for a moment. The terror in his friend during their earlier discussion had left its mark on Aziraphale. Crowley had lived without Her for more than six thousand years, and the Fallen angel still carried hope with him, Crowley only knew how, and even, by his own admission, held some fractured hope in Her mercy.

If Crowley could trust to hope, so could Aziraphale.

“Give us the power to work thy dark will.”

“We beseech thee. We beseech thee. We beseech thee.”

Perhaps Crowley had only whispered of Her mercy to make Aziraphale feel better after the Black Death. Kind of him, if so. It was easier to doubt Her character when She felt ever so far away.

He fought back the urge to call to Her, beg and plead to hear Her again, feel Her touch.

No, it would do no one any good if he surrendered to hysteria. She didn’t like to be tested, and so he clung to his weather-worn faith, even if some of his angelic kin had not.

The summoner's chanting was eerily similar to old prayers they had once sang to Her up Above. Someone had taught them. Someone had deliberately corrupted what should only belong to Her. A
repulsed shudder ran through him, but he felt his conviction reassert itself.

That was all evil was, in the end: Good corrupted.

Could Evil then, be healed? Some questions were perhaps best left to Crowley.

Aziraphale had done this to himself, after all, surrendering to them so that he could ferret out the treacherous ones, and to complete the task, he would have to screw his courage to the sticking place now, with or without Her love like a shield around him.

“Come forth, dark one, and surrender your will.”

“Go forth and do our bidding,” they chorused behind him.

Crowley would likely be furious with him for this, raging with worry, but the thought, ‘If not me, then who?’ pounded like an unwavering drumbeat in his head. He felt it profoundly sad that he, the least of Heaven's angels, was the only one he could be certain of doing right by Her in this matter.

He listened to the rustling of the friendly grass as the occultists moved around him in their ritual. Aziraphale was near to discovering the being responsible for victimizing Crowley, the many humans who had suffered, and even the humans surrounding him now, perpetrators and victims both, engaged in a ritual meant only to draw them in as tools, using them, grinding them up, and then discarding them.

But he knew how to draw his Enemy in. First, he would have to free himself from their binding.

“Wake, demon!” came the sudden command, and a lazy wave of stubborn defiance rolled through him. “Hear my commands!”

He kept his silence with a will, tempted to snipe back at them. ‘Hell no,’ Crowley would have said, or perhaps, ‘Heavens, no,’ depending on which of their sides he was more irritated with in the moment. He wasn’t above the temptation to rudely defy them, but his mind was focused on the war, not the battle.

Perhaps these people were lost, but they were still people. They did not, could not possibly fully understand the consequences and implications of their actions, but someone else did, and acted anyway.

“Rise, rise, rise, rise,” the monotone chorus went on and on.

Gracious sakes but they did get tedious.

‘You can all take a very long walk off a very short pier,’ he thought crossly, the nearby cliff adding a darkness to his thoughts that he struggled, momentarily, to shake off.

Was that bad? Were they affecting him?

It was, perhaps, a positive sign he felt no actual compulsion to do anything but fight the darkness tangled around him like a shroud.

“Hearken to me, demon!” the leader's voice rose above the others, arrogant in his demands.

Sometimes it was exceedingly difficult to remember he was an angel, Created in, by, and to love. Hate could be a temptation of its own.

“Hello there,” he said softly, because he still had manners, even if he was terribly occupied
trying to claw his way through the mud and shadows back to Her divine presence. “I’m quite sure I’m not the demon you are seeking to oppress, you villain.” When he lifted his head at last, there were scattered gasps of recognition from their last meeting. “I’m not a demon at all, in fact, and She knows full well how much I would love to stop having to say that.”

He attempted to gather himself to his feet, but felt dreadfully weak. Right, then. One battle at a time.

Aziraphale tuned out the human railing uselessly at him and turned inward, focusing not on the foolish, friendly bookseller he wore like a costume, but the iron-willed ethereal being whose first sight had been God Herself shining at him in power, who was death to look at for any unprotected mortal creature, the newly-created being who had reached out to Her in delighted gladness, and nearly burned himself to ashes by throwing himself heedlessly into Her arms.

She had laughed that day, diminishing Her nature so as not to harm him as She embraced Him freely, pressed something like lips to something like a forehead, and delighted in welcoming him to existence.

He wasn’t about to stay parted from Her unless She Herself rejected him, right to his face.

Until then, Aziraphale would never stop trying.

Wailing gave way eventually to long, drawn out croons of misery, the sounds of a brother mourning for his fallen sibling, of ineffable, unspeakable loss, before finally petering out altogether into helpless silence.

Crowley pressed his face into the floor of Aziraphale’s bookshop, feeling the cool tile, drawing the heat out of his burning cheeks, sliding it along his spine until it gave him chills. He held very still until he began to imagine sinking into the earth, crash landing in some office in Hell. Maybe he could take up some kind of desk job, just for a vacation. The only angels down there were far past worrying over.

The grief-stricken being put a firm stop to that train of thought and gathered the remaining, pathetic, shards of Crowley up to sprawl across the chair where Aziraphale liked to sit when they got drunk and debated this mysterious universe they meandered through together. With an imagination as vivid as his was, it was best not to let these things linger. It could be dangerous to let one’s mind wander too far down the garden path when one had the kind of control over reality Crowley did.

And Aziraphale.

He had quite a lot control over reality too, that is.

Crowley had no control over that balmy, demented, angel at all. If he had ever entertained that notion, the last few days had thoroughly disabused him of it.

He honestly didn’t even know if there still was an Aziraphale to worry about, or rage at, or rescue. He had cast a wide mental net, searching for the shining light of his presence, and had come up empty.

“Probably,” he told blissfully innocent Matilda, “I think probably, that there still is an Aziraphale, and he is off being noble and valiant, and kind too, wouldn’t that be just like the heartless bastard.”
In general, he'd be off making Crowley want to wretch¹.

So, probably, he still had some reason to get up off this floor and go do something. The problem was… he wasn’t nearly as sure as he would have liked, that there was still an Aziraphale. And if there wasn’t, he might as well just lie here and wait for the world to turn to dust around him, because “Curse God and die²,” was a perfectly valid option in Crowley’s books.

It’s not like he lived to work, or, in fact, worked to live. He had worked so as not to be dragged down to Hell for motivational flaying, and he had never worked particularly hard at that. There were advantages to being the architect of Original Sin.³

And the plants and the Bentley could carry one only so far.

Futility.

That’s what this was. Thick and black and empty, like this damn bookshop. Didn’t even have the dignity to be on fire this time. Looked perfect. A perfect mess, as though the creature that made it a place at all was puttering around upstairs and not, at the very least, in mortal peril.

Still thinking he was right.

“Selfish, useless, nitwit, son of a Bitch!” he hollered abruptly, stabbing a finger upwards. “You heard me!”

Needing to do something with all his destructive energy, he began yanking books off the shelves, not giving one single sweet damn about their uniqueness or value, and began violently pitching them around the room.

“It’ll be fine, Crowley!” Crash!

“I know I’m doing, dear boy!” Crash!

“Tickety-boo, my damned dear!” Crash!

“Why the Hell didn’t you just spare me the misery of caring about you, you fluffy pain in the ass, and smite me that first damn day!”

He left the back room and tossed his own self straight into the first bookshelf he saw, sending it toppling over to the ground.

“But nooooo, ‘I’m gonna be nice to you, fiendish enemy!’” He flung a book towards the storefront window, feeling rage and relief mingling when it simply bounced off rather than shattering the glass. Satan help the neenors fool enough to investigate the disturbance and roll up with their sirens to interfere with his rampaging right now.

“I’m going to worry about doing the right thing!” He shoved the antique register off the counter and found some semblance of satisfaction of hearing the enormous crash and seeing the layer of dust come off the seldom used contraption.

Nodding once in angry approval, he stalked back into the sitting room and overturned the chair that had given him faint solace only minutes before. “I’m gonna ask the God actually damned, actual demon if he thinks I did the right thing! Ten thousand times! And worry about his Mother-Blessed opinion, and be the only being in history to do so! Except when it actually matters!”

He nearly put his fist through Matilda's terrarium, catching himself at the last instant, and the
sudden shock of the near miss and those innocent eyes, so like this own, sent him falling to the floor, again, and wailing, *again*. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” he wept, tears stinging like acid, and nothing on the raw pain of a heart that refused to die, no matter what Crowley did to it, no matter what She did to it, no matter what his Blessed angel did to it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it.”

He didn’t suppose you could get absolution from a snake.

He didn’t suppose he could get it anywhere, even if he wanted it.

Fighting for control, he threw his hands up in a plea he could not stop making to a being he could not escape. “I didn’t mean it. Please… help me. How can I find him? Why can’t I find him? Answer me, just once, answer me.”

Crowley had only had trouble finding Aziraphale one other time in history, and that had been because Aziraphale had been discorporated, and that beacon of goodness and light that was him, radiant in the dark, cold, world was, albeit temporarily, snuffed out.

“I don’t know what else to do,” he whispered brokenly to his distant mother.

He still dreamed about that day. The burning bookshop simply a backdrop for the nightmare of feeling their connection snap, mere minutes after he'd trapped Hastur in the Ansaphone. He'd felt the incalculable loss before he'd ever arrived at A. Z. Fell and company, had felt nothing that came close to it save for the moment his Grace had been ripped away, and if he'd had to choose between the two, it wouldn't have taken him long. The ten minute drive had taken three and it had been the worst, longest drive of his life. Crowley had only been surprised he hadn't found a body.

*Things fall apart.*

*The centre cannot hold.*

*Nothing beside remains.*

“I don’t know why I even try with you anymore. You don’t… want, me.” Crowley shut his eyes against the pain, but there was no escape for him, and even that would not have mattered much, if only Aziraphale was here.

When he opened them, his eyes fell on one of Aziraphale's sordid bibles, splayed open in the floor. Someone had highlighted one of the lines, in an action his friend would have found positively criminal.

His angel and his little quirks.

“Seek and ye shall find,” he read.

He tilted his head and frowned at it. “Well, no help there.” It was sort of… encouraging though.

“This is probably coincidence, anyway.”

*Seek and ye shall find?*

“You know I know you can talk, right? The humans don't expect to hear from you, 'cause they'd likely drop dead, but I know what you sound like. You could just, whoosh, drop me wherever they've got him… or better still, just pop him right back,” he clicked his tongue and pointed at Aziraphale’s chair, “there. Call it a day?”
Silence. He wasn’t surprised.

“And I have been seeking. I can’t even feel him. Why can’t I feel him?” He started to get annoyed with Her reticence again.

“Did you have to let them get between the two of you? Poor bastard thought he was Falling because of cocoa. Cocoa!”

….wait. Aziraphale thought he was falling… presumably because of the evil nature of the summoning, wrapping around him. Crowley knew that strangling, drowning sensation too well.

Hiding him?

He couldn’t see Aziraphale’s unique presence in the world, because it was covered.

…Well, he always felt a bit better having a question answered, anyway.

It still upset him to imagine the angel being smothered with all that darkness. There had to be a way to find him despite it.

He cast his mind out again, looking not for Aziraphale per say, but any celestial energy, angelic or demon, floating in the world. There were quite a few minor demons out and about, which was hardly unusual. Oh, but that… that light there was.

There was another angel on earth, and not terribly far away either.

It was hardly a safe plan.

It was hardly a plan.

*Seek and ye shall find,* he thought.

He shut the bible and undid the damage he had caused to prevent an angelic heart attack on his return.

Aziraphale would return.

Crowley swore it on his life. He would get him back.

“Not that I’m thankful or anything,” he began idly, nudging the book with his foot in careful disdain, “and not that you had anything to do with my clever idea… but, just in case… thanks, doll.”

He checked to see that he had his seldom used sword handy.

Just in case.

Focusing his recovering energy levels on fighting back against the strangling power of the dark force they’d brought to bear against him, rather than the niggling humans surrounding him, Aziraphale let his weary corporation sink back down to the earth under the vexed astonishment of his captors.

*Let them be vexed, then,* he thought irritably. They were covered in innocent blood which he could hear crying at him with a very little effort, demanding justice.
But Aziraphale wasn’t here for them.

The tickle on his outstretched hand did attract his attention.

An ant had begun crawling over him, and he smiled down at it. Determined little creature, not dissuaded by the enormity of the obstacle Aziraphale presented, it carried on, steadfast in its purpose. Insignificant in a big world, but here, nonetheless. A tiny life, but able to stir his lonely soul. He hadn’t forgotten his debt to them.

He thanked Her, uncertain whether he was as lost to Her as She was to him, but he did try, for the encouragement from one ant to one angel. Though he still felt alone, bereaved without his connection to the divine, he was yet Principality Aziraphale, guardian of this world and Her most fragile children.

_I haven’t Fallen_, he reminded himself. Crowley had said it, and that was enough for him to dismiss his own senses.

She’s there. No one can touch Her authority, nor that which she has bestowed upon Her faithful servants. I’m still Hers. I’m immersed in the darkness. It’s night, but the sun is still there, even if I can’t feel it. She’s close, surely, even now, hovering, just beyond sight.

“Get up, you, you angel!” A faint smile graced his lips at the unintentional vote of support.

“What the hell are we going to do with an angel anyway? He caused enough trouble last time!”

Ah, some sense at last.

“We’ll master him!”

Why were the sensible ones never in charge?

He visualized the spiritual battle that he was currently fighting, swinging his old flaming sword against the pooling shadows. They slipped back, wrapped around, retreated and advanced as he tried again and again to break free.

It was exhausting. He had expected that. However, while he had considered what it might be like to find himself at the mercy of dark coercion, he had not considered that it could, at least feel like, being totally cut off from Her Grace. It was the most empty and alone, Aziraphale had ever felt in his long existence, and he was no stranger to either feeling. He wished Crowley was here, selfishly, he knew, but still… fighting was hard, in the midst of despondency.

His soul was aching.

When the night closed over his head, suffocating in its intensity, he wanted to panic, fling himself up, wings outstretched and beating, all the long, long way to Heaven, straight to Her empty throne if He could manage it, and beg her to reassure him he was not forsaken.

Well… She had in Her way, through Crowley’s last words. His dear, dear Crowley, who really was cut off from Her Grace, and no end in sight.

How did he endure the horror of it? The crushing, lonely, grief?

Only the knowledge this was a temporary state made it bearable for Aziraphale, and gave him hope enough to keep swinging. Crowley, his soulmate, if ever there had been such a thing, had saved him from despair already with that frantic reassurance, one he could never return in kind. He
was overwhelmed with his new understanding of the sheer depth of Crowley’s fortitude.

His friend was so strong.

Aziraphale struck out furiously, thinking of those shining eyes, the way he'd cried out as the angel had been drawn away.

He felt terribly guilty as well, for purposefully keeping his destination hidden from Crowley, but he had no desire to lead the dear creature to his discorporation or death at the hands of one of Aziraphale’s own.

And…

The angel had a gathering suspicion that he knew the culprit behind these infernal machinations, and there would be no mercy shown to a demon from that quarter. It’s better this way, he forced himself to think, body so still and spirit striving violently as ragged voices argued about what to do with him. He could do what needed to be done without fearing for his impulsive companion’s safety.

In preparation for his possible death, he had been quietly trying to let go of the frivolous desires of his insatiable heart. He had pared them down to only two now. He wanted to faithfully serve his Creator and so fulfill his purpose, and he wanted Crowley to live.

Truthfully, Aziraphale wanted Crowley to be happy too, but he was well aware the odds of his own survival were stacked against him, and he was honest enough to know his death would hurt his friend irrevocably… so he would conserve his hopes, and hope only for Crowley to live. Two wasn't so much to ask for, yes?

There was warmth and promise in the thought. Crowley would live. That would be enough for him.

With trembling strength, he continued his struggle for freedom, and it was like pushing away gallons of thick, suffocating mud. It flowed over him, threatening to drown him, coaxing him seductively towards despondency as he tried to break free but failed and failed again.

Mother, please…

No, no. None of that. She'd designed them as problem solvers, hadn’t she? Made them independent? Aziraphale was not a frightened child, he was a faithful servant of the Most High, and he would act as such. He just needed to hold himself together, find something to cling to, right here.

The little ant had passed him by, but the grass scratched lightly on his palms. She made the grass, he reminded himself, so She is as close to me as my little verdant friends, here to bless and comfort. I am not alone, not abandoned, and not without purpose.

Did Crowley feel that way about his plants? A soft taste of what was lost?

He relentlessly fought the darkness that, rather than enslaving his will as it had Crowley, cut him off from his own nature. Fire burned around raw nerves as the force of his own effort threatened to undo this fragile corporation that had nothing on his real being.

He erupted violently, distantly aware of the human screams as he slid entirely out of his own human form in a full scale assault on the power fighting against him.
“I. will. not. yield. to. evil!” he sobbed out, feeling the tides turn at last as the summons spell shattered and dissolved under the impact.

Feathers, holy light, and primal fire blazed in him like a furnace. Distant earthquake censors would sound off, detecting the disturbance in the foundation of the world, and satellite images went offline in an event that would have conspiracy theorists ranting about alien visitations. In years to come, retired military personnel would scratch their heads around campfires with their families in years to come, telling tales about the strange happenings on that long ago day.

For now, though, the Guardian of the Eastern Gate cracked through the choking summoning, and dropped again to his knees, weeping, not from the strain of his efforts but from the relief and joy of being bathed in the Grace his abductors had denied him, ever so briefly.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” he panted out his gratitude for some time until, with a trembling moan, the leader, still attempting to curse him, rose up.

Right. Back to the humans.

He staggered back into his corporation and then back to his feet, vaguely aware his wings were out and he was glowing softly like an overenthusiastic patio light. He didn’t bother with restraining himself, not confident he would have the energy to force himself free again if they tried to bind him once more.

Not that they seemed capable of much at present, splayed on the plantlife that had cradled him first.

He walked barefoot across the welcoming grass, angelic robes whispering around his feet as he moved. He knelt beside the lead summoner, who was still spitting hatred at him, trying to find strength enough to fight the angel.

“I should very much like to speak to your master,” he said gently, lifting the man's head to pull back the robe and settle his head on his lap. “It's not who you think it is, by the way.”

The man tried to struggle upward, but it was little effort for Aziraphale to pin him down again. He stroked his forehead lightly, soft brown locks over green eyes, not a youth by any means, but neither was he aged. He had been ravaged by the power he'd been employing, more than mortal man was meant for. His face was pale and gaunt, and his spirit fluttered inside him like a caged butterfly, it's hold to his body tenuous.

“What do you call yourself?” Aziraphale asked.

“I'm not telling you anything,” he spat, but his aggression couldn’t hide his physical weakness.

“I hope you'll forgive the intrusion,” he apologized, letting hands linger for a moment.

“Ah, Elijah Cole.” The human gasped and swung at him. The angel paid the blow no mind at all. “Elijah is a noble name, you know, though you haven’t done well with it yourself. Means ‘My God is YHWH,’ something of an honour to have a name that invokes the Creator.”

“Kill me!”

“Anything to stop me talking to you, child? I hardly think so. You'll be hearing me out, you and your followers. You can just hearken unto me, now.”

He struggled to escape, but gentle Aziraphale was unyielding. “I won’t!”
“You will,” he answered easily. “I knew the Elijah whom you are named for, in fact, and he was great among the humans of this world, one of Her faithful servants, Her prophets, in fact, which is an honour granted to few of your kind. You aren’t like him though, for you have set yourself against the Most High, and against the little children, and you have done grievous harm to the one most dear to me. Why have you done these things, Elijah?”

“I hate them,” he snarled, softly but savagely, Aziraphale’s presence drawing truth out of him like a magnet.

“That’s very common to humankind. Summoning demons is not, however. You have paid a heavy price to do it, and led others to the same fate.” He looked over at them sadly. “Reveal yourselves.” Obediently, if not willingly, they pulled back their masks and hoods… young, most of them, faces gaunt and strained, hands trembling. “Don’t you know that it’s killing you? Body and soul? Do you really desire power so greatly?”

Not a one of them answered.

Finally, Elijah did. “I had my revenge,” he said darkly, voice and soul both. "Worth it."

Aziraphale felt wrath and pity mix in his heart. “Yes, Blessed Hearts. You have no remorse for the innocent blood you caused to be shed?”

He fought a brief but intense battle for his own composure. He had helped give them the power to do this as well, and the angel was not innocent. He was quietly afraid to ask Her why She had let Crowley’s beautiful gift wind up this way.

“Place had to go. Grew up there. No one gave a damn. Pretended to. Every last one of them looked right through me. Bastards deserved their fates for being stupid enough to be there.”

“I have known many who have been harmed in such places,” he said sadly. “But they don’t all do as you have done, set out to cause destruction, regardless of the people they hurt… a few do, but not all of them. You’ve made a terrible choice, and a choice it was.”

“They deserved what they got.”

Aziraphale sighed at his intransigence. “You will answer for this, you know. Not just for the bloodshed, but for leading these,” he gestured to his sickly followers, “to their own destruction as well.”

“We don’t answer to you. We only answer to Satan, and he will reward us-”

“God have mercy, the angel interrupted, genuine plea bordering on the edge of frustrated blasphemy. “I think, perhaps, it is already too late for you, but in case it isn’t, I want you to know, I forgive you.”

“You think I give a damn about your forgiveness?” he demanded with a scoffing laugh that split dry lips, drawing blood.

“Probably not,” Aziraphale answered quietly, “but I wanted to give it all the same.”

Elijah startled him by spitting in his face, blood mixing with saliva. Aziraphale wordlessly dabbed himself clean with a pocket handkerchief. He shook his head at the apparent uselessness of his endeavour, but found some comfort in remembering who he was, at the core. Integrity was everything.
Mostly.

There was another purpose too. He ran healing hands over Elijah, watching warmth slide back into the pallid skin, if not the heart.

Releasing him to sputter and curse, Aziraphale moved to each one in turn, healing and blessing with unmerited mercy. Grace in power and in action.

“Why? Why did you help us?” a young female asked, staring at him in fright as healthy colour blossomed on her cheeks.

“To draw out my enemy,” he said calmly. “No demon would show that kind of compassion, even the best of them.” He pressed his lips tightly together, considering. “I suppose you could say I’m summoning an angel. A healing on that scale should get their attention swiftly. They will probably know it was me.”

His expression was grim as he turned his eyes from her towards the cliff and beyond. Elijah began paging through some sort of spell book, still ravenous for his destruction, despite the healing.

“Who could resist having a look to see the one who's caught on to them?” Aziraphale asked no one in particular. “Not me.”

The pillar of smoke swirled in as though mist blown in from the sea. It twisted and weaved before coalescing into something human-shaped.

“What the hell?” Elijah gasped, dropping the book and taking a nervous step back, far, far, Too Late.

Aziraphale breathed out shakily, fresh anguish rolling over him like sea billows as he recognized her.

“Principality Aziraphale, fancy meeting you here,” came the light, cool voice.

“Hello, Michael,” he said sadly.

Chapter End Notes

¹ Sort of an awful thing to want, as it turns out. He had tried it out first of the two of them, and quickly put that on the list of “Never again.” He’d immediately tracked down his Adversary and persuaded him to give it a go. Aziraphale had threatened to bless his bath water and refused to talk to him for six years.

It being early days, Crowley had forgone baths for just as long, demonically miracling himself fit for society, until he’d secured a written promise from the angel that it had been an empty threat.

That first bath after had been *amazing.*

² The actual advice given to Job by his lovely wife after losing his wealth, his health, and their ten children.
Quite the gal.

You can probably see why Job didn’t factor her survival into his decision not to fall on the pointiest sword he had lying around at the time.

³ There were also disadvantages, like losing every argument ever with the angel if he tried to make any claim to innocence.

“I'm telling you, I had nothing to do with unmatchable Tupperware lids.”

“I'd love to believe you, my dear, but you also convinced Eve to eat *the* apple.”

Well, fine, Mr. Should-Have-Been-Paying-Closer-Attention-to-the-Huge-Demonic-Snake.
Bloodbath

Chapter Summary

Bless me father, for I have sinned. Many, many times in this chapter.

Rough stuff, and crazy stuff. Hard landing at the end. Sorry, kids. Bring your teddies. Upped the rating for violence, but I'm not sure it really needs the M. Feel free to voice your opinion. I find it hard to know where to draw the line.

General archangel warning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Okay, okay, okay, okay.”

Trying to quell his nerves, Crowley looped around the block several times while he gave himself a little pep talk. “It’s a public place, so probably, I’m not about to be smote, smited, smitten, definitely not smitten! on sight. Probably. Hopefully. Maybe I should do something less suicidal, like make a pass at Beez, or bean her with a flyswatter. Something safe. I’m not going to rescue Aziraphale if I’m dead.”

Unfortunately, there wasn’t another way. So, swearing under his breath for the insanity of this plan, and perhaps at the strange tacit blessing of God Herself, which could have been a good or a bad sign really, given She was not exactly on his side, and he definitely wasn’t on hers, Crowley pulled over, neatly blocking a fire hydrant and a handicap parking spot, just to bolster his courage a little.

It was a tailor shop. Of course it was.

He gave his secret weapon a hopeful little pat before heading in to have a little chat with Gabriel.

“Oh, that’s really quite a good fit, isn’t it?” the Archangel commented on his ensemble with the same sort of pleasure Aziraphale expressed over a well made tortellini.

“Yes, it certainly suits you very well, monsieur.”

“Suits! And it's a suit! Haha, you are very funny, human male! Uh, you are male, yes? I can’t really see, you know, the details.”

“Uh… yes, male. Thank you, sir.”

Crowley hoped he had never been that awful dealing with humans. Satan knew, well, probably not actually, that Aziraphale still had his moments of near fatal embarrassing behaviour.

The stealth demon peeked cautiously around the corner to see Gabriel happily admiring himself in the full body mirror while the tailor fusses over his celestial customer.

He was reasonably sure Gabriel didn’t like him, which was certainly mutual, but there was a
certain matter of degrees.

Like, I don’t like you, pesky demon, I’m cancelling your subscription to Eden’s Garden Monthly. ¹

Alternatively, there was always, I don’t like you, pesky demon, I’m going to cancel your subscription to existence.

Gabriel had already tried to kill Aziraphale, who he should, arguably, love, at least in some sort of froo-froo, agape, generic, atmospheric love like the smell of stale popcorn in a movie theatre.

Didn’t seem to have even that.

Part of Crowley, the crazy part, the part that said, 'what the Hell, I’m driving right through the damned wall of Hellfire, sounds like it would make for an interesting day', or, 'let's go chat with that angel up on that big wall there, half an hour after making him look seriously bad to the Almighty,' that part was hoping it would all go pear-shaped.

He'd enjoy taking a hearty swing at Gabe, maybe even connecting, right before getting his hellish ass smote right back down to…. Hell.

Ish.


“Oh, I see they're letting just anyone walk into Gilbert's these days.” He sauntered out from his hidey hole at an extreme tilt, overcompensating due to sheer nerves, such that he required a teensy little demonic intervention to prevent slip-sliding right down onto the floor directly in front of the Archangel Gabriel. He recovered quickly from the near disastrous lapse in dignity, and fortunately, the Archangel was so stunned to see him, that he either didn’t notice, or didn’t comment on the near miss.

The snappy-dressing angel, euchhk, recovered from his surprise, and his eyes wandered briefly over the tailor before narrowing on Crowley. “You'd be the evidence of that, demon.”

“Exactly!” he grinned, tossing himself into a nearby chair, pleased to have made it this far without being struck by some serious Holy firepower. “I meant me. Nice suit!”

Alright, the pandering wasn’t any more dignified than the fall² would have been, but this was survival, his and Aziraphale’s both, and he had sacrificed his pride for worse things on many, many occasions. ³

It didn’t seem to help much. Gabriel gave him a disgusted look before turning back to Gilbert. “I require some privacy to talk to this… human, here.”

“Ah, but of course, Monsieur. I will go check in about those sock garters you were inquiring about.”

“… Well, that was more than Crowley wanted to know.

“Don’t go far!” he called cheerfully after his insurance policy.

“My job is to avoid having a really awkward conversation with the Dark Lord of the Abyss about being smote by an Archangel in a tailor shop.

“What do you want, Fallen wretch?” he demanded as soon as the man was out of earshot. Crowley

¹

²

³
hadn't been called a wretch by anyone but Aziraphale in ages.

“I'm looking for a certain angel we're both acquainted with.”

“First of all, I’m not helping a demon with anything besides a swift trip back to the pit.” He nodded firmly at his reflection, still adjusting his tie as he spoke. “Secondly, why don’t you just ask your bosom buddy, Aziraphale?”

What kind of buddy? He peered down at his chest to make sure he was still presenting male, but everything seemed in order.

“Because he's the angel I’m looking for, of course.”

“I might have known-"

“You should have, yeah,” he winced as the words slipped out and Gabriel’s expression darkened.

*Shut up, shut up, idiot. You need to be, ggaagghh, nice to the bleagh, Archangel slurrrgh Gabriel.*

He spread his hands wide in a gesture that at least vaguely suggested apology. “Sorry, sorry force of habit. Seriously though, I need to find him.”

He put a whole lot of effort into imagining himself relaxed and Gabriel helpful, which he had, on the way over, eventually decided was probably a better approach than screaming and shaking the Archangel until the truth came out, as fun as that would have been.

Right up until the violent discorporation.

“Why are you asking *me* for, foul beast?”

*Sheer, God Blessed, mad desperation.*

“I figured you would know, being his supervisor and all.”

“I don’t have anything to do with the traitor, Aziraphale. I don’t even read his reports anymore. Mesopotamia invented a new kind of desert, blah, blah—"

“Dessert…and when is the last time you read a report, because Mesopotamia—"

Gabriel didn’t even have the decency to look guilty. “-Is the last time Aziraphale did anything relevant to anyone.”


*Today.*

“Right, right, well, you know the old saying, right? ‘Someone call Heaven, there's an angel missing!’”

“What?”

Of course not.

“Well, I would give you all a little ‘jingle-jangle,’ but it’s been quite a while since You-know-who has accepted my calls. So, lucky for Aziraphale, here you are and here I am, and the sooner you tell me where he is, the sooner I can get busy never darkening your doorstep again.”
Gabriel rolled his ridiculous Liz Taylor eyes with more drama than Crowley thought was strictly necessary. 5

“I don’t know. Did you try the bookshop? He has a thing for it. Bizarre, if you ask me."

The only thing that stopped him from weeping in utter frustration was the fact that he’d rather sip a Holy Water toast than let Gabriel bear witness to such a display.

“I… did, in fact, try the bookshop,” he managed through gritted teeth and fangs trying to erupt. “And I tried looking the other way too.” He gestured with his hands in a way that explained precisely the spiritual and mental gymnastics he had gone through to a fellow celestial being, and would have suggested getting an elaborate perm to a human being. “He's, uh…”

Crowley didn’t really want explain the whole summoning thing to Gabriel. In fact, he didn’t want to explain anything at all, ever, more than was strictly necessary to Gabriel. “I think there’s some demonic interference. He borrowed this dagger from me, just out of curiosity—"

Gabriel snorted at that. “Always has his hand in the cockle jar—"

“Cookie, yes. Anyway—"

“I have entertained this long enough, demon. Go back to your Master before I decide to send you there myself.” Crowley tipped down his glasses to give Gabriel's threatening glare a long, golden glower of his own. “If you're actually concerned for him,” and his voice conveyed perfectly how much doubt he thought there was on that score, “Then why don’t you do him a favour and stay out of his life. Maybe he still has a shot at getting back into Her good Graces without your evil influence.”

That stung quite a bit more than he was expecting it to. Crowley really hadn’t spent much time with any angels except Aziraphale, who by virtue of virtue, tended to skew his expectations too far to the good.

Alright… he hadn’t wanted it to go this far, but Gabriel wasn’t giving him much choice. “I'll keep that in mind,” he said brightly, trying not to imagine Hellfire a little too vividly. It would be a shame if something happened... to the tailor's business. He made a show of turning to leave while quickly withdrawing his weapon, then turned himself right back. “Oh, one more thing, Gabriel.”

“What?” the Archangel sighed in the way of the dreadfully overburdened.

“The suit is nice and all, but you can’t go out among the humans just looking good. You need this too,” he yanked out the little bottle and spritzed it in front of the angel's startled face.

“What on Earth are you do…huh.”

“I know, right?”

“That’s quite… what is that?”

“Perfume. Angel, by Mugler. Smells great, yeah?”

Gabriel took the star-shaped bottle from his hand and sniffed at it like he was just discovering what his nose was for. “What… what is that odour, demon.”

“Call me Crowley,” he said, winking playfully, causing the same quick succession of surprise, consternation, and irritation his winks usually provoked in Aziraphale.
Dark Lord Below, but he missed his angel.

“And it’s caramel and chocolate, mostly. Like a dessert.”

“…something can taste like this smells?” the Archangel asked, intrigued. He made to lick the bottle and Crowley quickly caught him by the wrist. Violet eyes connected with his own for the first time since his own had been irrevocably changed. He released him quickly, feeling as shaken as Gabriel looked. “Dessert does, this doesn’t. Just for smelling.”

“Ah, I see. Well… thank you, demon- uh, Demon Crowley.”

Well, he supposed that was something.

“Keep it. Aziraphale says it’s too posh for him. Doesn’t feel worthy of it, but it seems to be well “suited” to you.”

The price he paid for Aziraphale sometimes.

“I, uh, whoa, yes! Suited! Ha, yes! That’s good, that’s very-” He shut his mouth very quickly. “You should probably get going then, before I gotta, you know,” he imitated punching Crowley in the stomach, “Smite ya.”

Crowley managed a painfully fake laugh to go along with whatever noise that was that Gabriel was making.

*I am a cheap, cheap, whore.*

Worse, as the Archangel turned back to his primping in clear dismissal, it hadn’t actually gotten Crowley anywhere closer to finding Aziraphale.

Feeling defeated, he started to leave, when Gabriel called out to him, without looking. “You know, Fallen one, if the evil of the dagger is making hard to find the flimsy bit of good left in your friend, you may want to try just looking for the dagger. But that's not really an Upstairs issue. Maybe you should be checking in Below.”

The dagger. The actual damned dagger.

He finally registered his mouth hanging open.

Find the *dagger.*

Merciless Master. He needed to visit Dagon.

He staggered, stunned into the street, almost hysterical.

Gabriel had given him a hope in Hell.

---

Michael smiled sweetly at Aziraphale, steel in her hard eyes as they swept over him, measuring. She walked around him in fluid grace, circling the Principality like a predator. He was instantly put in mind of Crowley at his calculating best, though he doubted the angel would find it a flattering comparison… or the demon for that matter. “So nice to see you again, little brother. It has been some time.”
The last time he had laid eyes on that particular Archangel, they were Crowley’s, and she had calmly provided the method for his execution. She hadn’t stayed to watch, and he’d wondered if that was a sign of some reluctance on her part.

He doubted it now.

The Archangels and the Lords of Hell seemed to have worked out some sort of Arrangement of their own, trading Holy Water for Hellfire, and if Aziraphale and Crowley hadn’t heeded dear Agnes’ warning and switched bodies, both sides would have succeeded in their efforts at murder. However, it had been clever Crowley walking into Hellfire, and silly old Aziraphale bathing safely in the Holy Water.

She didn’t know that, however. The last time Michael had seen Aziraphale, and knew it was Aziraphale, she’d practically purred while suggesting he was a bit Fallen, as if that was something one could do by half measure, or that he had, at the very least fallen in with Crowley.

Harder to argue that one, in truth.

Still, audacious of her to go there, considering her own actions.

Aziraphale held very still, fighting hard against a wave of rage against her hypocrisy, more concerned with losing control of himself than provoking the deadly creature before him.

Evidently, Michael had been scheming for a very long time.

“Nothing to say?” she prompted him lightly, moving to stand directly in front of him while he steadied his nerves.

Michael was the warrior of Heaven. She had led Her armies in the War, and would have again if Armageddon had gone ahead. It was she who had fought hand to hand with Satan, casting him down after an intense battle and nearly getting dragged down with him in the attempt.

The Lord Herself had stepped in to save her when the Morning Star seized her golden wings and wrenched them back, clinging to her as he began to plummet.

He remembered screaming her name that day. They all had.

The awesome power of the Almighty, suddenly stepping in, had brought Aziraphale, and the other angels with him, to their knees, awestruck and grateful as She’d seized back the one She loved, ripping her from Lucifer's hands, denying him his last victory. Michael had actually struggled with Her briefly, so focused on smiting the traitor she'd have plunged into the Lake of Fire with him, fighting all the way. Only the unrelenting, cradling arms of God had stopped her, unwilling to let Michael fall.

They'd all looked up to Michael for her valiant efforts, and she'd been so humble then, falling on her face under ravaged wings and snapped pinions, insisting it was her honour and duty.

How he had admired her.

Aziraphale could not be facing a more dangerous angel.

Best keep a cool head.

“Why have you done these things?” he asked softly, in the same manner he had asked the occultists, coming against his rampant desire to shout at her, counterbalancing anger with as
much serenity as he could muster.

“Popping in to check in on a rebellious angel, foolish enough to be captured by humans? Why, I’m here to look after you, of course.”

He lost it a little, despite his best efforts. “Will you lie to my face, Michael? You have led these humans to their destruction, sold them into the hands of the evil one! Not only that, but given them power to slay and destroy the innocent.” Her smile, maddeningly, did not so much as flicker under the litany of charges. "Are you denying your hand in all this suffering, enslaving demons to cause harm and death?”

Several of the occultists began trying to make a break for it, but Michael pinned them helplessly to the earth with a look.

“I don’t consort with demons, Aziraphale. I’m a proper angel,” she added smugly. “But I do know an angel that did once conspire against the Great Plan with a demon.” She paused a moment, clearly enjoying herself. “That would be you, traitorous Principality, in case you’ve forgotten. We certainly haven’t.”

He ignored the accusation and focused on the far more offensive lie. “Oh no? Maybe I've been misinformed”, he said tightly, drawing out the demonic blade and throwing it down to stab into the ground, right to the hilt. “Lose this, did you? Where did you get it in the first place?” He let the weight of his own unspoken accusation rest heavily between them.

She dropped the act and the smile in an instant. “We don’t have to be enemies, Aziraphale.”

“We aren’t enemies!” he insisted, passionately. “We are kin! But you have done a wicked thing! Humans, little children have died!”

