Remains

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Summary

Aziraphale was reading at his desk in the, mercifully empty, book shop when it happened, and it was startling enough to snap him out of the shamefully dreadful twelfth century Latin translation he was currently wading through and make him stare wildly around the room, the hairs at the nape of his neck standing to creeping attention...

When the World didn't end after all, things don't quite work out the way that Aziraphale had started to hope that they would.

24th December - Bonus epilogue added!!!!

Notes
Hopefully, both book and TV compliant.

Later chapters will contain scenes of violence and explicit content.
“Is there any other Crowley known to us both?”

Aziraphale was reading at his desk in the, mercifully empty, book shop when it happened, and it was startling enough to snap him out of the shamefully dreadful twelfth century Latin translation he was currently wading through and make him stare wildly around the room, the hairs at the nape of his neck standing to creeping attention.

It was a full eight days after the end of the world, or rather the start of the world that Adam had renewed, and so far for Aziraphale, it had all been a rather confusing anti-climax.

It had started promisingly enough with Crowley’s timid-but-almost-casual offer to put him up and Aziraphale’s cautious acceptance. They’d talked quietly on the bus ride back into London, puzzling over that final prophecy, puzzling over whether they would actually be able to do what they thought they needed to do, working through the intricacies of it all. But then, once the plan had been finalised and the bus driver had found himself trying to turn his vehicle around at the end of a quiet Mayfair street, they’d gone in to Crowley’s shining monolith of steel and glass and it seemed that fear had seized them both. They’d sat, side by side, on a spotless white leather sofa and drank blood-red wine in almost silence. Aziraphale himself had been shaking slightly, tiny tremors that ceased to desist, no matter how many times he ordered them to, whilst Crowley sat next to him, a good foot of safe space between them and simply stared out at the London skyline as the never-ending bottle was passed back and forth.

Eventually, as the street below them filled with noise and fumes, Crowley had turned his way at last and simply said, “Well. Shall we get this show on the road, then?” Aziraphale blew out a long breath and nodded, throat suddenly tight, and extended his hand out towards a Crowley who stared at it for so long that he almost drew it back again. Just as that tipping point was reached, though, just in the nick of time, Crowley’s fingers, dry and warm and sure, wrapped themselves around Aziraphale’s; contact was made though, bodies were swapped and Aziraphale found himself standing Crowley’s verdant room, in Crowley’s body, breathing far harder than he needing to and trying to pull himself back together, whilst Crowley volunteered to go and check on the ruins of the bookshop. It was not an average Sunday morning.

He’d felt a little better by the time he’d arrived in St James’ Park, wondered if it had something to do with inhabiting a corporation which hadn’t spent the last six millennia in a constant state of worry, and had been delighted to see the Bentley parked in its usual spot on the street, looking just as good as she always had. That sight lifted Aziraphale’s spirits even further as he knew just how much the thing meant to Crowley.

He reached the park sooner than he expected though and was relieved when he saw Crowley already waiting for him, gesturing to the ice cream stall even as he saw the angel approaching. He was just wondering if perhaps Adam had been able to also reboot the attitude of their employers towards them and their attempts to derail the Apocalypse when everything spun out of control once
again; a glimpse of Death and Crowley had gone from his side, dragged away by the ‘good’ guys in all of this. Aziraphale had panicked, even though they’d both known that a strike such as this had been coming. His attempts as retrieving the demon had come to nought, though, with the interference of Hell, Hastur specifically, and he’d awoken to find himself chained and slumped in a dark and dank cell.

The trial had been, quite frankly, terrifying, but all the way through, all Aziraphale could think was how much worse this would have been for Crowley, how completely and utterly terrible it would have been for him to stand there and listen to all of that and watch all of that and know that they were going to destroy him – and enjoy every moment of doing so. Thank everything good and kind for Agnes Nutter, and her incredibly perceptive and wonderful prediction. By the end of it all, Aziraphale was actually quite enjoying himself, terrifying the demons, stupefying Michael, finding a bit of Crowley’s wit and bite simply by inhabiting his body. It had been, in a bizarre manner, rather refreshing.

They’d met up again afterwards, Crowley as miraculously untouched as he himself was and – as much as he had enjoyed playing the demon – it was good to play himself once more. It was even better to get back into his own form and, yes, Crowley looked every bit as good in the new jacket, tartan collar and all, as Aziraphale had suspected he would. But then, Aziraphale always thought that Crowley looked good, it absolutely wasn’t the type of thought that an angel should be having about a demon, but then, Aziraphale knew with complete certainty that he hadn’t had an appropriately angelic thought about Crowley in five and a half thousand years… an appropriate thought at all, really…

They’d decided on the Ritz, with Champagne as effervescent as Crowley himself, which turned into tea at the Ritz with more Champagne, but a slightly quieter Crowley, dinner at the Ritz with Port and a decidedly subdued Crowley, and finally, drinks at the Ritz and a stumbling out into the night with an almost completely absent Crowley.

This change in temperament where his partner was involved was not that much out of the ordinary. As Aziraphale had observed Crowley getting more withdrawn as the evening had progressed, he’d simply put it down to the alcohol, and, remembering his own fit of the shakes the night before, the lingering trauma of the whole of the last week, he hadn’t been worried; Crowley was always so very…. transient in his moods.

Aziraphale himself had been cautiously hopeful. They’d lived, the pair of them, for so very long under the shadow of expectation from their respective head offices, the shadow of what was good (or evil) and proper (or improper), that he, himself, was finding the sudden lack of that censure utterly liberating. He felt that, at long, long last, he was free to think about what he actually wanted in life. Who he actually wanted in life. He’d spent so long trying to convince himself of what he’d known, deep down, was untrue, he was looking forward to investigating how wonderful things could be once he’d allowed himself to admit the truth. To embrace the truth. And he hoped he wasn’t being naïve in thinking that he wasn’t the only one who was looking forward to that change.
They’d stopped under a gently flapping Union Jack on the corner of Piccadilly over-looking a darkened Green Park and Aziraphale had turned, his heart lighter than it had been in as far back as he could tipsily remember, and just asked the question, threw it out there into the balmy night as Crowley stood, silently at his side. “Would you like to stay at mine tonight, dear boy?” he’d even been smiling, he remembered, completely unprepared for what was coming his way.

For a moment, Crowley hadn’t responded, his eyes, hiding behind those infernal shades, had been angled up and away from Aziraphale, looking up the roof of a blank-faced office block, his jaw tense, his posture stiff, and then he’d replied.

“No.”

Just the one, icy word and the surety of it all had brought Aziraphale up short.

“Oh,” it had been all he’d been able to formulate.

“I’d rather not,” the demon had added. Then, hands in his pockets, still determinedly facing the tops of the buildings, he’d just left, heading back down Piccadilly to where they, hours ago and together, had previously left the Bentley. Aziraphale had simply stood and watched him go, feeling foolish, and more than a touch bewildered, before he’d eventually roused himself and trailed back to the shop in slow contemplation.

And that had been that. Aziraphale understood how Crowley could be when he had something he needed to work through, and had given him some space, experience had taught him how futile it was to crowd him when he was being as prickly as this, and just waited. In the early days it might have taken centuries for Crowley to get over whatever it was that had irked him enough to appear at Aziraphale’s side once more. More latterly, it had fallen to years, months, weeks, and – since the eleven-year countdown had begun – days. So, he wasn’t that worried. Confused maybe, put out certainly; given his cautious hopes for this ‘breathing space’ they were living in – but still, not worried. And maybe they still could enjoy a fresh perspective on everything – just as soon as Crowley got over whatever it was that was rankling him.

It was on the eighth day, however, that things took that slightly sinister turn.

Aziraphale had had the Latin translation for years and had always suspected that it had been done very poorly. He’d never had the time to look it over, though, not with trying to keep up with the Antichrist-who-wasn’t, cancel out as much of Crowley’s demonic influence as possible, and still
have time for afternoon tea and charcuterie boards. He’d settled himself down that Sunday morning and set to work, tutting regularly at the sheer incompetence of the twelfth century translators, sipping, listlessly at cold tea and finally, jolting upright as he felt the change exactly as it happened.

For a moment, he simply sat, ink-stained fingers hovering over the aged text, brow furrowed as he tried to place what had happened. It was like… it was like… it was like a hole, a nothing, a space. A sound that suddenly stopped, a pain that suddenly ceased. The absence of stars in the night sky, the absence of chewing gum on the London pavements, the silence of the street outside abruptly emptying of traffic.

The hairs on his neck continued to rise, a shiver ran gently across his shoulders and Aziraphale found himself glancing, apprehensively around the shop. There was nothing there, though, nothing had entered to disturb the lazy floating of dust motes, nothing had left to take any of the Sunday serenity with it. Nothing had changed, nothing had happened, nothing had gone… he pushed to his feet, chair clattering to the floor behind him.

“Crowley.”

The word was pulled, almost unconsciously, from Aziraphale’s lips as, heart thudding uncomfortably in his chest fear surged through his veins. It had been so constant, so eternal that he’d stopped noticing it eons ago. That ceaseless, indefinable something, buzzing away at the back of his mind that told him that Crowley was here, Crowley was near-enough-by, Crowley was Crowley, should Aziraphale want him, need him… he shook his head, cheeks flushed. Whichever. But now… there was no buzzing, there was no sense of demon, the was no near-enough-by… there was no Crowley.

His hand was shaking ever so slightly as he reached for his phone and carefully dialled one of the only two numbers he knew off by heart. The phone in the flat rang once, twice, three times and then, “Hi, this is Anthony Crowley.”

“Crowley! Are you-”

“You know what to do. Do it with style.”

He slammed the phone down with rather more violence than was usual, hissing a vexed, “B**ger!” as he did so. After abstaining from swearing for more than four thousand years, it was a surprisingly easy habit to fall into. Snatching the receiver back up again, he dialled the other number, listening with confused fear as nothing at all happened. “B**ger!” he hissed again and
headed for the door.