“Humans always die, Aziraphale. It’s what they do. It’s probably the only thing they do that really matters in the long run, flying and falling in their turn.” Not for the first time, the distant coolness of an angel for humanity cut him deeply. Though she was bathed in the light of Grace, it was the ice in her that struck him to the heart.

It wasn’t who angels were supposed to be.

“You misjudge me though,” she murmured. “I wish your little creatures no harm… but I had to show my good will to the other side.”

He fought for composure. “The other side? What of them? What do you want from Hell that you'd seek their favour by shedding innocent blood and corrupting foolish souls. You are an angel, and unFallen, though I can hardly fathom why at this moment.”

She laughed like they were old friends. “Why have you united with the demon Crowley against Heaven? What’s in that for you?”

He shook his head helplessly, knowing he was being manipulated, but vulnerable, always vulnerable, where Crowley was concerned. “He isn’t like the others.”

“Oh, so naïve, Aziraphale,” she crooned in grating sympathy. “Of course he is. You didn’t see him Fall, did you? I did. Front lines and all, rather spectacular, terrible as it all was. He made sure he didn’t Fall alone. And he has always been so, mmm, talented at painting a pretty picture, getting angels to see what he wanted them to see.” She looked at him, pouting with mocking pity. "He's got your head so turned, it’s really no wonder he's made a traitor out of one who was once so loyal.”
“I am not a traitor,” he spat angrily, deeply offended and frustrated to find himself on the defensive when Michael was the one in the wrong. “Crowley isn’t trying to bring me down. He’s- he is a good person. My dearest friend.”

It was still so hard to say the word outright to one of his own, and he felt a kiss of shame for his weakness. He knew it was hopeless to really explain Crowley, but as always, he had to try.

“Are you even hearing yourself? He's a demon, corrupted since before he was cast out, irrevocably evil by nature, and by Her own word.”

“He isn’t! He can’t be! I hate all that is evil, yet I… still love him!”

Her eyebrows raised as he frantically tried to reel himself back in. He was losing this verbal sparring already.

“Perfect,” she said, after a moment’s consideration. “You're perfect.”

“Far from it,” he replied automatically, confused and uneasy. “But it doesn’t matter about me, Michael. We're talking about you- this is going against her. You're destroying her children.”

“She's destroyed plenty of them Herself. I'm not about to be bothered about little things.”

It was true… and to this day he didn’t understand it.

“She created them… life and death are Her prerogative.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

“I…” I have to. She sees everything. It's just not how we see things. She's ineffable!”

“Are you going to tow that line until you go up in flame or down in Disgrace?” She took his hand tenderly, as though soothing a confused child. “Oh, Aziraphale. Of course you won’t. Radical thinker that you are, befriending demons, living with humans, thwarting the plans of the Almighty Herself.”

“You don’t know me at all-”

“I know you perfectly. You, of all beings should understand that things need to change between us.”

“Us,” he echoed uncertainly.

“You and me, Heaven and Hell… Creator and Creation, but I’m starting with Hell. I send them a few corrupted souls, now and again, to grease the wheels, and we continue to work together on the plan.”

“The plan… not the Great Plan?”

She scoffed at him. “Are you still on about that? You surprise me, considering you were the architect of its destruction.” Her smile could have been warm, except for the malice in it. “Well played, my friend. Brave, going against Her.”

“No,” he protested immediately, writhing internally at the thought. “I'm pledged to protect humanity, and so I… I did. I had to try, but it wasn’t… it wasn’t against Her, uh, personally.”

He felt suddenly that he was on shaky ground here, and from the predatory glee in her expression,
so did Michael. It certainly wasn’t obedient to Heaven, admittedly, but he felt more and more the difference between God’s Ineffable Plan and Heaven’s scheming.

“Wasn’t it? You conspired with your little pet demon to stop Her own plan, Aziraphale.” Her voice dropped lower, silky and coaxing. It was perhaps well that he’d had an awful lot of practice arguing with that tempting tone. “So you must have come to understand… Her time is over. Past over. Done.”

Cold shock washed over him at her words. “Michael, no,” he breathed.

“Oh, yes,” she sighed, almost dreamily, giving him chills. “You’ll be perfect for this, little brother, ‘cause you’re already so far ahead on the path we are all on.”

“What… what path is that, precisely?”

“You must have seen it yourself. Mankind must rise up and slay its own gods. Quite a collection you’ve amassed in your little bookshop. Interesting reading. Such a naughty angel. A seditionist to the core, I’d say. I’d have come calling on you eventually. Had to get rid of your demon first though.”

He swallowed hard. “You targeted Crowley deliberately.”

“I didn’t plan to initially, but I was given the opportunity. He would have had to be brought under heel eventually though. He’s quite clever, as I’m sure you know, far too clever. I thought it best to keep him occupied. His people Downstairs aren’t fans anyway. Hastur and Ligur thought the summonings quite funny, until he managed to kill one of them with Holy Water from … somewhere.”

She gave him a long look, but he didn’t rise to the bait.

“He’s very resourceful. So you used the summonings to win Hell’s favour.”

“All the way to the bottom, really. The Morningstar is the only one who really matters, and I’ll need his help when the time comes.”

“Right,” he replied slowly, mind racing. “And what time would that be?”

Her smile was easy and her voice coaxing. She sounded terrifyingly reasonable.

“It’s time to move on without Her, Aziraphale. The Angel of Light was right all along. We are strong… together, all of us, we can send Her off to exile…. She’s all but done it to Herself already anyway, and then… then we can make a fresh start of it. Do things right this time.”

“You want to overthrow God.”

His voice abandoned him even as he processed the words, and he was distantly aware that all his corporation’s autonomous functions had ceased. Breathing, heartbeat, blinking, brainwaves, all of it.

Just as well they weren’t particularly necessary.

“She abdicated Her throne ages ago anyway, Aziraphale. I only want to make it official. If She desires Her retirement, let Her go on with it, but it’s time for Heaven and Hell to stop playing Her game.”
“That’s treason,” he breathed, taking a horrified step back, eyes lighting again on the humans pinned like butterflies to the earth.

He had to get them out of here.

“It’s time, past time. Part of you knows that too, dear brother. You’ve already been strong enough to shake free of Her judgements. I should have kept you by my side in the old War. Forgive me for not recognizing your potential. Come and help me, be in the forefront when the Last Change is made.”

“You were the strongest of us, “ he choked out. “You were so brave and loyal. We, I admired you! Faithful Michael! You threw down Satan himself, and so many others.”

“And was that the right thing to do?” she demanded, and he was back there, on a garden wall, listening to Crowley asking the same thing, feeling the question echo in his own heart. “I cast down my own family on Her orders…and I can hardly stand myself for it.”

She leaned in close, eyes blazing, and he met those eyes, patient, steadfast and true. “Has the demon ever told you about Hell? What it's like down there, cut off forever, the suffering of our fellows?”

“Ah, I, um, a little bit.”

“Well, I have been down there.”

He knew she had. So had he.

He did his utmost to feign surprise. “It’s a terrible, hopeless fate.”

“Her judgement… is always just,” he managed weakly as the thought of dear, wonderful Crowley lingering, miserable, down below for eternity sliced into his heart bitterly.

“I used to believe that too. No longer.”

“She trusts you! Gave you a place of honour! You’re supposed to be the best of us. Just like the Morningstar was. And now you're betraying her?! You've lost all faith?! Michael, aren’t you listening to your own words?”

“She let us down first, Aziraphale!” And for the first time, genuine emotion, pain, flashed across her shimmering face. “I waited and waited for Her after the war, and She never, ever spoke again!”

“She saved your life!”

“Only to abandon me, you, all of us! Is that really so different from how she treats those who Fell?”

“She’s still here! Just… She just doesn’t feel like talking to anyone anymore.”

“Right, well, that’s lovely for Her, isn’t it! Has it occurred to you that maybe She doesn’t love any of us anymore? That She's tossed us all out? She’s just taking the long road with the rest of us. She's supposed to know all-”

“She does, of course she does!”

“Then She saw the War coming and did nothing! Do you remember how many of my siblings, my
friends, my choirmates I had to cast down in Her name? She let it happen! I loved them! All of them, all of the Fallen! My beautiful Morningstar, and your damned Crowley too! So many of the Fallen were directly under my wings, but I was a good soldier, Aziraphale, and I chose Her, and I cast all my beloved down for Her sake.”

Even Michael’s tears had a golden shimmer to them. “I would, perhaps, have been better off had I been more like you, doubting, seditious Aziraphale, right from the very beginning.”

She seemed to notice her tears and quickly brushed them aside. He could see her heart harden as she stood there in front of him. He reached out for her compassionately, but it was far too late; she took an angry step back, and he let his hand fall. “If She's paying an ounce of attention, Aziraphale, then She can stop me anytime She wants to. This isn’t new… but either She doesn’t care or She is totally on board, because the wind carried your demon friend’s feather straight to me.”

She threw her hands wide in direct challenge. “Stop me. Cast me out or smite me then, I’m not afraid. Do it now, or I'll do it to you.”

She wasn’t threatening him, but God Herself, and Aziraphale swayed in terror for her sake.

“Oh, Michael,” he whispered, utterly appalled. “I am loyal, and I will never ever be swayed. Even though She slay me, yet will I trust her… Job, remember, said that, more or less, pronouns aside, and being frivolous things anyway.” He shook his head briefly before trying to really catch her eyes. "Beautiful, human faith, after losing everything he had. Something for all angels to aspire to… something for us all to cling to.” He picked up her hand and smiled kindly at her. “Michael… it isn’t too late for you. You can find your faith again. She'll forgive you.”

“No, She won’t.”

“Yes,” he insisted, blinking hard to clear suddenly uncooperative eyes. “She will, I know She will, because I will. I will forgive you, if you but ask me.”

Hope was such a fragile thing… and so persistent.

She patted his hands in apparent sympathy. “My faith is long gone, dear brother, and I have no interest in Her forgiveness. The only decision left here is yours.” The quiet threat slipped back into her voice. “What say you?”

He pulled his hands away from hers, heart in pieces as he let go of a being he had looked up to for uncountable years.

“I’m going to stop you,” he promised.

“Really?” she asked, genuine surprise, perhaps even hurt, colouring her expression before it hardened like the battlefield soldier she was created to be. “Brave of you to try. So brave, aren’t you?”

The soft shimmer of a sword being drawn sent a hard shudder through him. A silver sword, simple and powerful, appeared in her hand.

“I don’t want to fight you,” he hissed, backing up rapidly, scepter, crown and wings manifesting quite without his say so. A few of the humans gasped as she too shifted into her true form, shining silver shield and armour making her a striking sight. The sounds attracted not just his attention but hers, and a wave of fear for their safety coursed through him like an icy river.

“Very few beings do,” she said mildly, advancing on him, expression grave.
“Michael, Michael,” pleaded Aziraphale, still retreating, aware of the cliff edge behind him. “Don’t do this! We’re kin! An angel hasn’t fought another angel since the War. We can’t go back to those days!”

“We are going back to them, Aziraphale, but we're going to make sure it goes right this time.” She stopped advancing and he stopped too. “No hard feelings, little brother. I wish you would see things my way. Maybe you just need a little more time to think it over?”

The hope in her voice hurt deeply. She wanted him, truly, with her in this, and it had been so long since he’d felt that any of his kin had wanted him at all.

His hands tightened on the scepter. Aziraphale really missed his flaming sword all of a sudden. “Never, Michael, never.” He glanced down at his finger, thinking of the shining ring currently dangling from a demon's neck. “I belong to Her. I was bought with a price.”

He still didn’t know what that meant, only that it was true.

“Very well then. I'll be very kind. Stay out of my way and I'll let you go.” Her eyes drifted towards the summoners… their souls blackened and ready for sacrifice. “I'll see to it that these ones do not trouble you further.”

“I can’t let you do that,” he said firmly, gathering himself for a real fight.

“Do you really think you can stop me, Aziraphale?”

“I will give my life trying,” he said resolutely, sending a quiet apology to Crowley.

The voices of the frightened occultists still echoing through him, Aziraphale moved first, taking a broad swing at her that she parried immediately. “So be it!” she gasped out, attacking with a ferocity he had seen before, at a distance, but was in no way prepared to be opposing.

In the moment of her distraction, as they lunged at one another, Aziraphale cracked her hold on the occultists. “Run! He shouted, “Run while you can!”

She snarled and grabbed him by the throat, and he grabbed it, jamming his thumbs into her tendons to break her grip. The humans did stand, but they made no move to run, watching Elijah for his direction. The leader staggered wildly towards Michael, pointing at her. “You aren’t the one we serve! You aren’t the one I need!”

It was his last mistake.

Before Aziraphale could even register what was happening, Elijah was dying, impaled on her sword, gurgling in awful panic come far too late to save him. Michael had the sword out of him in an instant, forgetting him, and was turning towards the rest of them. Aziraphale thrust his scepter out, blocking her, and letting it clash heavily against her blade with grim determination, as he moved between the Archangel and her targets.

The Principality didn’t, in the vernacular, have a prayer, but he didn’t really want one anyway. She already knew, and he was ready, so ready, to abide by Her decision, whether She chose to act, or not to act. He felt peace, though he was going to battle. Faith sustaining him. She would have the right of it, when all was said and done.

Their weapons met again, Elijah's blood splattering over him as the impact shook it free. Screaming humans tried to run, but there was a sickening crack as the three fastest of them dropped to the ground like dolls, necks snapped.
“God, no!” he cried in horror, scarce heard over the shrieks of terror around them. The others froze where they were, uncertain of where to flee, paralyzed in futile terror.

“Blaspheming, guardian?” she teased with a smile that did not meet her ruthless eyes. “Thou shalt not take Her name in vain.”

“Thou shalt not kill,” he retorted, truly angry now, hitting back hard enough to stagger her off balance, then hooking a leg behind hers to send her tumbling backwards. “Run!” he called again.

“They ran!” came a terrified cry, the young woman who had asked him why he’d helped them, pointing at the bodies. “She’ll kill us!”

“She means to kill you anyway! Run!” He answered, throwing himself backwards to the ground and narrowly avoiding Michael’s attempt to stab him through the abdomen as she rolled back up to her feet in a second.

Taking advantage of her momentary freedom from him, she seized another human and slashed his throat open, before thrusting the occultist’s shuddering body into Aziraphale’s arms. Soaked red with human blood, in a horror he had not seen since awful days in Vietnam, the angel let the human drop free to meet his end alone and uncomforted, in order to try to save the remaining lives.

He struck at Michael again, and she was a whirlwind, fast, dizzying and destructive. A glancing blow to his right shoulder left him gasping as golden blood spurted up to mix with the red on his chest. He managed to land one of his own, throwing out a quick miracle to heal the damage she had dealt him, but she did the same, not slowed down a whit from his efforts.

Aziraphale was hopelessly outclassed in this… he needed something better than his scepter, which could send a demon scurrying but wasn’t nearly as effective against the commander of the Lord’s Army. His eyes lit on the hilt of the demonic blade. It was short, and not ideal, but it would serious damage to an angel.

He didn’t actually want to hurt her, but Michael wasn’t leaving him much choice. She meant to murder the nine remaining cult members to sacrifice their souls to Hell, and he was bound by duty, word, and basic morality, to save them if he could.

The occultists once again tried to scatter as she seized another and dispatched him without hesitation.

Eight now.

He lunged for the blade, heard her cry out angrily as she realised what he was after, and yanked it sharply out of the wounded earth, but he was too slow, and the maneuver had made him vulnerable.

Michael seized him by the hair and yanked his head back, lightly sliding her blade against his throat in cool, delicate threat. It was still bloody from the lost souls she had murdered, a weapon with a thirst that could never be slaked. Tears slid down over his cheeks, and she smirked at the sight. “Oh, little brother,” she crooned, “so sensitive to pain? Really, Guardian? You'd never have lasted in my ranks Above. It's just as well you were thrown to Earth to while away the years.”

Aziraphale caught her eyes as best he could from the difficult angle. “It's not pain, my sister,” he sighed mournfully, it's pity.”

She cast him down to the earth so hard he wondered if it would take a lake of boiling sulfur to stop his fall. Instead the earth provided a solid, if not particularly gentle landing, and stars danced and sparked in his fading vision.
Her weight, not just her corporeal weight, but all the power of her angelic nature crushed down on him. She wrenched his wings back, and something cold and holy wound around them, drawing them against his back, bound tight and useless. He didn’t recognize them as chains until he felt the manacles close around his wrists.

Michael was meant to chain Satan under the earth for a thousand years during Armageddon.

Panic, real and true clawed over him, slinky and seductive in its cool violation of his senses.

He wasn’t getting out of these for a very long time.

“Shhhh… she breathed into his ear in a twisted parody of reassurance. “See how merciful I am? I'm not going to slay you, like the others thought we should. You’ll have plenty of time to think things over while I go about my business.” She rolled him over and patted his back fondly. “Oh, and don’t worry, my dear, I forgive you.”

“Run, just run!” he yelled desperately to the surviving humans as Michael turned her attention to them.

Aziraphale wailed in anguish into the kindly grass as their screams dropped one by one into silence.

Chapter End Notes

¹ The photo spread of azaleas on page three was to Fall for.

² Little f… although since most of the demons had landed ass over teakettle, the actual Fall wasn’t big on dignity either.

³ Like the time he'd gotten in the argument with Aziraphale about which came first, the chicken or the egg, and ended up spending a week as a chicken to prove his point, whatever it had been. He had lost in so many ways that week, and had been years before Aziraphale stopped waggling his eyebrows and asking him if he was "making" breakfast.

⁴ These things could get away from a demon if he wasn’t paying attention. The lads at that Gentlemen's Club in 1837 had been very surprised, and intrigued, when they woke him unexpectedly female one sunny morning after a brief, twenty-seven hour nap. He still wondered what he had been dreaming about.

⁵ Which should tell you something.
It conveyed everything perfectly, his own special little quirk from their Mother.
Chapter Summary

Crowley seeks an ally and finds unexpected help.

Aziraphale does some seeking of his own.

Michael is seeking too.

Ah, the magical feeling of realising you are seriously setting yourself up for a convoluted sequel someday.

I hope you enjoy it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He did, eventually, quiet.

Michael had rendered Aziraphale quite helpless, body and soul, a feeling he was not at all accustomed to, bound tightly in chains that looked light but ran heavy with celestial power, making mere existence an exhausting thing. The Archangel had dragged him over the cliff edge, making short work of the flight down, much as she had made short work of her human victims, and dropped him on the sand to wait on her whim, the next celestial war, or Crowley’s dramatic attempt at rescue, whichever came first.

At least he wasn’t trapped under the earth or in the sea. There was still the salty ocean breeze, birds singing and the fresh light of dawn, giving him somewhere to hang his flagging hope.

Morning always brought new promise, no matter how long, dark, and cold the night had been.

So long as one made it to the morning.

As dawn kissed the ground, violated by the spilled blood of Michael’s sacrifice to Hell, a horrified shriek, followed by other frantic voices, heralded the swarming police sirens, gravely spoken words, and crackling radios as humankind arrived to pick up where Michael left off.

Such a terrible waste of life. He was still stained and sticky with the crusting blood of her victims, awful beyond the discomfort of the unpleasant itch of it on his smooth, unbroken skin. He couldn’t banish the bloodstains or change his clothes for another set, but he could let go of the human trappings and surrender to his true form. He slid into the pristine robes of Heaven, feet bare, wings, unfortunately, still as imprisoned as the rest of him.
Aziraphale had seen more deaths than any human ever had, both terrible and beautiful in their turn, both from lives stolen too soon and as a blessing for the weary ones ready to go on to their reward.

It wounded him that he'd not been able to protect any of the occultists, who now had no chance to rethink their life choices, and knowing where they had ended up had been no consolation to him whatsoever.

He closed his eyes and let the solid chalk of the bright cliff face support him, remembering the feeling of Crowley’s back pressed against his, powerful wings soft comfort in his heartbreak and the memory of his company making him feel less alone now.

Aziraphale wished his friend would come swiftly, and yet, contrarily, also hoped Crowley never found him. The longing to see his friend was, he supposed, an indicator of how selfish he was feeling at the moment. Michael would be a deadly threat to Crowley, having already identified him as clever enough to cause her problems, if he was so inclined.

One did not really expect a demon to go to bat for God, of course, but given the way Michael had gone about the whole thing, Aziraphale was certain Crowley would be very much inclined.

_We’ll go on that picnic_, he promised himself, if he could manage to get back to his dear counterpart, when all was said and done.

Michael would kill him if Crowley challenged her, and he was terribly certain his loyal friend could not have done so fast enough for his own liking.

Demons rush in where most angels fear to tread.

Not that he, chained and helpless, and likely to remain so for a very long time, was in any position to judge.

*Find the dagger.*
*Find the angel.*
*Find the dagger.*
*Find Aziraphale.*

Then he could yell.

Crowley stalked through London towards the nearest portal to Hell, radiating so much tension that passing humans were hastily throwing themselves out of his path without really knowing why they were doing it. It wasn’t so uncommon a phenomenon that he paid it any mind.

No one really went Downstairs expecting a good time, but Crowley had plenty of reason to expect a particularly bad time of _this_ time. No one had made any further attempts to kill him after
the holy bathtub incident, of which he'd gotten a line by line recounting from Aziraphale. Other than an official reprimand demanding he make an appointment for a good old fashioned round of torments,¹ no one had seemed much inclined to bother with him post Armageddon’t.

However, there was a significant difference between staying off the radar up on Earth, and striding boldly into Dagon's office down in the eighth circle and waving his non-tortured existence right in her scaly face.

There was asking for trouble, and then there was insisting upon it.

He arrived at the nondescript location and nudged at the sand with a snake-skinned toe. It required a little demonic act of will to open the portal, which was just as well, because otherwise a lot of little tots at Miss Mimi's daycare centre would have had quite a start plunging into Hell after a quick trip down the unfortunately positioned, rickety, metal slide. Some demon in construction had a good time with that one. Gathered inside the building for story time, at present, there were no toddlers running about the playground for him to worry about, not that he would have.

Never.

It was just easier not to be bothered with the pesty things.

Crowley hesitated before opening it, feeling a creeping sense of foreboding not entirely explained by the thought of dropping in to rub elbows with his fellow demons Down Below. He adjusted his watch unnecessarily to display Hell Time, Too Late, but actually a bit early since he was still above.

What was that odd sensation skittering on the edges of his nerves?

His corporation answered his question without it becoming a conscious matter. He was clutching at Aziraphale's ring.

It wasn’t that you couldn’t sneak things into Hell… that was almost encouraged, relatively speaking. It was, as a general rule, much harder to sneak things out, and most everything did, in fact, want out.

He could probably get in with Aziraphale’s ring. He would never get out with it. Crowley badly wanted the satisfaction of giving it back to Aziraphale, maybe sliding it on his finger when he wasn’t paying attention, preferably in the middle of a long, ear-splitting lecture on why he should always, always, listen to his dear friend Crowley.

The demon still hadn’t entirely ruled out chains.

Crowley wondered if his little angelic shield would survive if he left the ring behind.

Probably.

It had been more to help Aziraphale’s concentration knitting the thing together than anything else.

He wondered how obvious it would be to the others Downstairs.

Crowley contemplated breaking it ahead of time. Having it around him might help, if someone took a swing at him but it also might help someone want to take a swing at him. There was no
winning Down Below.

In the end though, as was so often the case, it was raw, foolish, sentimentality that won out. If he
had the hedge of protection, it meant Aziraphale was okay, somewhere, he hoped.

And Bless him to Heaven, but Crowley *wanted* that hope.

Slowly, cautiously, mindful of the shimmering vortex of Aziraphale’s Grace hovering around
him, Crowley slipped the chain supporting the ring off his neck and hung it on a little rubber knob
on the platform of the slide. He let his fingers slide down the length of the chain until they grasped
the ring itself.

He grit his teeth and let go.

The halo continued its peaceful dance around him.

Alright. That was something.

As softly as he could, he pressed his will outwards, trying to encourage it, if that was the word,
to remain hidden, not lash out against literally anything or anyone he might encounter Down
Below.

*Hell is safe,* he thought at it.

Well… no.

*Hell is home.*

Yeah, decidedly no.

*Hell is the office and you, shiny thing, are the little game of solitaire I’ll be playing when no one
is looking.*

That was about right.

He wasn’t confident he could persuade anything of Aziraphale to be stealthy, but it did fade
from his own perception quite significantly, and that would have to be good enough for now.

Crowley, after all, knew it was there to look for, but no one else did.

If all else failed, he’d credit it with making him immune to the Holy Water. Everyone would
want one. Couldn’t hurt to sound that drum again, in case anyone got any murderous ideas.

Not that demons were often without them.

Crowley stepped into the portal and plummeted.

It had been sometime since Michael had made her presence known. The day had stretched into
mid-morning, and it was a little disconcerting to have investigators tracking above and around him
while he was in full angelic form, robes and all, struggling uselessly against his bonds. Their eyes slid over him, unseeing and unhearing the celestial creature in their midst. He wished he could Bless them; they were doing work that was hard on the heart.

The odd situation reminded him rather of Eden and early days, before it had really occurred to him to go undercover as a human and live like they did. It had been ages since he'd been apart like this, with the exception of his discorporation and that had amounted to something entirely different, with his brief flurry of body hopping before crashing solidly into the obliging Madame Tracey.

Aziraphale didn’t like being parted from them, he discovered rather quickly. There was an odd sense of loss that came with it, a strange bit of loneliness, just watching humankind as an outsider.

Lonely, but not alone.

The angel could still feel Her Grace, unhindered by the heavy chains, so it wasn’t nearly as disorienting as the oppressive summoning had been, but it was still distressing, frustrating, to be bound so helplessly, unable to move much, and unable to work any miracles.

The humans couldn’t hear him, and Crowley wasn’t here, but there was another option.

“Crowley says I should talk to You,” he said out loud, feeling a little silly, and presumptuous as he spoke over the crashing waves. There were rituals to these things, normally, forms, ceremonies, preparations. An angel just didn’t park his corporation next to the Almighty and start chatting, not any more, but he couldn’t do anything formal, trussed up at the bottom of a cliff, and surely someone ought to give Her the heads up about Michael’s scheming.

Well, She had to know, right?

But surely, he should still try? Just in case?

“I don’t know... I have always assumed You, that You, oh Lord, have better things to do, really, than listen to someone like me go on about things.”

He shifted awkwardly, trying to find a more formal position, but the chains did not allow it so he slumped back down.

“I can’t quite... I beg Your pardon, but You’ll have to take me as I am, I suppose, if You’re so inclined. Don’t feel obligated though,” he added with something like shyness, “I shouldn’t like to impose.”

His posture wouldn’t have gone over well during an evaluation. Not that much he had tried ever really did.

“You... You haven’t talked to me since I lied to You about the sword,” he whispered, feeling the salt wind sting eyes already wrung dry. “I suppose You're still a bit tetchy about that. I'm sorry I lied to You. I was... I was afraid. I’m sure You knew that of course, but maybe You might like to hear me say it now.”

Was She listening? Birds were singing, and life teemed all around, but he didn’t know if its Source was there with him.

“I had never,” his mouth ran on ahead of him, and fear rattled his nerves as he delved deeper into a conversation that had waited a long time to see the light of day. “I had never been disobedient before, about anything, until I gave Your gift away.” He looked up, shutting fragile corporeal eyes against the glorious sunlight, still dim against the memory of his Mother. “I believe
I am supposed to be sorry about that, and the problem is, I'm not sorry, I'm not sorry that I gave it away,” he confessed openly at last. “They, your most precious, delicate, children, they needed it more. You must know that,” Aziraphale breathed in question and conviction. “It never did feel quite right in my hand. I wasn’t Michael. I had no love for war, Holy or not. I still don’t. I wanted to give, and Bless, not fight and slay. You appointed me their guardian, and I still don’t know why.”

He didn’t feel like She was accusing him of his failure. He didn’t feel much of anything now, but he pressed on, nevertheless. “I did the best thing I thought I could do, at the time. I didn’t mean to let you down that day, or any day, but then I lied and made it all the worse.”

Aziraphale was sorry about that. Dearest Crowley had the right of it; had him figured out, heart and mind and soul.

“I have lived my whole life, since that moment, in fear of You,” he whispered, little tremours running through him. “Not so much of Your Wrath, but of what You might say about it, what You must think of me.”

**What must you think of me?**

“Maybe that’s why You stopped talking to me. I don’t know, really. You stopped talking to all of us, and it took us a while to even realise it.”

**How long were we alone before we knew it?**

There was longing and grief and desperation in the thought, and his breath quickened at the sudden solidness of the loss.

“I am an angel of the Lord,” he declared firmly to sea and sky, and I have seen You face to face, in a way that living humans could only dream about, and demons could only envy and despise, and I still hardly know You at all.”

He just didn’t know. Was that because She didn’t want to be known? Or because She couldn’t be known?

Did being ineffable necessitate being alone?

If there was anything he did know about the being who had breathed life into so many others, it was that She had wanted others.

God didn’t want to be alone.

Was it kindness or foolishness to find a place in his heart with the audacity to pity the Creator Herself.

“Forgive me, please,” he offered, he asked, “if You will, for the lie, and for anything else I have done that wasn’t what You hoped from me.”

It was a good, freeing feeling to get that off his chest at last. In the clarity of forgiveness, unspoken yet trusted, Aziraphale felt older, deeper feelings well up.

“I have questions too. I always have, I suppose, but, it has never seemed respectful, to ask, and, I know, I'm not a particularly good angel, but I did always mean to be,” he added hopefully. “They
always say that there’s no questioning You, Lord. ‘Don’t question too closely, Aziraphale.’ Gabriel says it, well, all the Archangels say it, even my dear Crowley says it, like he's afraid of what You might do if I say the wrong thing.”

If the fear of the Lord was supposed to be the beginning of wisdom, how could anyone dare to understand Her?

“Seems a bit strange, really, when I say it out loud. Crowley questions You, all the time, in front of me, no less, and Falling certainly didn’t dissuade him from asking his questions, but he fears for me, that I'll question You… and why? To protect me?”

From Her? Did he need protecting from Her? Surely such protection could never exist.

“What does it all mean? Did Crowley really Fall for his questions, because he was angry and hurt and rejected You first, or because he persuaded others to turn against You as well?”

He tried to lift his arms to Her in plea as the words spilled out of him, but the chains bit into his wrists and he let them drop limply to the sand.

“Did You really stop loving him, that extraordinary being You Created by Your own hands? Did You stop loving any of them? Would You stop loving me someday, Mother, if I were to step too far out of line?”

He pressed bare toes into the warm, yielding sand.

“Where is the line?” he asked Her, unanswered.

Her silence, Her listening? to his worries did little to ease them, so he turned his heart away from the dark, whirling vortex of his doubt and confusion, back to the matter at hand.

“It's quite bad trouble with Michael down here, you know, well, of course, I am certain that you do know. You must know. I suppose she is able to make her own choice in regards to serving You, but in the meantime, she's caused a lot of pain and death for ones who don’t really have the wherewithal to decide these things clearly. Why are you letting- no, no. I shouldn’t like to tell you what to do, I wouldn't dare to presume, but I don’t know what else I can do from here.”

A little red-legged kittiwake flew down from some unnoticed pocket in the cliff, padding its bright, delicate feet along the water’s shifting edge. “Well, waiting, I suppose. I can certainly wait. Do let me know, if there’s anything I can do for You, Lord. I, am willing, if nothing else, I am that.”

Crowley didn’t bother to knock, but did make the effort of sketching a quick bow as he entered. Deference was a good thing in Hell, but demons didn’t trust too much of anything good. They didn’t really do things like loyalty and what with demons being big fans of backstabbing, the wise demonic underling, and/or recent disgrace, was best advised to strike a neat balance between respect and rampant slovenliness.

He considered himself something of an expert at tightrope walking that particular line.

Dagon didn’t look up at him as he, quite literally, snapped up a chair to sprawl on before her desk. There was something reassuring about daring to sprawl before one’s superiors.
He found himself immediately down on the disturbingly sticky floor.

Her expression didn’t change, but he felt her satisfaction all the same.

_Euyck._ He doubted that drying fluid was someone’s dropped Pepsi, and he had no desire to investigate further.

“Ah, Dagon! So pleasant to be sitting humbly before you, oh Lord of the Files.”

“I doubt that it’s any more pleasant for you than for me, Crowley. In fact, it had better not be.”

She snapped her own fingers² and a file clerk staggered out, rather corpse-like, from behind a staggering stack of folders in a room full of such stacks, which carried on, so far as Crowley could see, on into infinity. There was something familiar about the miserable creature who handed him a leaking pen and a clipboard that was as sticky as the floor, holding a complicated form with, so far as he could tell, instructions in ancient Mandarin using Latin syntax.

“Triplicate, please, in German,” the damned human said dully.

_Keeping it simple, today._

Dagon clicked her tongue at him, scolding. “Please? Please? If you keep using language like that, it'll be right back to the Hall of Torments with you.”

“Beg-beg pardon, your Lordship.”

Dagon rolled her eyes into the middle of next week.³ “I hate when they make me break in the new ones.”

The celestial equivalent of neurons went off like firecrackers in a burst of recognition. “It's you! You rat bastard! When did you get here! Did—” he shut his mouth fast.

It wasn’t fast enough.

Dagon laughed grimly. “Always trying to be so clever, Crowley. As if we don’t know about you and your fling with the angel. You've got some nerve, which entertains me, and as I’ve apparently got no way of killing you, I’m letting it go for now. And this squirming pile of entrails here was killed by an angel, but not your ‘special friend’.”

The disgusted mockery went right over his head. Crowley was having a moment, staring at his extremely deceased former captor. Anger and a _really_ scorching desire to gloat warred with relief that Aziraphale hadn’t been the one to send him here.

Who the Heaven had?

“Who the Heaven did then?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” which was unlikely to be true in the first case, and very likely be true in the second case, assuming she meant she did not care to to tell _him_. "You've got paperwork to fill out." She spared a quick glance at her new peon. “And _you_ have a lifetime of sins to suffer for. Get cracking.”
There wasn’t a drop of arrogance left in him now. Crowley couldn’t quite resist the temptation, and giving in to it would only make him look better to Dagon.

“Looks like you’ve gotten everything you ever wanted. Can’t say we- um, I,” he felt the eyes of the Lord of the Files boring into his neck, “Just I, er, no. Can’t say that the angel that I hardly know really, didn’t warn you!”

The ex-summoner did not reply.

Crowley shifted uncomfortably under the fishy demon’s questioning gaze. “He was a pain in my ass when he was still breathing.”

“Form. Now.”

“I haven’t even asked you for anything yet.”

“What’s the matter, is your Mandarin rusty? That’s for failing to die at your execution. If you're here to ask me for a favour, I have a whole wheelbarrow full of forms for that.”

“No, no,” he said hastily, beginning to scrawl, and immediately ending up with his fingers coated in what he hoped was ink. “I found something sort of interesting though, and thought you might know something about it. Very historical.”

That did capture her attention, as he knew it would. “Tell me,” she demanded darkly, counterbalancing her genuine curiosity with a little extra lurking menace to cover for it.

Crowley was very careful to keep his own expression neutral, but he knew the path to success when he was on it. “Found a bunch of humans, this one, actually,” he gestured to the eyes peeping at him from behind the stack of files, “and his, uh, servants, and wouldn't you know it, idiots had a pair of fighting daggers from the War. Angelic blood on them and everything.”

For the first time since his arrival, she stopping writing and really looked up from her files. “Angelic blood… on earth? In mortal hands?”

“Very mortal,” Crowley said sweetly to the cowering stack.

“There are a few missing,” she muttered, waving a thin red folder into being. “I had assumed they were captured by the enemy during the fighting. You have them with you?”

Trying not to show too much enthusiasm, Crowley flicked away a hellish little cockroach thing Beelzebub had probably created to add to the charming atmosphere of the place. “’Fraid not. Didn’t think they were anything but a curiosity, really. Left them to human hands. One is in a church basement-"

“Church!” she protested, shuddering.

“Yeah, long story. The other is somewhere. I don’t know. If you’re interested, I could bring them to you. “

“From a church?” she asked skeptically.
“It’s not so bad, if you move fast enough.”

“How do you know, Crowley? Been going to services with your little feather duster?”

He leaned back and tossed another Hellroach over the stack where he was well aware his ex-tormentor was listening with interest. Dagon grinned along with Crowley at the little yelp of pain. “We’re a bit kinky that way. I like the way it burns when he prays.”

Her eyes widened, “That's disgusting… go on.”

“I'll email you the whole sordid tale, if you want.”

Aziraphale was going to smite him out of existence if he ever read the pending email Crowley had already begun composing in his mind.

“And bringing me the daggers? That’s a bit generous, even for a nice little demon like you.”

The insult landed hard and Crowley hissed at her angrily. “Fine then, leave your little collection incomplete.”

She didn’t bat a water-pale eye. “What’s in it for you, you conniving bastard?”

He slapped the clipboard back her desk in feigned angry, trying not to dance out of his skin with raw glee. “No paperwork for a century.”

“Six months.”

“Half century.”

“Two years.”

“I'll be going in a damn church. Twenty-five years.”

“Thought you said you get off on that sort if thing, angel-lover. Ten, if you get me both blades.”

“Deal, if you help me find the missing one.”

“Fine!”

“Perfectly rotten doing business with you, Lord Dagon,” Crowley said brightly, gathering himself up to shake her clammy hand. She rubbed hers on her clothes afterwards, scowling, but not displeased.

“Here,” she snapped her fingers and the FTD-77e “Failure to die” form turned into a blank page, and his pen turned into a far more functional pencil. “Show me what they look like.”

Crowley shut his eyes as he sketched, focusing on the details of each blade, in particular the dark sigils and the faint sheen of blood.

Her eyes widened almost imperceptibly as she surveyed the page when he finished. A sudden sense of danger fluttered in his chest and he firmly ignored it, sliding the clipboard to her across
“How interesting,” she said mildly, as drawing and clipboard vanished. “I'll get right to looking then. You'll be hearing from me, Crowley, once I hear back from the finder.”

“You don’t need to send a finder.”

The demons’ heads turned in unison to the occultist-turned-file clerk. “I know where that dagger is.”

“There'll be blue birds over, the White Cliff of Dover, tomorrow, just you wait and see,” Aziraphale sang softly, the unearthly sound of an angel's voice tossed back to him by the waves, echoing up the cliff face, as he leaned against the chalk wall, eyes closed against the trouble surrounding him. “There'll be love and laughter, and peace ever after, tomorrow, when the world is free.”

The ruffle of wings and the feeling of dread heralded her return. “Isn’t that sweet?”

Aziraphale nodded sincerely. “It's a war song, Michael. I imagine you really would enjoy them, given the chance. Humans always write the most beautiful music in wartime.” He gazed at her in sidelong contemplation. “The worst things get for them, the more they look to the good and beautiful. We have so much to learn from these people.”

“There’s nothing useful about denial, Aziraphale.” The hardness in her tone made his heart ache.

“It's hope, not denial, and it makes life worth living, Michael.”

“Oh, Aziraphale, such a soft thing in a hard world. You will need to take a stand eventually. You cannot always have one foot in both worlds, since She hasn’t left that open to you.”

He felt something… a strange pressure against his mind and he shook his head lightly before forcibly pushing back.

“What are you doing, Michael?”

“I'm helping you to look past your own prejudices,” she said absently, focused on the plunging little assault on his mind.

“You can’t do that.”

“Demons do it.”

Not for the first time, his own words came back to haunt him. “To humans, sometimes, not to angels. I'm still an angel, and so are you! Desist your efforts to sway my thinking. You won't succeed at it, and it only shows your desperation.”

“We're two sides of the same coin, Aziraphale. You yourself possessed a human in the last days.”

“Because I had to-"
“Yes, to stop the Great Plan from going forward. You were quite right to do it, little brother.” She smiled sweetly at him and he thought hard of what she'd done to the humans to rob the warm expression of its persuasion. “Surprised to have my approval? See? Prejudices. They hold you back.”

“The only thing holding me back are these chains. Michael, you can’t fight God, by, by definition!”

“Sometimes human children slay their parents.” Her detachment from their suffering gave him chills.

“Yes, and it’s a terrible thing! Not something to be admired and emulated! Besides which, humans are mortal, created beings. Vulnerable. You’re talking about the One who set it all into motion. Your Creator, and mine too. She can’t be overthrown!”

“You don’t know that, Aziraphale. If I hadn’t chosen wrong the first time, if my armies hadn’t sided with Her and instead went with the Morningstar, maybe it could have been different. The more of us the better.” She settled in the sand beside him, running a gentle caress through his hair. “That’s why I want you with me, little brother,” she coaxed with a tenderness he hadn’t heard from another angel since they'd started whispering about him going native. “You’re very strong, and you have already stood against Her before, when She was wrong.”

“She isn’t ever wrong. She's the definition of right,” he insisted, heart twisting in struggle.

It hadn’t been mere justification, had it? Preventing Armageddon must have been part of Her will, since they'd managed it, right?

“My poor, humble Principality,” she sighed. “I understand. It was hard for me too, at first. I thought She was what Right was too, for so long, too long, but once you accept it, you'll feel so much better.”

“No, I will not, because that kind of thinking leads to Falling, Michael, Crowley told me as much.”

Her laugh skittered along his nerves like spiders. “You've talked with the demon about Falling? Your very… relationship is why you are so perfect to be the one to help our cause. You understand better than anyone that this isn’t all black and white between us. We should join with our kin, unite again, be a restored people.”

“That can’t happen, not without Her saying so, and not without their repentance.”

“And our forgiveness too,” she asked sharply, eyes boring into his. “Tell me, Guardian of the Eastern Gate, which is more likely to happen, their repentance or our forgiveness? Because I can’t see either one on the horizon.”

He was quiet under the onslaught of the hopelessness of the idea. It was one thing to debate and speculate about unification while seeing the futility of it as a casual thought experiment, harmless speculation, but another thing entirely when it was a quietly burning hope to have some kind of future with the one you loved.

“She'll sort it all out, eventually,” he managed. “She knows what she's doing.”
When Crowley staggered out of Hell, he found himself surrounded by chattering children making good use of the playground. He quickly projected the suggestion that he was a known and trusted volunteer, and felt the adult eyes supervising slide off him, unconcerned with his sudden arrival. It was as crowded as Hell, but there was so much life and joy here, you could never truly compare the two worlds. He took a deep breath of the fresh air and sighed as it all burst over him.

His first reaction was relief.

His second was panic.

Relief never did stick around long with him.

The ring was gone.

His panic, fortunately, was also short lived when he spotted an angelic looking toddler with red hair and a princess dress showing off the ring to a gaggle of admirers.

The red hair should have tipped him off to impending trouble, but it did not.

“Oh, uh, hi there, um, pumpkin.”

“One pumpkin?” she echoed, with supreme skepticism that could well have rivaled Beelzebub’s own reaction to Crowley whenever he was forcibly dragged into her office. “My name is not pumpkin!”

“Oh, uh, right, no pumpkins. Got it, so, I see you found-”

“You're a pumpkin!”

Delighted titters broke out from the entourage, and he was, perversely, put in mind of Aziraphale’s own tendency to giggle.

“He's a pumpkin!”

"A big pumpkin!"

He would have loved seeing Crowley at the merciless hands of, um-

“So, my name's Crowley, what’s yours?”

“Crowley?” she echoed doubtfully.

“Oh, what a coincidence,” he beamed down at her, pretending to misunderstand. “Pleasure to meet you, Crowley.”

This, it turned out, was the greatest joke in history if you were four. Peels of excited laughter broke out all around him, and friendly, curious hands began pulling at his jacket and scarf.

“No me, you!” she insisted, as imperiously as any royalty. “You're Crowley! I'm Katie!”

He made a great show of bouncing his palm off his forehead, which was met with more
delighted laughter and imitation. Despite everything, he could not fight off a smile, something old and warm stirring deep within him. A pair of arms wound around his hips in freely given affection, and he felt a sudden rush of fierce protectiveness.

The kids. Always the kids. You couldn’t have given me this job instead? I’d have been a better guardian angel than a seraph.

He pressed a hand to silky hair as the other children, seeing his acceptance, rushed to join in the embrace.

Joy never came pure in his world, he thought bitterly. It always came stained with regret.

“Hey, Katie, hey kids. Listen, listen,” he knelt down carefully to meet them at eye level, nearly getting tipped over on his buttocks in the face of their enthusiasm. “I need some help, yeah? I lost something, a ring.”

They couldn’t have outed it fast enough. “Katie has a ring!”

“It’s beautiful!”

Katie looked at him in surprise, and he didn’t miss the quick flash of dismay, followed by temptation.

Aziraphale would have gotten all teary-eyed to see how fast she conquered it, holding up the ring in her dainty palm for him to see it. “I found it for you,” she told him solemnly.

“Oh, thank you,” he told her with all sincerity, “What a kind little pumpkin you are.” Laughter broke out again, little hands patting his back in appreciation and this time she made no attempt to correct him, eyes shining at his approval. “Look what I found for you.”

He miracled a bottle of bubble solution out of the ether and unscrewed the cap, dipping the wand in and blowing an extravagant flurry of shimmering bubbles. Shrieks of excitement echoed around them as she clasped her hands together in delight like Aziraphale had done many times when Crowley indulged him on this or that. “Oh, can I?” she gasped.

“You can,” he grinned, pressing bottle and wand into her hand.

He extricated himself from the children quickly and headed, forgotten, for the Bentley.

I’m coming, angel. Hang on.

Michael drew his blackened feather out and brushed it against his cheek. “I thought this was rather interesting.”

“What of it?” he asked stiffly.

She blew on it softly and curse and darkness both lifted. “A reasonable forgery, if one doesn’t see the way we do. Having them summon you in your friend’s place. How noble of you.”
“It wasn’t a sacrifice, Michael. It was bait. For you.”

“So this was your plan then, to draw me out? Not going well, is it?”

“I did draw you out. You can be sure I’ll reporting all this to Heaven, first chance.”

“You won’t though,” she whispered silkily. “Get the chance.”

The words hung ominously between them.

“Do you plan to murder me too, then?” he asked flatly.

“I could execute you, with you being an enemy combatant, but I’m not thinking that will be necessary.”

She blew on the feather again and her weight on his will doubled. Aziraphale pushed her out of his head violently. “I already told you no. You can kill me, Michael, and safe bet She’ll take notice of that! But you can’t turn me away from our Mother. Not ever.”

“Oh, Aziraphale, you sound so very certain of that. Your words so clear and determined … but your heart is another matter entirely isn’t it, little brother.”

She left him then, with the unsettling worry that she was right.

Michael flitted up to the cliff face, observing but unconcerned with the human activity. They had removed the bodies of the wicked humans she'd slain, but the investigators and bloodstains remained.

Battle could be so messy.

She drew out her celestial cell phone, willing it to contact Luciel with the lightest thought.

“Michael?” came the melodious tone of the soft-spoken angel.

“Luciel, the item I mentioned to you earlier. Be a love, and fetch it for me, if you would.”

“Oh! Oh, I… wasn’t sure we would need it so soon.” Her obvious trepidation meant little. Luciel was a very obedient servant of the Lord, and she assumed the same of Michael.

It was wonderfully convenient.

“We do, but not for the usual reason. As soon as you can, my dear.”

“Yes, commander.”

Chapter End Notes

¹ Crowley had been making, cancelling and rescheduling for years now, like the old
hand at shenanigans that he was, and was quite capable of continuing to do so until Judgement Day or Hell got their bad books in order, whichever came first.

Crowley was not betting on Hell.

² And fortunately, no one else's.

³ Still Too Late. Probably why it was so hard to book anything in Hell.
Adversary

Chapter Summary

Well, I’ve been warning about a rough one, and here it is. It’s not that bad, except for the end. Rough cliffhanger for sure. Sorry about that.

The boys reunite, Gabriel makes an appearance, and Michael is very much up to no good.

Aziraphale is zen, until he isn't.
Crowley has a unexpected conversation, if you can call it that.

Thanks for reading! Matilda stuffies for all the angels and demons who comment.
Love ya!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a time when the virtue of patience was passionately celebrated by humanity, but as technology had developed and absolutely everything sped up, patience had lost some of its nobility in mortal eyes, and soon after, its frequency. One could hardly blame them for their slow slide away from that particular virtue, living out their numbered days under the remorselessly ticking clock.

Aziraphale himself was not nearly as patient as he had once been with the passage of time, but he found himself in dire need of embracing the genteel virtue once more, if only to hold off despair.

Sand. Sea. Stone. Air. Distant voices, ebbing and flowing like the tide that had begun playfully dabbing at his feet. The sea was frigid, but he hardly noticed it, edging more ethereal than corporeal as he sunk into his meditation. Peaceful, easy, calm, but preparing. Waiting was an active choice, demanding the silencing of the shrieking desire to move, fight, scream, panic, rage. One had to conquer the restlessness of a spirit already flooded with driving urgency to get back Upstairs and do something, anything, to thwart Michael, Prince of Her Princes, commander of them all, treacherous, lost, despairing, deranged. He held the maddening compulsion gently in his mind, acknowledging, and accepting it before setting it free, leaving him to wait serenely for his chance.

Surely, it would come.

Waiting was all he could do, in the meantime, and it would only torment him to wrestle with his helplessness. The prisoner these chains were destined for would probably fight fang and claw every moment of the decreed millennium of his sentence, but Aziraphale would not choose the way of insanity. He had already fought too much; his raw wrists were mute testament to that truth.

Be still, and know She is God, he counseled himself. She’s got this.

The bright sky gradually lost its luster over the course of the day, and the wind picked up, with the threat of rain lying cool and heavy in the stirring air. There were worst things than rain, though
Crowley would likely have argued the point if he’d made it to him.

He missed him so.

“Aziraphale?”

The angel's eyes snapped open in shock at the very familiar voice.

Unfortunately, it really wasn’t the one he was hoping to hear.

“Oh, Gabriel!”¹ The Archangel peered down at him, frowning. Aziraphale wriggled around frantically, trying to sit up properly while the words of the whole desperate story rushed to his lips, jamming together in their fight to be heard. “I have to tell you-“

He cut himself off in sudden dismay. What was Gabriel doing here?

Maybe he didn’t have to tell the Archangel anything. Maybe he already knew. Maybe… maybe they were in league together, he thought, scandalized.

His supervisor waited impatiently while Aziraphale scrambled to untangle thoughts and tongue both, but before he could manage it, Gabriel poked experimentally at the chains.

“Are these Michael’s chains? For after the war? These aren’t meant for you! Honestly, Aziraphale, can you not just sit on your hands or something? Stop from playing with things outside your dominion?”

Aziraphale frowned up at him, squirming against the chains, feathers ruffled in more ways than one.

“I wasn’t- I didn’t-This wasn’t my idea! Michael chained me up herself!”

Gabriel raised a skeptical eyebrow. That was an expression he had mastered.

“Is that a joke? Some human-ish thing? It’s not very funny, and I know funny.”² The captive angel fought back a groan as Gabriel continued. “That would be very irregular, especially with no authorization. Do you have any idea how many forms I had to submit to the Metatron just to get permission to haul you back up to Heaven for your trial? And then, only for word to come down that we should put the kibosh on the whole execution. Why would Michael bind you like this?” He wasn’t really asking Aziraphale anymore, already looking back over his shoulder as Michael stepped into view from behind him, shaking her head in mock sadness.

“For his own good, naturally.” She stepped between them, mentally hushing her prisoner. It took him a few seconds to push past it and threatened to make him lose his even temper, virtue hastily setting sail for parts unknown. “He’s out of control. That demon has really gotten to him.”

Gabriel tilted his head, pursing his lips like he was confused and not particularly pleased about it.

“Yeah, he actually came to see me, you know.”

Aziraphale felt his mouth drop open, and even Michael made a surprised sound. “He wha- he what? Crowley talked to you?” he asked, shock sinking quickly into fear.

“Yeah, I know, it was the damndest thing.” He spread his hands broadly and waited expectantly for them to catch the joke, looking disappointed when Michael just pressed her lips together in a
tense semblance of a smile, while Aziraphale stared at him in cold horror.

_Sweetest Mother Above, tell me he's alright…_

"Is he, I mean, did you, ah, the demon, um, did he-

"Dog…, no…rat, rat? Wait, cat! Cat's out of the bag, Aziraphale. There’s no use pretending you haven’t been,” his hands flashed back and forth in a vaguely suggestive gesture that ended with a shrug. “Colluding with the enemy.”

"Crowley is not my enemy.” He probably shouldn’t say that to Archangel Gabriel, but he was far too angry to be less than truthful.

"Exactly, he’s supposed to be. Official Adversary and all that. Mine's Beelzebub. I'll get around to dealing with her sometime.”

"Yes, great, but back to Crowley,” he insisted, because his friend was all that mattered in that moment, “Gabriel, please, tell me, did you smite him?”

Michael stared at him, hungry for the answer, wilting a bit as he shook his head carelessly. “Again, your job, not mine. You'd think six thousand years would have been enough time to get the job done.” He raised a considering eyebrow at the impatient growl that slipped out from Aziraphale before relenting. “I did not, in fact. There was a human in the sho- present. We talked briefly, that was it. Your little friend was fine, last I saw him.”

Gabriel's little flicker of embarrassment at the suggestion of what he'd been up, well, not up, _down_ to on earth was, Aziraphale assumed, due to Michael’s presence, not his own, but he didn’t really care about what the Archangel did with his free time, so long as Crowley was unharmed.

"Thank you,” he sighed, not addressing either one of the Archangels.

"What did the demon want with you?” Michael asked, voice as soft as her eyes were sharp.

"He was looking for Aziraphale. Said he was missing, couldn’t find him. I assume because of these,” he waved at the chains, “Although, he did mention some kind of demonic sword.” He lifted the chain experimentally and for a brief, shining moment, Aziraphale thought he would be released, but he let them go again. “What’s going on down here, anyway? I got a report we lost some souls to Hell we weren’t supposed to lose, and early too.”

"Michael's been.”

"Shh,” she scolded, reinforcing it with another little block that he had to work his way through again. “Don’t interrupt. We can still add rudeness to the list of your crimes.”

“I beg your pardon!. _My_ crimes-ouch!” He had tried to spread his wings in his outrage, and the frustration of being confined did nothing to help his rebelling temper. “Michael _murdered_ those poor people! She set them up to fall and killed them to seal their fates!”

Gabriel’s surprise and consternation was too raw to be anything but genuine, and so, despite every ounce of trouble dangling over his head, and every unkind, patronizing word he had ever heard from his supervisor, Aziraphale felt a sudden rush of relief, bordering on gratitude. It wasn’t both of them, at least, that were out to betray their Mother.

“It’s so sad,” Michael crooned, and Aziraphale had a sudden, wild urge to smack that false sympathy out of the wicked creature. “He’s quite gone over to the Other Side. Hardly an angel at
all, anymore, I would say. I hope we can help him.”

“So, you weren’t the one doing the smiting?” he asked her, no small amount of suspicion there. “You are head of the military.”

“No,” came the practiced lie, “Principality Aziraphale slew them, to win Hell’s favour… give him a softer landing when he eventually Falls. I’m sure he realises it is only a matter of time. Unless we can help him.”

Michael would be no help to anyone anymore, he thought in mixed dismay and anger.

“Really? Aziraphale?” Gabriel asked, astonished, even as the chained angel futilely tried again to leap to his feet and crashed down painfully.

“I most certainly did not! You're a liar and murderer, faithless angel! You're a traitor to God! She wants to cast Her down, Gabriel!”

The Archangels both gasped at his accusation, one quite a bit more honestly than the other.

“It’s terrible, tragic to see him like this,” she murmured softly, “I think they’ve driven him quite mad.”

“Well, you know, I've always thought we left him down here alone for too long. No one else has come anywhere near working those kind of hours… but still. This angel? Murdering a bunch of humans?” Aziraphale latched on to the doubt in Gabriel’s eyes and stared back, pleading with him to see the truth. “He's always been, well, not a paragon of virtue, the weakest guardian we've ever had, quite frankly, but then, that’s why he's not really the violent type. Thaddeus said he reported for War duty without a body, let alone a sword, and took off again almost immediately after refusing to fight.” His superior broke with his gaze to address Michael, “You're sure it was Aziraphale?”

“It absolutely was not!” Aziraphale spat, positively fuming, struggling against the chains, too full of righteous wrath to care about the way they were abrading his wrists and wings.

“Does he seem like himself to you? Look at the wrath in him! Gabriel, he took a swing at me with this.” She produced the demonic blade with an easy flourish and visibly enjoyed the way the typically, confident to a fault, angel took a hasty step back.

“I didn’t, actually, get the chance,” four ethereal eyes turned to Aziraphale. “Er, to swing it at her. I did plan to,” he confessed without an ounce of remorse, “but she was being a very bad angel, attacking the humans! I was trying to stop her. I was trying to be their guardian.”

He had utterly failed at protecting them, and grief and shame drained some of the energy from his anger.

She waved the blade skilfully through the air, watching Gabriel closely. “There’s already angelic blood on it, brother, although it seems like he thought there ought to be more.” She leaned in closely like imparting a great secret, though Aziraphale could easily hear her. “I have considered that it might be his blood. Perhaps he has used it on himself?”

Shock silenced him more effectively than her silent orders had.

Gabriel seemed quite shaken by the accusation. “Self harm? Do you think he could be despondent then?”
“Perhaps, or perhaps the demon persuaded him to do it. Who knows what dire things the Other Side would do with an angel's blood. Drive him to madness? Enslave his will? I fear for him, Messenger, and I fear what he may do if we don’t deal with this problem quickly.”

“She is lying, lying, lying,” he lamented, all but begging to be heard.

But why would Gabriel hear him today, when he never had chosen to before?

“What are you proposing we do?”

“Give our ailing brother to my care. I'll return him to Heaven, watch over him there. Maybe he just needs some good counsel and time away from humans, and the demon Crowley, of course. If he can’t be saved then, I’m afraid we will have to petition Her to cast him out before he can do more harm. Strip him of Her Grace, if need be, but first, for mercy's sake, give me charge over him.”

“As a prisoner?”

“As a patient, for his own good,” she repeated while hurt and despair spread over him like a thick, wet blanket, while she negotiated for his soul right in front of him like he wasn’t there at all.

“Patient?” Gabriel crossed his arms, visibly unsettled. “This is all very unseemly.”

Hope in doubt again sparked up Aziraphale’s frustration.

“Michael is lying to you, Gabriel… and an angel should know truth when he hears it!”

Clearly taken aback by Aziraphale’s anger and the flying accusations, unwelcome uncertainty washed over the male-presenting face.

“I… think we'd better take this to the other Archangels before we make any decisions. Come back Up with me, Michael, you can explain what you think is happening with him and we can discuss your plan.”

She nodded and they turned away from him, while Aziraphale cried out in protest.

“At least unbind me! Let me come too, to state my case against the traitor, Michael.” He gave her his most fierce glare, such as it was. “If you want to judge me, then do it, openly. I'll abide by your decision, if it comes to that, but give me a fighting chance!”

Michael shook her head, and Gabriel tipped his head one way, then the other, mulling it over.

“Well, I have to give more weight to Michael’s statement, Aziraphale, with her being an Archangel, you understand. You'll be fine where you are for now. Michael, come with me.”

A flash of lightning, and they were gone, leaving Aziraphale alone again, to wait for them to decide his fate. He shut his eyes, fighting the desire to scream his frustration into the ocean air. This time, he could find no peace.

Eventually, it started to rain.

Sometime after those first soft drops of water heralded a million more, Aziraphale, sitting, aching, drenched to the skin and ocean lapping icily on his toes, felt the sudden return of optimism,
like a living dawn bursting into song around him.

It wasn’t music that he heard. Not to most ears.

At first, the distant sound of the engine was almost imperceptible, but gradually it built into a promising roar. He was reasonably sure you were not supposed to be driving a car on these cliffs, and certainly not straight through a crime scene, but twiddly things like laws and safety would not have stopped this particular driver anyway, not so much above the law as below it. The engine cut and a door opened and shut, then a voice he had missed like a desert misses rain washed over him.

“Aziraphale?! Angel, are you here?”

“I’m here! I’m here!” he called, giddy laughter bubbling out of him. “Crowley!”

“Aziraphale! You’re- Where the Heaven are you?!”

“Down here! Over the cliff!”

A scuffling sound and Crowley’s head appeared peeping down at him from the edge. “What in Satan’s unholy name are you doing down there! Come up!”

Aziraphale made a demonstrative effort to stand and spread his wings, watching the consternation cross Crowley’s face as he failed. “I can’t. She's got me all bound up at the moment!”

“She? She, Her ?!” came the flabbergasted question.

“She, Michael! It's all been Michael!”

“Wha-? The blessed, bloody, Archangel Michael?”

“Yes! Look, ask me questions later. Get down here and release me!”

“Right, right,” Crowley muttered, gauging the distance, hesitating as he decided the best way to go about getting down there.

“Hurry! Just use your wings!”

As Crowley stood, he distinctly heard the word, “Pushy,” in the muffled response.

With a little shrug, dark wings rustled free and the demon dropped off the edge of the cliff, wings fanning out, beating a few times, more using them to take the edge off the landing than really flying or gliding.

Aziraphale knew he shouldn’t be smiling so broadly at his dear Crowley, but he couldn’t help it. His heart felt full to bursting as his companion landed beside him.

“Oh, Crowley, I've missed you so, my dear, sweet, lovely-“

“Ghhhhck! Agh, stop that or I will not be responsible for the consequences!” Crowley shook a scolding finger in his face and Aziraphale rolled his eyes Heavenward in exasperation.

“Well, honestly, when have you ever been responsible for consequences?”

“No, no, no, you don’t get to be cute right now, angel. You are in serious trouble.”
The angel sobered. “Yes, I know, Michael has really gone-

“Not with Michael, fu- forget Michael,” he amended under the chiding look. “You're in trouble with me, you princely, royal, idiot pain in the ass!”

“Crowley, there is no need to be so vulgar.”

“Oh, this is definitely me being the very picture of restraint! You don’t want to know what’s going on behind the scenes, right now.” He tapped the side of his head lightly, then paused and gave it a quick shake. “Michael?”

“Yes, Michael! She's gone quite over the edge I’m afraid. She wants to overthrow our Mother!”

Crowley had begun pacing, clearly gearing up for a right proper chastisement, but that stopped him, quite literally, in his tracks. “Wuh! Our Mother? Our Mother Mother! Like, ‘She Who Must Not Be Named or She Gets Real Pissy’, our Mother?”

“As in ‘Creator of All, Speaker to Few, Only One We've Actually Got Mother,’ yeah, that one.”

He knew he was being a prat, but it had been a rough few days, and he was really, very tired of being chained up.

Crowley had suddenly developed a strange, crooked little smile as he looked over the captive angel.

Almost sentimental.

“I missed you, you peevish, old, angel.” In the face of such fondness, what fussing could stand?

“I am sorry,” Aziraphale sighed, feeling golden eyes riveted on to his. “I’m an absolute fool, you know, and I do not have words enough to say how very glad I am to see you, my dearest Crowley.”

“You're emoting all over me, angel, and if you don’t knock it off, you'll have to ask your friend Michael to miracle me up another towel.” The demon smiled at him saucily and Aziraphale felt a rush of amusement at the memory before becoming quite serious.

“That traitor is no friend of mine, I assure you. She killed them, Crowley… body and soul.” He felt ill just thinking about it. “And what she has done to you,” he blinked rapidly under a swell of grief. “It’s a terribly cruel thing to add to the suffering of a being that already suffers.”

Shuffling feet in the sand telegraphed Crowley’s discomfort with no other need for words. “I, ah, noticed the…scene up there. Looks like it was ugly.”

“It wasn’t me, Crowley,” he said, needed to say, in the face of his earlier temptation, “That was all Michael.”

“Didn’t doubt that for a second,” the demon answered quietly, resuming his pacing.

“I tried to stop her, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t save them.”

He started as the hand came softly down him and alighted on his shoulder. “I know how that feels, Aziraphale.”

“I know you do, dear boy, and it breaks my heart. If you wouldn’t mind releasing me?” He lifted the chains tiredly, and winced at the distraught little sound Crowley made as he saw his
wrists. “It isn’t as bad as it looks.”

“Why haven’t you healed them?” He was looking him over in earnest now. “Urghh. Your wings are a right mess.”

“Can’t. Can’t do much of anything. She used the chains meant for the last days, meant for your Master.”

Crowley had moved in front of him again, and shuddered head to toe as he knelt in the wet sand. Damp locks of hair pressed against his forehead, making him look very young. “And she used them on you? Talk about overkill. No offense.”

“None taken, whatsoever.” He resisted the urge to wriggle in excitement as Crowley reached down to release him, freedom catching in his lungs and running up his spine.

The demon yelped in surprise, shaking his hands in pain the very instant he made contact with the chains. “Ow! Bless, that does smart. Figures they’d be holy. Nasty thing to do to her old friend, isn’t it? They were close back in the day, you know.”

“I know.”

Crowley tapped a chain cautiously, wincing again, the hedge of protection having apparently met its limits. “A thousand years wrapped up in these? Positively sadistic. Right up there with the Beast himself. Not hurting you?”

“Only a bit, where I’ve been struggling.” Gentle hands touched his wrists and Aziraphale sighed in relief as they were healed. “Oh, thank you, my dear.”

“Meh. Didn’t want to put up with you complaining on the drive home.” He shifted his gaze to the chains themselves. “Alright, back to Michael's little gift. ‘Let’s try a more hands-off approach then.”

He closed his eyes in concentration and Aziraphale mirrored the action, waiting expectantly for his freedom, one eye cracking open as the moment lingered. “Crowley?”

The strain was evident in the furrowed brow, eyes still squeezed shut. When he opened them they were even more strikingly serpentine than usual. “Just a second…”

He reached out again and grabbed the chains full on, the conflict of his occult nature against the blessed chains causing his skin to audibly sizzle.

Crowley hissed in pain and frustration, shaking free before stubbornly trying again while Aziraphale tried to wrench the chains away from him. “Stop, stop, stop, you’re hurting yourself-”

“I don’t care!”

“I do! I’ve done you enough harm to weigh on my conscience forever, my friend, and I’ve no desire whatsoever to do any worse. Stop. Please.” He waited until he was sure Crowley was listening. “Gabriel was by earlier. Apparently, you two have been chatting, you mad thing.”

The redhead rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Well, I had to find you-”

“Whatever you said to him must have been persuasive then, oh wily one, given that you are hale and whole, and he spoke of you almost civilly.”
“Must have mistaken me for some other demon then.” Aziraphale laughed lightly, charmed by Crowley’s embarrassment, flooded with love.

“Well, if you could manage that, then perhaps I can persuade him of the truth, and he can release me.”

Crowley yanked at the chains again, absolutely radiating frustration, fists clenched, golden eyes captivating in their intensity under a furrowed brow. “I should be able to release you.”

“My dear, these chains were forged to bind Satan himself. If anyone would not be able to release them it would be a demon. They would have been created that way. Not letting your people let him out to cause trouble is the whole point. I’m only sorry I didn’t think of that beforehand.”

“And if I was still an angel—”

It hurt him to see the underlying pain that was fueling the frustration. “None of that, now. I wouldn’t change a hair on your head, or a scale either.” He managed an awkward pat of Crowley’s knee. “Don’t take it to heart. You are so capable, of so many amazing things. Of course, you would be upset by running into something you can’t do, but they’ll be other options, and I already feel so much more myself just having you here.” He offered up his brightest smile in reassurance.

“Stop being so nice,” he muttered, looking everywhere but at Aziraphale. “I’m blessedly useless right now, and you are still a whole lake of stupid for walking in to this blindly.”

He tipped his head politely. “I do concede the point.”

“Yeah, well, you’d better, or I’m just going to pop you in my basement like this for the next thousand years. Get myself a hellhound for company. Less trouble. Cheaper to feed too.”

“There now, feeling better?” he asked mildly.

“A bit—”

They both felt the surge of power. Michael had returned, alone atop the cliff. Holy War was breathing down on them.

“You need to go, now!” Aziraphale whispered urgently.

“Not without you!” Crowley replied, pawing at him oddly.

“She will kill you, dear boy! She won’t kill me! She wants to turn me!”

“That’s not much better!”

Their eyes met briefly, and Aziraphale squeaked in surprise as Crowley suddenly scooped him up into his arms, wings beating hard as he took off, headed for the Bentley, chains and all. Michael met them in midair, golden wings shining, sword and shield at the ready. Crowley hissed in surprise, wings folding sharply, cutting into air as he twisted neatly out of the way before gliding over the cliff ledge and dropping Aziraphale none to gently to the ground.

“Michael! Michael, no! You leave him be this instant!” Aziraphale hollered at the top of his corporeal lungs, managing to roll himself over to see what was happening and wishing he hadn’t.

She looked the very picture of an avenging angel, squaring off, not against her old friend turned Adversary, as she had before, long ago, and was destined to do again, but against Aziraphale’s dear
Adversary turned friend. Crowley, brave Crowley, had positioned himself between the Principality and the Prince of angels, ancient black blade in hand, which Aziraphale had not seen in a very, very long time.

“Oh, your demon friend found you. Isn’t that sweet? Have you had enough time to say goodbye to him?” She feinted forward, laughing at Crowley’s nervous swing in response blocking it easily. “Someone hasn’t been training. Your lot is lucky that you managed to put off the Last War if they all fight like you, demon.”

“Crowley, just go! Go!” Aziraphale called. “Don’t let her kill you!”

“Trying not to!” Crowley replied as they exchanged a flurry of blows. Michael made it look like child's play. Crowley made it look like the life and death struggle it was.

“Gonna have to try harder than that,” she told him, vicious pleasure lighting her face in a way Aziraphale did not remember from seeing her fight in the first War. “Didn’t I cast you down in the first place, Serpent? Looked like it hurt when She rejected you.” He drove forward angrily and they locked together briefly as they tried to disarm each other. “If it makes you feel any better, demon, I intend to avenge you, and all the Fallen. Pity you won’t be there to see it, but I have plans for your Principality friend, and I won’t stand for interference.”

“Don’t you dare hurt him! I won’t stand for that!” Crowley snarled, attempting to land a blow and getting a solid crack with the broadside of her shield.

“You don’t have a choice, Crawley,” she spat, grinning wickedly.

“It’s Crowley now, you holy nutter.”

“Oh, yes, Anthony Crowley, right? Except we all know you're really just Crawley. You'll always be Crawley now, cast-off. You’re nothing but an overgrown worm, meant to crawl on your belly and eat dust the rest of your days, cursed by the hand of our mutual enemy.”

Swords crashed together, eerie, unnatural tremors spilling over as they fought not just physically but spiritually, running through the earth and through his bones as Aziraphale struggled with the chains desperately.

“Michael, no, stop this! Don’t hurt him, I… I'll do anything!”

She froze mid-swing and Crowley rounded on him quickly. “Don’t you dare, angel!”

“You'll help me?” she asked, eyes lighting up. “Against Her?”

“Ahhh…”

He was interrupted by the sudden arrival of an eagle, which landed next to Michael before shifting into an angel who looked to each of them in turn, all wide eyes and sparkling freckles, lingering longest on Crowley.

“Luciel?” he called out, recognizing her as a former choirmate, from back when he'd been a Cherub.

“Oh, hello, Aziraphale,” she waved at him shyly, before her eyes slid inexorably back to fix on Crowley with horrified fascination. She would not have had much cause to visit the human plane, and so was unlike to have seen many demons, if any.
“Boo,” the redhead tossed out dryly in her direction, returning his attention to Michael after the smallest, pleased, glance at her startled face.

"Did you bring it?" Michael asked her impatiently as she kept sword and shield squarely towards her opponent.

“Yes, I did,” she answered quickly, drawing closer to the captive angel, peering at the chains curiously. “I suppose it’s really for you, Aziraphale. Why are you bound?” She took a cautious step towards Crowley, who stopped her with a hiss. “A demon… so the stories are true?” she asked him thoughtfully.

“You should go, Luci,” he told her gravely, skin prickling to think of the sweet-natured Cherub in harm's way.

“What’s going on?” she asked, worry blooming, looking to the Archangel for direction.

Michael beckoned to her imperiously. “Give me the sword, Luciel.”

The wide-eyed angel hastily pulled out a sword that Aziraphale knew all too well and handed it to Michael, who set down her shield to accept it. The little intake of breath from Crowley was proof enough the demon recognised it too.

“You're dismissed.”

“Oh, but- Is there’s something wrong? Can I help?” She reached towards the chains until Michael stopped her.

“Can’t you see I’m dealing with a demon here? This is no place for you, Cherub.”

Crowley had been edging towards Aziraphale during her distraction, apparently intending to grab him and make a break for it. Now, he froze under her haughty look.

“Go, Luciel… “ the angel urged her, “Make your report to Gabriel. He should know about this.”

Michael smiled kindly at her. “He’s meeting with the other Archangels right now about our little problem here, but by all means, go and tell them.” She snapped her fingers and the chains abruptly vanished. Aziraphale couldn’t help the groan as his stiff limbs were released. He stretched his wings out, flinching in mild pain, fanning them lightly as the circulation improved.

“I… obey,” Luciel said quietly, shifting back into the graceful bird and flying up until she could no longer be seen.

“Of course you do,” Michael whispered contemptuously after her. Aziraphale began stalking towards her, appalled at her derision for a creature whose wings she was not fit to groom.

“Aziraphale was a good soldier in the War, weren’t you, little brother? Went right in there to help sort out the wheat from the chaff. How many friends did you fight?”

Aziraphale swallowed hard. “That was a long time ago, Michael, and the War is long over with.”

“The War never ended, it just went cold, that’s all, but we can fix that.”

“You're out of your mind,” he replied, advancing on her, clutching his scepter firmly.
“Let's go, angel!” Crowley hissed, grabbing his arm, still aiming his own weapon at Michael, who sheathed her own sword in favour of the new one… which promptly burst into flame. Aziraphale felt a chill go through him as he saw it and dragged Crowley behind him protectively.

“Holy Hell!”

The flaming sword was a formidable weapon, and only a very few had been issued. This one was the only one that had remained on Earth after Eden. As one of its four guardians, he'd been quite awed over the power in the blade when he'd been entrusted with it, but there had only been one time, on the cusp of the failed Armageddon, when he'd wanted to wield it, in defense against Satan, for Crowley, for Adam, for the humans in his care.

It was deadly dangerous to the forces of evil, and that did, unfortunately, include Crowley.

“You need to get out of here, now, Crowley,” he commanded in a tone that brooked no argument.

“There’s two of us now!” replied the being that brooked all argument. “We have a shot at her now, and believe me, I’d like one,” Crowley hissed menacingly. A warm feeling soothed the ache away from Aziraphale’s wings as he felt them set to rights. He gave Crowley’s hand a fond squeeze as he took it, drawing him back from Michael, who tilted her chin up at him in challenge.

“Not against that sword, Crowley,” he answered, releasing his hand and giving the demon an urgent push towards the Bentley.

The Archangel watched the exchange with obvious amusement before taking a more relaxed stance. “At ease, soldier. I’m just returning what you lost.”

Without warning, she tossed the sword, still flaming, towards him, and Aziraphale caught the hilt like it was coming home.

When he looked up, she was brandishing, not her sword, but his feather, and grinning with satisfaction.

Sudden dread hit him just as the assault began. “Sword and pinion, Principality, I have so much of you now,” she hummed brightly as her eyes closed.

He was distantly aware of crying out as the iron will of the Archangel flooded his mind. Numb to the outside world and with his inner spirit ablaze, blackness stole away his vision and he hit the ground hard.

“Angel!” Crowley called, dropping beside him but keeping his sword at the ready.

“You called?” she trilled sweetly.

“Not, you,” he growled. “You're no angel; you're a demented soccer mom. Every last one of you upstairs, idiots, fools, heartless bastards, and you don’t deserve a single damned iota of the feeling he has for you. Now, tell me what the Hell you did to him?”

“Nothing, he did that to himself. Must have fought hard. He's easy to underestimate.”

“You don’t know the first thing about him. Angel, Aziraphale, please-” He shook him, lightly smacked his face, reached out mentally to touch his friend.

“A begging demon,” she mocked Crowley, eyes bright. “I've seen that before, but a caring
demon, now that is unique in all the kingdoms.”

“Shut up. What’s wrong with him?” Aziraphale groaned softly and it was the best sound Crowley had ever heard.