It took him twenty minutes by cab to get the doors of Crowley’s flat, his eyes drifting dispassionately to the Bentley, parked quietly in its usual spot. By now, the silence in his head was so consuming that he didn’t even bother pressing the call button, he just waved his fingers as surreptitiously as possible and kept on walking. The front door swung wide for him, the lift pinged open in his face, but he ignored it, choosing instead to jog up the stairs, the worry pushing him into an exertion he usually preferred to avoid. The door to Crowley’s penthouse opened as he approached and Aziraphale rushed in, suddenly wondering if perhaps a little more caution would have been advisable.

“Crowley?” the time for that had past, though, and he dashed from room to room, eyes scanning every corner, his ears straining for the slightest murmur of life, “Crowley!” but there was nothing. He went from the lounge to the kitchen to the office to the bedroom. He examined the plants and the ceilings and behind the TV and under the bed. He looked into the empty cupboards and the fully-stocked fridge but there was nothing at all to give him any clue whatsoever as to where the occupant had gone. In fact – there wasn’t much of anything at all, the place that Aziraphale had always thought Crowley called home, was absolutely devoid of any trace of its owner at all, and the angel was beginning to suspect that it always had been. Finally, faced with a huge great big nothing to work on, Aziraphale let out a long sigh and sat heavily on the leather sofa, staring out at the London skyline, much as Crowley had done the morning after the aborted Armageddon. He had absolutely no idea what to do next.

He forced himself to think, Crowley had always had the ideas in their neat little team of two, but he tried to channel his inner-Crowley, tried to force himself to consider what his resourceful and mercurial companion would have come up with in similar circumstances but… it simply wasn’t easy. “Crowley!” he hissed again in frustration and stared up at the glass wall, catching the reflection of the Leonardo sketch amongst the scudding clouds. He turned, moderately surprised to see it there and wondered how Crowley had got it from the notoriously tight-fisted artist, how he’d managed to keep it so long, how well he’d known Leonardo himself, how he’d known him… and it suddenly occurred to him how little he, Aziraphale, knew of Crowley at all.

The flat for example. Like the Bentley, Crowley had had it since new, thirty years if Aziraphale’s memory was correct. Thirty years and had Aziraphale ever been in it before? In all that time? No. Not until the week before and Crowley’s casual invitation of, “You can stay at my place, if you like,” had he ever been invited into its concrete and chrome innards. And strangely enough, he’d not even really noticed that before.

He took the opportunity to look around now, tried to get a proper feel for the one being he’d thought he’d known best in all of existence. He wasn’t really sure what he’d thought of when he’d considered Crowley’s flat before, but it probably wasn’t this, that was for sure. The modern didn’t surprise him, neither did the gadgets – Crowley was always one for embracing the changing times – but the light did. And the plants. And the view. And for a demon who seemed to love the homely warmth of the book shop, the brutalist theme was, well, brutal. The place still looked like a show-
home though, but Aziraphale was left uncomfortably considering who the show was for; the
demon who lived there, or the man that demon wanted to be.

He walked back to Soho, pausing to examine the innocently gleaming Bentley on his way, and all
the time he walked and stared at every person he passed looking for answers, looking for Crowley,
he turned everything over and over in his mind. Where could Crowley have got to? Where would
he be where Aziraphale didn’t sense him anymore? Didn’t feel him? He supposed that ‘Head
Office’ would have been the obvious answer, but that just didn’t sit well with Aziraphale. In all the
years they had known each other, Crowley had been Downstairs plenty of times, just as Aziraphale
had been Upstairs, and not once, in all of those visits had he ‘vanished’ off the radar like this,
Aziraphale was sure of it. Another, far more troubling answer was also needling him, vibrating at
the back of his mind with images of holy water and that poor usher who’d been forced to try out the
bath that Michael had prepared for Crowley but – surely not, surely they wouldn’t try that again?
Why would they? They’d promised to leave him alone.

By the time that Aziraphale let himself back into the bookshop, though, that was the possible
explanation that Aziraphale had come up with and, as such, he knew it needed checking out. He
rubbed at his brow, really, really not wanting that to be the way he needed to spend his Sunday
evening, but, since there was nothing else for it, he set to work.

With heavy heart, he dragged his desk a little to the right and rolled up the carpet underneath,
coughing slightly as the clouds of dust billowed upwards. The chalked circle was still there and
Aziraphale frowned as he remembered the last time he’d done this, the time that had shown him
just how very alone he and Crowley were in everything. He pushed that thought away, though, and
instead started rubbing out some marks here and there, adding others in places, frowning and
tutting and muttering phrases like, ‘Oh, that won’t do at all,’ until he was happy he’d done it
correctly. He didn’t stop there, though. Rising to his feet again and brushing the dust from his
trousers, Aziraphale went over it all again, checking lines and passages and runes and marks until,
as the street outside started to slide into silence, he decided he was ready. He got the candles, lit
them with a flick of his fingers, carefully stepped inside his pentagram and spoke the Words.

It had taken two attempts to get through to someone from Upstairs the week before, Aziraphale had
resigned himself to the long wait for Downstairs, so was startled by the voice that instantly rang
out from somewhere near his feet.

WHAT?

Despite himself, Aziraphale shuffled back a little, only just managing to stay within the carefully
drawn lines and, clearing his throat to haul himself together a little, he looked down at the
floorboards with their glowing red lines and forced out a smile. “Good evening. This is the Principality Azir-”

WE KNOW WHO YOU ARE, ANGEL. NOW, WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Aziraphale hadn’t expected acquiring an audience to be quite so easy, but then, he reasoned, that was demons, wasn’t it? Always doing the least expected, always trying to lure in the unsuspecting.

“Yes, right,” he cleared his throat again, “And please tell me, with whom am I conversing?”

There was a pause, Aziraphale was wondering if he’d been hung up on and then, HASTUR. DUKE OF HELL. NOW GET ON WITH IT. I’M BUSY.

Aziraphale remembered Hastur from the trial, remembered how he’d hated Crowley, how much excitement he’d had for the ‘destruction’. He drew himself up a little, narrowed his eyes as he looked at the glowing runes around his feet. “Quite,” the tone was biting. “I am calling with an interpellation regarding-”

WHAT?

Another little sigh, “A question. I have a question for you. About Crowley.”

CROWLEY? CROWLEY THE DEMON?

“Is there any other Crowley known to us both?” Aziraphale felt that his snippily delivered retort had somewhat stumped Hastur. “Never mind. Yes, the demon, I was simply wondering-”

Hastur’s almost hysterical laughter cut him off, though, and Aziraphale felt his lips thinning in mounting anger.

THAT TRAITOR? CROWLEY THE TRAITOR? YOU HAVE A QUESTION FROM HIM?

Oh, really, for a Duke of Hell, this demon was incredibly stupid…
IS HE THERE? CAN HE HEAR ME?

Aziraphale’s frown deepened.

WELL, TELL HIM THAT HE’S GOT A CHEEK, THAT ONE, GETTING HIS PRISSY LITTLE ANGEL BOYFRIEND TO CALL US UP WITH WHATEVER IT IS HE WANTS FROM US NOW.

A cold sweat started creeping up Aziraphale’s back, cancelling out the flush on his cheeks.

HE’S A TRAITOR AND NOT ONE OF US ANYMORE. HE’S MADE HIS DECISIONS, HE’S CHOSEN HIS ALLIENCIES. HE COMES ANYWHERE NEAR ANY OF US AGAIN AND… Hastur seemed to struggle at this point, obviously remembering Crowley’s imperviousness to holy water and the fears about what else he could do. AND HE’LL REGRET IT, HE WILL. HE’LL REGRET IT. YOU TELL HIM THAT. FROM LORD BEEZLEBUB AND ME. YOU GOT THAT, ANGEL? YOU TELL HIM.

And then he was gone and Aziraphale was left, standing rigid in the centre of the now, slightly smoking, pentagram and wondering what the Hell, literally, that was all about. He stood for perhaps ten minutes, his mind spinning wildly and then, with yet another heavy sigh, stepped out. He sat on one of the battered old chairs he had dotted around the shop and stared at the row of dusty spines facing him from the bookshelf in front.

What was that? What was that? Was that Hastur lying to him? Throwing him off the trail? But… no… he hadn’t felt that. He hadn’t had the feeling that the Duke was being dishonest even though that was what Dukes of Hell were supposed to do. No… the demon had seemed genuinely incensed, genuinely worried that Crowley was trying to contact them. From this, Aziraphale could only ascertain that Hell, well Hastur at the very least, had no idea where Crowley was either.

Which left Aziraphale where exactly?

He was fairly certain that Crowley was no where on Earth, Hell either it seemed and so there was only one other place to look, a place that Aziraphale felt was a bad, bad idea at this particular moment in time. But what choice did he have? What would Crowley do in his place, if roles were reversed? With a nervous little twitch to his gut, Aziraphale knew only too well the reckless abandon that the demon would employ as he charged into Hell in search of a missing Aziraphale. Okay… so… right… Heaven then. But Aziraphale didn’t have to employ Crowley’s wild methods,
did he? Absolutely not, he could do this his own way, a more Aziraphale-friendly way, if Heaven had his friend, then they’d best get ready for trouble…
“You won’t find him here, you know.”

“A Freedom of Information Request?”

Aziraphale smiled in what he hoped was an engaging manner, “That’s correct, yes.”

“You are lodging a Freedom of Information Request. With Heaven?”

“Yes.”

“To see how many demons we are, currently, holding against their will?”

“Yes,” Aziraphale could feel his cheeks aching with the effort of keeping up his engaging smile. “Absolutely, dear girl, you have it in a nutshell.” For a moment, his countenance slipped a little as he wondered if he had committed a gross faux pas with his ‘dear girl’; just because the angel with which he was conversing had chosen to appear to him as a rather pretty, red-headed lady, it really didn’t mean that they identified as a she. Or a he. Or any an anything at all, for that matter: Aziraphale really needed to be more careful.

Fortunately, the angel, Erelah, hadn’t seemed offended by Aziraphale’s hasty use of gender-specific nouns, although that was probably because she was too busy being astounded that he would have the temerity to even consider launching a Freedom of Information Request at a celestial level. They stared at each other, Aziraphale doing his best to stand smart and assured as the rising sun crept through the dirty shop windows behind him, Erelah’s angelic face hovering in the shaft of silver light so recently occupied by the Metatron.

The stand-off dragged on, Aziraphale forced himself not to shift backwards and forwards up onto his toes, and simply concentrated on his smile, whilst Erelah stared at him and waited for him to back down. When he didn’t, despite an uncomfortably long impasse, she rolled her eyes slightly and threw out a curt, “Wait there,” before disappearing in a ripple of silvery goodness.

Aziraphale let out a long breath and sagged against the nearest bookshelf, his heart thumping uncomfortably in his chest. Oh, my word, for now his cursing had abandoned him once more, what am I doing? Crowley, my dear, what am I doing? Aziraphale often used Crowley as his barometer, but only when the demon wasn’t there to laugh at him. What would Crowley say about this? What would Crowley do if he were here? What would Crowley suggest? What would Crowley think? It had helped Aziraphale to choose the right – or wrong – path on many an occasion and on this
occasion, Aziraphale knew exactly what his friend’s laconic answer would be; Crowley would tell him to stand firm, to straighten his spine, to look them in the eye, so that’s what he tried to do.

The flash of light startled him when it came, but there was no Erelah this time, no anyone in fact, just the flash and then a single piece of best quality parchment floating serenely from the ceiling and into Aziraphale’s waiting hand. His fingers shook as they turned it over, spun it around so that the ostentatious Heavenly header was at the top and then he held his breath as he skimmed down the golden, looped writing, settling on the one, pivotal sentence he’d been waiting for: *Number of demons currently in Heaven, against their will or otherwise – zero.* And it was signed by Gabriel himself, the man at the top. Almost.

*Zero.*

*Zero.*

Coincidentally, that was also the number of ideas for progression that Aziraphale currently had in his head. He sat, roughly, on the wooden chair behind him and stared, sightlessly, at the books once more. What *was* he supposed to do now?

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He sat in silence for the rest of the day, forcing himself to trawl backwards and forwards through the events of the last week. What had he missed? What had slipped past him in his relief to still be on Earth doing what he loved with Crowley? But there was still nothing, still a great big hole where he felt that there should have been answers – and demons. It was a mystery of the type he just didn’t like.

A thought struck him then, and he chewed his lip pensively as he considered. It seemed awfully presumptuous, to be frank, but then… he really was quite desperate and the thought that somehow Crowley might just *need* him would not leave him alone and so, with a heavy sigh, he checked his wallet for cash and wandered out into the London streets to see if he could hail a taxi.

The taxi driver had seemed thrilled with Aziraphale’s request, and it did seem to be rather a large amount of money that he handed over at the end of their journey, but, no matter, Crowley was worth it all – and more. Steeling himself, Aziraphale raised a knuckle to rap out a sharp hello on the rustic old door, but before he had the chance, it swung open in his face.
“Aziraphale,” Anathema looked far more relaxed now that she wasn’t trying to save the world, and she smiled warmly at him, “Please come in.”

The same could not be said for Newt, however, whose smile was an attempt at welcoming, whilst his eyes were like saucers and seemed to be trained firmly onto the soft beige of Aziraphale’s jacket, as if expecting his wings to sprout at any given moment. Anathema sent him off to make tea in the kitchen and turned to face Aziraphale as he perched, awkwardly, on the edge of the sofa, her smile as gentle as his was brittle. “I don’t feel that this is a social call…”

“No, dear girl,” Aziraphale knotted his hands together in his lap, wondering why on earth he hadn’t rehearsed what he could say on the way over. He flicked a glance her way and braced himself, there was a clock in his head that seemed to be ticking louder and louder with every passing moment, he let out a little sigh, tugged his waistcoat down and simply launched into it. “Well,” he cleared his throat, “it would appear that I have – quite anomalously to be honest –” his fingers re-tightened their grip on themselves, “Well, it would appear that I have… misplaced Crowley.”

There was a pause, a stretch of silence, before he allowed his eyes to flick up, just as Anathema replied, “Misplaced him? Anomalously?”

Aziraphale nodded wretchedly as Newt passed around mismatched mugs of tea and Penguin biscuits before lowering himself, nervously, at Anathema’s side.

“Perhaps you had better explain.”

So Aziraphale did. He talked a little about their shared history, their pact regarding Adam (or more correctly, Warlock) and the buzzing. He mentioned their body-swap, the breathing space they’d hoped to enjoy and dinner at the Ritz. He left out the way it had ended of course, his dashed hopes, Crowley’s strange mood and the days of silence from his best – his only – friend; somehow, he just couldn’t persuade his mouth to form those words. “So,” he concluded with false brightness, “if he’s not in Heaven or Hell, or here on Earth with us, then I am really at a loss as to where he could be. And since dearest Agnes was so incredibly helpful in her advice regarding how we should deal with our respective employers, I was wondering,” the way that Anathema’s expression clouded and her eyes slipped, guiltily, towards Newt, did not fill him with any semblance of hope, “Well, I was hoping that there may be more of the same that you could put my way.”

This time the silence was marked, and heavy, and Aziraphale found that he couldn’t maintain his false cheer in the face of Anathema’s hands tightening around her untouched tea and her desperate expression.
“Aziraphale, I’m so sorry…”

Ah, of course.

“There were more prophecies,” another glance at Newt who was looking positively terrified by this point, “but… we burnt them.”

Aziraphale blinked. “Burnt them?”

“That’s right, yes.”

“Burnt them?”

Silence, as two pairs of eyes stared his way, both more than a little widened at this point.

Aziraphale swallowed, forced himself to push on, the girl’s prophecies were her own, after all. “Well,” his ever-hopeful smile was back to fluttering around his lips, “can you remember them at all? Any that might have helped me out a little here? I mean, I feel that Agnes wanted us to survive, wanted us to, to, succeed against the forces of Heaven and Hell, I mean, why would she do that if she was going to let Crowley just vanish at the end of it all?” Oh, he sounded so desperate, even to his own ears.

“We didn’t read any of them,” Anathema’s voice was barely a whisper.

“I see,” Aziraphale couldn’t hold eye contact anymore, “And this was the only copy of her newest prophecies?” he could feel something like heat rising inside him at her nod, “And she entrusted them to you?” Another nod, and now Aziraphale’s voice was rising with the heat, “But you burnt them? The only copy? Unread?”

The hands gripping Anathema’s Mini Mouse mug were white and trembling, but all Aziraphale could focus on was that there had been an answer here for him, a trail of crumbs for him to follow, and yet she had destroyed it, annihilated it before he’d even had the chance to see which direction it led him in. It was the cruellest of disappointments, one that stoked the desperate heat inside him and obscured the waves of despair which had been rippling ever stronger for the last twenty-four hours.
“Breathing space,” Newt interjected into the rising tempest and Aziraphale was so surprised to hear him speak that a slice of that heat fell away.

“Pardon me?” he prompted.

“Breathing space,” Newt looked to the stricken Anathema and then back to Aziraphale. “You said it yourself. You and Crowley hoped that you’d be left alone to live your lives your way without Upstairs or Downstairs telling you what to do – well, Anathema felt the same, she felt that she needed to be without Agnes telling her what that looked like.”

Aziraphale blinked again and stared at the two humans, side by side on the chintz sofa, Anathema’s white fingers now clutched in Newt’s long ones, which were trembling as he faced down an angel. Breathing space. Free will. Human life. Isn’t that exactly what he and Crowley had been hoping for? The heat inside him died down. The brittle smile returned. He dropped his gaze to the worn wooden floorboards.

“Quite,” he offered into the stifling silence. There was nothing here for him after all. “Quite, dear boy,” and then his throat closed all the way as he remembered the last being he’d used that endearment towards. He got up and left.

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There wasn’t really a plan in Aziraphale’s head as he hurried away from Jasmine Cottage, not a conscious one at any rate, but somebody, somewhere must have been driving him as he certainly wasn’t going to find a taxi to hail in the middle of Hogback Wood. He hurried along under the heavy canopy of summer leaves, his fingers still anxiously twining together, his mind turning and turning through his predicament.

“You won’t find him here, you know.”

The voice rang out clear in the heat of the perfect afternoon and Aziraphale stood for a moment, turning on the spot, before his eyes flickered upwards to a thick branch of oak and the first thought that struck him was, ‘How in Heaven’s name did he get that dog up there?’

“Adam,” he forced out a friendly greeting and wondered if he’d actually been seeking the boy out. “How are you? How’s… everything?”
Adam shrugged. “Yeah, it’s okay, thanks. Pepper’s on holiday this week, gone to Cornwall with her mum and her sister so it’s a bit quiet. But, yeah, everything’s okay, really.”

“Right,” Aziraphale was at a loss as to what to say next as he squinted up into the tree, “I see. Super. Glad to hear it.”

“And you?” Adam countered, “Everything okay with you?”

“No, not really,” Aziraphale admitted, “I just wondered if Anathema might have some ideas, well, Agnes really, or, well, you, I suppose.” He looked up and met Adam’s wide, blue eyes, “I suppose I must have wondered whether you had any ideas or any way in which you could find him…?” he trailed off, hating the desperation that must have been evident in his every word.

Adam frowned, and Aziraphale’s heart sank yet again as his gaze fell back to the damp ground. “Not really,” the tone of voice was the same as any boy of eleven might use in discussing how fond he was of visits to his elderly Aunt’s house. “I can’t really do that much now, you know? I think I like it better like that.” Aziraphale found himself wondering if the lack of ‘doing’ was actually by Adam’s own design. “I certainly can’t find him for you, or even suggest where he might be. I’m sure you’ve looked in loads of places.”

“Quite,” Aziraphale agreed.

“Only…” Ridiculous hope flared in the angel’s chest and his eyes leapt to meet Adam’s once more, “Well, he must be somewhere, right? He’s not just nowhere?”

Aziraphale winced, “Well, I don’t know. I mean, I don’t really know where a demon would go if he were to be,” the wince deepened, “Well, you know…”

“Destroyed?”
Aziraphale held his stare.