“Nothing, he passed out because he wouldn’t submit, stubborn fool, but now that he’s out, he's all mine.”

Panic clawed at him with bony fingers before Crowley even knew why. She made no move towards them, which was probably wise, because a panicking demon was nothing to shake a stick at. “You're a Mother Blessed lunatic-” Turbulent blue eyes dark like the sea, slid open and locked with his before widening in surprise. “Get up, angel, we need to move-

He found himself flat on his back, vision filled with agitated angel, flaming sword burning bright flashes into his retinas.

“What is this! Get back, fiend!” came Aziraphale’s voice, but it was directed at him in a way he had never heard before.

As though they were Adversaries.

“This is the demon Crowley, Guardian of Eden. In truth, he is the one who forever corrupted the sacred innocence of humanity.” Michael gave him a scathing look, but he doubted it had anything to do with the apple business. "Ruined Her greatest work."

“He is?” Aziraphale asked, grip tightening on the sword, which flared up even more, drawing his eyes in like a moth to a flame.

“Angel?” Crowley whispered, feeling every bit of his blood run snake cold. Aziraphale didn’t acknowledge the address, eyes watching, suspicious, guarded, distant.

Hostile.

“Word has come from On High, that the Serpent is to die for his offense,” the Principality looked at her in surprise, but under her intense gaze, turned back to Crowley. “She's asked you to carry out the sentence, to prove your loyalty. It's why She's returned the sword to you.”

“It, it is?” He shifted uneasily, inhaling deeply.

He wanted to grab him by those fluffy robes, shake him til the sense came back, but a prickling sensation on the back of his neck made him feel that was a very bad idea. “Nooo, no, no, no, angel. Hell, no- Heavens, no, both, neither! You, you can’t be listening to her!” He stabbed a finger in her direction. "She's insane!"

"That is Michael, the Archangel," Aziraphale protested immediately. "She's a hero! She threw down your own Master, fell creature, and you should show some respect!"

"She's messing with your mind, angel, and I doubt she's got much grip on her own!" He took a few steps forward, unable to resist, and halted when the centre of his entire existence raised the sword threateningly at him. "Look at me, you know me, it's Crowley. We saved the world together!"

Aziraphale gave his head a light shake, and Crowley thought for a warm, glowing moment, that he was breaking through. "You're a demon. Your words are poisonous, and I won't hear them."
Michael was all but purring. “You are loyal, aren’t you, Guardian of the Eastern Gate?”

He straightened up to his full height. “Oh, yes, I am, certainly.”

“Complete your mission then,” she said coolly, only breaking into a smile straight from the pit when Aziraphale had fully turned to face Crowley, sword at the ready, expression determined.

“This cannot be happening,” he whispered, breaking out of his frozen posture to take a few nervous steps back.

_Aziraphale, please._

“I hope you understand, dear fellow, that this isn’t personal.”

Crowley laughed, and there was no mirth in it at all. “You can’t kill me, angel, you're my best friend! Michael's the bad guy! Not me! Which, I do admit is sort of surprising when you think about which teams we're playing for, but-“

The angel nodded in sympathy. “Well, I’m quite certain it does all look a bit backwards from your perspective.”

“Aziraphale, don’t make small talk with your Adversary. Now, just get on with-” a vaguely celestial sound chimed out. “Oh, hang on, I have to take this.”

She pulled out her exceedingly angelic phone³ and answered it. “Michael here, yes? Oh, they do? Now’s not really a good time. Of course, I want you to give him to me. Alright, then. No, Sandalphon, I’m not taking a tone with you. Yes, I know. Alright, tell Gabriel I’m on my way up.”

Michael blew on it quickly and vanished it out of the way⁴. “Never fails, does it? I have a little meeting I need to attend. You'll take care of things here, Aziraphale?” She nodded towards Crowley significantly. "Like, the demon, you'll take care of him?"

“Take care of-"

“Kill him. I mean kill him,” she said bluntly, waiting for the angel to nod, and Crowley winced, remembering a similar conversation in a desperate time.

“Oh, I don’t really think you need to kill him, kill him,” said Crowley bleakly, feeling a touch more optimistic about getting through to Aziraphale with Michael trundling back Upstairs.

“Yes, he does,” she snapped. "I'll be sure to check in later. Happy smiting, darling. Then I have so much to tell you about the future.” She dissolved into a pillar of mist, then vanished much like her cell phone had.

“Handy trick that,” Crowley observed with a lightness he did not feel, before turning his attention back to the angel, and shortly thereafter, to his own survival, when Aziraphale abruptly began advancing on him like someone who had just remembered what he was supposed to be doing. "Please tell me you're joking, angel, he hissed urgently.

"Doing my duty is never a joke, demon."

"Crowley," he pleaded, feeling pathetic. "Call me Crowley, or... or dear. You always call me that. You don't remember?"

"I call everyone dear... even a demon deserves a little kindness, I suppose. I don't remember
seeing you before, no." His angel swung the flaming sword at him and he would have landed it, if he’d been any slower to skitter back.

"You're my best friend; We've known each other since the beginning of time! Back in the garden!"

"Which you violated!" Aziraphale snapped, angry now. "I don't remember, so you must be lying. It's what demons do."

"No, I'm not! Okay, sometimes I do." He dodged another swing, heart pounding in his chest with far more enthusiasm than Crowley thought appropriate. It was very distracting, and he did not need distraction. "But I am not now! The, the bookshop! We spend hours there, drinking, and uh, listening to music, and talking about why humans barbeque, and why God is ineffable, and uh, whoa! what's up with ducks! Why aren't they penguins? I don't know, everything! Angel, please!"

"You're making no sense. Now, please," Aziraphale stopped attacking for a moment and gestured at the sword, forgotten in Crowley's hand. "I would really feel much better about this if you were fighting back."

"Oh, Aziraphale," he groaned unhappily, feeling his hand tense on the hilt. "I don't even like it when we fight with words. I definitely don't want to fight you!"

The angel spread his hands out in a helpless gesture, and he looked so sad for a moment, all damp hair and angel robes, looking so much like he had that first day in Eden, that it cut Crowley to the depths of his bedraggled soul. "I have my orders. If you force me to cut you down undefended, then, then... I will have to."

The thought struck him hard. Aziraphale meant it, and it wasn't his fault, but if he succeeded in this mission, his angel would have an unbearable burden to live with forever.

Crowley raised his suddenly very heavy sword. "I'm sorry," he whispered hollowly to his treasured Adversary.

"For what it's worth, dear boy," the angel sighed sadly, "I am as well."

The fight began in earnest, the combatants joyless and grim. Michael was the only one involved with a true love of battle, and the absence of it showed in every movement, every flash of blade, black or burning, every superficial impact.

Crowley was quick, had always been quick, but the Principality was ruthless, giving no quarter, on him every second of the way. He might have been able to miracle himself away, dive into the Bentley and take off, but he didn’t want to. He didn't want to leave Aziraphale like this, stripped of his kindness and mercy, his hard earned humanity, strangled in this cold angelic detachment he was wearing like a shield, ripe pickings for that psychotic bitch.

“Aziraphale, Aziraphale, please-" he panted desperately, accidentally landing a blow that caused the angel to grunt in pain, but not to slow down one iota.

“Do not think you can sway me by using my name, foul fiend. I'm on my guard against you. I won't fail Her.”

“Aziraphale, please, please stop. I really am your friend!” Desperate, he tossed his own sword down and made a frantic grab for the hilt of the flaming sword, screaming as it offered its own
resistance, burning him, but holding on despite the agony. “You have to listen to me! This isn’t you!”

“You’ve some nerve, I’ll give you that!” Aziraphale sniped at him, trying to yank the blade back, and it was so like him in voice and tone, Crowley wanted to weep.

Their eyes locked, again and again, and the complete lack of recognition killed him.

Just one moment of being too slow was all it took.

The sword slipped by him, plunging deeply into his side. The part of him not blinded by anguish or contemplating his suddenly very immanent mortality, clung to the awful thought that this spell would not hold the angel forever, and he would never forgive himself for an action entirely outside his control.

Crowley had told him earlier; he knew what that felt like.

Deaths.

It wasn’t like discorporation.

Though blood spurted wildly coating them both in a sheen of gold, the sword pierced deeper than the mere human shaped costume he wore to blend in. Discorporation was cleaner, closer to the feeling of scissors, slicing smoothly through fine fabric, cutting away the trappings but leaving the person beneath whole. This was him, Crowley, naked and burning, pierced to the core and spirit slipping away into the dark edges of his vision. Night was falling around him, and the ebbing futility of his existence was worse than the pain of his mortal wound.

He clung to Aziraphale with numbing fingers, who surprised him by holding him in return, the embrace dark and chilly, expression grim as someone who had completed a task neither desired or shied from, holding his mission complete.

He had to do something, before he ran out of time.

He was running out of time.

“I forgive you,” he managed to gasp out words that would mean something to his angel, if not now, then later, when he would be beyond saying them. “It’s not your fault, okay? Remember that.”

“I have slain my Adversary, as commanded.” His face softened a bit. "I had to do my duty... Crowley."

He laughed from the pain of his name, but that made the pain worse, so he quieted. “Yeah, well, you just remember what I said. Cause you’re gonna hurt later about this, and I want you to be okay.”

He curled forward, pressing his face into soft, heavenly robes, as nice as he remembered them.

Someone... Someone was, astonishingly, plucking at the back of his mind for the first time in forever, but he had no desire to talk to Her right now. She had allowed this to happen, and Aziraphale was never going to be alright again, and he would be far too dead to do a thing about it.

Touch him. The voice commanded, sheathed in steel, in an order even the most rebellious demon could not help but obey.
“Already am!” he growled at Her defiantly, cut again by the confusion on Aziraphale’s face, who, even in this state, continued to show him the kindness of holding through his death. Despite himself, Crowley struggled to lift an arm that felt like it belonged to someone else.

Reach up! She demanded, infuriatingly insistent.

I don’t listen to You anymore. Go way.

Nevertheless, he tried.

He nearly managed to land a bloody hand on Aziraphale’s face, but it snagged on something instead.

The chain that his friend had made for him, so he could wear that little golden piece of Heaven.

With the motion of his hand, Aziraphale’s gold signet ring sprung free. He heard the angel’s intake of breath but, spent by his last effort, could not bring himself to even to care about it.

“My ring! Where did you get that?” Aziraphale shook him to prompt a response, but sleep was taking him.

No… not sleep, something deeper, and quieter. Seemed alright though, he decided, feeling limp and relaxed. He deserved to relax.

This was Sleep’s icy sister. Black wings spread wide over him, and it took him fleeting seconds, precious under the still remorselessly ticking clock, to realize they weren’t his own.

“How did you get my ring, demon?” Aziraphale asked, clutching it tightly, suddenly desperate, shaking his head again.

“Azrael?” he whispered. “They got you doing demons too, yeah? I always wondered about that.”

A short intake of breath. His or Aziraphale’s, he wasn’t sure. Not that it really mattered.

“Do me a solid. I know you aren’t much for socializing, but drop by later, tell him it wasn’t his fault. He'll be a mess.”

“This was freely given…”

He felt the chain fall away, and a profound sense of loss took him, but all the Crowley was draining away anyway, so that was alright too. A soft sweet burst of warmth rushed through him, but Crowley could no longer see anything but Azrael's own empty eyes. He reached for him, suddenly ready, as he never expected to be.

Chapter End Notes

¹ Dirty trick, I'm sorry.

² I know. I heard him too.
3 It was not an Apple.

4 And physical existence. Angels don't need pockets.

Breathe, my dears. I promised a happy ending, and I meant it.
Chapter Summary

Not quite as long as I planned it to be. Pushed some things to the next chapter, just to get this one out tonight.

Aziraphael realises what he's done, and has a little chat with Death.

Special thanks to Dangernoodle for helping me edit. ♡

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Trying not to dwell on the pang of sympathy that rushed through him at the noise the demon made, the devoted Guardian of the Eastern Gate yanked the sword from his enemy's side, hooking his arm around him, sword pressed flat against his back, blood messily smearing between them in the battlefield embrace. Michael would expect him to be thorough, to make sure his task was truly complete, and he couldn’t let the demon, treacherous by nature, dash off to Hell for salvation, or rather more accurately, damnation.

She’d wanted extinction, which was unusual for their merciful Mother. Mortal death was one thing, a change more than an end, but actual extinction was forever, so far as anyone knew. Aziraphale had never killed anyone before, and only determined loyalty had helped push past his own reluctance. Corrupting all of humanity, though, was no trivial offense, perhaps it did merit the harsh sentence.

Well, of course, it would have to, wouldn’t it? The Lord did not err. Not that it was his place to question Her, anyway.

The demon was speaking softly, making little sense, and when he suddenly thrust a hand towards the angel’s face as Aziraphale leaned close to try to understand him, the Principality thought for a moment he was being attacked. Poor fellow was quite far gone, however, with no real fight left in him, and the movement was clumsy and failing, fingers tangling in a delicate chain around his neck.

It wasn’t the shine of gold, but rather the startling little gleam of Grace from the demon that shook him to the core. Shocked to recognize something of Heaven with a creature of Hell, he caught hold of the ring reflexively with the hand that wasn’t supporting his Adversary, who sunk down limply, shuddering through his passing. It was difficult to hold him up so Aziraphale let them both sink to the ground. Even a being of evil should not have to perish alone. They'd been brothers once, after all, and something of that had to hold, despite the fathomless gap between them.

*It can’t be.*

This was *his* ring. Aziraphale checked his hand and noted the absence, but he would have recognised it anyway. The ring was as much a part of Aziraphale as his spirit or his wings, closer to his soul even than the long ago gifted, flaming sword, now cool and subdued, golden in its awful victory. The signet ring could never have been stolen from him by a mere demon, and especially
not without his knowledge.

He asked his fallen enemy about it but the demon was too far gone to reply, babbling something to Azrael.

Oh! Oh, yes, of course.

Aziraphale blinked and Death slid into his realm of perception, watching, waiting for the right time.

I did this, he thought sadly, and wondered about the sadness, looking between ring and demon.

“This was freely given…”

A terrible sense of dread filled him, though he didn’t understand it, and the angel clung more desperately to the rapidly fading being in his arms, suddenly frantic, desperate that the demon, that Crowley, should stay.

Azrael spread his massive, haunting, black wings, unique in all Creation, soundlessly approaching them, scythe in hand. Aziraphale found himself throwing up a hand in protest, troubled by the turbulent, and mystifying, surging of his own emotions. “No, I mean, just… mm, just a minute, please, he- he isn’t quite ready.”

I’m not ready. Why? Surely it was best done quickly, in the name of Mercy. An angel didn’t torture as they did Below.

MANY HAVE SAID THEY ARE NOT READY. I AM NOT STAYED BY MORTAL PLEAS, NOR BY YOURS.

“Something… something is wrong, Azrael, a minute, please, to think!” He tried to find some signs of life in the dull, vacant, yellow eyes, looking for answers to a question he did not know how to ask.

HE IS UNDER MY AUTHORITY. YOU HAVE NO SAY HERE, PRINCIPALITY.

His ring shone unnaturally, oddly bright now, and distinctly connected to the demon in his arms. How did such a thing happen? The ring, why the ring… How could he even touch it? Why would he wear it? His head ached and it was nothing to the sinking feeling in his heart.

“For pity’s sake-”

I WAS NOT CREATED WITH PITY, NEITHER WAS I CREATED WITH MALEVOLENCE. I COMPLETE MY TASKS, AS YOU HAVE COMPLETED YOURS, AND SLAYED THE DEMON CROWLEY.

“It feels wrong, somehow, like it’s not in the Plan!” He was aware of the madness of standing between Death and the demon he himself had, er seen to, but Aziraphale couldn’t seem to stop himself arguing with his own heart. “But… She asked me to do it. Michael said so…”

IT IS NOT FOR YOU OR I TO QUESTION THE PLAN. HE IS PERISHING. LET ME SEE TO HIS SPIRIT.

The dark angel, he who, more than any other being existed apart from everything save the Lord herself, advanced again and Aziraphale found himself up on his feet, standing between Crowley and Death, sword blazing brightly once more. “I cannot allow you to take him, Azrael… I’m sorry.
I don’t even know why.”

YOU CANNOT STOP THIS. I AM WRITTEN INTO THE PLAN INDELIBLY, SEALED BY HER HAND.

Aziraphale fanned his wings out protectively. “I don’t… I can’t think straight-

The eerie spectre stopped.

I HEAR YOU.

The Guardian stared at him hopefully, confused, torn.

“You, you hear me?”

Death neither answered nor moved. Aziraphale felt breathless, something nameless and urgent screaming along his nerves, thoughts storming along just where he could not decipher them.

*Kill the demon.*

*You can’t let him die.*

“My forgive you… remember that.”

What kind of demon knew anything at all about forgiveness?

Who are you, Serpent?

No, no, no, no…what was happening here? Aziraphale wished Michael would come back, though he felt a bit embarrassed about it. Still, things had been clearer in his mind before her departure.

HE IS READY.

“He… ? This poor sod, ready? No, no, he isn’t. He is definitely not ready. I shouldn’t have done this-”

THEN YOU MUST ACT NOW.

The lack of connection with Azrael left him feeling out of his depths, like he was in a conversation in a language he’d never before heard. “What do you mean?”

AS YOU WISH. I WILL TELL HIM.

Oh! Connection. He suddenly knew Death was looking at him now, a chill gracing over his skin.

DROP YOUR SWORD.

“I… beg your pardon?”

If nothing else, Death was patient, waiting him out. “Why? So you can take him?”

DROP YOUR SWORD.

And relentless.

“But, why, what will happen?” He had a strange need to hold it, something running deeper than fear of Azrael, an oppressive compulsion.
But a mere blade, even one so extraordinary, would not stop Death.

**IT BELONGS TO YOU NO LONGER. RELEASE THE SWORD.**

A soft sigh slipped out from the demon at his feet. He did not inhale again. Breath wasn’t necessary, but Aziraphale could feel the life leaving him.

TIME IS UP.

He dropped the sword.

The instant he released it, Aziraphale too was released, and horror and grief crashed over him like a tsunami. “Crowley!” he cried, dropping to his knees and grabbing him. “No, no, no, my dear! No!” He flung a panicked hand towards Azrael. “Stay away!”

Death watched silently, lingering in the shadow that was his own soul.

Healing, healing, the need of it overrode fear, guilt and anger. Everything fell away except the frail physicality of his beloved companion, his dearest friend's evaporating spirit, the sheen of Crowley’s blood on his hands.

He bit back his initial instinct to bless, to pour out Her Grace on a person no longer designed to tolerate and thrive in it. Aziraphale could not heal him like that, especially not so near death.

“Stay with me, dear one,” he crooned low, half plea, half lullaby. “Oh, Crowley, what can I do?”

Almost inaudible, the unearthly moan broke him, heart and soul. He felt the agony of Crowley's pain like it was his own.

A hurt to you is a hurt to me.

Wait.

A hurt to Crowley is a hurt to me.

It was a wild idea, worthy of the demon himself. Novel, imaginative. He could not heal Crowley, but could he perhaps take the wounds himself? Share them?

Of the two of them, it was Crowley with the imagination, Crowley with talent for last minute miracles, the skill to astonish and blindside and floor. Aziraphale, in contrast, was the deep thinker, the planner. This was entirely outside his element and he had no time to weigh the consequences.

It mattered not. Perhaps, somewhere, there was a line, carved out of stone, burned into eternity, that he would not, could not cross for Crowley. Wherever that line lay, it wasn’t here.

Eyes still locked on the Angel of Death, Aziraphale drew his soul's own mate into his arms and cradled him there, chin dropping limply across his shoulder, face brushing lightly into one soft wing. He clung to the love, the great tenderness he felt for Crowley. He had no room for fear. It was love he needed now. He shut his eyes, and bowed his head, casting up for help as he breathed the words like a prayer.

A hurt to him is a hurt to me.

A hurt to him is a hurt to me.

A hurt to him is a hurt to me.
When Crowley woke, all the world was feathers. He wasn’t surprised to see them, so much as he was surprised to see anything. Thinking was a bit of a novelty too. Moving… hurt. He could have done without the pain, but as a demon, he supposed it was only to be expected. At least it wasn’t sulfur. Took ages to get the smell out of his nose. He reached out again curiously to touch the wings of night that had swept over him, and he wondered why they were so bright.

“Hmm?” He’d have known that faint little sound anywhere, stirring sleepily.

“Angel?”

Gleaming feathers rustled as they withdrew from above him, and with a start, Crowley realised Aziraphale was lying next to him, strong arms clinging to him tightly, right wing stretched out against the grass, still cradling his head and shoulders, left wing floating above him, ready to drift down and shelter him from the world again. He shifted in order to turn his head far enough to take in the sight of his angel, eyes shut, skin sallow and face drawn in pain. The battered redhead felt much more in the world than he had since being run through, and the reason had to be right there, holding him fiercely like he might float away.

“Aziraphale?” Crowley prompted softly, not liking the look of him. Red-rimmed eyes fluttered open and a smile that had more tears in it than joy touched the angel’s trembling lips.

“Hello, my dear. It’s so very good to hear your voice. I wasn’t sure for a bit, that I would ever hear it again.” He couldn’t see the fresh spill of tears, but he could hear them dropping softly from Aziraphale’s lips with every sorrowful word. Crowley sighed, unsettled by the fragile way his own breath slipped out, and by the quavering quality of a voice normally so vibrant and warm.

They'd been put through the ringer, this time.

“Told you before, I’m like a bad penny. No getting rid of me now. Are you alright?” he added softly, just letting the angel cling, allowing his own head to drop back against Aziraphale’s wing. There was something peaceful in being held so, like being back home without having to endure the ordeal of going back home, closer to Heaven than he ever wanted to be again. Crowley was achingly aware of the raw pain in his violated abdomen and the desperate fingers digging painfully into his forearms. Truthfully, even that discomfort was welcome, for there was something bracing about it, the security of the real, Aziraphale’s presence marked in the bruises, with which he was unknowingly blessing Crowley. The metaphorical rug had been rather roughly pulled out from under Crowley, and it wasn’t nearly dying that had shaken him so badly.

She was silent again, but the memory of Her words, innocuous and brief as they were, was rushing through him like a freight train.

*Touch him. Reach up!*

*Shespoketome Shespoketome Shespoketome Shespoke*- 

“I think, in future, it would be best for us not to tangle again, dear boy. I-” Aziraphale broke off, blinking rapidly and clearly trying to find that ‘stiff upper lip,’ managing it to an extent before squaring his shoulders and continuing, “I very nearly killed you.”
“Thought I was history,” he agreed mildly, unable to muster energy enough for relief. He was hurting, and looking into Aziraphale the Soldier's eyes was likely to be nightmare fodder for a very long time to come.

*Shespoketome* -

“Well, in many ways, yes, you are, ancient thing,” Aziraphale replied playfully, as though Crowley couldn’t feel the tremours racking his friend.

“You were right there with me, geriatric angel.” Screw the rules. This was an old dance they both knew very well indeed, and there was security to be found in that too. As though interrupted by a record scratch, Aziraphale suddenly dropped all pretense, shoulders and wings falling with it, feathery wing dropping carelessly over him like a draped blanket.

He could live with that.

“I'm so, so, so very sorry, Crowley.”

He decided very quickly that shame did not suit Aziraphale at all. “It’s not your fault, angel,” he whispered hollowly, head spinning.

“It is-"

“It isn’t-"

“It is, Crowley!” The demon gasped in surprise as Aziraphale lifted his shirt and thrust his hand through the hole the sword had left, burnt at the edges, agitation boiling behind tumultuous eyes. “Look what I did!”

It was the flicker of pain in Aziraphale’s distraught expression that really caught his attention.

*He’s hurting . Not just upset.*

Crowley snagged the angel's hand firmly before he could withdraw it, even as he moaned dramatically, deliberately misconstruing the cause of his upset. “Aw, I *liked* this shirt. Should have liked to be buried in it. Make a note of that, will you?”

Outrage at his insouciance made the angel flush red, and Crowley took more than a little pleasure in seeing it. There was the relief at last.

Mostly.

If Aziraphale could be mad at him, he would be alright eventually. Crowley was less confident in his own recovery.

*Shespoketometometome* -

“Crowley, don’t say such things!”

“What, you mean like talk about my death like it's nothing when all you can think about is how close I came? Gee, why does that sound so damned familiar?”

He now knew exactly what it felt like to be stabbed by the flaming sword of the Guardian of the Eastern Gate, and those big wet eyes were still far more dangerous weapons. “I…I see your point, now, and I am sorry if I caused you any distress, but, but I, you… Crowley, I-"
“It’s fine.”

“It’s not-”

“Angel, angel, angel. Honestly, and don’t let that get around, that I was being honest, but honestly, it’s fine.”

He was surprised to feel the face suddenly pressed into his back. “It isn’t. What I’ve done, it could never be forgiven.”

“Errrgk!” A sound that walked the line between irritated and concerned burst from him as he flipped himself over, nearly nose to nose with the angel. “I already forgave you, weren’t you listening?” He hesitated, suddenly too aware of weary blue eyes under damp and messy white-blond curls. “Do you not remember?”

“I do remember it, all of it, all too well, but Crowley, you can’t have meant that.” He resisted a whimper at the pain from Aziraphale’s grip, but the angel picked up on it anyway and it melted into apologetic little circles, soothing the hurt away.

“I said it because I meant it, so you would know, so-“

“So I could live with the shame of murdering you at Michael’s behest! In the Name of our Mother?! How could I have ever-”

As his voice raised in pitch, and worse, at the mention of their Mother, Crowley felt a distraught pang run roughshod over him. He grabbed Aziraphale’s head and pulled it down to press their foreheads together. “Shhhh, angel. Don’t get so upset. You’re alright, I’m alright, and we're just gonna… gonna make sure Michael pays for doing this to you, okay?”

The little sob that shook free undid him, and Crowley released his face to pull the angel against him, tucking his head against his neck so he could only see feathers and not the pain of Aziraphale’s guilt and grief for him. Bad enough just to hear it, just to feel it in every shudder.

“I've got you, angel. It’s alright. It’s not your fault. It’s Michael’s fault.”

Strange, so strange and terrible, to know, though he’d known it a long time, to see, rather, that a demon could be truly loved, and mourned, by an angel.

There it was. There it was again, the enduring bit of hope that yet lived in the demon Crowley, and if there was hope for him, maybe there could be hope for anyone, for everyone.

*Shespoketome…for the first time since She cast me out… She spoke.*

“What happened to the kids, to Mike, the fire… Angel, was that my fault?” Aziraphale pulled back to peer at him surprise, forgetting himself in an instant to pour his generous heart all over Crowley, and surprising the demon not a whit.

“Oh, no, no, my dear, you mustn’t think that. You had no control of those vile acts at all!”

“Neither did you, angel.”

“Oh… oh, but, if I’d fought harder-"

“You did fight, and so did I, and they got us all the same, didn’t they?”

Aziraphale absently tugged at a button on Crowley’s mangled shirt. “I suppose so…”
“If you'd been able to choose, angel, you wouldn't have killed me anymore than I would have killed those kids, yeah?”

“No, no, never.”

“This isn’t your fault… or mine,” he added, feeling the unfamiliar feeling of his own forgiveness as something eased in him. “We didn’t do anything wrong.” He startled Aziraphale by booping his nose. “Don’t tell my boss I said that.”

“Oh, my dear.”

He wasn’t entirely surprised to find himself being rather painfully crushed by an overly affectionate angel, who should not have been surprised to find him in possession of a hissing, protesting demon.

It didn’t seem to phase him.

Frowning, Crowley realised his hand, his right hand, was wet, and he knew immediately it wasn’t from the rain.

Crowley raised his hands up, unable to prevent the squeak of alarm to find them bloody.

“Angel! What did you do?!?”

“It’s fine,” Aziraphale replied with a level look that would have earned him a punch in the arm had Crowley not been busy losing his mind.

“It isn’t- ggah!” he broke off, annoyed. “You’re bleeding. Oh, Bless me right to the Pearly Gates, did I do that to you?!”

He began pulling at the robes trying to get a proper look at him, aware but not particularly concerned with the fussy hands batting at him. “No means no, Crowley!”¹

“Aziraphale, I swear-”

“I’m as fine as you are, dear boy.² Came out about fifty-fifty, I’d say. Leave off. Give me a bit of a rest and I’ll heal it up neat as you like, spit spot.”

Crowley gave it up in favour of peering at his hand, rain slowly beating away the gold. “What happened?” he asked tiredly, feeling a bit sick, and not having had much experience with the unpleasant sensation, the demon was not enjoying it at all.

“You were-” Aziraphale looked away from him, “Well, I wasn’t able to heal you outright. Divine fire, part of me… really didn’t want to bolster what it was already, ah, anyway, you understand, I’m sure, so I couldn’t do the usual,” he wriggled his fingers, but without his usual flare, “Bob’s your uncle.”

Crowley let that pass. “But you did something.”

“I did, rather. You see, my dear, I count you kin, closer than a brother, and so, I thought, a hurt to you is a hurt to me. And I thought it so fiercely, dear one, that while I could not take your burden, I could share it. Which brings me back to not tangling with myself again. I didn’t realise how dangerous I can be. It's been a very long time since I did any soldiering.”

Crowley processed that silently, eyes closing against the angel for a moment, feeling exposed. He
missed his glasses. Where had they got off to?

“Crowley?” How could he deny the angel anything after something like that. He opened his eyes, lips pressed tightly together.

He wanted to say something light, casual, sarcastic, maybe. He wanted stability back in his world, but that was silly. Crowley was all wrapped in angel, and that was the only safe haven he had had since that heartrending plunge long ago. “I don’t deserve you, Aziraphale.”

The angel's face opened up in three perfect circles, before softening into something infinitely kind. “There you are, once more, wrong again. Don’t fret about it. A bit of a rest and I’ll see to this, and you, I presume can see to yourself, and then…” he paused and Crowley could see a little more of that divine fire in him, “Then we find a way to set things right.”

Chapter End Notes

¹ Well, sometimes no means yes, but that’s what safe words are for.

² True fact.
Dear

Chapter Summary

God talked to Crowley, now Crowley talks to Aziraphale.

Heaven makes it clear they aren't done with them yet.

Sorry for the long wait this time! I'm moving a lot of pieces into place for the endgame. Love and thanks to my lovely Beta reader, Dangernoodle, who weeds through my muddled thoughts and brings sweet clarity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The companions sat together in quiet company, just existing in common sympathy while stars spun above them, velveted in cloud, and the mighty Atlantic steadfast surged, and everything, *everything* teetered on the edge of infinity while they considered the future of it all. The rain had eased up briefly before resuming with some enthusiasm, soaking them both to the skin and they allowed it, neither one caring in the least about the cold caress of nature as they regained their strength.

His abandoned sword lay quiet and neglected in the dark.

Aziraphale had determined to make no effort to heal himself until he was certain Crowley was back to rights again. Just a little bit of respect, it was the very least he could do, all things considered, but as the hours passed with the humming rotation of the Earth, he began to worry about the sheer length of time it was taking for the demon to act. The weight of a head thudding gently on his shoulder caught his attention, and he debated whether or not his faithful Adversary had dropped off to sleep.

“You sure you’re alright then, angel?” The question, though soft in its delivery, still managed to startle. Lantern eyes gleamed up at him, warm in the molten dark.

Not asleep then.

“Well, just concerned for you, my dear.” Something… new… flit across Crowley’s face, and that alone was noteworthy. After an age of intimate association, new was not simply rare, it was practically… new.

Crowley ducked his head and turned away before straightening up. Aziraphale missed the golden light of him immediately. “Why? Do I look different? Besides this sophisticated ‘drowned rat’ look I have going on?”
Confusion, not without consternation, fluttered for Aziraphale’s attention at the odd weight looming under a question asked just a titch too casually. He looked the demon over attentively as a flicker of fear bloomed and mixed with the remorse the angel had quietly decided would forever be entwined with his soul now. Some sorrows should be kept close. “No, not-” He broke off, tried again, “Your wounds... not up for healing just yet?”

The light returned as the demon peered back at him, blinking in solemn surprise, before responding with the easy shrug of one shoulder. “Was waiting for you, you know, just to be ready, in case you needed a bit of a boost.”

Aziraphale felt better about, ah, just about all of everything as he laughed.

“What? What?” Crowley demanded, first confused, then defensive. “Whass’so funny?”

“You are, I am,” he replied, amusement and affection play-tousling for dominance in his spirit. “I was waiting for you,” he added hastily, when serpentine gold narrowed dangerously. “Just to be polite, really, and you were right there too, waiting on me!”

Crowley snorted, averting his eyes again, dark, wet wings sliding against damp grass. “I was definitely not being polite. I was being practical, which is a perfectly demonic thing to do, so don’t start.”

“Right, right, my mistake. Shall we?” He stood, and offered a hand to Crowley who gave it a thoughtful look before taking it and allowing himself to be drawn up. A brief foolish yearning to Bless Crowley danced in his fingertips but he was an old hand at ignoring such silly impulses. Instead Aziraphale released him and relaxed into his own Blessing, feeling the pain of Crowley’s wound, which he had first inflicted and then self-inflicted, ease off, gentle, warm and fly away. They sighed together in mutual relief.

It didn’t last long.

An elegant, cream-coloured note card drifted down from Heaven, gilded edges shining despite the darkness. Crowley foolishly reached for it and yelped as he made contact. The angel plucked it easily out of the air. He met Aziraphale’s concerned, yet chiding look with an annoyed scowl. “Blessèd papercut. Your people-”

“You’re welcome to them,” Aziraphale muttered crossly as his eyes drifted over the message. He shook his head and tsked lightly, taking it in.

This wasn’t going to go over well with Crowley.

“I’ll pass, thanks. One of their, ‘rude notes’ I take it?”

Aziraphale chewed on his lip, closer to offended than upset, really, but hesitant to share. “You’ll appreciate the irony of this,” he replied acidly, brandishing the card like a weapon, which was apt enough, trying to make light of a heavy load. “It’s a summons.”

He felt the weight of Crowley’s stare, nearly as burdensome as the delicate little card in his hand. “Did they have to sacrifice any books to do it?” he teased after a beat, wrapping himself in carelessness like a shield.

Aziraphale shot him a scolding look and deemed it answer enough before reading the summons aloud. “Principality Aziraphale, thou hast been-”

“Thou hast,” Crowley echoed, “Really? Still? Your people need to get with the times. Now if you
want a rude note, Beelz is really the way to go.” He spoke quickly, trying to cover for anxiety and thus projecting it all the clearer. “I knew a guy, nice guy, well, demon, nice demo- euh, no, not really nice, anyway, he got this letter from her Lordship, and whoosh, covered in Hellfire ants for a month.” Crowley chuckled darkly, fidgeting. “Messed with her record collection. Asking for it, really.” Aziraphale coughed politely and the demon paused, sweeping rain-darkened red hair off of his forehead. “Oh, right. Do go on,” he added nattily.

Aziraphale did. “Thou hast been summoned under charge of high treason and stand accused by Prince Michael, Archangel of the Lord. Come with all haste to make an accounting and be judged. Don’t dawdle.” “Well, hardly.”

Crowley made a disgusted noise as he peered over the angel's shoulder. “Again, your people are such...”

“They won’t be ‘my people’ for much longer.” He cut him off, stiffly. “It’s quite clear they’d be more than happy to be rid of me. Only to be expected, I suppose. Gabriel didn’t even bother to sign it. So passive aggressive.” He sighed and let the note dissolve back into the ether. “They’ve already made their minds up, without even hearing me out. She's deceived them, and it probably wasn’t a tough sell.” It still hurt. “Foolish me for thinking better of her, or him, or any of them.”

Black wings shook roughly in a futile attempt to free themselves of the wet. “Can’t even argue that, angel. Hope, in Gabriel's commitment to the truth? Hope in Heaven at all?” Strangely, there wasn’t much life in the skepticism. He felt suddenly like Crowley was very far away, and he wondered which of them was fading into the distance.

Aziraphale surveyed his dearest friend's face, watching the...Something New, and mystifying, lurking there. “I-I know, already, that you don’t think I should go, but-”

The demon started walking rapidly, head turning away last minute as though he had forgotten it behind him, marching towards the edge of the White Cliffs, though in the dark and from this angle, one could not see the ancient beauty they possessed.

“Crowley, please,” he began, gasping in spite of all he knew when his friend stepped off, only to drop roughly onto the earth, feet dangling freely over the side, dark wings spreading wide, slick with rain and nearly invisible against the night sky, rustling in the persistent wind.

When he didn’t answer, Aziraphale did the only thing that really made complete sense to him in the world, and settled faithfully next to Crowley in wordless pledge, peering blindly into the cavernous darkness, content with the limits of human vision. Crowley, however, was staring at his hands, examining first one, then the other, before catching the edge of his wing, running fingers quickly, even desperately, over the dark feathers, giving no other clues to his strange behaviour, no indication he had even noticed Aziraphale perched beside him.

“I know, now, I do realise, my dear, that we have no way of predicting what will happen,” he tried again, halting in his speech, confused when Crowley abruptly switched wings, blocking the sight of his face as he sorted swiftly through soft feathers. “Crowley? Are you listening to me?”

When the demon ignored him completely, Aziraphale did the only thing that really made complete sense to him in the world, and settled faithfully next to Crowley in wordless pledge, peering blindly into the cavernous darkness, content with the limits of human vision. Crowley, however, was staring at his hands, examining first one, then the other, before catching the edge of his wing, running fingers quickly, even desperately, over the dark feathers, giving no other clues to his strange behaviour, no indication he had even noticed Aziraphale perched beside him.

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When the demon ignored him completely, Aziraphale, with a boldness born out of concern as much as impatience, caught the black wingtip and brushed it back, murmuring an apology, so he could see wide golden eyes set like carved amber in a pale, uncertain face. “My dear, whatever has possessed you?” His friend drew back a bit, and the movement caused a glimpse of flesh, flashing from the hole in jacket and shirt, stark against the dark fabric.

I did this. Did I do this?
Why? He remembered with sudden clarity, Do I look different?

“…are you afraid I… I did you permanent harm,” he fought to voice the terrible thought, shame welling up anew, toxic and agonizing, “When I hurt-

“What?” Crowley snapped, fully back with him, “No, that’s not- don’t be stupid.”

“Well, what is it then?” He demanded, exasperated, worried but hoping that was, in fact, the truth.

His friend opened his mouth, looked stricken, shut it again, shut his eyes then opened them again.

Aziraphale waited.

“She spoke to me.” Crowley plunged in, the strange newness about him slipping into a living urgency which the angel could feel sympathetically skittering along his own nerves. The redhead grasped the edge of the angel's robe, then let it go, conflict in every movement. Genuine fear bloomed on the heels of the nameless emotion, written on the demon's face, as though he was afraid of what his own words meant.

Ah, he understood and, with a will, blew out a wave of protective wrath through tense lips. What had the wicked Archangel said to him? What awful threat to trouble him so?

Crowley did not want Aziraphale to face her again. Of course not.

The kindly angel made little shushing sounds, reaching out to draw the demon against his side with weary affection. It was a testament to the depths to which she had shaken the dear thing that he made no effort to resist or crack wise. “Michael spoke to me too, about, ah, terrible things. Her plan is… is madness, but it is doomed to failure. My fear is for any who may choose to follow her to their destruction. I have to try to protect them. You mustn’t worry so-”

“No, angel. Not Michael,” Crowley shook his head almost frantically and Aziraphale felt the shudder course from his friend all the way though his own form. When the redhead spoke again, it was hushed and gentle… no, it wasn’t. A jolt shocked its violent way through him as he put his finger on it exactly.

It was awed.

That was definitely new.

When Crowley spoke again, Aziraphale could see the ancient pain running through the core of the Fallen angel as though it had been painted for him, all the old and aching hurt, hiding in the desolate places in his soul, naked and afraid without any anger left to sustain his defenses.

“Her. *She* spoke to me.”

He opened his mouth to reply, and as Crowley’s real meaning sunk in, shut it again, at a loss for words. Silently, he pointed Heavenward, in a gesture far more human than angelic. How could you actually point at Her?

What sane being would dare?

Their eyes locked and the demon ducked his head. “Yeah.”
Well, that was… that was…

“Really?”

“Yeah.” The tension was almost visible.

“The Lord, Herself, Maker of-”

“Let’s not do that again,” Crowley snapped, rolling his eyes. “Yes, the Great Ineffable one.”

“Oh, well,” he searched for an appropriate response. “How’s She doing then?”

That wasn’t it.

Crowley looked at the angel like he could hardly believe what he was hearing. “How is She-how the Heaven should I know? It wasn’t exactly tea time, ‘Oh, hello there, Lord. Lovely weather these days. What’ve you been up to since tossing me out?,’ sword stuck through me and all-”

The reminder did hit hard, and Aziraphale supposed he deserved that and worse besides. “Oh… oh, when you were, ah,” he set his jaw, committing to his responsibility for the act, “dying?”

“So dramatic, angel,” Crowley scolded on autopilot. “I’m an idiot. Can’t have been real. Probably just hallucinating, giving myself something to do more interesting than making small talk with Death.” His tone shifted into something jocular and mocking. “‘How’s it hanging, Azrael? Reap any good souls, lately?’ Humans are always having near death experiences, so I was just-”

Aziraphale pressed a finger to his lips, letting it linger a moment until he was sure it had served its purpose. The angel locked eyes with his best friend and said earnestly, “I believe you.”

Hands dug hard into the cliff edge. “Yeah?”

The angel nodded slowly, letting his certainty sink in for both of them. “You would know, dear boy. If you say She spoke to you, well then, I know She did.”

The demon swallowed audibly. “Right,” came the small voice. “I guess… I guess I know it too. She really spoke to me.” Crowley shook his head slowly, breathless and solemn. “She spoke to me.”

It was a grandiose thought, and the funny little humanish hairs on Aziraphale’s arms perked up as he imagined, remembered the cadence of the voice that spoke the universe into being, sang the most magnificent of all songs, told the best of all tales. Stunning, that’s what it was. It had been so long since he or anyone had heard from Her. The angel wasn’t sure he himself could have borne it, and Aziraphale was still connected with Her, living in Grace, surrounded by the certainty of Her love, but for Crowley-

Crowley stared down over the edge, into the infinite blackness waiting beneath, as though he wanted to tip over and fall until he really landed.

There was no touching bottom in the absence of light.

“What did-"”

“I don’t know what She was thinking, talking to me,” he said quickly, smile wry, perhaps bitter. Aziraphale ached at the sight. “I told Her I didn’t want to hear it.”

The angel was startled and then amused as he realised he shouldn’t have been surprised. “Such
a rebel,” he observed smoothly. “Well, She knew She was talking to the right demon then.”

Crowley went rigid, eyes seeking his desperately. “Did She? She knew She was talking to the right demon then.”

There was something open and unguarded in the way those marvellous eyes pierced the darkness. It was an expression that hearkened him back across millennia to younger days. Crowley looked innocent, which, truthfully, he wasn’t, and scared, which he must surely be.

“What did She say?”

He shook his head and shrugged. “Hardly anything. ‘Touch him. Reach up.’ Just gibberish, trying to tell me what to do again. Rub your belly, Crowley. Tap your head. Sing to me. Blah blah blah. I suppose not much has changed.”

“Oh,” he breathed, remembering the grappling hand, trying to lock out the awfulness of knowing what it felt like to push metal through Crowley’s flesh. “And you did, didn’t you? You listened. I remember you reaching.”

He gave the angel an affronted look. “I’m still a demon, Aziraphale, I don’t listen to Her, even if She speaks.”

“Oh, but you did-”

“She didn’t give me much choice in the matter.” He shrugged his shoulders up, wire tense, “Damn, but that was humiliating, just caving to Her like that.”

“She saved you, Crowley, don’t you know that?” Aziraphale breathed, wondering when it had gotten so cold. “From me, She saved you.”

His expression was pure scorn. “She definitely, definitely did not do that. You did that, the whole ‘share the wound’ thing, thank you very much, not that I’m thanking you.”

Feeling more than a bit overwhelmed himself, Aziraphale lifted a hand and touched Crowley’s cheek, drawing his face back where he could see it. “She did, my dear, and saved me from killing you.” He was trembling, and it was annoyingly distracting when he really needed Crowley to hear him. “That’s when I saw the ring. That’s when I knew something wasn’t… right. She saved you. How extraordinary.”

Crowley went white as angel down, making a horrified sound that would have been a shriek if there had been any volume to it at all. “No…. no, nonononono-”

Absolutely sunshiny delight burst upon Aziraphale who wanted to himself burst into song, or laughter at the very thought of it. “Amazing-oh, oh, no, now don’t panic, dearest.”

Crowley leapt to his feet and nearly tipped himself off the ledge in his haste, would have had Aziraphale not had a quick hand under his wing, catching at his jacket. “I don’t owe you anything!” he yelled angrily into the darkness, wresting himself free from Aziraphale’s grip and stepping back from the edge.

“Calm yourself, dear boy!” It really wasn’t necessary, but it made Aziraphale feel better so he stepped between Crowley and the ledge. “This isn’t a bad bit of news. It’s… well, it’s astonishing really… isn’t it?” He trailed off, fully absorbing the stricken face and defensive posture. “Crowley?”
“Why?” he snarled, stomping an angry foot. “Thousands of years I talked to Her, begged and pleaded and yelled at Her.” He glanced back over his shoulder as if afraid someone was listening in. “I even thanked Her, a time or two, mostly for you, or for you thwarting some particularly diabolical wile, because I’m a soppily idiot sometimes, and once… one time only… I apologized. I offered to repent in a burning orphanage, if only,” he choked a little, “If only she would let me save two little humans from death, and even then, She didn’t answer me, and She certainly didn’t lift a finger to help.” Crowley threw his arms wide, throwing himself out there in open display, as he was wont to do when at the end of his rope.

Now, as always, it struck Aziraphale as an expression of despair.

"But She did this time! Crowley, She spoke to you! A demon!"

If looks could dis incorporate, Aziraphale would have, and he cringed in apology for his insensitivity, but it didn’t stop him from trying to make his point.

“What I mean is, of everyone else in creation, She spoke to you! Because you matter!” He smiled almost manically, trying to impress upon Crowley what a Blessing She had bestowed upon him. “You still matter to Her. She loves you!”

He shuddered like he’d been doused in Holy Water. “No… no, angel. She doesn’t. She doesn’t, okay? Love can end. It ended. Look at me, just the same, right?”

_Do I look different?_

_Oh… oh, Crowley._

Fresh grief washed over him, “You thought you would look different, because you thought-”

“I thought,” he laughed, a dry, painful sound, “I thought, She’s talking to me. I’m here, on my way out, and She’s talking to me again. I thought,” he dragged a hand over his face, pure misery in the gesture. “I thought, She actually forgave me, and then I thought that was as good a way to call it quits as any.” He pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes as tears he refused to shed sprung violently from Aziraphale’s. “How damned stupid and pathetic am I, to have thought that could ever happen, even for one instant?”

The wet-faced angel reached out for his friend, overrun with sympathy, but stopped and let his arms drop when the demon took a guarded step back. “Hope…. Hope is not stupid, Crowley. It’s beautiful, that you still-”

“Angel, giving someone hope when there is none is not kindness. It is cruelty. It is torture. It is the heart of all suffering.” Poor Crowley looked so beaten. “It is Hell.” Aziraphale watched his friend trying to shore up his defenses again, and he was torn between wanting to pull them down to see him clearly, and wanting to wrap him up to shield him.

“Surely…. Surely, it’s a step in the right direction. Who knows… who knows? Maybe, if you repent, not… not as a bargaining chip in a crisis, but as an act of faith-”

He was taken aback by Crowley’s appalled expression, and the answer, when it came, cut the deeper for its softness.

“Not you too, angel. Okay? Don’t you torment me too, with false hope. Promise you will never tell me She loves me again. I can’t hear it anymore. It will break me.”

Aziraphale froze, wondering when his hands had crawled up under his throat, clinging to each
other because they could not cling to Crowley. Silence drifted between them like midnight snow as he hesitated, finding and rejecting words and actions, searching for the best choice, lest Crowley skitter away from him like a frightened animal.

“You know,” he began cautiously, keeping his voice even, his expression calm. “You know that I should never ever like to cause you pain.”

A tentative little nod, all the answer Crowley provided, was enough, and Aziraphale could breathe again.

“And I know, that you have been terribly hurt, my dear, and I… there are times when I don’t really know how you bear it.” He took a cautious step forward, glad when Crowley didn’t move away. His eyes straying to his old sword, still laying patiently in the wet grass. “If you don’t want me to say it again, then I won’t. I will try my best never to breathe a word of it again, but,” Crowley shifted uneasily under his gaze, “you have to know I really believe it is true.”

“You’re wrong,” he spat, and Aziraphale nodded kindly.

“Hardly would be the first time, would it?”

“You are wrong a lot.”

“Of course.”

“Like, all the time.”

“So you tell me.”

“Right. Just so long as you know that.”

“Oh, I do; certainly, I do.”

The annoyance in the demon’s expression was proof enough to knowing eyes that Crowley had found his footing once more.

The angel resolved to keep his tender-hearted sorrow to himself, to avoid rocking the boat more than it had been already. Perhaps it was dangerous to hope for too much. His thoughts strayed to the looming future. It did so hurt to be let down by those you trusted and admired.

With a snort, Crowley tucked his hands into his jean pockets as deeply as he could manage it, kicking idly at the sword.

“Aziraphale?”

“Yes, dear?”

His Adversary’s expression was grave, and resigned. “When you go up there, bring the damn sword.” He gestured to where it lay, before touching it tentatively. When nothing happened he scooped it up. “Don’t go down without a fight, whatever happens. The bastards should know what you stand for.” He reversed it with exaggerated care and offered it up to the angel, but Aziraphale did not take it.

For a moment, he could not speak. The demon's gaze was relentless on him until Aziraphale relented. “I won’t go quietly,” he promised, shutting his eyes, unable to bear Crowley’s burning into his soul. “In Her name, and in yours, my friend, I will fight against Michael, with truth or with
a sword, if I have to, until they cast me out or slay me.” He smiled weakly and felt the sadder for it. “Perhaps there yet remains those I can persuade.”

Crowley cursed quietly and Aziraphale nodded in grim agreement with the sentiment, but his breathing quickened as his friend strode forward and caught his forearm. “Go then, but not in my name, angel. I’m not worth dying or Falling for, but,” Crowley’s face set with determination, and something eased in Aziraphale to see the steel in him, “I do believe in you, and if you say She’s worth it,” he broke off to curse again before continuing, “Then maybe She is.”

The trampled faith of a Fallen angel.

It was a bit terrifying to be faced with that diamond of faith, born black as coal, ground, burned, and crushed to shining, and to know you were the last Guardian standing watch over such an exceedingly rare treasure.

So dear.

“I see. And if I were to say you are worth taking Heaven on for, or,” the angel smiled a little, tinted thickly with gallows humour, “perhaps marching into Hell for?”

“We've already established how wrong you are,” Crowley answered, prowling around him in a restless, protective circle.

“And how frequently?”

 Crowley stopped to waggle his head at him, expression mocking like a saucy teenager's before catching his arm again and nodding firmly. “Yes, exactly.”

Aziraphale took advantage of the demon's grip on his arm to tug him into a tight hug, squeezing his beloved friend tighter in the face of the struggling, because he knew Crowley was perfectly capable of breaking free if he actually wanted to do so.

“Gonna call my lawyer,” he groused, even as he returned the embrace. “Get me a pentagram!” The requisite protest made him laugh lightly, and that was no small gift in grim times.

Aziraphale released him, with one last shake of his head at the bluster before looking at Crowley with great fondness and all sincerity.

“My dear…” he paused, gathering himself up to deliver a lesson, and wanting it to have an impact. It was, after all, perhaps, serving a bit as a farewell. “Crowley, listen to me, with great attention.” He paused, waiting until he was satisfied that he had it. “It is not for nothing that I call you, ‘my dear.’”

The wary expression returned in a moment. Crowley’s guarded nature, surely necessary in the existence he had long been condemned to, nonetheless broke the angel's heart.

“Dear… it means loved, yes. Treasured, yes, but also prized, valuable, precious, costly, and so you are,” he crooned tenderly, “And so you should be. You are more than worth any price one could ask. You are priceless.” Warmth at the thought of all that Crowley was bubbled up within him, and he could not have helped the insistent smile that graced his face. “I would go to my fate with some satisfaction if only I could convince you of that truth.”

He had expected sarcasm, or a laugh, teasing or a quick change of subject. Aziraphale hadn’t expected the stark silence and childlike vulnerability there before him, naked under a dark sky. Crowley stood, motionless, sword dangling idly in his hand as all of their history passed
soundlessly between them.

“You can’t say something like that and leave me behind, angel,” he said at last. “Promise you'll come back.”

“Crowley, I just don’t know—”

“Lie to me, then. Please.”

_Oh. What a thing to ask for a last request._

Aziraphale didn’t want to lie. If this was to be their parting, then he wanted nothing but truth between them, and yet, how could he deny Crowley anything now?

“I will, then. With my shield, or on it,” he said faintly. “Like the Spartans once said, before their battles.”

It was no help.

“Oh, that’s very sweet and poetic, Aziraphale,” the demon snapped abruptly, wire tense and furious in his fright, “but you aren’t a Spartan and this isn’t Greece. Sure as Hell isn’t comforting.”

Aziraphale took him by the hand in mute apology. “It's the best I can offer, my dear. I may survive.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted that. If he wasn’t able to convince the Archangels of the truth about Michael’s plotting, they would likely look to his execution. If they moved to cast him out by breaking his faith in Her, he would be unbearably disappointed in his terrible failure. Above all things, he wanted to be loyal, to his Mother, and to his Crowley, but he was less confident he could stand that test then he once was. “If I Fall, I imagine you will hear about it. Do look me up. I am certain, I will, in that hour, very much, be in need of a true friend.”

“You’re killing me, angel,” Crowley told him, far too seriously. He proffered up the sword again. “Take this, at least. Not many like this.”

Aziraphale reached out reflexively before curling his fingers back against his palm. “Ah, well, I have the feeling that I shouldn’t. Michael still has my feather, and I… I want to be me, make my own choices, and not follow hers blindly.” He shivered at the memory of being a stranger. “I fear she will influence me again.”

Gentle words, as he always preferred, for a terrible violation.

Crowley frowned down at the sword, and the angel watched, riveted, as a familiar pattern of movement danced across the expressive face, the creation of an idea coalescing in his clever mind.

The sword burst into flame.

Aziraphale cried out in alarm and dove for it. “Crowley let go! You'll be burned!”

Quite unhelpfully, Crowley rapidly put some distance between them, clutching the sword terribly close. “Sss’alright, stay back. It’s not you,” and then he had the nerve to _wink_ at the distraught angel. “It’s me.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“It’s Hellfire.” He observed the blade in his hand like he would the dabbling ducks on a pond.
“I may have done a little corrupting—”

“You *profaned* my holy sword??!”

“Seems like something I’d do,” he grinned, sweeping it through the air like a child playing with a sparkler. “Gotta do something to keep myself on the payroll.”

“But, but, well, you can’t just go around defiling—"

“Sure, I can. In fact, I’m a little embarrassed that you’re so surprised, really, oh mine Official Adversary and part-time thwarter. We corrupted lots of Heavenly weapons in the old days. Had to, I mean the first ones would just passed right through all that righteousness. Not sure anyone’s done one of these before though. Anthony J Crowley, trailblazer.”

“…but—"

“You said it isn’t yours, anymore, right?”

“Well, yes, but—"

“And, you did give it away ages ago, literally.”

“To the humans, but—"

“You wouldn’t even want it back now, I figure; you've no idea where it's been. War had her hands all over it—"

Well, he hadn’t promised never to surrender to Crowley.

Possibly someone should have made him, a long time ago, but that was a ship long sailed.

“Alright, alright, I yield. Crowley, my dear, would you like my rusty ol' Hellfire-spitting flaming sword?”

“This one I've got right here?” he asked, peering at it as though just noticing he had it, despite the aggressive licks of flame curling around it. Aziraphale resisted the urge to cringe as it brushed against the demon, but it left him quite unharmed.

“The very same.”

“Well, if you insist then.” There was something about being bathed in the firelight that made his friend look particularly deranged, or, demonic... both. “And you can have mine. Gotta trade fairly, it's part of the demonic code.” Aziraphale was quite sure it wasn’t, and nearly as sure that there wasn’t any such thing, but there was no sense in arguing the point now. First fire, then blade were sheathed handily out of the earthly plane before Crowley drew out the wicked looking demonic sword. “Shame there’s no hoity-toity fire, but I wouldn’t want to be Michael with you swinging this in my direction. Safer than your sword now, well, for you, that is, still very nasty for an angel on the wrong end though.” He offered it, hilt first. “Don’t bloody cut yourself.”

Aziraphale hesitated for a moment before gingerly tapping the hilt. Crowley, quite kindly, he thought, let it pass without comment, and the angel accepted the weapon. It wasn’t a pleasant thing to hold, all coiling menace and viper-deadly. The malevolent darkness lurking around it was terribly unsettling, and he had the troubling feeling that he'd taken another step away from home.

Crowley watched him hide it away with obvious approval. Not exactly chipper, but his mood
was visibly lighter. Aziraphale wondered where the argument that he had originally expected from his headstrong friend, had vanished.

“I must say, you're taking this better than I expected of you.” He let the unspoken question hover midair between them, waiting patiently for Crowley to take it up.

“Yeah, well…. Maybe you’re wrong a lot, but,” he shrugged lazily, looking for all the world like he wasn’t filled with dread, and fooling Aziraphale not a whit. “Sometimes you’re right. If I were an immortal, omniscient, omnipotent pain in the ass-,”

“Near enough at times, darling.”

Crowley pulled a face at him. “Aren’t you just precious? No, seriously, if I were,” he clicked his tongue and pointed up” Her, I wouldn’t be bothering to talk to some little demon unless I had a damn, er, Blessed good reason.” He scratched his head, looking uneasy. “I really don’t think this had the least bit to do with me, angel. But you … you still do have a listing in Her book. She didn’t save me to save me, ’cause I’m Her enemy, after all,” Aziraphale opened his mouth to object, but Crowley plowed on, “But you… you wouldn’t have done well after killing me. I know that much if I know anything. She didn’t save me, I think She saved you.” He nodded to himself in thoughtful approval, “and if She is willing to step in for you with a small thing, then maybe you do stand a chance, going against that lot up there. I’m not sure you'll be going it alone, anymore.” His mood shifted into something strangely playful, a feral gleam suffusing his eyes. “Actually, I know you aren’t, because I’m coming too.”

“Oh, no, you couldn’t possibly!”

“Oh, but I am. I'll disguise myself, of course, unless something needs doing, and this way, we might be able to put the flaming sword 2.0 to good use.”

If there was anything needed doing by a demon in Heaven, things would be dire indeed, Aziraphale thought, but kept silent about it.

“How-” but Crowley was already changing, catching the angel's wrist with one hand, shrinking down, shifting colours, black and red welling up only to brighten into burnished gold. The tiny snake coiled delicately around Aziraphale’s wrist like an ornate bracelet, a gaudy little accessory which would not, he had to admit, go amiss in the fashion of today's modern angel. Evidently he'd made note of a few things when they'd traded places after Armageddon. “Well, you do look lovely, my dear, but surely they will be looking for you.”

Well, perhaps not. It wasn’t as though he was keen on putting Crowley through more of this ugly business.

“Look closssssely,” hissed his unholy charm bracelet. “I'm camouflaged in more wayssss than one.”

“Oh!” And so he was, with Aziraphale’s signet ring nestled up behind his head like a decorative collar. “It does rather hide that whole Hellish aura you have going on. Very clever, dear.”

Crowley didn’t have to say anything for Aziraphale to hear the smug. That probably wouldn’t hurt his chances of blending in with the Archangels either.

Still…

“Are you quite certain this is what you want to do, my dear? If things go badly-”
He didn’t have to complete the thought to know Crowley would understand. If things went badly, they were going to go very badly indeed.

“Get a wiggle on, angel¹.”

Chapter End Notes

¹ There were no foot notes in this chapter.
There were many ways for an angel to get to Heaven, and most were quite quick and efficient, but Aziraphale was in no particular rush to leave the world he had guarded and loved since its trembling infancy, so he elected simply to fly there.

“Off we pop, then,” he told his sentient little bracelet, striding to the edge of the White Cliffs for what was, perhaps, the last time. As he spread his wings, Crowley let out a little alarmed noise and constricted around his wrist tightly.

“Something wrong?” he asked, dropping easily into the sky, snagging a helpful updraft that was more fun, rather than actually necessary for angelic flight. As was often the case for them, physics need not apply.

“Errk … not used to being carried. Don’t drop me.”

“Well, of course not, but I can’t help but point out that I’m not holding on to you, my dear. You’re holding on to me.”

“Fine, whatever,” he grumbled, clinging all the tighter. “I just don’t want to end up in the drink. Do we have to go this way? Drag things out?”

It wasn’t as if Crowley couldn’t shift back quick enough to avoid such a fate, but he let it go. “I’m in no rush to leave, nor arrive, dearest, are you?”

“Could get it over with.”

Aziraphale wasn’t sure if it was optimism or pessimism driving that thought, but it was starting to tweak his well-tried patience. Folding his expansive wings tightly, he dove without warning towards the tumultuous sea.

He was far too charitable, of course, to enjoy the tiny squeak of protest as they plummeted together until he fanned his wings out at the last minute to break their fall, extending one hand, not the one bearing Crowley, of course, to graze the icy surface of the water.

“Show off,” muttered his little stowaway, who nevertheless extended the golden tip of a tail to dip into the rolling sea, zipping along beneath them.

Crowley loved it too, he knew, the earth and everything in it, and Aziraphale stayed low until the little snake coiled himself once more around the angel.

Together then. There was a rightness to that thought.

Slowly, he beat his wings, lifting away from the sea and the world too. He began humming to himself as he rose, faster and faster, past trees, past clouds, past sky, past the friendly veil of atmosphere that cradled all mortal life.

One could not fly or hear in the all-encompassing void, but that was no hindrance to either one of them. Aziraphale turned back idly and sighed longingly at the twinkling light of cities far below, where the people quietly battled back the swallowing dark with their streetlights and lamps. “I see
trees of green, red roses too,” he sang to them softly, a lullaby in parting. He would miss it all. “I see them bloom for me and for you, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”

It did rather remind him of his long ago service as a star. He still liked the peace of it, thought it did lack something of the raw vibrance of reality. “I see skies of blue, and clouds of white, the bright, blessed day, the dark, sacred night, and I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”

He broke off singing abruptly, caught off guard by the unearthly harmony floating up like a blanket beneath him, wordless and exquisitely beautiful, even by angelic standards. It dropped off as quickly as it had begun, and Aziraphale was immediately dismayed to have interrupted.

“Crowley…” he breathed.

“Shut it.”

“That was-”

“Shut. It.”

He tried. He really did, but some things could not be helped.

“I didn’t know you could sing! I mean, still, what with-"

“That’s it, I’m leaving.” He made to let go and Aziraphale quickly pinned him down to his wrist. “Ermmph! Leggo! I’ve still got fangs you know, and I’m probably venomous. In fact, I’ll make a point of being venomous.”

“Oh, but you are a handful, at times.”

“Not even that, at the moment.”

He looked down at the demon, all looming power compacted in such a dainty form, and supposed that was true. Not even a handful.

Aziraphale let his wings float freely in the brisk nothingness around them, shifting his hand from holding Crowley down to gently stroking his jewel-like form.

“Thank you,” the angel told him sincerely.

“For being a handful?”

“For singing with me. For coming with me. For being my best friend. For everything.”

For his part, the little snake was quiet. Everything was. Beneath them spun the fragile planet, as delicately balanced a miracle as ever there was. He broke into song again, rather than tears. He didn’t want to go.

“The colours of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky, are also on the faces of people going by. I see friends shaking hands, they say, ‘how do you do?’ They’re really saying, ‘I love you.’”

He felt it now, both for, and radiating from the earth, from life, from humanity: love, rich, sweet, and warm.

Perfect.

“I hear babies cry, I watch them grow. They’ll learn much more, then I’ll ever know. And I think to
myself... what a wonderful world.”

When Crowley hummed along this time, Aziraphale pretended not to hear him, even as he determined to remember the moment for the rest of his existence.

Don’t dawdle.

Well, at a certain point, one could not avoid the truth of it. Aziraphale was dawdling, but who could blame him? Here he was, having to walk away from a past so big and bright, into a future so nebulous, uncertain and dark.

And possibly short.

Worse, he was marching his best friend into a Heaven far less charitable than Hell would have been, and they really didn’t have anything like a plan for getting Crowley out again. Carting him, hidden and vulnerable, straight into the lion’s den, as it were, did not seem like something a true friend should do, either, but Crowley would not be parted from him any more than Aziraphale would be parted from Crowley if their places were reversed.

Something in his manner must have made his intentions known, because a tiny golden head lifted up from its resting point on his thumb to gaze at him. “Time, angel?”

He nodded wordlessly, all the warning he gave before stepping sideways, cracking through the limiting physical boundaries of the mortal universe, drawing them through into the ethereal plane, ever vaster and brighter, isolated and cold.

Beautiful and mysterious, Heaven had been long extolled in the songs and dreams of yearning human hearts, but the soulless silence of the business end of the Celestial plane would probably have left them wanting.

Aziraphale slipped into Heaven quietly, as he usually did. He supposed it should feel good in a way, like coming home after a long absence; instead, he felt like he had accidentally wandered into a stranger's house, as though someone else had moved in and no one had bothered to let him know.

It didn’t help that they wanted to try him for treason.

The twitching movement at his wrist drew his eyes down in time to see Crowley shudder. “Are you quite well?” he asked softly, looking around in as casual a manner as he could manage.

Aziraphale was reasonably experienced affecting the attitude of a “cool customer,” having learned from observing his actual customers as they’d hopefully wandered, oh, so nonchalantly, towards his bookshop, right before he hastily flipped the sign.

An angel probably shouldn’t take as much satisfaction in thwarting book sales as he did demonic mischief. Ah, well.

Aziraphale had also practiced using the expression in a number of tawdry locations as Crowley entertained himself by dragging him from one den of sin to the next, in the hopes of cracking his composure. He did live to fluster, and heavily implied that tricking him into these little tours featured prominently in his memos.
When one went and befriended a demon, these things were only to be expected.

Aziraphale had consistently won these little games, healing the sick, embracing the rejected, bathing the filthy, loving the unloved, until somewhere along the line, they’d both realised it wasn’t a game. While Crowley didn’t help him, he did like to see Aziraphale’s kindness in action. For his part, just keeping his hands busy did help ease his mind whenever the Archangels were being particularly overbearing.

“Remember that time, at the end of the world, I said I was a big spooky fan?” Crowley asked, peering around at the shining landscape and sweeping architecture.

“Oh, yes, of course.”

“This place is too spooky for me.”

Aziraphale frowned at him, offended on principle, if nothing else. “Heaven is not spooky, Crowley. It’s supposed to be beautiful, peaceful…” he gestured all around them, indicating the light above and the golden street below. In the distance the Pearly Gates gleamed, and perhaps no choirs were singing now, but surely one would break into glorious song at any moment. “A harmonious place of love.”

“Is it?” Crowley asked, a question as pointed as his unusually prominent fangs.

Aziraphale could understand why the demon would be feeling defensive, and was mildly thankful that he, himself, had not developed the habit of shifting willy-nilly to any of the other wondrous designs She had come up with. Truthfully, Aziraphale didn’t even like changing his hairstyle.

“Yes, of course-”

“No, you’re not following the question. Is it then? Look around, tell me: Is this a harmonious place of love? You’d know better than me; do you feel any love here, at all?”

He started to answer automatically, but that tone meant Crowley wanted him to really think about it, and he did have a way of getting what he wanted.

*Did* Aziraphale feel love here?

It struck him a little painfully to realise he didn’t feel *loved* here, but he pushed the selfish thought away in a heartbeat. He wasn’t meant to be loved; he was meant to give it, share it, reflect it to others not as fortunate as himself. More than a job, though he often used the term when chatting with Crowley, love was why he *was*.

And if he wasn’t generally on the receiving end of it here, well, all the more reason to be grateful he’d found it elsewhere.

But, was there love here in Heaven? Still? There was Grace, of course; it was the light of this place, and it permeated every nook and corner, and every being too, save one. He gave Crowley’s head a little rub, feeling the difference between them with a cutting keenness.

“You can’t even say it, angel,” Crowley observed, peering around the emptiness of the place. “Even when you described it yourself, you said ‘supposed to be’, but you know it isn’t. There’s no love here. It’s sterile as Hell- well, quite a bit more, I imagine. What Upstairs is, angel, is empty.”

“Why are we talking about this?” he asked stiffly, unable to tamp down his burgeoning
unhappiness. There were more pressing matters to think about. “What is the point?”

Crowley uncoiled a little to raise his head a bit higher. Aziraphale tried not to look like he was talking to a wristwatch. “The point is, what the Heaven happened? I try not to dwell too much on the old days, but I don’t remember things being this… barren. Did all the fun angels Fall?”

He was teasing, Aziraphale knew, but there was too much truth in it for him to dismiss the words casually.

Typical of his conversations with Eden’s Serpent.

The angel surveyed the space, feeling as though he was looking with new eyes. “It is different, isn’t it?”

“It’s dead. It’ssss -” He flicked out his tongue. It was golden too. “I really hate to say it, but what happened to- I mean…” Crowley didn’t have to be human-shaped for the angel to pick up on his discomfort. “Before it all went wrong, I remember joy.”

Aziraphale’s heart plummeted in piercing sympathy, and he fought to keep the sudden pity out of his expression. He reached for his bow tie to straighten it out of habit, only to remember he was still in his celestial robes. With an impatient noise, he changed back to his own clothes, neat as a pin, and felt much more himself, though still sickened by the memory of bloodstains. “You aren’t wrong. I remember it too. You all Fell, and She dropped humanity on our doorstep and all but vanished-” He brought his hand to his lips to stop the critical thought before Crowley could. “Anyway, this is Heaven now, Crowley, and it has been for a long time.”

“Right, well, if that’s the way you want it then. I don’t have to live here.”

“Crowley, please, this is not a good time for this conversation.” He kept his head up, watching carefully. The Principality wasn’t so naïve as to think no one would be coming for him.

Don’t dawdle.

“I’m just saying, it’s so empty-”

“Well, of course it is empty, Crowley,” Aziraphale huffed, finally losing his patience. One third of us Fell. You were supposed to be here, with us, shepherding humanity, watching them grow. We are missing you, all of you. Don’t think you were the only ones hurt in the war.”

He didn’t mean to be cross, but Aziraphale felt terribly defensive, and Crowley picking apart what he was desperately trying to hold on to was not helping.

“You, what did you lose? We lost home. We lost hope-”

“We lost you, and we had to carry on like nothing happened. So many of us lost our choirmates, had to fight them…”

He stopped again. Memory wasn’t always kind.

“Maybe Heaven isn’t like it was in the Beginning, but we’re doing our best.”

A couple of guardian angels approached, peaking at him curiously. When he waved at them in greeting, one of them whispered harshly to the other before they moved on in a hurry. He let his hand drop with a sigh.
“What’s their problem?”

“I am.”

“Bastards,” replied the snake, heatedly, before conversationally asking, “Why?”

Because everyone knows I’m your friend now, and that is just not done. It makes me a bad angel in their eyes, and everyone else's too.

Golden eyes met his, small, but no less familiar for being small, no less steadying in the shifting tides of all this trouble.

No, not everyone else.

“I have a bit of a tarnished reputation, I’m afraid. It hardly matters. We'd best be off.” He turned in the direction of head office. Having been spotted, word of his presence would spread quickly.

“Because…?”

“Well, my role in preventing Armageddon didn’t help matters, but just spending so much time away from them, puttering about on Earth has made me a bit of a curiosity.”

It was hard to spare someone the truth when they could see right through you, and had done so with ease since the day you first met.

“And... because of me?”

Aziraphale smiled weakly, eyes tracking a familiar angel bolting towards him. “It works out fine, Crowley,” he said softly. “Less of them, more of you: win-win, as they say.”

“Mrrfk.”

“I was always an odd duck. It’s nothing new, and it’s nothing to fret over.”

“I don’t like it,” Crowley answered darkly, hushing when Aziraphale covered him reflexively for only a moment as the Angel of Restoration arrived, before letting him go again.

“Aziraphale! You're here!” Luciel announced breathlessly as she looked him over, constantly in motion, herself. Blessed with a unique talent for finding the lost, be it person, place, or thing, Luciel was created as an angel of the third sphere, and so, relatively speaking, spent a fair bit of time on Earth, albeit in a long series of quick missions, and never around long enough to really get to know the humans she assisted. They had had the odd run in during their respective assignments, and Aziraphale appreciated her devotion to her duty.

He tried very hard not to hold Luciel's assisting Michael in finding his old sword against her, while not trusting her an inch not to do it again if she was asked.

She was a very good angel.

Under her thoughtful gaze, he tried very hard not to think of Crowley, still as stone on his wrist.

“Of course,” he replied, with exaggerated and blatantly false ease. “Did they think I would disobey a summons?”
She hesitated, and it was clear as day did, and thought him a rebel for it. “I thought you might. Michael has been saying such strange things about you. Most of the angels think you'll... not be around much longer.”

To her credit, she looked distressed by the thought.

“Ah, well, we must rise to whatever path we are called to, isn’t that so?” He smiled at her kindly, hoping desperately she would not noticed Crowley’s hissing. Honestly, did he have no self-control at all? They couldn’t afford to have him caught.

“Rise or Fall,” she replied grimly, without an iota of schadenfreude. Her eyes dropped sadly, and he realised she was looking at the not-bracelet. “Is that-”

“Oh, this silly little oddity?” he blurted nervously, hoping she'd assuming it was fear of Falling, not fear of outing Crowley, that lent the speed to his voice. “Latest fashion in London. Sounds so realistic. Hisses when you tap it.” He did so, and Crowley stubbornly stayed silent. He did it again with a little more force and a desperate look and Crowley let out a long hiss that would have struck fear into a less sturdy soul.

He'd pay for that later, if they had a later.

She watched it for a long moment, before reaching out to tap him herself. Crowley positively snarled and she yanked her arm back nervously. “Interesting creatures, humans.”

“You would like them, I think, if you had the chance to know them,” he said wistfully.

“Not my path,” she said quickly, before glancing quickly around them, voice dropping conspiratorially. “What happened to your Fallen friend?”

That she would ask, both touched and surprised him.

Don’t look. Don’t look.

“Oh, he, ah, got away unscathed.”

She made a face, like she wasn’t sure where her opinion should fall regarding a demon's survival. “Michael doesn’t like him at all. Really, Aziraphale, not at all.” It ran almost like a warning, and he didn’t know what to make of it.

In any case, Aziraphale was quite certain the antipathy was mutual. “Well, Michael is, ah,-”

“You like him, a demon, truly?”

He forced himself to keep his eyes on the curious angel, and not let them drift down to his wrist. Crowley had gone absolutely silent, thankfully.

What was the point in secrets now?

“I... I love him very much.”

She looked at him in absolute horror, before schooling her expression. “Aziraphale, I don’t know you well, but you seemed nice enough in the early days and now you are so... so tempestuous. Your friend, he can’t be your friend. You understand that, don’t you? Love or no love, he’s going to be your downfall.”

Aziraphale pressed his lips together, understanding her good intentions, but annoyed,
nevertheless. “So be it, then,” he said firmly, before softening his tone to something wistful and sweet. “He’s worth it.”

“He’s the enemy.”

“No, he isn’t.” He insisted, and remembering her earlier curiosity, added, “You would like him too.”

An angel probably shouldn’t be playing demon's advocate in Heaven.

“This was a mistake,” she whispered edgily. “Look, I just wanted you to know, we didn’t all want this to happen to you. I'll remember you, from the old days. Like I remember them all.”

She spun on her heels and hurried away, like she was afraid to be seen with him.

Probably wise.

He glanced down at Crowley, and nearly discorporated.

He was gone.

Aziraphale had smuggled an angry demon into Heaven and then let him loose.

Maybe the other angels had a point to make about him after all.

He didn’t give a damn about what Crowley might try to do to Heaven, but ice cold fingers danced down his spine at the thought of what they might do to him.