“With holy water or something?”

Nausea swam through Aziraphale’s corporation as Adam frowned at him.

“But who would do that? Both heaven and hell know they’ve tried that and it didn’t work – do you really think they’d just do it again? Try the same thing? Why would they do that?”

“I don’t know,” Aziraphale admitted, “But I just can’t feel him anymore and that’s never happened before, and I can’t think what-”

“Well, someone’s hiding him then. From you. Someone who knows you’d come and get him is hiding him from you – it’s simple really,” Adam smiled at him and produced a Drumstick lolly from a pocket somewhere, unwrapping it with unnatural ease and popping it into his mouth.

“Hiding him…” Aziraphale’s heart was pounding in his chest.

“Who’d want to hide a demon, your demon,” Adam added and Aziraphale flushed, “and, more importantly, who knows how to do it?”

There was a beat of thought, “Demon hunters…” Aziraphale breathed and Adam frowned around his lolly.

“Really?” he waved the stick in the air as he thought, smiling at Dog who was sitting so politely wondering if he would get a treat. “Are they even real? I thought, you know, they were all made up. Like Van Helsing. Or Buffy.”

“Well, no, there are demon hunters,” Aziraphale’s mind was charging onwards at the speed of light. “People who dabble, you know? Play about with runes and demon traps and… well, other things. And sometimes, yes! Sometimes, more by luck than design, they are successful in trapping a demon! Yes, yes, that must be it! Yes…”
Turning, Aziraphale started back the way he had come, his fingers now clenched at his sides, his frown more determined than despairing – he had a plan once more, a lead he could follow and maybe, just maybe, this would actually lead him to Crowley. “Thank you!” he glanced distractedly over his shoulder to find Adam frowning at him, “And look after yourself, dear child, I shall be in contact with you sometime in the near future.”

Lolly forgotten, Adam took a step after him along the path. “Demon hunters?” he queried again. “Are you sure? Would some experimenting human even be able to trap something like Crowley? Hide him from you?”

“Of course, of course! Thank you, again, Adam!” Aziraphale offered a jaunty wave as he turned the corner of the path and headed back towards Tadfield and the hope of a taxi, but he could feel the remains of the frown across his shoulders as he went. It had to be demon hunters, though, didn’t it? Who else could it be? The only other entities who were capable of such a feat would come from Heaven or Hell and Aziraphale had already checked with them, neither side knew where Crowley was, they’d told him so.

*Maybe they lied…* suggested a voice in Aziraphale’s head, a voice that sounded a lot like Adam’s.
It was dark by the time that Aziraphale made it back into London, and he’d needed to use a miracle in order to replenish the money in his wallet and pay the taxi driver. He didn’t alight from the taxi outside his bookshop, though, or even on the pavement outside Crowley’s building, no, he found himself standing outside a neat row of suburban terraces, adjusting his waistcoat after his long journey and hoping that this wouldn’t be half as awful as he suspected it might be.

Steeling himself, he walked up to one of the doors and rapped, smartly on the painted wood, bolstering himself as the door opened to reveal a demur-looking lady of advancing years, dressed in a rather prim looking twin set and smiling at Aziraphale as he started to introduce himself. “Ah, good evening dear lady. I do apologise for interrupting your domesticity in this manner, but I am looking for a gentleman by the name of-”

“Mr. Aziraphale!” the demur lady exclaimed, her smile widening as she reached for his arm, “How absolutely wonderful to see you again so soon!” Aziraphale blinked at her. “By yourself?” she queried, leaning around to look along the pavement, “Ah, no matter. Do come in, though, dearie. I can put the kettle on and we can have a cuppa and a lovely catch up. Come in, come in, do!”

Aziraphale found himself drawn into what was obviously a shared hallway, bleak but functional with a telephone mounted on the wall in a sea of magnolia coloured wood-chip. His hostess smiled again and gestured to a door which stood open a little way along the hallway, “Come on, this way, goodness me, you look almost dead on your feet, you poor thing! Have you been having a time of it? Come on, come and sit down, tell me everything and then you can have a look at some of the cottage details I’ve got from the Estate Agents.” She blushed a little at that and gestured to a comfortable-looking sofa where Aziraphale sat whilst she then bustled over to the little galley kitchen off her main reception room.

“Madame Tracy?” Aziraphale’s mind was just starting to catch up with proceedings, “You look-”

“Oh, Marjorie, please dear. If you don’t mind?” For the second time in a day, tea and biscuits were set out before Aziraphale, but this time the cups and saucers were china – white, with pink flowers – and the biscuits were Party Rings. Madame Tracy smiled at him as she sat in the chair to his left and Aziraphale felt a fluttery little smile rising to his lips to meet hers and took a deep breath, attempting to settle himself.
“Marjorie,” he was sure that she actually blushed at that. “Thank you. And you are looking… really quite lovely today, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Oh, Mr Aziraphale! You charmer!” the blush deepened. “It’s a good job that Sergeant Shadwell isn’t here to hear you saying such scandalous things,” she smiled warmly at him, “Or, your young man, either, Mr Crowley! He not with you tonight?”

“Ah, no, unfortunately,” Aziraphale took a sip of tea in an attempt to lubricate his suddenly dry mouth and weathered the swoop his stomach had made at the mere mention of Crowley’s name. “And no Sergeant Shadwell?” That was a blow to his hopes, “Will he be back any time this evening?”

“No…” much like Aziraphale, Madame Tracy seemed to find the lack of her partner in crime rather difficult. “He’s actually up in Scotland. The Borders. Looking at some properties…” what could only be described as a beatific smile crept over her face and, for the first time in days, Aziraphale felt the warm seeping touch of love wash against him. She tapped the pile of property details on the table next to the tea tray, “We’re relocating.”

“Ah,” Aziraphale graced her with the best smile he could possibly manage, but in reality, his insides were squirming with a cold feeling he felt, rather uncomfortably, might have been jealousy. “How very lovely,” he hoped his smile was convincing enough. “I’m so excited for you.”

Madame Tracy eyed him over the rim of her tea cup as she sipped, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that she had seen straight through his charade, but she nodded in reply and thanked him quietly before asking, “But you wanted the Sergeant? Is there something you needed from him? It’s just, well, we are both planning on retiring as soon as we get the move sorted out.”

Retiring… the cold squirming was back in Aziraphale’s stomach but he did his best to beat it down and cranked his smile up another notch. “Ah! Delightful!” the word was still almost spat out, though. “No, no, my dear lady, I didn’t need him to do anything, I was more interested in asking him what he’d heard.”

“Heard?” Madame Tracy carefully selected a pink Party Ring.

“Yes. I know that the Sergeant keeps his ear to the ground, so to speak, listening out for anything Witch-related,” Aziraphale leaned forward slightly in his seat, unable to keep the hope, the hopeless hope, from spinning out in every word he spoke. “Well, I’m actually looking for anyone
who might have come across,” he swallowed, “a… a… a demon.” As Aziraphale smoothed down the linen of his already-smooth trousers, he missed the way that Madame Tracy’s face crumpled at that word. “I was wondering what the word was, on the street, as it were.”

“On the street?” she clarified, painful sympathy in every line of her face.

“Absolutely.”

“Well,” she was obviously thinking, running conversations backwards and forwards in her mind before offering Aziraphale a paltry smile of her own. “I really can’t think of anything he’s said, Mr Aziraphale, I’m afraid he might have been rather a little distracted, at late, from his usual Witch-finding fervour.”

“Ah…”

“But he may well have heard something! I can ask him if you like? He usually calls here around ten o’clock? Once he gets back to the B&B? Would you like me to ask him? See what he’s heard? If there’s anyone he can think to check with? See if anyone has seen Mr-, seen any demons at all?”

It was Aziraphale’s turn to flush, he could feel it creeping across his cheeks as he stared at the carpet between his feet. “That would be most helpful,” there was no way he could dredge his smile up any longer. “Most helpful indeed. Thank you, so kindly.”

Midnight found him back at the bookshop at last. No further on and even more discouraged than he had been. He wandered through the silent shelves, feeling the yawning emptiness of not having Crowley and his noise and his constant movement and his sheer presence rippling around him. Aziraphale had always, right from the very first, liked spending time with Crowley; liked talking to him, liked listening to him, liked the way the demon made him laugh, liked the way he made him feel. For many years, he’d been well aware that he probably liked all of those things far more than he really should, but he’d felt it was in the same way that he’d liked Châteauneuf-du-Pape, Chilean chocolate and those tiny little goats cheese tarts from Harrods. This last week had taught him – with brutal efficiency – that Aziraphale liked Crowley far more than any of those other things. Liked him far more than anything, really. Liked him so much, that it could hardly be described as ‘liking’ any longer.
And was that revelation a shock to him? Of course not, if Aziraphale had been less of a coward over the last, oh, thousand years? Then he would have admitted this to himself a long, long time ago, and maybe now he wouldn’t be standing here feeling so utterly useless and totally bereft.

He wandered over to his ancient desktop computer and powered it on, coming back with a mug of cocoa in his hand just as the dial-up-tone vanished from the room and the CompUserv homepage blinked at him in welcome. He could almost hear Crowley’s sardonic, ‘The nineties are on the phone, angel, they want their modem back…’ as he sat down, taking a deep breath before typing ‘Demon sightings, London area, please’ into his search engine. As the results scrolled up before him, Aziraphale sighed and took a sip of cocoa – it was going to be a long night.

“‘It’s always been my sister’s absolute favourite book!’”

“How lovely.”

“She will be completely thrilled to get this. I’m so excited to give her it!”

“I’m sure.”

“It’s so kind of you to wrap if for me as well.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“I wish it was Christmas morning already.”

“Only three weeks to wait.”

“I know… I’m so bad at waiting though! Especially if it’s something I really want.”

Aziraphale simply nodded as he threaded a snowflake shaped gift tag onto the ribbon wrapped around the first edition of Alcott’s *Flower Fables* he was selling; he’d never liked waiting either,
but sometimes there just wasn’t any other option.

“Oh, that’s beautiful!”