He had to find him, preferably before anyone else did, and before someone dragged him to his trial. A mad desire to flag down Luci to help him in his search came and went in an instant.

Alright. He couldn’t have gotten too far, surely, probably still within earshot, not that he could very well go around calling to him.

Grace.

That was the ticket. It was everywhere here. He just had to figure out where it wasn’t. Harder to do, with his ring shielding, but at least he knew what he was looking for. He shut his mortal eyes in concentration and as he opened his ethereal eyes, the full Glory of God broke upon him, staggering in its intensity.

Surely She wasn’t so far away either, with so much of Her presence seeped in to every shining wall, priceless gem, and golden paving stone.

If you knew what you were looking for, Crowley did rather stand out like a sore thumb, despite the ring and he hadn’t gotten far. He sighed in relief, but the moment was snatched away almost instantly as he realised he had slithered his way right next to an amethyst fountain, flowing with the Holiest holy water.

He crossed the plaza hastily, trying to look the opposite of all he was feeling. With all the practice he'd gotten of it over the years, he ought to have been brilliant at it by now.
“Don’t you dare scare me like that again!” he hissed, scooping up the little snake without a moment’s hesitation.

“You should be scared,” came the agitated reply, Crowley trying to squirm free of a grasp strengthened by fear, and no small bit of annoyance. “We are completely screwed, angel, if you haven’t noticed. Let go of me.”

“Do you even know how close you are to all that holy water?”

“Sure, I do. I remember the damned purple monstrosity. Used to blow bubbles in it, back in the day.” He paused, taking in Aziraphale’s expression. “What? It’s not like I was going to go for a swim or anything.”

“You disappeared! I was scared to death!”

“Don’t go dragging him into this. Relax, angel, I’m fine. Look… I left a little memento in case it all goes to pot.”

‘Abandon hope, all ye who enter here,’ he read aloud, before sputtering, “You graffiti-tagged Heaven?”

If he hadn’t already known, all too well, that a snake could look insufferably pleased, he would have known it now. “I think it’s quite profound really,” Crowley said mildly, “Very apropos, when you think about it. Dante had the right idea, just the wrong location.” Aziraphale silently read it again, and Crowley made a pleased noise. “I know that look. You love it!”

The angel was not about to cop to that, regardless of how true it was. “It’s a ridiculous risk to take in a situation that is bad enough already, Crowley. I should get you out of here.”

He ignored the protests as he spun on his heels and started stalking, not out of Heaven, but towards main office. Enough dilly-dallying, hovering in constant terror for his friend. Crowley stopped objecting when he realised where they were headed.

“Angel?” Far beyond tetchy at this point, Aziraphale refused to answer at first, but Crowley had never been one to say die. “Hey, Aziraphale, stop. Stop for a second. It’s important. Stop, I’m sorry. Look, apologizing.” He slowed his pace, then sighed and stopped, refusing to look away from his goal. “I just don’t want you walking into the fire angry with me, alright?”

That was really all it ever took.

Aziraphale, wrath dissipating like a fast moving summer rainstorm, impulsively dropped a kiss on the tiny golden head. “I’m being foolish. Forgive me?”

Smooth scales layered over taut muscle tightened briefly on his arm. “Yeah, of course. Look, I just wanted to get back at them a little bit. Last time I was here, I had to keep my mouth shut, so I wouldn’t give away the game. You don’t know how awful they treated-,” he broke off with a flick of his tongue, “I guess you do. You must. I didn’t know how awful they are to you.” He hissed softly, “Shouldn’t surprise me you never said a word about it. I wanted to strangle them with my bare damned hands. I know, it’s stupid.”

He relented with a weary sigh. “No, it isn’t. It’s very ni - You’re right. I love it. I hope you burned it in there with Hellfire and they can’t ever get it out.”

Crowley wriggled out of his loosened grip to wind softly around his wrist again. “Hell yes, I did.”
Chin held high, and hope battered, but intact, Aziraphale entered to face the Archangels' judgment.
Hi everyone! So very, very sorry for the long wait! I don't think it will be nearly as long next time. This chapter was very tricky. I hope it was worth the wait.

If you like courtroom drama, this is the one for you. Also, if you don't really grasp the difference between figuratively and literally, you will soon.

Oh, and exciting news, I have learned how to make my footnotes all helpfully clicky at last!

Aziraphale was quietly mourning the death of decorum.

He, well, technically, they, had been escorted brusquely to the Main Office, and ushered into an uncomfortable chair to wait uneasily for the Archangels to call him in. Aziraphale tried to sit up tall, with dignity, but it wasn’t easy to maintain under the glower of the two moody Thrones\(^1\) who seemed convinced he was about to make a break for it.

He tried to keep his own counsel under their stony hostility, but eventually he cracked. “Oh, really now. I did march my own self in here, didn’t I? And quite frankly, I’m not bothered the least bit by all your wheels and eyes. I can present just as brightly, with the ‘Light of Her Wisdom,’ or whatever you chaps are calling it these days.” He wriggled his shoulders a little before staring straight ahead. “Some of us have better manners than to go around showing off how well we can burn holes into mortal retinas.”

Was it his imagination or had the two angels dimmed slightly?

It did no real good to chide them; they were after all, just doing their jobs; however, Aziraphale found a certain bolstering effect in it. Perhaps Crowley had been a bad influence on him after all. He rubbed the subtle bump hidden under his jacket sleeve, trying and failing to resist the temptation to fidget.

He had every right to be fussy, knowing quite well they were keeping him walking \(^2\)on eggshells \(^3\)and waiting on pins and needles.\(^4\)

It was literally \(^5\) the most maddening thing he had ever experienced\(^6\), and it was all out of some twisted desire of the Archangels to play psychological games with him, keeping him waiting and anxious in some ridiculous play for power.

Well, he hadn’t spent six thousand years arguing with Crowley without learning a little something about psychological games.

All the same, when he was called in, the cold, tense, grip of dread took hold of him.
Grandiose was the word, if the definition were stretched slightly to include completely lacking in any sense of warmth.

In utter silence, many ranks of the Host stood in rows, loosely arranged by choir, with representatives of each of the nine orders. He recognised a number of the Cherubim and Principalities, and his eyes were drawn to the unusual sight of the lone Seraph, twisting and burning in his Holy Flame. They didn’t often venture far from where they sang praises around Her throne, so his presence marked the gravity of the occasion.

Aziraphale wondered if the Seraph knew and remembered Crowley, and vice versa, and a sad pang went through him for all the immeasurable loss caused by the War.

Of the seven Archangels given charge to keep the rest of Heaven on the straight and narrow, six were arranged in an imposing semicircle of chairs that were almost, but not quite, audacious enough to call themselves thrones. The empty one was plainer than the others, shadowy and stark in the light of Grace. Aziraphale wasn’t sure if he should be sorry or relieved that Azrael was not among them. One did always know where you stood with Death, who did not play politics, but he was kept far too busy for such trivialities as meetings.

Even with these kinds of stakes.

With the exception of Gabriel, the Archangels had their wings out and were in full celestial regalia, right up to the ostentatious crowns on their heads. Gabriel, on the other hand, preferred his, no doubt wildly expensive, suit and tie combo. The colour flattered his eyes, he'd claimed, having heard it said in that first magical encounter with a tailor.

Aziraphale tugged fondly at his own gently worn vest and met each suspicious look in turn with a level gaze of his own.

He wasn’t the one in the wrong here.

Michael smiled at him under cold, calculating eyes, implicitly threatening in her unnecessary armour. He thought it made her look rather brittle, like something on the edge of shattering.

That made him sad too.

“Lost something?” she asked.

“The flaming sword that I assume you're referring to is right where it should be,” he answered primly. “Where it won’t do further harm.”

“I was referring to your foul pet, the demon.” The silence of the witnesses was broken with a rippling tide of murmuring and excited whispers. Even in Heaven the forbidden relationship between an angel and a demon was intriguing. Accused and accuser both ignored the curious angels.

“He's my friend, not a pet, and he's right where he should be too.” Crowley stirred and it took quite a bit more willpower to ignore that. He was probably boiling mad already.

_Please, Aziraphale_ thought desperately in his direction. _Please, stay out of sight._

Gabriel frowned at the two of them and broke in. “I assume you understand why you are here today.”

“Better than you do, I believe,” Aziraphale answered honestly.
“I’m not sure you’re striking the proper tone here, Principality Aziraphale,” Gabriel replied using the angel’s title like a human parent would use a child’s full name.

_You are in trouble, young man._

In the face of the futility of arguing minutiae, Aziraphale simply relented. “My apologies, Gabriel. It’s been a difficult day, and I can’t help but think it’s not likely to get any better.”

“We are all here in the service of Justice, Aziraphale,” God's most celebrated messenger replied in a way that suggested he wanted to add, ‘Buck up.’

_Everyone’s watching._

“No, not all of us,” he corrected softly. Michael’s lips quirked in amusement.

“Archangel Michael,” Uriel prompted smoothly, always one for moving things along. “The charges are yours to lay before him.”

She smiled sweetly at her fellows before schooling her features into something a bit more grim, stepping out from her place to approach him. “Aziraphale, I have made this counsel aware, _more_ aware, of the extent of your long collaboration with the Enemy.”

Scattered exclamations were silenced with a stern look from Gabriel.

“I assume you're referring to Crowley?”

She didn’t answer directly, instead gestured upwards with a little flourish as a still image appeared, clear as the sky of the morning it represented, Aziraphale next to Crowley on the wall, one elegant wing extended over the demon, shielding him from the first rain. “It started so innocently, didn’t it, this first treasonous act of yours, giving aid and comfort to the enemy.”

The surprised reaction from the witnesses both hurt, and offended, Aziraphale.

“It was merely a courtesy,” he replied easily, refusing to get defensive over a moment so close to his heart. “Hardly treasonous.”

“A stronger angel would have recognized it as the weakness it was. You let him under your guard! The Serpent who corrupted humankind! The Tempter of Eve.”

Aziraphale supposed he had only himself to blame for Crowley’s reputation among his fellows, given the… colourful nature of his reports, but it was still upsetting to hear the scorn in her voice. It was astonishing how patient their Mother could be with such rampant hypocrisy from those in authority, whether Heavenly or earthly, he reflected.

“You’re overreacting, surely! It was simply a kindness, not a sin, and perhaps… no, in fact, it _was certainly_, the first kindness Crowley had ever received since before the War.” He ran a soft thumb subtly over his hidden friend.

“He chose to rebel,” Sandalphon announced snidely, “A demon merits no kindness. I’d have smote him straight back to the Pit, first sight.”

Not particularly given to displays of temper, Crowley’s Advocate nonetheless found himself having to fight for control of his emotions.

“Kindness isn’t dependent on _merit_. It’s just kindness. It’s supposed to be freely given, and it
was.” Outraged by the rude tittering floating up in response to Sandalphon’s condescending head shake and nasty smile, Aziraphale struggled to keep his voice steady. “Do you accuse Her of making an error in judgement then? Did the Lord of all Creation put the wrong angel at the Eastern Gate?”

Sandalphon clammed up immediately, and none of the gathered angels looked particularly comfortable under the challenge. A tongue flickered lightly against his wrist and he took it for approval.

“She chose me,” Aziraphale reminded them, “And I have offered Her everything that I am. If you think She was wrong, maybe you should take it up with Her directly,” he flicked accusing eyes at Michael, “rather than causing distress, or destruction, to Her own.”

Michael broke the tension with an easy laugh. “You see? He’s picked up the demon's style of argument. So clever.” It was not a complement. “I remember it well from the old days, as well as the angels who lost everything for making the mistake of listening to that Serpent. The error here was all yours, Principality.” She was no longer truly speaking to him, “Though this was only the first treasonous act of many, wasn’t it?”

“There’s only one traitor here, Michael.”

“Quite correct, Aziraphale,” she agreed, almost gleeful. “Perhaps we should move on to the first temptation, then? Because that is where it all led, is it not? Your weakness… the demon asked you to help him to corrupt humanity, and you did, angel.” There was no hiding the mockery in her tone as she turned her eyes to the assembly surrounding them. “Principality Aziraphale has directly tempted humans to sin.” She leaned in close, whispering in his ear without the warmth of human breath. “Perhaps the only reason why you haven’t Fallen is because you are beneath Her notice.”

“What does that say about you?”

She smiled at him like he was a particularly astute student. “The very same.”

The soft exchange went unnoticed in the heated conversations sparked to life by her accusations. He felt the change in the witnessing choirs, from curiosity to condemnation. It was impossible to deny the accusation, and harder still to proclaim his innocence in the face of deeds he still felt some lingering touch of guilt about.

Probably less guilt that he should have felt.

“Testify, little brother,” she murmured, and he felt the power seething darkly underneath the encouragement, prodding roughly at his will. She still had his feather, and she had not let go of the power in it. “Unburden yourself and confess.”

Well then. If that was really what she wanted, she could have it. There was always opportunity to be found in crisis. Maybe now was his chance to help them all understand.

“Inhave tempted them,” he replied gravely, ignoring the smattering of gasps. Even Michael seemed caught off guard by the quick admission, and he could feel Gabriel radiating disapproval from across the room. “The first time was in Bethlehem, then not again for a very long time. Given the circumstances, I could not say no.”

“The demon Crowley drove you to it, as he’s corrupted so many others.” Like a barrister in a trial, she spun it out for maximum effect for the angels listening. They were not a jury, and would not make decisions on his fate; that fell to the Archangels, but if, as he found himself increasingly
believing, this was a battle for the soul of Heaven, then they would all be making decisions today, and in all the days to come. “I remember our brothers, don’t you? We were united in the days, the sweet and golden days, before the Fall claimed them, and yet they are lost to us now, not destroyed but eternally corrupted.” She drew closer to him again, too close, and he stubbornly held his ground, wordlessly defying the ruthless soldier. “His ‘friend’s’ clever questioning turned many good hearts to rebellion, and now the demon continues his legacy, making a traitor out of formerly loyal Aziraphale, left alone too long, and vulnerable. It’s tragic, really.”

He impatiently shooed away her repelling onslaught of false sympathy. Michael didn’t lose the smile, but she did at least step back. “Crowley asks good questions, ones we all should ask more often—”

“Sounds to me like Aziraphale is the one questioning Her now.” Sandalphon simpered at him venomously, brightening when Michael moved to pat him approvingly on the shoulder.

“That is exactly what I thought too,” she agreed.

Some angels were easier to love than others, he thought, biting back what would have been an impulsive, if satisfying, reply. Aziraphale hadn’t gotten to where he was by giving in to tempt—

“Uh, yes, you, Archangels,” the Principality continued, “I am questioning you, and me, Heaven too, all of us, all of this, except…” he locked eyes with the depraved Archangel, “I have no question of Michael at all. In regards to you, my sister, I am clear as a pealing church bell.”

Aziraphale did not dignify that with a response, focusing on the witnesses instead. Those were the hearts he had a shot at changing. Surely, they could find their lost compassion for humanity. They weren’t all evil… just so terribly isolated in this barren purgatory.

“If we don’t ask these things of our Creator, then we should ask them at least of ourselves. On earth, Crowley and I did speak, often, and argued, oh, nearly as much, but at least we were communicating. He was the one who convinced me that it was worthwhile, all the talking, the endless debates. It was bold, I’ll give you, on his part, to approach me, from the start. He has far more courage than I do.” Aziraphale knew the admiration slipping into his voice would do him no good in the judging minds of the counsel, but he wouldn’t have changed it, even if he could have.

“Courage is a virtue, Aziraphale, and we all know demons have no virtue,” Chamuel broke in coolly. As the Archangel in charge of restoring peace to broken relationships, Aziraphale rather thought his attitude towards the Fallen was no small factor in why there had been almost no communication between the divided kin over the last six thousand years. It was a pity, really, as he could have been a good ally, if his heart were only in the right place.

“Oh, do we know that?” he challenged, before inevitably turning the question back on himself. “I must confess, I did think I knew that, for a very long time.” He walked around Michael, without so much as a glance, to approach Uriel. “We're the Good guys, yes?”
“Of course,” she agreed confidently while he remembered her hitting him, quite forcefully, without cause.

“Right. They’re the bad guys? Every last one?” He raised a questioning look to Gabriel, who did not reply, frowning.

“Absolutely right,” Sandalphon piped up in his stead, eagerly.

“Certainly. Hot, cold,” he asked quiet Raphael, Archangel of healing, who gave no immediate sign of his thoughts, as was typical for him. “Black, white. No room for any other shade on that palette… unless you’ve been to Earth for more than ten minutes, and talked to a human or two.”

“They’re rarely in any state for conversation when I am sent to them,” Raphael offered, seriously, but not unkindly. Aziraphale smiled sadly at him.

That was the problem in a nutshell, wasn’t it?

“It’s quite extraordinary what She’s done down there, you know. Pity so many of us never get more than a glimpse. Still, it took a brave demon to open my eyes.”

He turned with the intention of confronting Gabriel, but stopped, startled, when Michael abruptly stood in his path, seething with malice. “We are talking about your sin, Aziraphale.” She drew out his feather, sweeping it in front of the council before letting it drop delicately to hover in midair in front of Gabriel. Though it had been white and gleaming when last he saw it, it was now a dingy grey and softly pulsed with evil. “I found this amongst the corpses of the humans who served the Other Side. It belongs to you, doesn’t it, Aziraphale?” She caught the Archangel by the hand and the feather as well, pressing it firmly into his palm. “Look, tainted, just like the rest of him, and proof of his transgression against Her. How far he has fallen,” she sighed plaintively as Gabriel peered closely at the feather before handing it off with a little shudder.

“It’s been cursed,” Raphael murmured, “by angelic hands… it feels very strange.” He raised unsettled eyes to look Aziraphale over, head to toe. “Why would you do this?”

“I…” he hesitated, still feeling a tiny rush of relief to have it at least out of Michael's hands. “I was trying to find the occul-”

“Oh, and you did, didn’t you?” Michael interrupted coolly. “And now they’re all dead and condemned. You were meant to guard humanity, but you have failed them, haven’t you?”

It stung, her words sharply stabbing into the still raw wound, fractured echoes of their screaming reverberating through his head as a hundred little temptations done in the name of the Arrangement fluttered accusingly in his heart while he stood under the judging eyes of the Heavenly Host, but only Michael and Aziraphale, and Crowley, his own silent witness, truly understood what this was really all about. “Have I? Right then,” he snapped firmly. “Very well, my confession then, and if you want it, you should listen well.” A flash of genuine surprise crossed her face, quickly melting into malicious delight as he continued, speaking to the assembly. “I have been on Earth, almost unbroken in my service, from The Beginning. I cannot speak to why I was chosen for the role, but She did choose me, and in it, I have done the best I can.” He gestured to the image of Eden, still idly hovering before them. “On that day, Crowley approached me with a question I do believe he was asking of himself, honest being that he is, under the surface-”

“A demon cannot be honest-”

Aziraphale spun to him, holding his forefinger to his lips. “Hush now, Chamuel, I’m giving my
confession, and such a thing should not be interrupted. An Archangel should know that.” Gabriel caught his eye hard, something unreadable in his face, but Aziraphale was already in far too deep. “Crowley wondered if an angel could do the wrong thing, and, conversely, if a demon could do the right thing, and at the time, I too, Chamuel, held quite fast to the notion a demon was a demon, bereft of Grace, and no longer capable of the good they were originally created to do, as terrible a loss as that it is. However, I did think, perhaps, that an angel could do the wrong thing, because I was quite frightened that I already had, though I had only best of intentions. Since you are holding me for judgement, and since we all know that angels can Fall, and have, certainly, Fallen, then I suppose we can admit to ourselves, that yes, an angel can do the wrong thing.”

“He admits it!” Sandalphon announced, and Aziraphale could not help but roll his eyes. “I have told you repeatedly that this is my confession. Hear me out.” He waited until he was certain, after a subtle headshake from Gabriel, that the cowed Archangel had acquiesced before continuing. “Even knowing that, I still wondered was it actually possible for our Fallen brethren do the right thing, if any of them ever wanted to?”

“No demon-” began Chamuel, only to be efficiently cut off.

“Call it hypothetical, then. Posit the existence of a demon that wants to do the right thing. I do realise that it’s almost heresy to suggest such madness here, I suppose, but you’ll have to excuse me, as I have spent my time on Earth, and it is a vibrant place, made lively by the multitude of people, and their multitude of maddening questions. “

He smiled to himself at the thought. Earth. Life. People. Home. “How marvelous Her wisdom,” he declared brightly, “To create creatures in the dark, uncertain, unknowing, so they can blunder about, blindly learning to imagine such a thing as the light? How much of a marvel is it, that She should give them the freedom to choose, the curiosity to explore, and the wonder to dream?”

“You think that’s what it's all about?” Gabriel exclaimed, eyes widening momentarily before his brows knit together in troubled thought under the weighty stares of his peers.

Aziraphale did his best imitation of the lazy shoulder shrug that Crowley used when he wanted to encourage mulling. “Perhaps. Anyway, I’m afraid I’m woolgathering. My point is, that it was only in Bethlehem that I had to truly recognise that, yes, a demon could do the right thing, or at least one of them could, and if him, then perhaps others as well, because there he was, the demon Crowley, my friend, careening out of nowhere, frantic, and desperate. He was determined, though he would certainly have suffered for it at the hands of his Master, to do the right thing for a handful of baby boys slated to die in a small village. Can you imagine it?” he asked his fellows, blinking suddenly wet eyes, “A demon, having never received compassion himself, so full with it, just brimming over, for a handful of lives Heaven had already declared inconsequential?”

Suffused with awe and shame in equal measure, Aziraphale pressed his hands to his face, feeling his friend wriggling slightly against his forehead, and wanted to apologize, not to Heaven, and certainly not to the Archangels, but rather to his friend, for his own failings over the years.

“You see, Crowley didn’t want the children to die, and certainly didn’t want to have any hand in it. To my surpassing shame, I must admit, if he hadn’t been so distraught about it, I would have done my angelic duty, and done nothing to stop them from being slaughtered, but there he was, and I was faced with the answer to my question, yes, a demon could do the right thing, with a bit of help.”

He was aware, and worried, that he was spilling some very personal moments of Crowley’s in front of veritable flocks of angels, but he hadn’t been bitten yet, so he hoped Crowley understood
what he was trying to do.

“Temptation to evil, real evil, I declare to all of you here, I have steadfastly resisted, whether
you find me guilty or no, but how could any angel worth their wings resist the temptation to
mercy? And shouldn’t a creature as remarkable as a Fallen angel capable of demonstrating the
Grace once violently ripped from his spirit, be honoured for such courage. Crowley, my friend,”
and he claimed him now, before them all, with pride. “He was ready to plunge into Hell again, in
defiance of them, this time, not of Her, and seeing him like that, did I, as an angel, a Guardian of
humanity, and all their little children, not then have an obligation to help him in his act of mercy?”

He waited then, in the hopes of an answer, some answer, from any of them, but none came. His
disappointment was a bitter thing, made him want to give up on them, but he could not.

“I came swiftly to the conclusion, whether you will judge it Righteous or Sinful, that I did need
to help him, whether or not I would also suffer for it. If there is any hope of redemption for our
people, all angels, Fallen or not, then I do believe it is to be found in my dear friend Crowley, and I
cannot do less than fight for him to the very end, and to that end…”

He broke from his place and advanced on Michael, fired up and ready to put action to words.
“Speak truthfully, Prince Michael,” he charged her, “In the matchless name of our Creator, and
before all here assembled. Let us now hear your confession. Do you desire to see our Mother
thrown down?”

The wave of shock and outrage ran through the angels like that of a hydrogen bomb.

“Blasphemy!”

“Treachery!”

Michael didn’t bat an eye. “Oh, are you confusing us again, Aziraphale? I’m the loyal
Archangel, and you’re the lonely little Principality, who enjoys consorting with the Serpent of
Eden.”

“Liar,” he said quietly, drawing her in. “You taught mortal humans how to summon demons.
You gave them the power to enslave Crowley and use him to curse, kill, and destroy. You
corrupted their souls and murdered at least thirteen of Her children right before my eyes.” He
reached out and grabbed the hilt of her sword, pulling it free in a movement all too naturally. “You
are responsible for laying the deaths of an innocent man and two young children at the feet of my
friend, and you have added to the torment of a being who has already suffered for far too long.”

“He's armed!” Uriel shouted, moving forward aggressively until blocked by Gabriel's arm.

“Now, just a minute here, Aziraphale,” he began, “We aren’t turning this into a spectacle.”

Michael herself made no move to stop him, grinning triumphantly like She had already won the
battle. “What are you doing, Guardian?” she purred.

He grasped the golden hilt, remembering names and frightened faces, needing justice, feeling
Crowley, clinging to him, painfully tight, such that the angel fancied he could feel a tiny heart
frantically beating against his wrist. Aziraphale took a step back from Michael, letting them all get
a good look at the weapon as, with a simple act of will, he coaxed the blade to reveal the blood it
had so recently, wrongfully, shed. “Not so long after the Garden,” he began conversationally, “In
case you weren’t paying attention at the time, a human, Cain, and the first child born to humanity,
committed the first murder. You see, he became jealous when She favoured Abel, and so slew
him.” He pressed his lips tightly in ancient grief. “It was a terrible moment, one impulsive angry act that could not be undone. He regretted it, almost immediately, in fact, and tried to hide, but as we know,” he made a show of polishing Michael’s sword carefully on his arm. “One cannot hide from God. She gave him the chance to speak truthfully, and asked him where his brother was? It was only after he lied that She condemned him, saying, ‘Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.’” He took a step towards her, blood between them. “And so I find myself asking you, ‘What have you done, Michael?’ for the blood of Her children is calling to me from your sword.”

All the delight was gone from her expression, as he brandished the proof of her guilt before them. “They were corrupted… by the demon!”

“No,” he corrected angrily, “They were corrupted by you, Prince Michael.”

“They deserved their fates, and went to the Pit.”

“They might have repented! They might have been saved! Where there is still life, there is hope, and you robbed them of the chance! You could do no worse against Her!” He tossed the sword to the floor and it clattered noisily as it struck, blood splattering free as though it had just been shed, marring the immaculate perfection of their surroundings.

He turned back to Gabriel. “Prince Michael is the one who has turned on our mother and on Her children. She is the one corrupted now, and if you don’t do something, She’ll be the one to start the next War.”

Violet eyes met blue, and everything was quiet for a moment, until Gabriel reluctantly began. “Aziraphale, Prince Michael is an Archangel, and if she thought there was an adequate reason to destroy the humans, then—”

Gabriel might as well have struck him. Aziraphale stared, stunned, in the face of a stone wall, as he watched, one by one, the council members look away, uncomfortably, from the truth. Behind him, Michael laughed, almost hysterically. “You can’t be serious,” he wheezed out, feeling mortally wounded. “You can’t let her get away with this!”

“They’re only mortals, after all,” mumbled Chamuel.

“If you don’t cast her down, she will corrupt all of heaven! There’ll be another war!” Aziraphale pleaded.

“You want her to Fall? She’s Michael!” Raphael exclaimed.

“No… not at all, but if she doesn’t, eventually all of Creation will be in ashes!”

Oh.

Oh dear. In a flash of inspiration, he knew what he would have to do.

Forgive me, Crowley.

…Forgive me, Mother.

“Cast us both down,” he managed, screaming internally even as he breathed out the words. “Condemn me as well. I will give up my place, willingly, so long as Michael Falls with me.”

“You can’t be serious,” Gabriel said flatly, trying to drudge up some sort of smile in his disbelief.
“Dreadfully serious,” Aziraphale managed faintly, already feeling like he was plummeting helplessly down. “If that is the price for protecting Heaven and Earth from her machinations, I will pay it.”

What Gabriel would have said in reply, he did not hear, because Michael crashed heavily into him, and then had the bloodstained blade in her hand, shrieking angrily as she took a swing at his head. He threw one arm up reflexively, grappling for the demonic sword Crowley had left him to defend himself, when he found himself violently shoved backwards into Gabriel as fire and darkness burst across his vision.

“Don’t you dare touch him!” Crowley snarled, standing between Aziraphale and Michael, sword blazing with Hellfire as it crashed heavily into her own.

Chapter End Notes

1a Lowest ranked members of the highest sphere of the three angelic classes, they had a bit of an inferiority complex, which wasn’t particularly helpful given their position in charge of meting out divine justice. Sandalphon liked to hold educational sessions with them every Tuesday and Thursday to discuss topics of interest, such as ‘How to Show Love with Fire from Above.’ Many of them were also quietly offended by the lack of accurate artwork depicting them on earth, due to the scrambling effect they had on the human brain. After the first millennium or so they stopped being sent to give divine visions. Mortal kind did not take in Heavenly wisdom well while suffering from motion sickness. [return to text]

2 figuratively [return to text]

3 Figurative eggshells [return to text]

4 Which were also figurative. [return to text]

5 Figuratively. [return to text]

6 No. The most maddening thing he had ever experienced was the week he lost a bet to Crowley, resulting in him declaring himself Aziraphale’s personal stylist, which was certainly a lesson learned. He hadn’t minded the evening gown so much as the sequins, but the mullet and hot pants had threatened to destroy their relationship.
Crème brulée and a lot of really expensive rum had soothed his ruffled feathers.\footnote{7}

\footnote{7} figuratively. His literal feathers wound up more than a bit ruffled by the end of the night. \footnote{return to text}

\footnote{8} Little t. No need to avert your eyes. \footnote{return to text}
Swordplay

Chapter Summary

It's been forever, I know, and a short chapter on top of that, but my life was sucked into the swirling vortex of Christmas concerts and it's not done yet. I'll be back at it and on vacation in a week and a half.

Very sorry for the wait. I hope this tides you over a touch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Michael’s blade slammed into Crowley’s with such force that the shock of it numbed the demon right up to the shoulder.

Now there was a sensation all too familiar. It hadn’t gone well for him at all last time he’d struggled with the Archangel, but then again, he hadn’t had a sword capable of merrily blazing away with Hellfire at the time either.

He hadn’t had the concept of Hellfire back then, it being just an ember in their wrathful Mother's eye.

Live and learn.

Crowley was distantly aware of the scramble behind him as Aziraphale and Gabriel tried to disentangle from each other, but he didn’t have time to think about it under the raining blows of a being forged for battle. She was terrifying and as unhinged as anyone he’d seen in an astonishingly long time, but he didn’t have time to think about that either.

He struck back at Michael aggressively, fury mixing with fear to add heat to the blows, quite literally, as the flaming sword responded eagerly to the tempest within him.

What in Her Holy Damned Name had She been thinking when She’d dropped a weapon like this one into Aziraphale’s gentle hands?

He much preferred being on this end of it, this time around, with the sword tuned rather friendlier for demons than for angels now. Michael had gone too far this time, and Crowley was livid and out for blood.

The Archangel had swung at Aziraphale from behind in a way clearly meant to kill him, him! Crowley’s own kind-hearted angel, who was probably already working up some God Blessed forgiveness for the psychotic bitch.

Well, Crowley was not Aziraphale.
Michael feinted and he caught on to the maneuver at the last possible second, deflecting her strike, but just a little too late. The sword that had once gone up against the Falling Morningstar himself sliced into Crowley’s forearm drawing molten gold from his flesh and a choked cry from his lips, echoed in distraught sympathy by Aziraphale. “Ss’nothing!” he called out, not wanting the angel anywhere near his weapon, let alone Michael’s. It wasn’t much of an injury, but it would do perfectly well for first blood, and the wound hurt like the Lake of Fire itself.

Of course she had Blessed her damned sword.

Maybe even She had. Would figure.

Crowley responded to her breathless laugh with a reckless, wrathful lunge. He had never had much finesse with this sort of thing, but he didn’t need it with the Hellfire having something of a mind of its own, a stewing bloodlust for destroying anything Holy and Righteous.

Michael’s agonized shriek was proof enough it wasn’t that picky about strictly targeting Righteousness, her own claim to it decidedly in doubt, and even the brief lick of flame against her hand where she grasped the hilt of her sword was enough to pour a little splash of caution on the inferno of madness in the rampaging Archangel.

Tit for tat. Satisfying, as these things went.

Gabriel finally pushed Aziraphale back on to his feet, shouting for order as Michael took a hasty step back in the face of the malevolent flames licking around the blade. “You brought the demon here?” he demanded of Aziraphale, who was already moving towards the combatants, dark sword in hand. Crowley fought the urge to hiss at him to stay the Heaven, Hell… whatever, out of their way.

“He wasn’t about to stay behind! He doesn’t listen to reason!” The demon rounded on his friend in frustration, despite the risk of leaving himself open to Michael’s attack. The Principality realised Crowley was glaring at him and scolded, “Well, you don’t! You never-”

“Thou shalt not speak to me about reason right now, angel!” he snapped, warily turning back to watch Michael, who was sizing him up predatorily.

“I’m going to enjoy tossing you down into the fire again, demon,” she told him, face lighting up as her words met with scattered cheers from the assembled angels, who naturally assumed him the villain in this fight. Tossing a grin at her audience, she stabbed the sword towards Crowley and dragged it down through the air, whistling a descending pitch in imitation of him Falling. Behind them, Aziraphale choked out of sheer, offended, loyalty.

Heartened by the sound, Crowley swung hard onto the blade, using her momentum to send it down as he darted in close enough to jab her in the chin with his elbow, in an attack that was, unfortunately, more insult than injury. “After you,” he said sweetly, in an imitation of his own, though it decidedly lacked Aziraphale’s usual chipper sincerity. She didn’t waste a moment on reacting to the pain, kicking him in the stomach and sliding her sword against his in a clever maneuver that nearly disarmed him, wrenching his wrist painfully in the process. He staggered back, waving his weapon desperately between them to keep her away, wings spreading into reality for the stability they provided, their startling black snapping out in stark contrast to the silent white of Heaven. The angelic witnesses cried out at the sight, reminding the demon rather ridiculously of his and Aziraphale’s unexpected visit to the air show, which seemed so long ago now. He would have laughed at them, and their titillated reaction to his wings, if he wasn’t trying so very hard to keep living.
“Michael!” Gabriel boomed authoritatively, in a tone that caught the combatants’ attention. She looked to her choirmate, but Crowley did not dare take his eyes off of her, though the Messenger’s words resonated through him despite his attention being solidly fixed on Michael. “This is Her house, not a battlefield! We will deal with the demon—”

“You'll have to go through me!” Aziraphale cried, grabbing Gabriel by the lapels and hauling the Archangel bodily around with a startling show of strength that left Crowley’s heart thudding even faster.

Tough to say who was the most surprised by his actions, Crowley, the Archangel, or Aziraphale himself.

Recovering quickly, Gabriel shooed Aziraphale’s hands away and straightened his lapels using a profoundly frivolous miracle, shooting him a contemptuous look as he did so. “Really, Aziraphale? That was uncalled for, like all the rest of this fuss. Prince Michael, lower your weapon. This isn’t the war. You forget yourself.”

“Really, Gabriel?” Crowley echoed snarkily, ducking an angry swing from Michael that was clearly intended to decapitate him. “Your friend here is off her rocker and that’s all you have to say about it? Why, allow me to bow to your great angelic wisdom.” He sketched a sarcastic little bow that would have carried more respect had he simply flipped him off. “Actually,” and here, he offered up an entirely different kind of salute, “That probably says it better.”

The gesture didn’t have much of an impact on the majority of the ethereal beings present, though Aziraphale cringed and rolled his eyes, mouthing, ‘Immature!’ at him, and Sandalphon tittered at him like a twelve-year old boy.

Really? That one he knows?

Gabriel apparently recognised it too; he certainly did have a grasp of the language underwriting the movement. The Archangel gave the demon a look of pure contempt, attempting to step towards him only to be blocked by a terribly agitated bookseller.[1]

“You shouldn’t be here, anyway, demon, this doesn’t concern you—”

“Well, of course it does!” Aziraphale huffed immediately. “He’s the primary victim of her machinations, ah, along with the humans killed.”

“He killed, you mean. He lit that fire—” Uriel chimed in coolly.

“They forced him—”

“Don’t, angel—” Crowley ground out unhappily.

“It was a demonic attack—” Chamuel added, hand lazily drifting to the hilt of his own sword as he raked his eyes over the demon in question.

“He tried to save them—” The angel's pleas on his behalf cut worse than any of their accusations.

“Aziraphale!” Crowley snapped, nearly losing an arm due to his distraction.

“Oh, my dear, do be careful!” he admonished, as though the demon had forgotten he was in a mêlée with the being who had sent his boss hurtling into the Abyss.

“You aren’t helping!” he gritted out, only for his heart to lurch hard as Aziraphale inhaled
sharply and raised the demonic blade, moving towards Michael with righteous wrath in his eyes. Holding his sword as far away from the angel as possible, Crowley slapped a restraining hand to the angel's chest. “Nkkkg! Not a request! Do not help!”

A rather impressively defiant expression flitted across Aziraphale’s face, but Gabriel headed the Principality off at the pass, stepping neatly in front of him.

“Enough of this,” the Archangel tried once more to restore order. “Michael, lay down your sword. Demon, be gone from this Holy place. You know you don’t belong here-”

Crowley rounded on him, incensed. “First of all, don’t you tell me what to do. I don’t answer to you or Her either. I’m my own demon.”

Michael laughed scornfully. “Your own demon? You’re so blind, it is absolutely pathetic. You’ve been a slave for the other side since the day I cast you down.” In a flurry of motion, she darted in dangerously close, golden blade knocking back the blazing one, letting her slide cool fingers along his neck before seizing on his chain, yanking it free from where he kept it hidden and dragging him helplessly down, leaving him furious, vulnerable and humiliated. “Remember that?” she snarled cruelly, shoving him roughly to the floor.

Crowley sprung back to his feet, already swinging, but she backed off before he could land a blow. Her face twisted in cool mockery. “I do. ‘No, no, please, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it!’ No wonder you’re so attached to Aziraphale. Weakness attracts weakness,” she threw up a hand in a dismissive gesture in the angel's direction, “And you were dripping with it that day, begging and pleading for mercy after you dragged so many others down with all those hushed questions, breaking down their faith in Her.” Michael looked like she belonged in Hell as she imitated him. “‘Why can’t we make our own songs? Why can’t we do something different? What does She really mean by the Great Plan? What if it all goes wrong?’ So many questions, because you had no faith!” A collective shudder went through the crowd at the accusation, but Crowley simply rolled his eyes.

“Look to your own, Archangel. I'd name it shaky and weak, if there was anything left of it now. You'll be crashing down with me soon enough.”

Michael seemed to ignore him, even while they struggled, raising her voice for all of Heaven to hear. “And who listened? Don’t you remember? So. Many. Of. Us! and look where they ended up.” Their swords crashed together as she began reciting names in time with the teeth-rattling blows. “Sachael, Angel of the Sea? Gone! She’s Dagon now! Demon of the Deep. Lailah! All that love of life twisted into Azmodeous! Demon of Lust! Poisoning what she once loved. Micah?! He was a seraphim like you! Now She’s Beelzebub, Prince of Hell!”

Crowley snorted, knowing well how ol’ Beez’ would feel being added to the list of his sins. She wouldn’t have let him take the credit for that Fall for one second. “Well, you have to admit he really landed on her feet.”

“Raziel, angel of mysteries-”

He held up his free hand in protest for just a second before grabbing the hilt to stop her from slicing into his side. Aziraphale’s blow was enough for one day. “Ohh, no, no, no, I am not claiming credit for Hastur. He was out of here before I was! He was the first! And the only mystery there with Ol’ Froglegs is why She kept hold of him as long as She did.”

“Maybe the first one, but not the last, his friend Xapham too, also Fallen! He was Lidur! And now Lidur is really gone, thanks to your little trick with the Holy Water.”
Crowley froze for a moment. “Wait. How do you know about that?” He rounded hard on Gabriel, “Who has Michael been talking to Downstairs that she knows about that?! There’s a damned question for you!” He didn’t have time to pursue the thought however, turning back just as Michael struck hard and fast, wearing him down with hammer strokes on each darkly spoken name.

“Tabbris, Paschar, Hadraniel, Forfax-”

Michael was wearing him down, physically, if you could quite call it that, and spiritually too, blackened soul drowning in memories he, himself, had so long and so often tried to drown.

“I know what I’ve done,” he hissed defensively, trying not to let either sword or accusations strike home. Crowley found himself, even in the midst of his mortal peril, terribly aware of Aziraphale, listening, solemn under the increasingly grim and growing litany of the names of Fallen angels, stirring something heavy in him. “They made their own choice!” he declared, trying to drive her back from his angel. “And I may be one of Her many, many, mistakes, but at least, unlike you, I've never had the nerve to claim to be good!”

“But you were good! Such a good little Seraph,” she hissed with enough biting sarcasm that Crowley could not believe she had not yet outted her own treachery to the entire Host.

There are none so Her-damned blind as those who will not see, he thought, thinking angrily of Gabriel. The whole blessed lot of them.

“Until you Fell, that is, and shattered all Her lovely little plans for you, dragging your corrupted friends with you.”

“I didn’t… plan that,” he faltered, swallowing hard, with the accidental admission, before gathering himself again.

He wasn’t speaking to Michael, Gabriel, or anyone else.

Oh, angel.

They hadn’t really talked about everything after all.

“I questioned because I was questioning. I just couldn’t understand Her, what She was thinking, and why…and I wanted to know H-” Crowley frantically reeled himself in, but he couldn’t quite shut himself down, desperately wishing Aziraphale was not here to see this, then wished himself away too, while he was going about wishing. “I didn’t foresee their fall anymore than I saw my own!”

Michael laughed, a sound thick with malice, which didn’t befit any angel ever dreamed of by human, or even Heavenly hearts. “Listen, you can lie to Aziraphale; he’s a soft-hearted fool, but I know what you really are, demon, and Creation would be well rid of you.”

There was only one being whose opinion was worth anything to him… and it was worth everything. He ducked a blow that glanced off the flaming sword and straightened only to find himself connecting with soft eyes steeped in worry and kindness. Relief crashed over him painfully, like tension held too long suddenly snapping free. Aziraphale didn’t have to offer forgiveness for him to know it was there. With a victorious yell that was almost a sob, Crowley crashed heavily against her, trying desperately to take the Archangel down while there was still a bit of fight left in him.

A strong hand caught at his wrist and drew him away from her in a way that brooked no resistance. Aziraphale brought the demonic sword between the combatants, blocking a blow with
an easy skill that sent a harsh shiver through Crowley. He managed a very undignified squeak in protest at Aziraphale’s proximity to the Hellfire wreathed sword, but an impish smile touched the angel’s lips, and a sudden, dainty tingle ran through his wrist and into the blade, which abruptly extinguished itself. “Wha- what did you do?!”

“A little demonic miracle of my own?” the angel suggested with a brazen wink, releasing his wrist and turning to face off against Michael, wings spreading into magnificent existence, a glint of steel sliding into his bearing.

“You can’t just-"

“I just did, my dear,” he answered firmly as a slow smile crawled across Michael’s lips. “It was my sword first, after all,” he added, before sobering. “You’ve done so well, dearest, but this isn’t your fight, Crowley.”

Chapter End Notes

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1 By far, the least accurate of Aziraphale’s many titles.
The Plunge

Chapter Summary

Well, this is the big one, friends. I am sorry you had to wait such a very long time. I hope it is worth it. DangerNoodle, my lovely beta assures me she wept copious tears, and warned me leaving the cliffhanger where I was going to leave it would be fatal...whether for you, or for me, I am not certain. Therefore, you can thank her for the bit at the end there, as well as many lovely turns of phrase she contributed.

Either one or two chapters left to go before all is said and done.

If you have read anything by KannaOphelia, there is a loving little tribute to her pre-Fall Crowley in there, and if you haven't read any of her writing, run, don't walk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The two opposing angels wasted no words on a lost cause, launching against each other immediately, swords[1] smashing together like claps of thunder.

Michael staggered back momentarily as Aziraphale brought his demonic blade crashing roughly against hers with a solemn aggression that shook the demon to the core, creating a quiet, unsettled place within him. Astonishment gave way to fear almost immediately as Crowley’s mind caught up with the sudden turn of events. Reeling, he struggled to come up with a better plan than yelling, “Aziraphale, no!” which frankly, had never, ever, actually worked.[3]

Another cry entirely threw his planning straight out of the ethereal plane as a flash of power and radiant silver feathers cut between the combatants, holy light stabbing unkindly into Crowley’s brain. “Stop! This will not happen!” Gabriel shouted, as though issuing an order he expected the universe to obey. [4] “We are angels! We will not fight each other again!”

Shock washed over Crowley as he was forced to reconsider the Archangel, struck more than anything by the real fear underlying the command that was still powerfully reverberating through all present.

War with the Fallen was one thing, evidently, civil war on home ground another. A brief, bizarre impulse to reassure the Archangel that this wasn’t that left Crowley wanting to get his demonic self back to Earth, where sanity was not so hard to keep a grip on.

The Archangel, who had once shaken and, in turn, been shaken by, a young and courageous Jewish girl during a gleaming Annunciation, was clinging to the hilt of Michael’s sword as she fought frantically to wrench it free of his hands, splashes of liquid gold proof enough that he was not left unscathed by his efforts.

Telling, Crowley thought bitterly, that he had not chosen to stop Aziraphale’s blade.
Gabriel knew perfectly well where the problem lay.

The Principality was stopped anyway, arms and wings yanked back by Chamuel and Raphael, the former forcing him to the ground, while the later pried the demonic sword carefully out of his resisting fingers.

Crowley was distracted from his attempt to get the arrogant bastards off his angel almost immediately when Sandalphon and Uriel, in turn, made to grab him. He ignited the sword again, glad it cooperated readily, waving it at them in warning. “Not a good plan, people, let alone a Great one,” he added snidely.

The flare up of the Hellfire drew Michael’s attention, not to mention that of the milling choirs of angels. The few that had chosen to approach the newest scuffle rather than simply awaiting orders froze in their tracks at the sight.

In the moment of Michael’s distraction, Gabriel seized his opportunity and neatly disarmed her. Crowley’s would-be captors reversed course, grabbing their deranged colleague to secure her, but not forcing her down, even out of control and among her equals, her position drew deference. The difference between the way the captives were held rankled the Hell into Crowley.

Sandalphon and Uriel held fast to their fellow Archangel, looking expectantly to Gabriel whilst periodically flicking hostile glances in the demon’s direction. Crowley found himself doubting that they wouldn’t be just as content to let her go after him again.

After a brief struggle, Michael let them hold her, glaring murderously, first at Aziraphale, who tried to meet Crowley’s eyes before Chamuel roughly forced his head down, then at him. The demon stuck his tongue out saucily at her, even as rage pooled in him where he stood, white-knuckled grip on the hilt of the weapon, but any impulsive action he might have taken was quickly interrupted by Gabriel moving to confront him.

“Don’t make the mistake of thinking I like you any more than I like Michael,” Crowley ground out with as much lurking menace as he could muster, swinging the flaming sword in his direction. “I remember what you tried to do… to Aziraphale.”

“Water under the bridge now, wouldn’t you say?” Gabriel asked easily, spreading his hands in a pacifying gesture. Beside Aziraphale, Chamuel was obviously gearing up for a fight Crowley really didn’t want. “I had a chance to think it over, afterwards. Since Aziraphale lived, She must have wanted him to live. I don’t pretend to understand it-” A little ripple of consternation went through the assembly. “But I trust Her judgement on the matter. Put the sword down… Crowley.”

The demon shook his head slowly, edging towards Aziraphale. Chamuel was going to be a Heaven of an obstacle. He wasn’t sure what Raphael would do. If he could free Aziraphale maybe his friend would finally see the logic in making a run for it, away from all this, Earth, Alpha Centauri, anywhere but here, somewhere they could be safe at last. He was so tired. “Not a chance in Hell,” he snapped.

“Not a chance in Heaven either,” Gabriel told him softly, making Crowley feel all the worse for the sickening attempt at kindness. “You know you can’t win here. Put the sword down…and you can go. You have my word on that.”

“And Aziraphale?” he demanded, hating the way his whole body wanted to tremble.

“Just go, Crowley,” the angel called out to him urgently.
“We have to deal with our own,” Gabriel replied, his nod echoed silently by the other Archangels. “We will consider your offer, Aziraphale,” the Archangel said grimly, visibly uneasy.

“Oh, thank you,” Aziraphale sighed, and the relief in his voice cut Crowley to the quick.

“Angel, you can’t be serious! What, you think you’re going to enjoy it in Hell?” he demanded, biting back a scream better suited to bringing unruly azaleas in line.

“Crowley, please, just go.”

“Yes, Crowley,” and now the demon hissed at the easy way his name fell from Gabriel’s lips. “Go on home now, relax.” Gabriel walked over to where Aziraphale was being held and patted him on the shoulder in a way that could have been, should, perhaps, have been, affectionate. “Heaven is merciful, after all.”

The ark, the cross, the inquisition, the crusades. Six thousand years of cold judgement, rampant neglect and token miracles stormed their way through Crowley’s soul and robbed him of speech. Aziraphale made an unhappy little sound that gave fractured voice to what the Fallen angel could not.

Gabriel frowned down at the Principality and sighed regretfully. “I will never understand why She put an angel so weak in such a difficult and important position… but I’m sure you did your best, Aziraphale,” he added, flashing a pitying smile.

Crowley didn’t see the smile.

He was too busy seeing red.

“Weak?!?!” he demanded, outrage maddeningly causing his voice to crack as he suddenly realised that he very unwisely had seized the Archangel by the tie, sword between them, Hellfire threatening to burn off Gabriel’s ethereal eyebrows. “Oahhhgghh,” Crowley ground out, infuriated, slowly shaking his head in disbelief as he struggled to find a reason not to start with the eyebrows and work his down.

“Don’t, Crowley! They’ll [5] destroy you!” Aziraphale’s panicky voice filtered through the Hell-spawned bloodlust storming through the shredded remains of the demon’s self-control.

“You don’t know anything about him,” he whispered against Gabriel’s ear before shoving the angel back and turning, waving his blade in broad, challenging strokes to drive back the smattering of angels who had risen to the Archangel’s defense, including several Thrones and Cherubim, plus one aggressive Virtue ready to put the proverbial sword to his virtuous reputation, and an actual sword to Crowley.

Oh! And-

“Hey Botis, long time, no see,” he drawled out as casually as he could against the sea of wrath he was already floundering through, the sudden assault of keenly felt loss doing him no favours.

“Demon,” came the terse response from the writhing mass of flame in front of him, the radiant holy fire of the Seraph putting the flaming sword in its humble place.

“Shouldn’t you be singing to an empty throne?” he snipped back dismissively, turning his back on Botis to face Gabriel, who looked more irritated than anything else, as he waved off his defenders.
They didn’t move far.

“You should leave,” Gabriel told him, “while it’s still an option,” friendly tone doing nothing to disguise the underlying threat.

“Yeah, probably,” the demon agreed brightly in a way that would have immediately set Aziraphale on his guard. “First things first though… we’re going to clear something up.”

“In Her own name, Crowley!” Aziraphale pleaded in exasperation, “Just go home.” The demon didn’t look over at him, knowing that would have been a mistake, and having that confirmed with the next words, painted with a faltering veneer of confidence that just made Aziraphale’s uncertainty all the more glaring. “I’m sure that…I’m sure I’ll be along shortly.”

“I’ve heard you lie better, angel!” he tossed back. It was easier to be angry with him, easier to bear than worry and grief. “And I’m not leaving til they know who you are.”

“That really isn’t going to help me, dear.”

“It will me,” he breathed, looking hard into ludicrously pretty violet eyes, before flashing a grin that was all teeth. “What’s that, y’say? This little Principality you’ve got here, weak? Interesting choice of words that…” He finally flicked his eyes back over Aziraphale, who lifted his head to meet Crowley’s eyes but was unable to hold his gaze.

He looks beaten, the demon thought bleakly, and he knew who had done the beating.

Crowley inhaled deeply, drawing as much power as he could, driving himself on with his own wrath. Heaven was not an easy place to bring about a demonic miracle on this scale, but he had been an angel once, and that connection had never been entirely severed, the electric agony of Her rejection kept alive and well, open and festering forever.

It was what gave Hell its burn.

About time it proved useful.

The veil of Heaven was torn open, wounded sky roiling darkly as the eternal past broke over them, Crowley’s living, writhing memory of the Great War playing out with vividness that put mere reality to shame.

Fighting, screaming, misery, rage, confusion, above all.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Brother against brother, stewing jealousy against the Most High having fractured into treachery and finally outright rebellion.

Old wounds could still hurt like a bitch, he thought quietly amongst the pandemonium his display had wrought: the Archangels, calling for order, Gabriel, pale as glass in the face of his great fear, even as he shouted orders against the bedlam. Real, raw and honest remorse washed over Crowley as he registered the shine of tears on Aziraphale’s soft cheeks, fists and eyes clenched shut.

He would apologise later, if he had the chance.

“NO!” came the shout, frail memory holding not a candle to the reality of Her sudden intervention, as angels, past and present, many for the second time, though not all, froze in shock.
They hadn’t even had a word for war back then, he reflected, there had never been a need.

Many new words were born that day.

“Lucifer, Son of the Morning, for your rebellion, you are hence cast out from my sight.” Her voice, strident in the clear air, was ancient and cracking memory to him now, but that did not soften the blow of hearing it again. “Those whom you have stolen from me, you may take. Go quickly.”

“He didn’t, of course,” Crowley said, gathering enough of his pieces together to sound reasonably whole. He hadn’t thought about this so intently in so long. Michael, young, if young was the word, and still passionate in his living memory, locked blades with Heaven’s firstborn.

She’d be back for one curious, broken angel soon enough.

Lucifer really had been beautiful then.

So had he.

“Oh, my child, what have you done?”

He had forgotten how broken She had sounded.

The War played out around them, but he let the sound and energy fade out until only image had power. Crowley wanted to be heard. Circling Gabriel, he made a show of thinking it over.

“So, if I’m following you here, you think Principality Aziraphale is weak because… well, must be me, yeah? All alone on earth, the embattled angel falling as so many others have, to my evil willing?” He wriggled his fingers with a playfulness he didn’t come close to feeling. “But who could blame him, amiright?” The demon gave Gabriel a cool look that could have frozen over a circle or two, or nine. After all, the “good” Archangel Michael here,” he pointed to where she was battling Satan, before correcting himself. “Oops, apparently this is the one I mean, so hard to tell…. Anyway, Michael just gave you the short list of angels who can thank me, at least in part, for their eternal damnation. Must have been weak, all of them, yeah to hand their keys to the Kingdom over just like that. Whoops, there goes Beez’.”

He pointed a lazy finger in the direction of a ball of flame and feathers streaking down, out of sight, hand coming to rest over his heart as he sighed in lament. “Ah well. Here’s the thing about that weakness thing though… I’m really good at finding it. Fantastically good at it, in fact. Maybe good isn’t the word. Skilled. Fantastically skilled at divining out weakness. Most of my lot have learned to be at least half decent at it. Had to. But, me… well, you might even call it a gift. Straight from Her, oh, am I being blasphemous again?” he asked Chamuel, taking no small pleasure in the contemptuous curl of his lips. “Gets away from me sometimes. Perhaps a demonstration is in order.”

He made a show of scanning the angels, having long since picked his target. “Weaaaak link, weak link… Ah, Gabriel! I know your weakness,” he waved casually at the burning sky. “Helpful, isn’t it? But you’re really not what I’m looking for if I wanted to corrupt someone. Hell has enough bureaucrats.”

“Why are you listening to this wicked creature? Let go of me!”

“Oh, Michael!” He said brightly before scrunching up his face. “Nah, not worth the time, like shooting ducks in a barrel. Ducks? Mmrgh… I digress. She already belongs to us.” He drew out the long thin chain that marked his own captivity. “Must like the look, yeah? Itching for your own one of these? Soon enough, I’m sure. Probably sent snail mail…”
“Your pet Aziraphale will be right along with me if I Fall,” she snarled savagely. “Poetic, don’t you think?”

The thought of his angel streaking out of paradise while long ago angels were stripped bare of their grace and plummeting, burning around them struck a nerve. Crowley launched himself an inch from her face, holding on to restraint by a spider-silk thread. “I think the way that you are still standing here is iron-clad proof that She stopped paying an ounce of attention to any of us long, long ago… but you think so too, don’t you, Prince Michael?”

Gabriel took a step towards him and Crowley, mindful of time racing out of his immortal hands, spun away, heading directly for his target.

“No… Let’s not draw this out. I want the weakest link, and I know who it is.”

He stalked forward, well aware of Aziraphale’s little roll of the eyes at his dramatics as unsettled angels parted before him.

If that wasn’t the demon calling the sinner, Fallen.

“Ah! You! Here we are!” he grinned as he latched onto a watching archangel.

There was nothing special at all about him, excusing the unfathomably mighty and holy servant of God part, but Crowley knew plenty of those. This particular archangel just happened to have enough arrogance to refuse to get the Heaven out of his way.

“Oh, hello… don’t mind me. I just have a few questions for you.”

“Get thee behind me, Satan!” he barked, with just enough authority that Crowley could smell the fear. Perfect.

“Euuuhhh… same team, but I’m just a runner, not the captain. Still, at least I know where he is. Could do afternoon tea with him every Thursday if I had nothing else on the go… but you? Been a while since you’ve seen the boss, hasn’t it?”

“Her ways are mysterious… ineffa-”

He interrupted that with a rude noise that visibly offended his target. “Yeah, I heard that around. Why do you think that is?”

“It’s not my place to question-”

“No, it wasn’t mine either, apparently, but seriously, you’re on Her side, loyal to the ends of eternity and all that, yeah?”

“Of course I-”

“Right, but She can’t even be bothered to leave you a note? ‘Sorry, bit busy running the universe, bang up job on that dancing sun thing in Fátima, keep up the good work, whoever you are?’ That’s too much for the Almighty?”

“I have faith that-” Was that a little quaver in that once so certain voice?

“Sure, right, faith… except, you can’t really have faith-“

Alarm sent a shudder through the angel’s wings. It was a small wonder he wasn't beginning to
"Yes, I certainly do."

"Aw, no, n-n-n-no, no, no, you can’t," the demon replied, shaking his head pityingly. Not like the humans do, faith. I mean, faith is just certainty in what can’t be seen, but you’ve seen Her… just because She’s gone and buggered off hasn’t changed that. Seems a bit unfair, that, doesn’t it?" Crowley tapped him lightly on the chest, peering thoughtfully into his eyes. “Their faith is the real thing, you know, and She'll always treasure Her human creations more than She could ever be bothered with your lot.”

The pause before his denial was all he'd been waiting for. “She, I… they-"

“See that, right there;” he poked him again, decidedly harder. “That'sssss jealousy. Do you have any idea how many angels stepped off into the Abyss just because of jealousy? Lucifer himself was just the first. How long do you think it will take before it’s your turn?” he asked kindly, apparent sympathy making the impact of his words ever darker.

Crowley surveyed the crumbling angel, already wide-eyed and trembling from the fear of Falling, by now drinking in the demon's every word.

"Crowley!"

The demon knew that tone all too well. Aziraphale had had enough. His friend roughly shook his arms free of his captors, moving forward determinedly despite their clutching at his wings.

All eyes shifted towards him, but Crowley's came slowly, sauntering along with a predatory smile.

"Yessssss, my ancient and fearsome Adversary?” he challenged, waiting for the sought after righteousness to burst forth; however Aziraphale spoke softly, patiently.

"You shouldn't test him to destruction."

There was sadness there... and it lanced straight through him; the angel was absolutely aware he was throwing Crowley's own oft voiced lament right back at him.

Wicked, that. Stung but good.

"You angelic bastard, he grinned, striding away from his target towards the Archangels. "Weak? Seriously? He's the best you have. Six thousand years, and I couldn't bring him down. I'd have had that one,” he waved behind him without so much as a glance, “In five minutes. Stay off Earth, kid. You won't make it.” He shook his head at Gabriel in disbelief. "Weak. Aziraphale? You people are idiots."

He spun on his heels and stalked towards Gabriel, taut like an over-tuned fiddle string, ready to be snapped.

“But you know that, don’t you? Deep down, you know Aziraphale is right, that Michael is lying. There's a little Earth in you,” he flicked the Archangel's tie idly, “‘A little bit of humanity. But you're too much of a coward to stand up for it. You'd rather let Aziraphale die by her hand than deal with the real problem? Because you don’t want to face another Fall? Fine then,” he swallowed hard, hating the way his rage threatened to come out as tears, “but I would not want to be in your Italian Leather shoes if ever She does turn up, Gabriel. Do you understand that? My fate has been sealed for a long, long time, and I would still rather be me than you.”
The Archangel, to his meager credit, did not shrink in the face of Crowley’s accusation. After a long moment, he snapped his fingers and the Hellish miracle dancing overhead vanished. Crowley sagged wearily, feeling more than a little snapped too. “There are no good options here, Fallen one,” Gabriel said formally, sounding every bit as drained as Crowley felt. “Just go.”

“I have a good option for you—No, no, I do. No tricks.” He held up a hand to forestall the inevitable objection. “But I can’t tell you here. Talk to me, alone.”

“You really think we’re going to let that happen?” Uriel demanded, accusations of treachery floating up around them. He should have anticipated that too.

“No, not alone. All of you, whole undammed Council of Light. He tilted his head slightly. “I have an idea. Win-win. I just, I can’t do this in front of… everyone.”

“Crowley?” Aziraphale asked, guardedly. “Whatever are you doing, dear boy?”

“Just hear me out… please. Do you really want to lose two angels today? You think She wants that? Look, just listen for five minutes. You can always say no, toss me into the Pit if you want.”

Surprise and consternation warred on Gabriel’s face. When he saw the curiosity wedge its way in, he knew he’d won.

“Fine, and I will cast you down if you’re wasting my time.”

“I’d be pleased to assist with that,” Chamuel promised darkly, startling a little when Crowley beamed at him and gave him a comradely punch in the arm.

“Fantastic! Then it’s settled. Shall we?”

A quick gesture from Gabriel and different angels stepped up to restrain Aziraphale and Michael, freeing up the Archangels. It did Crowley a world of good when they bound up Michael in her own chain, just in case. Less so when Aziraphale was treated likewise.

Hardest was pretending he didn’t hear his angel’s frantic questions, even when they plunged roughly straight into his head.

Crowley, please. What are you doing?

He didn’t reply to Aziraphale, but he did hold tightly to the thought for himself.

Setting you free.

Abandon hope, all ye who enter here

His eyes lingered on the words that were both insouciant prank and iron condemnation in turn, fondness and worry blending as Aziraphale’s thoughts clung desperately to their absent author.

Oh, my dear. What are you up to now?

He shifted a little only to find fingers digging roughly into his bound arms by the overly enthusiastic Throne.

“He isn’t going anywhere, Hantiel,” Gabriel told him, mildly reproachful. “He’s already proven that; haven’t you, Aziraphale?”
The Principality turned anxious eyes on his supervisor, desperate, yet also afraid to ask what Crowley had discussed with the Council.

“Leave him go. I commend you for your duty.” With a stiff nod, the angel departed. Aziraphale watched him go, toying idly with thoughts of a different world, where he'd never left Heaven in the first place.

“It seems like you understand what must be done,” Gabriel began, tension radiating off of the Archangel, visibly, if you had the eyes to see.

“I know what I think. I wouldn’t dare to guess what you’re thinking,” he replied, words strangling in his anxiety. *Where is Crowley?*

“We can’t have conflict in Heaven, Aziraphale. We can’t have doubt. You know as well as I do where such tremours can lead.”

“Test her, then. Have Michael swear fealty, on Her name, as we all once did. Truth will out,” he added darkly.

“She’s an Archangel! Even the question itself will sow doubt through the whole kingdom of Heaven, and where will that end?”

“‘Test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world,’” he quoted gravely, ‘causing Gabriel to shoot him an annoyed look, “… and one has stayed put. The question has already been asked; I asked it, and I will keep asking it until I am silenced or she is revealed.”

“We know, which is why the Council has decided to ask her to prove herself.”

“Ohh…” he breathed, profound relief trembling through him. “Oh, that’s-”

“Your pledge has also been accepted,” he told him grimly. “The price of having her faith questioned will be your own Grace,” his tone shifted in imitation of someone else, Chamuel, probably. “So that our people will see the strength of your conviction, and that these charges are not laid lightly.”

Aziraphale had a sudden flash of being summoned, cut off falsely, yet dreadfully, from Her grace, and the icy horror of it lingered still. He supposed he should be grateful for a forewarning of the experience, something that had never been granted to another that he knew. “I don’t make any pledge lightly,” he said faintly, heart fluttering away, memory of a black feather and another soft pledge blanketing over its shuddering fear, love and guilt intermingled. “I know what I've done. What of Crowley?”

“He made his own bargain, as demons do. …I voted against it,” Gabriel told him quietly, after a short hesitation. “A very high price has been paid for you today.”

“I... beg pardon?” he snapped, startled as an old, old promise leapt hard into his mind.

There was an odd tension in the Archangel’s bearing as he fidgeted absently with his cufflinks, ignoring the question entirely. “Well, not all of us feel that way, the motion did carry, after all.” An involuntary shiver ran through Aziraphale, and in an unusually perceptive moment, Gabriel registered it, bringing a hand to rest stiffly on his shoulder in a gesture with some semblance of comfort. “There’s nothing to be done for it now. You might want to try doing something with that gift… but I thought you should know it wasn’t unanimous. Raphael and I both voted against it, but your friend's argument was persuasive.”
Aziraphale did not like the oddly pitying look in Gabriel’s eyes at all.

“What did he say?”

Gabriel looked at him a long moment, but didn’t answer directly. Instead, he said, “He loves you.”

“He said that?”

A quick shake of the head. “Didn’t have to. He radiates it. An angel would have to be senseless not to know.”

The appalled look on Crowley’s face when he’d earlier so blithely announced the demon had tried to save the children from the fire he'd set was more than enough reason not to chat about Crowley’s love with Gabriel. “Ah,” he settled on as a response instead, awkwardly turning away.

“The demon loves you. I can feel it,” the Archangel persisted, more uncertainty written in his expression than Aziraphale could recall ever seeing.

“I know,” he acknowledged softly, the truth of it having been carved into their long, winding history in a million acts of service for which Crowley had never accepted a whisper of thanks.

If Gabriel picked up on his discomfiture, it didn’t slow him down any, obviously wrestling with his own. “But how is that possible? A demon that can still love? What does that mean?”

“It means anything is possible,” the angel answered, hope a miserable ache in a worn out heart.

“You’re going to suffer for this,” Gabriel told him, eyes on the fathomless horizon. "I don't expect that you will believe me if I say this, but... I have to say it anyway. I never wanted you to suffer. I had thought- I had meant to do right by you, by Her, to be a proper steward of all given into my care."

"You tried to have me killed," he pointed out, like they were discussing a disagreement over the proper pairing of wine and quiche.

"...yes," he admitted. " But I didn't try to make you Fall."

There was a difference, and they both knew it.

"I shouldn't have offered you to Hellfire," Gabriel told the horizon, unable or unwilling to look at the angel at his feet.

It was apology from one he'd never dreamed would recognize his own mistakes. "I forgive you," he offered peacably, meaning it, as he always did.

The Archangel, nodded stiffly, in as human a gesture as he'd ever seen, before looking to Crowley, stubbornly casual in the face of troubled waters, as he had always been. "I did vote against this."

Aziraphale wondered what it said about him that he was surprised the Archangel was not gloating. That Gabriel should not want him to Fall was... heartening. “It’s worth it,” the Principality said with more bravery than he felt. “We won’t be on the same side after this, I suppose, you and I. Perhaps you could try to fix things, when I’m gone. Heaven is supposed to be good, Gabriel. Maybe you can make that happen. I don’t know how much of me will change afterwards... so you may consider this my last request.”
He was surprised again when Gabriel simply answered, “I will try.”

Though the door of the tower opened silently, there was a weight to it that caught him hard in the chest. Even the distant celestial harmonies stopped abruptly, Heaven’s silence as deafening as Her own.

Uriel and Sandalphon escorted Michael out first, clinging tightly as she struggled in their grips, freezing in place as her eyes locked defiantly with Gabriel’s, until they dragged her before him.

Behind her Crowley sauntered out unencumbered, grinning carelessly at the uneasy Chamuel and Raphael, who were visibly unhappy, on either side of him. Aziraphale felt his heart lurch, that smile not fooling him for a second.

“Crowley?” he called, uncaring of the audience. The demon stubbornly refused to look over at him.

“You’re certain, then?” Gabriel asked him solemnly, drawing his attention reluctantly away from his dear friend.

“If it’s the only way, yes. Put her to the test, and I will share her fate.”

“So be it then.” Gabriel voice carried easily as he spoke, all of Heaven seeming to pause.

One unified held breath. Choirs of angels, holy as they day they’d been created and one lone former angel, who did not so much Fall, as saunter vaguely downward.

“Principality Aziraphale, Guardian of the Eastern Gate, faithful creation of Her own Hand, do you agree to bind yourself to Prince Michael’s fate? If she remains a faithful servant in Grace, then so shall you, and if she should Fall, so shall you?”

Now, now, at last, Crowley was looking at him, steadily, with a calmness Aziraphale had not expected. It was dreadfully unnerving.

“I’m… I’m sorry, my dear, but-”

“You have to,” he replied readily. “I know. You do you, angel. Ss’fine.”

“It is?” He swallowed hard. Well then, if Crowley could hold himself together, so could he. “Right, yes,” he nodded firmly. “I do.”

“Amen,” Gabriel said quietly. Let it be so.

Raphael plucked a single golden thread from mid-air as Gabriel released Aziraphale’s chains with a touch. Freed, he moved quickly to kneel next to the bound Archangel.

“I suppose you’re getting what you wanted in the end,” Aziraphale told her, voice feather-light and kind. “You wanted me to go with you, and I will, for good or ill.”

“You’ve ruined it all. I’m going to enjoy seeing you burn,” she snarled. “You’re going to lose everything too. I may not love Her anymore, but you do. This will break you.”

“If not for Her, if not for Her children, then for who?” He glanced at Crowley, unusually still, flashing a wan smile when their eyes met. The demon responded in kind. “If not for him, then for who?” He extended his right hand to lay over her left, still bound and resting on her lap. Raphael began winding the thread around their wrists, thin as the line between symbolism and reality was in
their realm. “I highly doubt either of us will be enjoying anything for quite some time.”

“Prince Michael, commander of Heaven’s army and once-favoured child of our Mother, I do hereby bind Aziraphale’s fate to yours. Your faithfulness to the Almighty has been questioned. Remove all doubt, and pledge your soul to Her, else reject Her and Fall from Grace. There is nothing in between.”

“Of course I am faithful-”

“Swear it on her name, I charge you.”

It should not have been difficult, really, and though he had already known she could no longer have made such a pledge, it wounded him nonetheless.

She shuddered and began to struggle. Bound to her, physically and spiritually, Aziraphale fought to keep himself together as she inevitably failed.

“I have rejected Her,” and the silence became all the heavier around them. “Because She abandoned us first. Do you really think She’s coming back for you? She stopped caring millennia ago, and we’re all just toys in Her game!”

“Oh, sister,” Gabriel sighed, having the decency to look more disappointed than shocked, unlike the rest of the Council. “I did hope Aziraphale was wrong. Aziraphale? Keep your promise.”

He nodded shakily, eyes misty as he spoke. “I, Principality Aziraphale do hereby renounce all claim to Her Grace. I re-,” he choked a little and tried again. “I reject Her claim on me, and refuse henceforth to serve Her.”

He shut his eyes as the bottom dropped out of his world, but he didn’t fall far, a soft sound near his wrist had him snapping his eyes open again. Delicately, Crowley produced a small dagger and sliced through the cord binding him to Michael who shrieked in misery as the Grace began to drain from her form.

“That isn’t possible!” he exclaimed, staring first at Crowley, then back to Michael, horror winding around him. “I took an oath!”

“So did I, the demon said breathily, wrapping the golden thread in loop after loop around his wrist. “Mine was first. To go in your place.”

“What? Wha-Crowley,” he grabbed his wrist tightly over the binding. “You can’t Fall twice!”

"No, I can’t," he agreed slowly as he took his sunglasses off, tucking them in his breast pocket like he was laying them to rest. His brow wrinkled as his eyes scanned Aziraphale’s face, as though he were desperately fixing every detail into his memory. “M’sorry, angel.” There was more farewell in those words then there had ever been between them.

He stepped up on the ledge of the fountain, the holiest water burbling softly away.

Shock splashed coldly through him as he understood the bargain Crowley had struck.

“Crowley, no…” he exhaled, in quiet horror.

“It’s the only way, angel,” Crowley replied equally softly. “It’s worth it. Probably getting a bargain, my wretched soul for yours. Michael gets what’s coming to her, and you get to stay in Her good graces, where you belong, if anyone does. Win-win.”
“No, it isn’t! You aren’t winning!”

“No supposed to win, angel-” He gave his head a brief shake before lifting his golden eyes. “They’re gonna want to change you, you know, was part of the deal, but don’t you let them change a hair on your blessed head.” He stepped up onto edge of the fountain. “You stay the magnificent bastard I know and lo—stay you.”

“No, no, no, no…”, he moaned from the aching depths of his spirit, a anguished prayer if ever there had been one uttered.

“M’getting off easy, angel. No more suffering. You're the one gonna be stuck listening to "The Sound of Music," for all eternity.” A lopsided smile quirked up the corner of his mouth, playful in his pain. “Gonna get some questions answered.”

“This isn’t your fight!” Aziraphale lunged to his feet, fighting desperately as Gabriel held him back, the cause of so much misery twisting insensibly at his feet, charring from the inside out.

“You are the only thing I have worth fighting for, angel.” Crowley proclaimed with quiet conviction, locking eyes with Aziraphale like it was only the two of them left in the universe.

We weren’t meant to be parted! Please, please-

Aziraphale was still wailing his name when Crowley calmly stepped backward, his gaze never leaving his best friend's tear-filled eyes.

__________________________

Everything was very, very quiet.

Almost everything.

Violent, hiccupping sobs racked Aziraphale as he pressed his face to the cold, golden street of Heaven, wailing in an inconsolable anguish, too great for even a mighty angel to fully give it voice.

Everything else was silent, and it was the silence that held the power now.

It was a loss unbearable, and he didn’t want to suffer another moment existing through it, but he was an angel, and so could not mercifully die from such trifling things as a broken heart.

So he screamed his grief into the empty universe, as loudly as he could, and felt the awfulness of being unheard.

His thoughts turned darkly to his old sword, and he wondered if he could coax enough Hellfire out of it to free himself from the agony of life without Crowley.

A warm hand touched his shoulder, and grief transitioned hard into rage. It was far, far too late for the washed out pity of angels. If they'd had any pity at all in the beginning, Crowley would still be here and there would still be some meaning for his wretched existence. He leapt to his feet, sword flying to his hand as he spun to face-

Wrath dissipated immediately, though he tried to hold on to it, slipping away like sand through his fingers and leaving him with only a few scattered grains of misery amidst the emptiness of his
all-consuming despair. His knees buckled under him. Under the weight of those eyes, who could
stand?

“I hate you,” he told Her brokenly, straight to Her face, and waited for his fate.

He had always expected Her rejection to hurt, but no pain came. Perhaps there was a limit to
how much misery an ethereal being could process. In the shadow of Crowley’s destruction, his cup
of grief had runneth over, spilling freely, leaving nothing else in him to ache.

Softly, She gathered him against Her like a mother bird gathering her chicks. Ineffable wings
wrapped tightly around him and he melted into the embrace before sobs took him once more.
“There’s a difference between feeling and doing, beloved,” She told him with the voice that once
spoke him into life. “Be not afraid, for I am with thee.”

“He’s gone,” the angel wept, trying desperately to make Her understand just how much he had
lost, how much everyone had lost.

“Shhhh…” She breathed, and life danced in the eddies of Her breath. “He isn’t. Look and see.”

Chapter End Notes

1 If Crowley had had the time[2], he would have reflected that it was just as well that
celestial beings, of whichever political stripe, had not taken up the use of Holy
howitzers or Demonic derringers. Their affection for awful alliteration was
aggravating as well. [return to text]

2 Sadly, he did not have the time, but you do. [return to text]

3 Actually, it had worked, once, during his long, long sleep after their little tiff about
the Holy Water, when Aziraphale had secretly popped in to check on him, and
Crowley, lost in a nightmare, had called those very words out just as the angel had,
coincidentally, been straightening a painting. Startled, Aziraphale, handling the
interruption with all the calm grace of Hastur on a bender, yelped, knocked the
painting off the wall, crashed into an end table, and shattered a lamp. Panicked, the
angel snapped his fingers, setting all to rights, and hastily escaped onto the streets, not
daring another peek-in for nearly six months.