“Quite.”

“And five hundred pounds, you said?”

A credit card was pushed Aziraphale’s way and he stared at it for a moment, trying to remember the times before, when he hadn’t ever wanted to part with one of his precious books. That was from a life when he hadn’t already lost the only thing he’d ever really cared about.

“Take it as a gift, my dear, we’ll waive the fee.”

“What?” it was the quietest the woman had been since she’d first stepped into Aziraphale’s shop almost an hour ago.

“A Christmas gift. From me to you. Take it,” suddenly he just wanted her gone.

“I couldn’t possibly-”

“Please do,” Aziraphale lifted the package from the desk and shoved it into her hands. “It’s late and I need to lock up and I’m really in no mood to argue over Christmas spirit so please,” he pushed out a tight smile. “Just take it.”

Looking quite uneasy, the woman allowed Aziraphale to almost propel both her and her purchase out of the shop, turning around in shock as the door was slammed and locked behind her, the closed sign displayed and the blind pulled down in almost the same movement. Aziraphale turned into the blessed silence and sagged against the comforting grain of his door, closing his eyes and forcing steady breaths in and out of his chest until his emotions settled once more. Another day survived, he mused as he shuffled slowly through to his back room. Another one to add to the hundred and twelve he’d already lived through since last seeing Crowley; it was hardly something to get excited about.
He sat, heavily, down on the sofa where Crowley had spent so many evenings draped over its length and closed his eyes. He wasn’t tired, well, not in a way that sleep would relieve, but he’d been busy all these long nights of loneliness, busy sweeping as far as he could possibly reach with his grace, busy trawling the Earth and space, the solar system and now beyond, searching desperately for any trace at all of his demon.

Alpha Centauri was his destination, eventually. He’d remembered Crowley’s offer, and his threat, and wondered if, for whatever reason made sense to a demon who’d just saved the world and survived an assassination attempt, whether he hadn’t actually gone there. Aziraphale had no confidence at all in himself making the journey alone – unlike Crowley, he’d never been to the stars before – but it had occurred to him that he could maybe reach that far with his grace, if he trained, if he persisted, if he endured. After Shadwell and his own internet search had drawn a blank, what else was there he could possibly do?

Again, he forced his breathing to be slow and calm and, as he slipped into a state of deep concentration, he let his very essence creep out into the night, peering and probing as it went.

The sound of the street cleaners emptying the street bins outside his shop jolted him back to awareness as another new day dawned in London’s West End. He blinked a few times, waiting for his essence to regroup inside him and congratulated himself on the distance travelled during the night. He was now reaching three light years away from Earth, another couple of nights and perhaps he could even reach the star itself. Not that he was expecting to find anything there – there would be no way that Crowley could have gone so far without leaving a trace of his own essence along the route and there hadn’t been even the slightest of hints. But what else could Aziraphale do but look?

He sat for a moment longer, toying with the idea of leaving the shop closed for the day but he gave himself a mental shake and pushed determinedly to his feet. Giving up, giving in to the despair that stalked him, simply wasn’t an option, as far as he was concerned. Crowley had not gone for good. At some point Aziraphale would find him and then he would need the angel to be ready to offer whatever assistance he would require. To believe anything else, would be to betray his closest friend.

With nothing more than a thought, Aziraphale was cleaned and refreshed and dressed in a new three piece suit. He straightened his bow tie and headed for the kitchen, “What do you think, my dear? A nice cup of Assam before we open?” he refused to think of addressing the silence as talking to the absent Crowley. “Or Darjeeling perhaps? Mauritian even? For a change.” There was no answer to his musing, so he selected the Assam and made a whole pot, warming it first and turning it carefully before pouring. He added just a splash of milk into his favourite cup, the one with the little blue sunshines dotted around, topped it up with the heavenly smelling amber liquid
and closed his eyes as he lifted it, ready for his first sip of the day.

The sound of smashing china rent open the silence of the bookshop as Aziraphale’s carefully pressed cream coloured trousers were suddenly splattered in liberated Assam. It was a situation that, normally, would have had him fussing and moaning and agonising over whether he could use a miracle to fix his china and his trousers, or whether he should try and deal with it in a more human manner. On this particular morning, however, Aziraphale hardly seemed to even notice the tea seeping into his spotless linen, he stood transfixed, staring, sightlessly at the teapot tiles on the wall of his kitchen, his superfluous heart thundering away in his chest as he tried to make sense of what he was feeling. The moment seemed to last for hours, but, in reality, was nearer seconds before his fuddled brain managed to sort through the information it was receiving and deliver the verdict, “Crowley!” He was out of the door and hailing a taxi before the tea had finished dripping onto his comfortable brogues.

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“How much longer do you think this will be?” he knew he sounded rude and cared very little.

The taxi driver blew out a long, whistling breath, “Uh, dunno, Gov. You see the traffic was stacked up right down Park Lane when I-” he stopped at that, wondering what the strange noise was he’d heard from the back seat. It hadn’t been the sound of the door opening and closing, he was sure of that, but now his cab was empty, no fussy, overdressed passenger to be seen anywhere. Just a crisp twenty pound note, which was more than the fare so far into the job anyway. He shrugged to himself, reached through the glass screen to pocket his money and flicked the metre off. Looked like it was going to be another one of those days…

It was risky to just vanish from the back of a taxi on Wardour Street and then miraculously appear in the hallway outside Crowley’s flat, but Aziraphale was honestly well past caring and could barely even think rationally over the pounding of his heart and the trembling of his limbs. His hands were sweaty as he reached the familiar doorway and he forced himself to pause, to take a deep breath, to accept that he had no idea what he would find on the other side, if he would find anything on the other side, and also that he might be in great danger here. Sufficiently prepared, well, as prepared as he would ever be able to find himself, Aziraphale reached out to the handle, imagined the door unlocked, and simply walked through as it opened for him.
‘Minimalist’ was how Crowley had described his flat, ‘bare, barren and cold’ had seemed more appropriate from Aziraphale’s point of view, but even that description held nothing to the atmosphere when Aziraphale stole, silently into the hallway. It was December, granted, but the flat was perishing cold, the smell of damp and empty assaulting the sensitive insides of Aziraphale’s nostrils. From where he stood near the doorway, there was a clear view down to the room where the plants lived and, even from his distance, Aziraphale could see that they were all dead, their leaves, withered and dried, littering the floor and their decomposition adding to the stench of the place; he belatedly realised that maybe he should have been watering them for Crowley.

There was a silence as well, thick and suffocating and Aziraphale could feel the tendrils of fear waking up inside him as he wondered if his feeling of Crowley was misleading, if maybe he wasn’t back after all, or maybe this was just Aziraphale’s heightened essence, picking up a reading from Proxima Centauri or something, or- he froze in his panicked ramblings, that had been a sound, he was sure of it. A sound, coming from the bathroom just along the hallway from him. He swallowed and edged forward, cursing the noises his feet made on the over-polished tiles, he didn’t speak, he couldn’t, but he did find himself wishing, rather fervently, for his flaming sword. Yes, there was definitely movement in the bathroom, definitely someone in there. Gathering his courage, Aziraphale crept forward, heart pounding, hands flying up to protect himself as the door suddenly swung back in his face and a figure stood there, brandishing a chrome toilet roll holder above his head.

For the count of ten, they stood, frozen in an almost-comic tableau, and then Crowley was the one to move first, deflating like an unwanted bouncy castle, the toilet roll holder clattering to the floor as he slumped down, collapsing onto the edge of the roll top bath, one arm wrapped around his ribs, the other resting on his knees, holding his head up. “Aziraphale,” his voice was shaking as much as Aziraphale’s entire body, “what the fuck are you trying to do to me?”

For a beat, Aziraphale stood and stared down at him, cataloguing the usual clothes, the usual hair, the paler than usual complexion, the shaking… then he dropped to his knees between Crowley’s feet. “Crowley, dear boy, where have you been?” He touched then, he had to, all the months of fear and loneliness were stacking up on top of him, weighing him down and so he just had to. He recoiled just as fast, though, jerking backwards with a gasp as Crowley violently twitched under his hand. “Crowley,” he could barely get the words out as his hands crept forward once more, tentatively this time, sliding up black-clad thighs, “Crowley, you’re hurt!”

“I’m fine!” the word was hissed from reluctant lips.

“You’re not fine, you’re hurt! I can feel it in you, you’re really hurt…” Aziraphale could feel it as well, the vicarious agony flowing into him from where his palms rested on taut thighs and now, he could even smell the wet demon-blood, hiding under layers of immaculate clothing.
Crowley didn’t move.

“Come on, let me see.”

Nothing.

“Crowley…” Aziraphale spread his fingers wider, he closed his eyes and reached, feeling through the figure in front of him, recoiling so fast he ended up sprawled on his backside on the cold tiles, his face slack in shock, his eyes wide in horror as Crowley erupted at the intrusion.

“Don’t!” he hissed again, his naked, yellow eyes zeroed right in on Aziraphale. “Don’t touch me!”

“Oh, my heaven…” Aziraphale’s eyes were wide. “Oh, my dear…” he could still feel the grating of broken bones beneath his palms, the tearing of lacerated skin, the misfiring of damaged organs… it was a miracle that the body he wore hadn’t already disorporated. Crowley’s head drooped down into his hand again as Aziraphale edge forward. “Who did this to you?”

Silence.

“Crowley…” Aziraphale pushed back to his knees but didn’t touch, not yet, “Why haven’t you healed yourself?”

Silence.

“Here, my dear, let me help.”

The memory of the feel of broken bones and beaten flesh was pulsing through his palms as one hand reached out, one hand only, but Crowley exploded again, lashing out with the arm that had held up his head, flicking Aziraphale’s hand away from him, wincing as the effort shifted his fractured ulna. “Don’t touch me!”

Aziraphale rocked backwards again, sitting on his heels this time, his face slack in shock, the fleeting touch enough to discern the residual energy running through Crowley’s form – the residual angelic energy.
“Angels did this?” his words were barely a breath, Crowley’s hand slid up over his eyes, Aziraphale leaned back in again, “Angels did this to you? You’ve been in Heaven all this time?!”