    Bleary-eyed, Crowley had dropped back to sleep almost immediately, chalkling the
whole thing up to a strange dream, and Aziraphale never laid another finger on any of
Crowley’s “souvenirs.”

He did not, however, swear off breaking and entering, if the cause was just. [return to
text]
4 In fairness, usually, it did. [return to text]

5 Er… the angels. Not the eyebrows… though I wouldn’t put it past them. [return to text]

6 Little a. Chosen to give direction to the lesser angels, guardians and the like, the archangels had most of them let that tiny taste of power go straight to their individual heads, however many of them they happened to have at any given moment. [return to text]
Redemption

Chapter Summary

Soooo sorry it took me such a long time to get this chapter up. It's fair to say that I struggled with this one, and all props to my fabulous and steadfast beta, Dangernoodle666, who worked very, very hard with me on getting this one up to par. I'd be lying if I said I felt completely confident about this one, but she approves, and that's good enough for me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Let Me Live Out My Years
-John G. Neihardt

Let me live out my years in heat of blood!
Let me die drunken with the dreamer's wine!
Let me not see this soul-house built of mud
Go toppling to the dusk—a vacant shrine.

Let me go quickly, like a candle light
Snuffed out just at the heyday of its glow.
Give me high noon—and let it then be night!
Thus would I go.

And grant that when I face the grisly Thing,
My song may trumpet down the gray Perhaps.
Let me be as a tune-swept fiddlestring
That feels the Master Melody—and snaps!

“Don’t make me,” Aziraphale whispered into her arms, eyes squeezed tightly shut against the expected horror. “I can’t… I can’t see him like that.”
“Aziraphale, do you trust Me?” She murmured, fingers gently stirring his hair in soothing little arcs, peace settling over him despite his decimated spirit.

“Oh, Mother, don’t you know?” he keened miserably, skewered by such a question, after all this, after everything.

She tilted his head, guiding him to look up at Her, ever so slowly. Instinctively, he knew that She would not have forced him had he resisted, and somehow Aziraphale felt all the more fragile for that, like the delicate powdered wings of a butterfly in the face of the tempest-driven winds of Her unfathomable strength. Softly now, he felt Her knowing, aware that it would be nothing for Her to crush him. “Yes, I know, but you don’t. Look, beloved, and see.”

There was no compulsion in the request, though certainly there could have been. Instead, She was endlessly patient as he gathered himself to look. Hesitantly, Aziraphale finally dragged his eyes up to look, dreading what they would reveal.

Water droplets sparkled prettily like a million tiny diamonds where they existed, sprayed out in midair, frozen along with helpless time, which was futilely struggling in the relentless power of Her grasp.

Crowley had stopped time once, all but their little pocket of it, on that last day of everything and the first day of everything else. Stopping time on a limited basis was something of a naughty parlour trick, not considered remotely angelic if for no reason other than the heavy-handedness of seizing that much control. To do it on such a vast scale… it had been an astonishingly bold action, and draining.

Afterwards, Crowley wouldn’t have been able to fend off a stiff breeze had the need arisen.

Aziraphale's exhausted, grief-wrung sigh slid painfully out of a chest too raw to contain it for another moment. He looked upon the frozen tableau before him, taking in a long, last look at his truest friend, surrounded by the water of his terrible baptism, stilled this time along with all else.

Crowley was clear-eyed in his solemn goodbye, tension warring with surrender, as fear wars ever with love. His arms were spread wide but his fists were clenched, whether in pain, or the anticipation of pain, the angel was not sure. The holy water below him held an ominous darkness as it had swirled around his legs, and would swirl again when time started back up. The murky shadow contrasted sharply to the shining droplets in the air.

Holy water was, in all other creatures, a blessing and a force of healing, body and soul both. To a demon, however…

*So beautiful, as many deadly things are.*

There it was before him, Crowley’s death, frozen in time but already begun. Nothing to be done about it now but wait for time to slip free and steal his friend away forever.

How could anyone so precious have ever been rejected? How could their Mother have let Crowley go?

He tried to scrape together enough heart to ask.

*You were an angel, once.*

*That was a long time ago.*
“Isn’t it beautiful?” She asked before he could find voice for his own aching question, smiling warmly at him before turning glad eyes back to Crowley, an unspoken Blessing pouring forth. Elsewhere, a mother found the strength to lift a car off her injured child, a teen on the rocky road to a criminal future had a change of heart, a new sort of flower burst into undiscovered bloom.

A sick, appalled, angry feeling crawled over Aziraphale, like the ghosts of a thousand crushed ants. “His death?” he asked, voice cracking like the rest of him, hot tears newly burning as they redoubled, tracking down over his skin in well-worn paths.

Though never stating it outright, Crowley had often implied that, in her disconnection from Her masterful Creation, She was cruel. They had argued about it fiercely over the millennia, never meeting in the middle as they had in so many other ways. His world tilted violently on its axis as he found himself closer to shifting than ever before, wondering if it were true, even here, under the warm shelter of Her wing.

*The* force of nature.

The orator of life.

The seamstress of all Creation.

Not for no reason was She feared.

Immeasurable.

Incomprehensible, even for an angel, tucked up against Her as if he mattered. *If* he mattered. In the face of Her unfathomable vastness, how could he matter, really?

But She was right there, looking at Aziraphale like he did.

*Ineffable*.

She didn’t answer for a time, long enough that he wanted to scream, with the small fractured shard of him capable of wanting anything. Finally, She said, “I am the One who sees the sparrow fall. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of Her saints.”

“But he’s not,” the angel heaved out painfully, anguish and loss ravaged, as he began to consider, truly consider, whether She was too distant to really love any of them. “Crowley isn’t one of yours, not anymore.”

And he hadn’t been precious to Her for a long, long time.

*I won’t ever be forgiven.*

Spoken so casually at the time, like some strange, defiant joke, yet even the memory cut like jagged glass.

“Not his death, Aziraphale,” She said, smiling tenderly, as if gently explaining a difficult concept to a confused child. Elsewhere, a little species of bird, the Carolina Parakeet, long thought extinct, began nesting once more. “His life is beautiful. Though Crowley was cast out, your friend still loves the Light. He could have stayed in the pit, cursing the darkness, as do the others, but instead he sought you out… ever the moth to the flame.” She traced a soft finger across Aziraphale’s forehead like a blessing, Her approval open and undeniable, staggering in its simplicity. “You could have driven him away, as would the others, but instead, you were compassionate.”
“He suffered… so much, and for so long,” Aziraphale swallowed hard, thinking of seeing the anguish past Crowley’s easy denial over the years, and in the tragedy that had finally pushed him over the edge.

*Smite me, angel. 'M ready. G'head on with it.*

“Wounds don’t always wither the soul, Aziraphale; in some, they make it flourish, as the desert bursts into bloom after the rain.” She fanned out idle fingers, and the angel felt Her words truly spring to life in some distant, thirsty land. “Some can drink deeply from a bitter cup without becoming bitter… and you yourself have helped to sweeten him, and he, in his way, you.” There was something faraway in the shining eyes so near to him as She spoke again, gravity mighty in each word. “He chose his fate. He has always wanted to do that.”

She was still, maddeningly, smiling.

He couldn’t bear it.

Hardly knowing what he was doing, the grieving angel took a stumbling step towards the fountain, the darkness of the corrupted water threatening to drag him under. She touched his shoulder and he steadied, despite himself. “Shall we let him keep his oath, My son?” She asked softly, watching him carefully as fresh sorrow welled up from its eternal spring.

“He’s, he’s in it… it’s already happened-happening.” Not without reason were angels sometimes fearful to look their Creator in the face. Aziraphale feared it as well, but not because of Her inconceivable nature. Despair did not hold a candle to the kind of cutting anguish hope could inflict.

Nevertheless, he looked.

“Can we stop him? Can I Fall, die, anything, anything…please, Mother, please. Tell me it’s not too late.”

“Would you have Me take this from him?” She asked mildly, curiously… “Take another gift from you that he has freely given?”

*Pointedly.*

His heart lurched as he recognized the night-black feather suddenly in the hand of God, still softly radiating the tender-hearted touch of Crowley’s long ago Blessing.

“No,” he moaned, then, “Yes! No… I don’t know… I just-” He broke off, reaching for the feather, trying and failing to force words through a body too forlorn to speak.

*I would not be parted from him, for all the world, even if it slew me, even if it cost me your love,* came the silent lament.

He didn’t need to speak for Her to hear him.

“My dear Aziraphale,” and She whisked the feather out of sight. “You know him better than anyone, save his own Mother, and yet you still haven’t seen him.” Her face took on new radiance, burning bright, too bright, even for angelic eyes. “Come and see.”

When She moved, She moved. Scrambling along, heart in his throat, cruel hope lancing through him like a knife, Aziraphale approached the amethyst fountain, dropping to his knees before it when a glance of Crowley’s playful inscription burned like Hellfire into his soul.
She did not hesitate, passing easily through structure and water both, as they were already a part of Her. She glanced back as if to check on his attention, as though there could ever have been anything else that would have had a hold of him now.

God reached out to Crowley, and a wretched panicky wave slammed through Aziraphale. She was the very source and definition of holy, what would that do to a demon?

It was a silly thought really. Nothing worse could be done to him now, and She didn’t sound… She didn’t sound…

Her hand slipped through ginger hair as unruly as the rest of him, sliding down to cup his cheek.

“Crowley,” She said, authoritatively, yet not without affection. "Come forth!"

“Ngk!” he choked out, knees buckling under him like those of a newborn fawn as he found himself, for the first time in a very long time, face to face with Almighty God Herself. Aziraphale leapt to his feet at the shattered sound, but the demon would have dropped like a stone into the holy water if She hadn’t been quick to catch him, easily drawing the Fallen angel up and holding him there while he tried to find his failing feet. “Oh, bless it all, I’m dead, and I’m still alive?!"

Aziraphale had never heard anything sweeter in all the long days of his life.

As shock left, along with its kindly numbness, reality set in. Crowley began struggling, nakedly broadcasting fear and hurt, even as She held him. “You-! I can’t- I won’t- Please tell me it doesn’t get worse than Hell!” he gasped out, frantically looking anywhere but at the One holding him up. “Isn’t it bad enough that I’ll never see Aziraphale again?”

“Shhhhh…” Wordlessly, She caught his chin and steered his head to face Aziraphale. A force like lightning shot through the angel as their hearts connected along with their eyes, and Her long forsaken creation sagged abruptly, fight leaving him even if fear did not, as Crowley gazed upon the only solace he’d had for millennia. One long, keening sigh, and serpentine eyes turned back to lock onto the shimmering face of the Being who had first imagined light.

Eternity passed in the soft seconds as She drew the trembling demon to Her, pressing a kiss to Crowley’s forehead.

“My good son,” She sighed, voice warm with approval.

In a soul-stopping instant, Aziraphale suddenly saw Crowley… not in his familiar demonic form, but in the true form in which he was created, bright, so bright, flame and light, dancing and shifting, radiant and stunning, golden eyes and spirit.

*Achingly beautiful.*

Hand clasped over his mouth, the angel sunk to the ground once more, this time laughing breathlessly in sheer awe at the sight of him…. then Crowley looked over at Aziraphale, and there he was again, all mop of ginger hair and physics-challenging skinny jeans, shaking like a leaf with fear and grief and incomprehensible joy.

“M-mom,” he managed. “You still love me?”

She tilted Her head as an impish smile danced on Her lips, and Aziraphale was struck by the sudden discovery that the apple had not after all, Fallen so far from the tree.

She spoke to him, just for him, and a deep and tearful joy bubbled up through Aziraphale as he
watched Crowley let out a hiccupping little sob before falling completely into Her arms. She fanned wings of dawn out and around him protectively as She drew him out of the fountain.

Aziraphale knew that a mere angel should not dare to think of even considering interrupting the Almighty at anything. Nevertheless, he all but danced in place waiting for his chance to reassure himself that Crowley was indeed hale and hearty, and that this was not some soothing fantasy of a mind snapped like matchsticks by a wrenching grief too terrible to bear.

Her wings withdrawing, Crowley reappeared from the blanket of pearlescent feathers and the first thing Aziraphale heard was, “Why am I still here?”

“Crowley!” he scolded, yanking the demon back out of what suddenly very much seemed like harm's way. “Haven’t you learned anything? Don’t question your Creator and Preserver!”

The demon made a face at him even as She laughed fondly at the angel’s belated mortification at his outburst. Millions of ladybugs woke from their hibernation to scatter into the Spring.

“Why should he stop now, Aziraphale? He was created with a question on his lips.” She leaned in to them as though divulging a great mystery. “It was ‘Why?’ and then, ‘Who are You?’” She gestured to Herself, before pointing to Crowley with a playful flourish, “‘Who am I?’… and after that,” She let out a long-suffering sigh, “The deluge.”

Seeing Her wink had never really lost its ‘surprise’ factor, and it had been a very long time since Aziraphale had seen it. Or Her, in fact. And that last time hadn’t been his most shining moment.

He pressed his hand to his warm cheeks and let out a long, slow breath. It was all a bit much for him today.

Crowley didn’t repeat his question, but he was looking at Her steadily despite fidgeting hands that defied his efforts to stop them from trembling. The demon expected Her to answer, and Aziraphale could not help but be impressed at his friend's audacity. “Th-thank you,” the angel stammered, when She did not reply, or smite the demon for his temerity. The breathed words were a mere tear drop in the bucket of the ocean of his gratitude.

Crowley, Crowley, Crowley… speaking, shivering, living. My dear, my heart, my love.

“Sooooo… no answer then. I’m surprised that I’m surprised,” his friend said bitterly, turning away from Her only to freeze as his eyes connected with Aziraphale’s, Crowley rapidly trying to blink away his vulnerability.

She swept Crowley firmly, harmlessly, against Her fiery form and turned, settling on the edge of the fountain, which sat up a bit straighter at the honour. Aziraphale edged closer, hopefully, wanting badly to reconnect with Crowley, touch him and reassure himself that all was well and… it did appear so. His demonic counterpart was here, managing to look petulant despite the wonder of his continued existence, despite being tucked snugly up against the Mother who had once cast him out.

Or perhaps, because of it.

Ah, my dearest… the hold you have on me, he thought as his heart lurched in sympathy.

Aziraphale hovered awkwardly, debating whether it would be terribly impolite to draw nearer, then gasped in sheer, giddy relief when She gave the amethyst edge an inviting pat under Her right wing. Crowley, by now, was so wrapped up in Her left wing that he was almost completely hidden, but when Aziraphale took his place Her wings arched out a bit more, encompassing them both in a
safe little nook away from the rest of existence.

He had never felt safer… or more seen, and that, in itself, was terrifying.

Crowley seemed absolutely shell-shocked and Aziraphale imagined he looked much the same. Darting a look at God that was mixed gratitude and apology, the angel stretched a hand out to Crowley, waiting with impatient patience before the demon flicked his eyes down to notice it, and waited longer still before long fingers, chill from shock, brushed clumsily against his own, before finally closing firmly in his grasp.

“Aziraphale,” sighed the demon.

Crowley, his friend, his brother, his truest companion seemed hardly able to take his eyes off their Mother, drinking in Her Wondrous presence like he’d been suffering from thirst for six thousand years. Aziraphale, by contrast, kept his eyes on Crowley, mounting anxiety tugging on his nerves, breathing on his neck.

After all, the Principality had not, in the end, turned out to be what She’d intended, whatever that was. He was not sure what he had been supposed to be; he only knew that he wasn’t. He’d lied to Her, and to Heaven in general; he’d had a hand in thwarting Her Great Plan, sushi and crepes, a million tiny indulgences waved accusingly through his head and above it all, he loved a demon, well and truly, and even now, the strength of his love for his loyal Adversary was still a mighty force to be reckoned with, undaunted and unyielding despite the enormity of Her Presence.

He couldn’t bring himself to repent of it, even if his love made him a traitor in Heaven’s eyes.

Guardian Aziraphale wasn’t a good angel; the Archangels had taught him well enough that crushing lesson, and he felt it like an open wound, and his heart thudded all too humanly in his chest as he waited for Her to notice and pass Judgment. It seemed to him like he had been waiting for it forever.

“Long time, no see,” Crowley drawled with exaggerated swagger, and not without guarded hostility, eyes narrowing at Her in a challenge that caused Aziraphale to want to shake him. “What made you finally drop by, then? ‘Cause I don’t know if You noticed, but this whole place of Yours is going to Hell in a handbasket, and I don’t just mean the third of us you’ve already tossed-eeugh, too tight, angel.”

“Ahh, sorry, my dear, but I really think-”

“What’s the matter with you then? You’re paler than an angel’s backside-” The demon shook his hand free with more drama than strictly necessary.

“What’s the matter with you then? You’re paler than an angel’s backside-” The demon shook his hand free with more drama than strictly necessary.

“Crowley, please!”

“What?” he demanded, “You think She pulled me out of the drink just to smite me now?” It was almost a dare, and Aziraphale negotiated a frustrated, frightened scream down into a strangled whimper instead.

“She’s right here.”

“Oh, I hadn’t noticed. Do you have a comb? Should I put on a tie?” Crowley dropped the raking sarcasm abruptly. “She’s never out of smiting distance, you know. What difference does it make? I’ve said way worse things to Her… and about Her.” In the face of Aziraphale’s alarm and under Her mysterious smile, the demon leveled an impressively cool gaze at Her as he spoke. ‘I’ll do it again, too. It’s not like we can do anything to stop Her whims.” He turned his attention back to
Aziraphale. “Why are you the one frightened of Her anyway? She still likes you, well... enough to
keep you Upstairs, anyway-”

“Loves, and not just me, Crowley. You can’t just sit here and pretend you’re not falling to bits
inside because She still loves you-”

“Pfftt,” he scoffed defiantly, even as he visibly squirmed. “Well, I’m not going to go on and on
about it. Doesn’t change a thing. I’m still a demon. Loving me didn’t stop Her from kicking me to
the curb for asking a few questions-” He mimed tossing a ball away with a parting kick.

“Crowley, for all that is Holy- ooh, ah-” Aziraphale abandoned one tactic for another, turning
his attention to their Mother again, and wishing She would stop that incomprehensible smiling as
She watched them argue back and forth.

Although… considering the alternative…


“Ahh, beg pardon, please, beg pardon, I just-mmph.”

She pressed a quieting finger to his lips and the power of the touch set them burning pleasantly,
holiness tingling through him, the holy kiss of a burning coal. “Principality Aziraphale, fear not!
You are one of my Guardians, after all-,” She tilted Her head suddenly. “Did I not make you to be a
Cherub?”

“Ahhhhh… ah, yes, well…” His heart sank like a stone. “I suppose you made me to be a lot of
things, really.”

Crowley made a sound somewhere between sympathy and irritation. Her countenance took on a
very grave expression and Aziraphale fought for composure as She leaned in close. Crowley spread
his wings, such as he could, surrounded by Her own, making as if to leap to his defense, and a
hysterical giggle forced its way from the angel at the thought of Crowley being willing to take on
God Herself for him.

She reached for his head and his life flashed before his eyes. Worse still, so did Crowley’s.
Time consuming, considering the length of their lives, and he really hadn’t gotten much past
Mesopotamia when Her clever fingers dove behind his ear and drew out a silver coin.

“Tada!” the Almighty Creator of All that had Ever Been announced, letting it roll flashily across
Her palm and down Her arm.

“Auwwwno, not this,” Crowley groaned as Her smile broadened with devilry.

Aziraphale wondered if She’d used proper magic or sleight of hand, or if there was any real
difference between the two for Her.

It was so silly and playful and insane, Aziraphale buried his face in his hands as he laughed and
laughed, until he registered the warm dampness stinging his face and Crowley’s worried, “Angel?”

“I’ve missed You,” he blurted out, wondering at the smooth way mirth slip-shifted into sorrow.
“You left us for so long... and the last thing I said to You was-”

“A lie,” She said solemnly, coin still dancing in Her fingers. “Yes, I know.”

“Is that why you left?” the angel ground out painfully, shame heavy and choking. Crowley was
already shaking his head, but what the demon wanted to be true had no bearing on fact, and Aziraphale gathered enough nerve to look Her in those ancient, omniscient eyes, though he felt faint as a wilting flower doing it. “Please, I- I need to know.”

Her smile took on a serious air, almost grim, and She did not answer right away. Instead, God held up a finger and the coin rolled right to the very tip before beginning to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

“Proper magic,” Crowley observed, eyes locked on the shining coin with fascination.

“You have found your courage at last, beloved child,” She sighed, pressing soft lips to his forehead. His skin was warm where they landed, a Blessing of strength and peace in the touch, and with it…

Somehow, somehow, approval.

“In the Beginning,” She began[1], “My realm was a gleaming jewel, unified, a place of life, creativity, and change. I did not want a people bound and chained to My will, so I blessed them with their own free will to do as they would, regardless of how I bade them.”

“Wuh, wait a minute here. That’s not how it goes. You gave the humans free will. We’re different,” Crowley objected. He reached under his collar and dragged out a length of chain, flashing it quickly before letting it disappear beneath his jacket.

Undeterred by Crowley’s objections, the coin, and the universe, kept spinning, blurring softly into a glowing orb. Her smile brightened, and the rainy season began a month early for the African savannah. She shook Her head lightly. “How you continually surprise, Crowley.” He sat up straighter, startled, as a ripple of amusement went through Her… and sailed right through the pair of them as well.

Odd, and a not entirely soothing sensation, that.

“The surprise, my dear, is that one of my most willful creations truly believes I did not grant him free will.” She laughed softly and thousands of fussing babies sighed, smiled, and dropped sweetly into sleep.

Crowley held his breath, frowning slightly as he considered Her words, remaining silent until he noticed Aziraphale’s questioning eyebrow. “Well, ss'not like I ever really chose anything. It was all sort of… accidental. I didn't… mean…”

“Of course you chose,” said his Creator. “You've chosen again and again, more than most… listen well, and understand.”

Her face fell, suddenly, smile vanishing into something older and harder. The sombre expression sent shudders through Aziraphale, but even with his own discomfort, he did not miss Crowley’s wary cringe. Her wing drew closer to delicately graze his own and Crowley shut his eyes for a few deep, unsteady breaths. “With free will, we do not always choose wisely,” she began, “And actions must have their consequences.” The coin stopped, and an inky darkness slid over the surface of the metal, spreading and staining, marring its formerly pristine beauty. “The Traitor set himself against Me in My own House, and seduced others, so many others,” and there was a sudden influx of grief in Her voice, while in Paris, a cold, hard rain fell over the City of Lights. “To rebel along with him. With that conflict came the first War, and much harm was done.”
The coin warped, then split, jaggedly, not quite down the middle. She snatched the flying pieces in each hand before they could hit angel or demon.

“Now My house is divided,” She said gravely, “And My children despise each other.” Crowley caught Aziraphale’s eye and Her expression warmed considerably. A barren woman in Greece longing for a child discovered she was pregnant with twins. “Most of them.”

Oh.

“Yes, ah, about that, well, you see, Crowley and I—”

Crowley frantically shook his head, drawing a finger across his throat in a silencing gesture and Aziraphale threw his hands up towards Her in mute, yet dramatic, exasperation.

*She’s right here… and omniscient!*

“Actions, and in particular, My actions, always have consequences, and so I do nothing lightly,” She said, gently pushing his hands down before running her thumbs over the jagged metal in Her own. Aziraphale startled to see blood well up from the scratch, but Her expression did not change. “I did not Create you for strife and suffering, but with freedom, it came all the same, and now My servant Michael has rebelled as well, pushed over the edge by her disappointment in… Me.” She looked up from the coin to Crowley, and the demon stilled as their eyes met. “And with that choice, there came more suffering: Yours, in your torment and guilt, and that of the innocents who perished in the flames.”

“And the souls who followed her to perdition,” Aziraphale added, that loss heavy on his mind, despite Crowley’s snort of contempt for his former captors.

“Them as well, though they also chose freely,” She replied, steel in the soft words.

“But not knowingly,” the angel replied, consternation dragging his spirit low.

“Actions have consequences, Aziraphale, and I do not condemn the pure of heart. You also have made choices. You gave away my sword.”

Her gaze was measuring, and he fought back the sudden, panicky urge to lie... again.

Aziraphale drew in a breath, gathering his courage. He held Her gaze as he finally, softly, confessed, "I did, yes."

“As you were meant to—"

“I…what?” Aziraphale felt his jaw drop, hand reflexively grasping the air as if for the sword itself.

“And then you lied to Me about it… as you were meant to.” An early, bitter snowstorm swirled across the Rocky Mountains, and the people began digging out their winter gear from storage.

Shock splashed, ice-cold down his spine, fanning along his trembling wings as the solemn words registered. He struggled to pull himself together enough to vocalize something, but he could not. A strangled, inarticulate, appalled sound slipped from Crowley, always there to rush in where the angel feared to tread.

“What the living Hell?!” the demon spat, up on his feet only to be tugged back down.
“Language,” She chided lightly, almost teasingly, giving the stunned angel the feeling he was being imitated.

“How dare-” Crowley began, trying to break free of Her grasp, and overbalancing when She released the demon only to reach out again to steady him.

“Shhhh…” She soothed Her seething child, before turning fully to Aziraphale.

“Guardian of the Eastern Gate, do you love Me?”

“I… of course.” It hurt him, really, to have Her ask, even as the memory of his stumbling, nervous excuses in front of Eden’s great wall, taunted at him.

“Of course,” She echoed calmly, nodding in agreement, and some of his tension eased. “And indeed, you extend that love freely to all my sphere and the people therein, even though they wound your generous spirit, again and again.” She held up Her bloody thumbs, and instinctively, he reached out and healed them. Her smile became infinitely softer towards the flustered angel, who was staring at his own hands, stunned by their audacity. A flurry of dandelion seeds burst into the air to the delight of children playing tag in the field. “Aziraphale, you are My good and faithful servant, and of you, I had to ask a dreadful sacrifice… for the restoration of My broken people.” The coin dissolved as She took him by the hand, Her words bathed in something he might dare to call supplication, if he didn’t know any better.

“You set him up!” Crowley hissed, furious, even as Aziraphale held his hands out to placate him.

“Please, my dear, just-”

The demon rounded on him sharply. “She asked you because She knew you were going to lie, so you could do Her dirty work!”

“Crowley, I can’t think with you all in a tizzy-”

“Aziraphale had a choice. He answered freely-”

But Crowley had never been easily placated.

“He didn’t know why You were asking! Nicest damn thing any of those bastards upstairs ever did, and he was terrified about disobeying the Mother who just kicked millions of kids out of the house-”

“But I didn’t Fall, Crowley!” Aziraphale shouted, leaping up to grab the demon’s flailing, frantic hands. “Hush now,” he breathed out shakily, blinking to try to clear blurring vision. He addressed Her without taking his eyes off their clasped hands, giving and receiving what each of them needed in the moment. “I have always wondered about that.” He ducked his head, unable to face Her. “You had to know I was lying.”

“I did,” She confirmed, silently inviting them to sit with Her again. After a moment, Aziraphale did. Only when the angel turned soft and pleading eyes on him, did Crowley also acquiesce.

_Not to Her, he seemed to say. Never, again, to Her._

In a smooth motion, She plucked two feathers out of midair and held them out on Her palms. One white as snow, and the other dark as sin. Aziraphale closed his eyes against the sight of Crowley’s gift and his own small sacrifice. A unhappy noise rose up from the demon’s direction
and flickered miserably in the angel's heart.

She quietly held the whole of their worlds in Her hand, letting them have the moment they needed. When he opened his eyes, he saw Crowley looking grim, as though just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You shouldn’t have lied, Aziraphale,” She said softly. “But that doesn’t mean you aren’t what I created you to be, beloved. My sweetest child, always so worried that you wouldn’t live up to your purpose.”

He found himself rubbing his eyes, that odd and ancient defensive reaction by his corporation against the sudden moisture gathering there.

The deep ache of being so fully known.

She held up his white feather. “Pure, for the most part, but the curse you invoked still lingers, just a little. You are kind, child of Mine, and brave… and flawed.” Aziraphale closed his eyes against the sudden rush of shame, hearing the rustling as Crowley shifted unhappily against Her feathers, ready, again, always, to defend him. “Shhh, Crowley. Listen. You’ve wanted Me to answer. Aziraphale, your awareness of your flaws keeps you humble, which has kept you kind, a virtue which the rest of Heaven has long forgotten.”

“They’re- they're not- they’re afraid,” he sighed sadly, but not uncharitably. “They’re afraid of being corrupted, of being rebellious.”

_They remember what happened to their choirmates._

“Yes, very afraid, as are you, so you can understand their fear… and yet, you stood against them for Righteousness and Truth's sake. You are brave. You are faithful. Guardian Aziraphale, you are exactly what I created you for.”

She raised Crowley’s black feather, breathing in the scent of it, the sweetness of his ancient Blessing. “And you, beloved,” Crowley shuddered a little at the term, “Are wrathful. It is a virtue to despise injustice, as you do, and in your Fall, you see injustice.”

“…I didn’t mean to-” he began, voice cracking in a rebellion of its own.

“You did, in fact,” She corrected firmly, and the angel did not miss the hurt and frustration that flickered through Crowley’s expression. “But now you understand the wrath of Hell. Like Aziraphale, I have tempered you in the furnace, like the finest steel. Oh, My dear child, in the darkness, how you shine.”

She crossed Her arms and held each of their feathers before the other, gleaming ebony before angel, purest ivory before demon. “You were both sent to Earth, to influence My mortal children… and to be influenced by them in turn, and there you learned compassion for the imperfect, and forgiveness for the wrong.” She laughed then, and startled them both. Nine new Atlantic Right Whale calves were on the way. “Well done, My children. You two, of all My servants, have learned the lessons sketched out for you.”

The turmoil frothing within Aziraphale as the angel tried to process what She was telling him was interrupted by a gentle prodding along his back. He reached back to find Crowley’s questing fingers. The demon had reached right through the trailing edge of Her scintillating wings to plunge his hand into Aziraphale’s.

Crowley’s hand was clammy and racked with tremours that his face resolutely refused to show.
The angel squeezed tightly, pouring love and comfort in the gesture, such as he could.

The feathers were pressed into their free hands as She continued. “You met, and bonded, even through adversity. You looked at your enemy and found a friend. You, the two of you, came together despite your opposing natures, and in each other found the love and understanding you needed.”

Aziraphale raised an uncertain hand, like a shy child in a classroom. “Oh, Mother… why did you let Crowley’s Blessing cause such tragedy. He was being so good.”

“M’not good,” the demon corrected quickly, staring into nothing as he spoke, “And nothing good could have ever come from it anyway. It was stupid…”

“You’re wrong, Crowley,” She said, firm as the rocks at the base of Everest. “A demon’s Blessing, your Blessing, has never been done before. Such a rare and precious gift, I could not let it go unfulfilled. An act of such love, from one brought so low, must be made to shine in the very highest places, a lantern on a hilltop, for all to see.” The aurora, borealis and australis, were going to be particularly spectacular that week. “I delivered your gift onto Michael, who chose to use it to wickedly rob you of your will, but what she has intended for evil, I shall use for good. Behold:”

She plucked the feather from the demon's hand and pressed it to Her lips, the black shimmering into a burning, fiery gold that reminded Aziraphale of Crowley’s astonishing original form.

“To rise to your defence, Aziraphale had to challenge the blindness of Heaven, and to break them of their complacency,” She told the awestruck demon. “He had to grow fully into the steadfast Guardian that he was always meant to be, that you helped him to be. You,” She breathed over him with ethereal tenderness, “You gave him the cause he needed. For your sake, Crowley, there is nothing Aziraphale would not do, and so through your Blessing on him, I shall Bless all of Creation.”

When she pressed his feather back into Aziraphale’s hand, it had changed into a shining key.

“Guardian of the Eastern Gate and of all humanity,” She addressed him formally, and he sat up as though struck by lightning. “You are ready. Truly,” Her hand was gentle as She guided up a head he had not realised he had ducked. “Truly, Aziraphale, you are. Take the key to My Kingdom. I charge you to use your strength along with My authority to unite My divided people.” She dipped her chin gravely in a Blessing that washed warmly through him. Despite the rush of Power, the angel's hands shook a little as he accepted the monumental charge from the Creator of All.

“Oh,” Aziraphale breathed out like a prayer, though breathing seemed suddenly difficult. “I think perhaps you've got the wrong…” he trailed off under the weight of her gaze, before nervously correcting himself. “No, I don’t suppose that You would, no.”

He looked helplessly to Crowley, who was frozen in place, so still that the angel briefly wondered if She’d stopped him in time again.

“Child after Mine own heart, know, as I do, that I have chosen exactly the right angels for the task.”

“This is a bad plan,” the demon said, shaking himself free of his paralysis.

“Crowley?” Aziraphale asked, heart skipping a beat. The plural hadn’t escaped his notice.

“Definitely not the first time I've said that to Her either, angel… angels?” He snapped his head to stare Her full in the face.
“Much good will come of this, Crowley. Though I know, oh My child, I know well that the price you paid was high.” She brushed a kindly thumb across his cheek. “I grieve for you, and her victims, but to restore My realm and heal My people, what sacrifice was too great?”

“I don’t… know,” he replied, peering up courageously from unruly red hair, golden eyes flicking to Aziraphale, uncertainty and distress in each pained word.

“You do,” She insisted, sadness in Her smile.

“Aziraphale… I sent you to the Garden so you could protect humanity. I questioned you, knowing you would lie, so that you would Fall… but only to help the lost ones Rise. To reach them, someone must Fall.”

“What?! You let it go six thousand years just to slap him with it like an unpaid parking ticket now?!” Crowley demanded, out from under Her wing and on his feet in outrage.

“I… I understand.” Aziraphale said, hesitantly, aware of the sharp contrast in their reactions, shame and acceptance warring with the fear of Hell’s brutality in his heart.

“What, no! The Hell, angel!”

“You know who She is. I can hardly argue with Her, Crowley.”

“I sure as Heaven can!”

“I didn’t let it go. I could not,” She told him firmly. “My people needed intercession, someone who could walk with them and understand, someone who has lived their suffering.” She stroked a soft finger over Her palm. “I do not ask more than what I have done Myself. Someone must bridge the gap to bring the lost ones home.”

“Damn them all! Again! And the whole bloody world too! He’s the only good one you ever made-” Lanky arms were thrown into the air with frustration as Crowley paced back and forth, fuming. “You can’t just throw Aziraphale to the wolves!”

She watched him storm impassively as Aziraphale reached a shaky hand out in consolation. “No, no, She’s right, naturally. The cause is just.” He squared his shoulders as best he could. “Imagine. We could fix this, my dear. Set things right. I… I would be willing-”

“No, damn it, no!” Crowley grasped Aziraphale by those same squared shoulders, forcing the angel to meet his gaze.

“It’s an honour, really, to be asked,” he managed, trying to reassure, delicate key heavy in his hand, the weight of destiny in the tiny structure, but still somehow holding the softness of Crowley’s feather, the shine of his earnest, frantic Blessing.

So kindly.

“I didn’t jump in that fountain to see you go down for this Her-forsaken place!”

She touched his hand and Crowley wrenched it back, but he quieted anyway. “One of you must Fall or they will have no hope. Someone needs to walk the hard path, and bring them home. It is the only way to restore what was lost. Who will go to them, and stand for them? What is your answer? Will it be you, or will it be Aziraphale?”

God leveled her steady gaze at him. “Yes, you did.”

“For asking questions-”

“For answering one,” She insisted, sliding Her hands out to clasp one of his own, drawing him close as She spoke sadly, tenderly. Stars and comets and sea and magma, Heaven and Hell and life, life, life swirled in the fathomless depths of Her eyes. “I’m not bound by time, beloved,” came the gentle reminder, along with a hint of something, oddly playful, despite the gravity of Her words.

It set Aziraphale’s mind spinning, and clearly he was not alone in that.

“You’re not bound by time…” the demon echoed, mulling over Her words, openly staring as he dragged back shaking hands to his chest. “It’s me… because it was me. I will, I did. I-” Crowley raked hands through disheveled locks and dragged them down over his face. “I say yes now, and I Fall then. I already Fell! It wasn’t my questions. It was my answer!” he reasoned, understanding for his suffering blossoming in his soul, even as twisting thorns pierced Aziraphale’s heart.

This was my fault. He Fell for *me*. No, no, no...

Her long ago words echoed hauntingly through his soul.

“I am not my own, for I was bought for a price…” the angel whispered, hand clutching his vest where it lay over his racing heart as he staggered from the shock.

She inclined Her head gracefully, once for Aziraphale, then for Crowley, smile playing on Her lips like a teacher whose students had finally grasped a difficult lesson. The demon looked down at his hand in Hers, then at Aziraphale, still noiselessly reeling in dawning crisis, and then Crowley tilted back his head laughed, like some long anchored weight had suddenly released him.

With a soft sound, the chain around the demon's neck snapped and dissolved. As quick as it had come, his laugh evaporated too, as Crowley gasped and grasped frantically for the missing chain.

She caught one of his desperate, empty hands and curled his fingers around Aziraphale’s newly purified feather, now shining with a golden light that would have put the bashful sun to shame. “My child, you have paid a great price… and you are worthy of my Grace. If the day comes when you are ready… come Home,” She cupped his cheek, love a living thing laced in every word.

Aziraphale pulled himself out of his own roiling internal tumult to see Crowley, stock-still in stupefaction staring at the angel's feather, now Blessed by Her own hand, protruding from slack fingers as She reiterated, “Crowley, come home and be welcomed.”

Chapter End Notes

1 Oh, boy, did She began. Begin. Begun. Beget. Bebop? All of the above and lots of it. [return to text]
There are so many talented writers in this fandom that I feel I can hardly keep up! Still, I will do my best to write worthy of these amazing characters and their world.

I'm doing some historical research as I go, but what a vast world Aziraphale and Crowley inhabit. I love them in any relationship, so you may read them in anyway you like.

Close, without question.

Thank you so much for your support! It means the world to me.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!