“Aziraphale, please…”

“But I asked them!”

Crowley shook his head.

“I… I… submitted a Freedom of Information Request!”

Crowley shook his head again.

“They lied to me…”

Silence slipped over them again. Crowley’s trembling, as he remained perched on the roll of the bath, was getting worse with every passing moment. Aziraphale sighed, biting down on his swirling emotions and edging as close as he dared, “Let me heal you.”

Nothing.

“Crowley, please. It’s obvious that you’re in no state to heal yourself, and, well, quite frankly I’m worried that you’re going to discorporate right in front of me!”

Nothing.

“Please. Now is not the time to be stubborn!”

A short laugh at that, bitter, and choked off, as if it wasn’t worth the added pain to indulge in resentment. “I think I’ve had about enough of angelic interference, right now, to be honest.”
Aziraphale gaped, “I’d never hurt you!”

Crowley just shook his head once more.

“Crowley, please-”

“Go home, angel,” it was the first time that word had ever been used and made to sound like an insult.

“Oh, come on…”

“Don’t!”

“Let me help you!”

“No!”

“Why won’t you let me-”

“Just go, Aziraphale!”

“This is ridiculous!”

“Go…”

“I could make you feel so much more comfortable in a moment!”

“Please go…”
“Oh, for goodness sake…” Aziraphale reached out, pressed his palm back to Crowley’s thigh and concentrated, pushing a healing miracle outwards, feeling it flowing into Crowley, mending bruises, melting skin, straightening bones, but then he recoiled yet again, sprawling backwards onto his elbows as Crowley screamed, jerking away from Aziraphale’s hand and falling backwards into the bath, his arms wrapped around his ribs, the scream fading away into an awful, sobbing, hitching sound as he crashed into the porcelain, rolling onto his front, drawing his knees up underneath himself, shaking and convulsing, eyes screwed close, breath catching in his throat.

“Oh! Oh!” Aziraphale scrambled across the tiles on his knees, gripping the roll top and gaping in horror. “Crowley, my dear, I’m so sorry!”

Crowley didn’t answer, he was too busy keening in distress, pressing his forehead to the cold porcelain and, as Aziraphale stared in horror, he lost control of his corporation, letting his wings erupt from his back, accompanied by a groan of utter agony.

Aziraphale clamped his hand to his mouth, his eyes filling with tears as he took in the pitiful sight before him, watching in horrified helplessness as, what was left of Crowley’s stunningly beautiful wings, flapped and shuddered before him. They were broken, that much was obvious, the fine bones snapped clean through in more than one place, ruptured skin, white and edged in old blood. They were also featherless – not a single one remaining, tiny, bloody cavities indicating where each one had been viciously ripped out, tight, bone-white skin all that remained, two shuddering stick-like appendages where Stunning wings had once been. “Oh my God!” the blasphemy wrenched from his lips much like Crowley’s wings had been hauled from his back.

As Crowley shook and whimpered and tried, again and again, to fold his broken wings away, Aziraphale’s shock was slowly being eaten away by something that felt uncomfortably like rage. He drew himself up onto his knees, fingers tight on the roll of the bath. “Who was it?” he whispered, heat swirling through him, filling him, charging him. “Who did this?”

Crowley didn’t answer, he was still far too busy riding out the waves of pain that Aziraphale’s aborted healing had awoken.

“Was it Gabriel?”

Crowley shuddered as he finally managed to fold his wings in once more.

“How. Dare. He?” Slowly, Aziraphale got to his feet, unable to wrench his gaze away from the
agonised demon in the bath. “What was he thinking? Surely he’d know that if he were to come after you, then I would come after him?” The anger roiled and heaved inside him. “This time, he’s just gone far too far…”

“Aziraphale…”

“To touch your wings…” Aziraphale’s anger swelled inside him, enlarging his corporation, bending the physical rules of the bathroom in order to allow him to remain standing in the same room as Crowley despite being over thirty feet tall and still growing. “To touch your wings!”

“Aziraphale, please…”

“How dare he!” The anger coiled and exploded into fury, flashing out through Aziraphale’s eyes, turning the cornflower blue into molten, white heat. Yet again, he found himself wishing for his flaming sword, but this time it simply appeared in his hand, ten feet long and blazing in a white hot fury identical to his own. “Right,” he hissed, his voice warbling and resonating as curtains of disgust pulled closed around him, “Right…” he crouched where he stood, ready to spring out into the morning air.

“Aziraphale!” a thin, pale hand flopped over the side of the bath, grabbing onto the linen of his glowing trousers as he spun to leave. “Don’t you fucking dare!”

“What?” the outrage in Crowley’s voice had cut the slightest edge off his fury, dimmed down the glowing of his eyes, awoke him once more, just enough to let him hear.

“I have just spent,” Crowley hissed in pain as he twisted round onto his knees in the tub, his fingers still latched onto Aziraphale’s trousers, “four months with that jumped up prick. Four months as his fucking plaything, denying any knowledge of what you are, what you’d done, how you’d become immune to their punishments, denying all knowledge of you, just to keep you safe… and you’re going to what? Throw all that shit back in my face, going in there in full avenging angel mode, lit up like a fucking Christmas tree? Defending my honour, and to what? Smite him?” a bitter laugh burst forward. “Aziraphale, you wouldn’t last five minutes against him. I made my choices,” his fingers slipped from the material of Aziraphale’s trousers, leaving a tiny smudge of blood in their wake as he slithered back into the bath, his shaking arm folded across his eyes. “And dial it down a little will you? You’re fucking burning me here…”

Aziraphale stood and stared down at him, the sword stuttering and fading into nothing, the righteous anger waning from his eyes, his corporation shrinking until he felt even smaller than usual. “Oh, my dear…” Small and utterly useless.
Crowley was silent in the base of the tub, his limbs shaking, his chest heaving as he sucked in breath he didn’t really need.

Letting out a long sigh, Aziraphale sank to his knees once more.

“Don’t,” the word was little more than a breath, “touch me.”

“I won’t.”

“You need to leave.”

Aziraphale’s forehead sank onto his arms. “Crowley, how can—”

“You need to leave. Now, Aziraphale. I’ve had about as much of angels as I can honestly take.”

‘I’d never hurt you…’ fortunately, the words stayed in Aziraphale’s head. “Crowley…”

“You need to leave. Satan, Aziraphale, aren’t you listening to me, here?”

“I can help you!”

“Leave!” Crowley gritted his teeth and hauled himself up into a sitting position. “Get the hell out of my flat, angel, you hear me?”

Shakily, Aziraphale stood. “Crowley!”

“Okay then, I’ll go!” he started scrabbling to pull himself up and out of the bath.

“No! No! You’re hurt!”
“Go then!” Crowley rounded on him, his yellow eyes flashing, his cheeks sinking to further emphasise the sharp bones above them, his jaw lengthening, making space for fangs to descend, claws sprouting from the ends of his fingers as his voice deepened and reverberated, bouncing off the tiled walls of the bathroom. “GO!”

Aziraphale went.
“Take that back, demon!”

Chapter Notes

Please check for updated tags :)

He didn’t go far, though. How could he possibly leave after missing Crowley for so long? After seeing how hurt he was? After seeing what Gabriel and whoever else had done to him? In Aziraphale’s name as well. Staying had seemed counterproductive though, in all their years together Aziraphale had never hurt Crowley by healing him, and Crowley had never gone all demon on him either… But still, he couldn’t actually leave.

He went as far as the roof, using a miracle, suddenly completely unconcerned as to whether it was ‘frivolous’ or not, he shifted straight upwards, wanting the slimmest of barriers between himself and Crowley as the demon licked his wounds in his penthouse flat. On rematerialising, he stood for a moment in the chill morning wind, breathing into his palms as he tried to collect his thoughts.

They’d lied to him.

And really, of course they’d lied; he was a ridiculous and thorough stupid buffoon for letting them convince him so easily. His cheeks burned as he thought how they must have laughed at their own cleverness before going back to whatever secret place where they were hiding Crowley, just to hurt him anew. To try and get him to reveal Aziraphale’s secrets. For the first time in his life, Aziraphale felt sick to his stomach.

After a few silent minutes, he closed his eyes and tentatively reached downwards, careful not to cause any additional pain. He could feel Crowley’s presence, could feel that he was healing himself; slowly, slowly, barely a trickle of demonic energy being spared from keeping his body alive. He was going for the easiest ones first, keeping right away from his mangled wings for now. Aziraphale stood, his back to the wind, his eyes closed, just feeling, desperate to do more but helpless – and so terrified that Crowley would sense him and flee.

Eventually, the healing slowed and Crowley slid into sleep, nowhere near completely healed, but enough to stave off discorporation, for now, and all Aziraphale could hope for was that he’d managed to get himself out of the bath tub and into his bed before he slept. He wasn’t planning on going anywhere, though; he had no plans on leaving at all until Crowley was back on his feet. He turned to survey his surroundings, he’d never even given them the slightest sliver of attention until now and, as soon as he looked over his shoulder, his stomach swooped once more and he felt the unwelcome prickle of tears in his eyes.
He was standing on the roof of Crowley’s building. It should have been a utilitarian space, there was the top of the lift shaft, an air-conditioning unit, a few shabby-looking solar panels, access only through an awkward-looking hatch and… what should have been the most stunning roof garden that Aziraphale had ever seen. He stepped forward, drawn onwards almost against his will, as he took in the neat rows of vegetables, over-ripe now, gone to seed and bird-pecked; the raised beds which would have housed summer blooms, traditional cottage-garden fare, but were now faded and dried and sagging as they rotted. There was a green house, a good size and obviously top of the range, stuffed with a mixture of dead tomato plants and grape vines, as well as tray upon tray of dried-up seedlings. A herb garden, set out in neat, symmetrical sections, an extinct fountain at its head, the herbs all overgrown and seeded like everything else. Various seats and benches, some positioned to catch the sunrise, some the sunset or the view across the city. A summer house, right in the corner offering up a view of the whole plot, as well as the distant Houses of Parliament, two folding chairs set next to each other inside, one worn and well-used, one freshly pristine.

As if on auto-pilot, Aziraphale crossed the gravelled paths, feeling the stones crunch under his shoes, and let himself into the summer house. He’d had no idea that any of this had existed, no idea at all. Had Crowley kept it to himself? Trusted no one enough, not even Aziraphale, to let them into this private part of himself? Spectres of loneliness chased around in his head as Aziraphale closed his eyes for a moment at the familiar smell of its owner, before sitting himself, gingerly, in the pristine chair, reaching out a shaking hand to grip the arm of the other, before, finally succumbing to the abject sorrow running through his veins and allowing his tears to flow.

Once the tears had run dry, Aziraphale simply sat in the summer house, watching over Crowley as he slept, trailing backwards and forwards through his mind, identifying all the things he could have done differently, all the ways he could have seen through Gabriel’s deceit and been some actual use to his friend. The opportunity for wallowing didn’t last long, however, the washy sun had only just reached the zenith of its wintery course when Aziraphale felt a spike of distress leap up through the roof beneath him. He got to his feet, heart beating hard against his chest, and felt around, wondering how something could have snuck up on Crowley without him noticing. There was nothing there, though, nothing ethereal, nothing occult, only he and Crowley and… he closed his eyes, Crowley’s terror.

He dropped to his knees, fingers splayed across the wooden slats of Crowley’s summer house, and concentrated. It was a fine line to travel, sending enough divinity down to soothe and calm and change Crowley’s dreams for whatever he wanted to have in his mind as he slept, without waking him from what was desperately needed rest, and without causing any more pain as he had with his attempts at healing.

Eventually the terror subsided and Aziraphale opened his eyes, “Sleep well, my dearest,” he muttered and wished, fervently, that he’d ever had the nerve to say that when they were together.
Five days Aziraphale was up on that roof. Constantly checking up on Crowley, feeling from a
distance as he slowly, slowly healed himself, soothing his frequent nightmares into dreams,
watching over him ceaselessly, determined that no one from either Heaven or Hell would get
anywhere near him whilst he was so vulnerable. At the end of the fifth day, Aziraphale sat up in
the chair in the ruined roof garden and felt as Crowley tentatively flexed his wings out, testing
newly healed bones, stretching newly healed skin, and he sensed the lingering pain as if it were his
own. No feathers though. They could not be miracled back into existence, luck was the only thing
that would see them re-grow.

The demon was almost back to full strength. Two days ago, Aziraphale had felt him warding his
flat, erecting complicated barriers to both angels and demons alike. It seemed that Crowley, never
the most trusting creature in the World before any of this, had now decided that no one was worth
his faith. Aziraphale sat and wished he’d thought of doing it first, before wondering, again, just
what Gabriel had thought he was going to actually achieve with his abduction of Crowley. A way
to get to Aziraphale? A chink? A weakness? Something that would work better than the hellfire?
Or, was it a lot simpler than that? What had they called Crowley? ‘Your boyfriend in the dark
glasses’. Did they know what he was to Aziraphale? Was taking Crowley, hurting him, was that
the weapon? And anything the demon might have disclosed about Aziraphale just an added bonus?
And would Aziraphale ever know the truth?

There were so many questions, so many. How had his attempts at healing caused more pain? An
even worse pain than Crowley had already been enduring? Aziraphale had healed Crowley
countless times in the past, they both had, and there had never been any unpleasant side effects.
What was it that Crowley had said to him, that he’d had enough of angelic interference, already?
Since when had anything Aziraphale done been simple interference?

And how did Crowley get free? Aziraphale hadn’t even asked him. Had he escaped? Slipped away
from his capturers and headed straight back to Earth? Or had they grown tired of the game?
Realised they were never going to get anything from him and so just – let him go? Should
Aziraphale be living in terror of them returning?

Anger stirred inside him again. Where in the name of all things holy, had their breathing space
gone?

He should leave, really; there was no need for his continued lurking up on this roof in the depth of
winter. He’d already used far more than a reasonable amount of miracles in simply keeping his
body from freezing and dropping digits all over Crowley’s garden. He was reluctant though.
Underlying all of this, underlying all of the mystery and anxiety wrapped up in Crowley vanishing
the way he had, was the way he’d been before Gabriel’s intervention. His strange behaviour
outside the Ritz, his silence afterward, even going home alone, injured and vulnerable, rather than
coming to Aziraphale once he was free… None of that made sense, none of it fit with the Crowley
that Aziraphale knew, and Aziraphale had never been a fan of not understanding.
It was dark when he finally made it back to the book shop, not in the very best of tempers after having to negotiate his way home through a London filled to the brim with festive cheer. Usually, Aziraphale loved Christmas. He would spend all night on the thirtieth of November decorating every inch of his shop, festooning garlands everywhere, hanging more sets of lights than Crowley considered safe, putting up at least three trees, all of them real, all of them slightly doctored so that they would never lose that wonderful, freshly cut fragrance. He wrote and sent cards to every other business in a mile’s radius of him and bought extravagant presents for his closest neighbours. He had mulled fruit juice constantly warming in a vat on the side and made sure he keep a self-replenishing plate of mince pies, free to anyone who was lucky enough to find the shop open when they called. This year – there was nothing. Not a single sprig of holly or a bauble to be seen. Not a single card. Not a single warm wish. Aziraphale just really couldn’t see the point.

He locked the door behind him, determined to keep the Christmas cheer outside where it belonged and boiled the kettle before deciding he couldn’t even face a cup of tea. He stared at the telephone for almost half an hour before sighing and slowly dialling Crowley’s flat – it was no surprise when the call went unanswered. He sat for another half hour before deciding that the demon wasn’t going to call him back and so making his way over to the Celtic Ecclesiastical section of the shop and the re-alphabetising of books that had needed doing for at least the last two years.

Days passed, slowly, meanderingly. Aziraphale split his time between staring at the door, desperately waiting for the merry little tinkle it sounded as Crowley barged straight in past the lock, and staring at the phone, willing it to ring, and picking it up, checking that it was still working in a manner embarrassingly similar to that of a lovesick teenager. The phone did not ring, however, and the door did not tinkle open and after three days of that, Aziraphale had reached his limit.

Yet again, he hailed a taxi from the road outside the shop, yet again, directing the driver to head for Crowley’s Mayfair penthouse, and yet again, he found himself standing outside that same door, his nerves twisting his stomach into knots. Taking a deep breath, he knocked.

It took a while, he was just beginning to think that his visit was going to be ignored, when he heard footsteps on the other side of the door and then it opened, swinging silently inwards to reveal Crowley, looking every inch his usual self, reclining against the wall.

“Angel,” it was coolly delivered, but not the spat insult it had been.

Aziraphale nodded and tugged at the hem of his waistcoat, his eyes raking all over the demon’s
form, flashing out a relieved smile which quickly suffocated in the cloying atmosphere they were creating. “Crowley. My dear... how are you?”

“Fine,” Crowley’s face was like alabaster, his eyes hidden behind the darkest glasses he’d ever sported and Aziraphale found himself sweating in unfamiliar anxiety.

“Oh, good! That’s really good. Good. I mean, lovely!”

Crowley didn’t move a single muscle.

“Fine,” Aziraphale continued, his mind running desperate circles on him. “It’s fine that you’re good. Good! Good that you’re fine. When you weren’t. Before. But you are now! Fine. So that’s... fine! More than fine, really more, splendid I would say. Totally splendid really if-”

“Did you want something?” that tone could carve diamonds.

“Of course! Of course, dear boy, I was wondering if you wanted dinner? Somewhere? Out? With me? Tonight? If you wanted? Of course...” he forced himself to stop speaking before his voice rose any higher.

For a moment, nothing changed. Crowley simply stared at him, immobile and then, as quick and serpentine as he’d always been: “No thanks. Busy. Goodnight,” and the door started to close in Aziraphale’s face.

Everyone has a limit, even mild-mannered and frustrated angels. Especially mild-mannered and frustrated angels. Before the door had shifted more than an inch, Aziraphale jerked his foot forward. “Now, just wait one moment,” he started, finishing with an undignified, “Eep!” as he was propelled backwards into the wall behind him as Crowley’s protective sigil leapt into action.

They stared at each other, the silence choking, Aziraphale’s blue eyes wide in shock as he sprawled against the far wall, Crowley looking not quite as untouched as before as he hovered in the doorway, his fingers white on the handle. Aziraphale staggered to his feet and stepped forward again, tugging his waistcoat back down and held Crowley’s stare. “You warded your flat,” his voice was low, shaking, “You warded your flat – against me.”

Crowley rolled his entire countenance and lounged, forcibly, against the door frame. “Not against
you, specifically, angel. Just your lot and my lot,” he shrugged, “I felt it was best not to be too picky.”

_We don’t have a ‘lot’ anymore_, Aziraphale wanted to remind him, instead forcing out around the tightness of his throat. “But you included _me_.”

There was definitely a frustrated hiss in reply. “It’s not that easy to just select which angels it works on and which it doesn’t, you know!”

“It is _exactly_ that easy.”

Crowley’s expression clouded, “Maybe not if you’re not feeling… _fine_, it isn’t.”

Aziraphale felt that barb and cast his eyes down to the floor. “Of course.”

The silence was back. Aziraphale heard the snap of the sigil being removed but didn’t lift his head from studying the beige, speckled carpet at his feet.

Eventually, a long sigh drifted his way across the hallway. “Was that it?”

He took a deep breath, looked up, met Crowley’s stare, “Please come to dinner with me.”

For a moment, the briefest of moments there was the possibility of capitulation, Aziraphale could feel it and then: “I told you, I’m busy.” He pressed up from the frame, fluid insolence in every line, and Aziraphale felt that desperate anger ignite in him once more.

“No,” his foot was back in the doorway, he took a step forward even as Crowley stepped back. “No, you don’t get to do this to me now, Crowley.”

“Aziraphale…”

“No, Crowley! No, you just don’t! Now, I know that these last few months have been awful for you, truly, truly, awful, I understand that, but don’t you think that I—” he stopped, abruptly, three
paces into the hallway as a silently stunned Crowley back-pedaled before him. He looked down,
gaze fixed on something right next to Crowley’s boots and Crowley’s eyes followed his, foot
moving to surreptitiously kick it away, but of course it was too late, Aziraphale had seen it.
“What,” his voice was low, tight, “is that?”

Beat.

“A bag.”

‘I’m going home, angel. I’m getting my stuff and I’m leaving. And when I’m off in the stars, I won't
even think about you!’

“A bag…” Aziraphale’s heart was doing something very strange in his chest. “Your stuff… You’re
leaving…” it wasn’t a question.

Crowley sighed, “Look, Aziraphale, don’t make a big thing out of this, the end of the world didn’t
happen and-”

“And so you’re leaving?” Aziraphale’s voice was climbing in pitch once more. “After, after, all the
worrying I’ve done over you, you’re just planning on leaving? Were you even going to tell me?”

“Obviously…”

“Obviously? But when obviously, Crowley? It doesn’t seem that obvious to me! You’ve done
nothing but, but, avoid me ever since we left the Ritz on the first day everything changed!”

Exactly!” Crowley had one hand clenched into a fist and the other ruffling up his hair.
“Everything changed, Aziraphale! We didn’t need the arrangement anymore, we didn’t need us
anymore! Why shouldn’t I go off? Find somewhere else to live? Find a new life? What is there
here for me now?”

Aziraphale felt the flush that crept over his cheeks, “Well, what do you mean? I mean, of course
there’s… things for you here, dear boy, there’s always things for you here!”
“Like what?” the words were spat out.

“Like things! All sorts of things!”

Crowley took a step in, dangerous, lithe, and Aziraphale’s heart started leaping in his chest. “What things, Aziraphale? I need you to tell me,” his voice dropped, so, so low, “I need you to tell me…”

Aziraphale couldn’t hold that stare, even through the dark glasses. His eyes shifted off to the side where they fell back on the bag and the undeniable truth that Crowley was going to leave him. “Us…” he breathed, sweating under his layers of tweed.

“Us?” Crowley stepped in again, “What do you mean, Aziraphale? What about us? I need you to tell me what you think we are.”

What they were, what Aziraphale thought they were… now, that was a question, wasn’t it? He considered all the pondering he’d done when Crowley was gone from his side, all the soul-searching and the revelations that were just starting to take form in his head. Only starting to take form though, struggling into life in the head of an angel who never liked rushing into anything. An angel who was currently desperately trying not to fidget, but was breathing hard, a cold line of sweat trickling down his spine as he frantically flailed around looking for some courage, “Friends?” Somehow he felt his own disappointment at the flawed definition.

Crowley stopped, everything seemed to stop and Aziraphale closed his eyes, “Friends?” the sharpness was back in Crowley’s voice. “Is that what you think we are?”

Aziraphale nodded, finding it hard to think with Crowley so close to him, but he was feeling that this was the moment when everything changed, when everything could become just what, for a very long time, he’d hoped it would be, but somehow, he wasn’t sure if he was doing it at all correctly.

“We're not friends, Aziraphale,” the words were vicious and biting. “We are an angel and a demon. We have nothing whatsoever in common, remember? You don't even like me…”

Aziraphale felt the pain as it slashed through his chest, thrown at him along with his own words. “Oh, Crowley!” his voice was tight, “Don’t be like that!” he could feel the moment, the opportunity, all slipping away from him again.
“Like what?”

“All bitter and, and retrospective. That’s in the past, this is what matters now.”

Crowley folded his arms, “So, you lied then?”

“What?”

“In the bandstand. You lied to me? You did like me, but you lied to me?”

“I… I… No!” Aziraphale doubted he’d ever felt so flustered, and for someone who’d turned flustering into a hobby, that was really something.

“So, you didn’t like me, but you’re lying now? Which is it, Aziraphale? You lied then or you’re lying now?”

Aziraphale was hot, and ruffled and confused and Crowley was being deliberately obtuse. “I’d never lie to you! I’m an angel!”

Crowley laughed, loud and manic and decidedly nasty. “You lie all the time, angel. You think your side would have let you stay down here for so long if you’d ever been truthful about what you were actually doing? You lie to them, you lie to the humans and now, it would seem, you also lie to me!”

“You are being quite ridiculous, my dear! And anyway, none of that matters anymore-”

“It matters! To me!”

“It doesn’t! You said it yourself, there is no my side and your side anymore!” He reached out, desperate, fingers stretching towards Crowley, “There’s only our side…”

“Our side!” Crowley exploded, throwing his arms up into the air and Aziraphale was slightly surprised to find that time hadn’t stopped. “There is no our side! That’s what you said! That’s what
you thought when I wanted us to *make* our own side, to go away together, to get our own ending! But you wouldn’t and you didn’t and I asked you twice and twice you turned me down flat!”

Aziraphale had snatched his hand back, his face burning as his anger rose once more, “The world was ending, Crowley! Was I supposed to just leave the humans to their doom?”

“Yes! Why join them when you had an option?”

“I could not do that!” Aziraphale drew himself up tall, “As you so rightly pointed out, I am an *angel*! A Principality! I was put on this earth to *protect* the humans!”

“From me!” there was a desperate edge to Crowley’s voice that was ratchetting up Aziraphale’s anxiety. “You were supposed to protect them from me! Not from God’s clusterfuck of a damn plan!”

“Crowley!”

“What, Aziraphale? What? I’m not supposed to do that? I’m not supposed to point out how fucking ridiculous this whole thing is? The plan to end the world that no one even knows is a plan or not? Millions of bloodthirsty angels and demons baying for blood and a god who sits there and says nothing at all? An archangel fucking *dickhead* who takes the worst that humans and hell can come up with and runs with it and calls it *divinity*? Calls *me* the abhorrence? And you, you, who would still side with *all of that* rather than come with me at the end of it all? I can’t question any of that? *Any of it*? Fucking hell, Aziraphale, it’s not like I’ve got any further to Fall!”

“That’s not how it is!” Aziraphale felt, ridiculously, like crying.

“It’s *exactly* how it is. And the *really* incredible thing is that, even after *all of that*, you’re still too stupid to see through it all!”

Aziraphale bristled, “Take that back, demon!”

But Crowley just laughed, “Or what? You going to *smite* me?” he shook his head, “I’m not taking anything back – I’m just leaving.”
Stepping in front of him, Aziraphale pulled himself up to his full height, and hooked Crowley’s bag with his foot, pulling it behind him and out of Crowley’s reach. “No,” his voice had taken on the strange, resounding quality of the morning in the bathroom, “you’re not.”

Crowley was not to be intimidated, though, he shook his head as he stared at Aziraphale, misery in every line of his body. “I go too fast for you, angel?” Aziraphale flushed once more. “Maybe I like that you just can’t keep up with me.” With that, he snapped his fingers and vanished, and Aziraphale, with Crowley’s meagre possessions still tucked away behind his feet was left lunging at empty space.
“Hold on, my dear, I’m coming to you!”

Chapter Notes

A little bit of an interlude before the drama kicks in again...

Crowley hadn’t ‘vanished’ this time, not completely; there was none of that horrific *nothingness* from before. Aziraphale could feel him, feel the buzzing in the back of his mind, albeit quieter than usual, as if from a vast distance. Alpha Centauri? Possibly. He didn’t get in touch though, didn’t answer his mobile, which wasn’t surprising when it rang in the bag that he’d left at Aziraphale’s feet, didn’t even send a postcard and, *stupid* as he might be, Aziraphale could certainly take a hint.

And really, honestly, honest in a way that Aziraphale realised he rarely was where Crowley was concerned, Aziraphale could admit that he *had* been stupid, in lots of ways, really, for lots of years. The question really should not have been, ‘Why has Crowley run from me?’ and, more accurately, ‘How on earth did it take Crowley so long before he ran from me?’

Aziraphale thought of the hurt that had poured out of him as they’d argued in the hallway. The way that he’d memorised all of Aziraphale’s slights against him, all of the unpleasant words he’d thrown out as a screen for the fear he just couldn’t live with. Whilst Aziraphale would never, ever think of himself as a *mean* being, one who tried to court misery in others or, at the very least, loved seeing it happen, he would admit, retrospectively, to being mean by default. Constantly. With every ounce of meanness directed at the same hapless being who had, so far, shared eternity alongside him. All this did was prove to him, as if he’d ever needed that proof, how fundamentally *good* Crowley was, and how Aziraphale had spent all of their vast history together mostly ignoring that, belittling it even. Belittling Crowley. It was not surprising that Crowley had decided he’d had enough of all angels – when had any of them ever done anything other than hurt him? And all of this when Aziraphale had been hoping to create something more with his best friend? Crowley had been absolutely spot on – he’d been the most stupid of fools in all eternity.

Well, he had plenty of time to consider that stupidity, now, didn’t he? It was maybe a little late to realise, in recent years, that Crowley had become his only friend on the entire planet. Yes, he had acquaintances, people who would nod to in the street, his barber, the man who ran the vape shop next door, and people who would, from time to time, message him with good wishes, Anathema, Madame Tracy, even Adam once, but he had no friends, not a single one, and he was, quite honestly, lonely.

Angels by their very nature were social creatures, ‘flocks’ Crowley used to tease, and so, sitting one evening in the darkened book shop, eyes on the empty sofa that seemed to mock him in its silence, Aziraphale considered the ways which, in the past, he had found friends to socialise with, to try and replace the absence of the Host around him. He’d joined gentlemen’s clubs which had
opened the doors to all kinds of enjoyable, and very human pursuits; he’d signed up for lectures or courses or listening to fascinating speakers; he’d joined reading clubs, book circles, and even once, a writer’s club; he’d taken cookery lessons (disaster) and joined a pudding club (better than Heaven) and in all of those ways he’d collected people around him who’d helped him pass the time until – his heart clenched in realisation – until Crowley had turned up at his side once more.

He closed the newspaper on the ‘Local Events’ section he’d been perusing and let out a long sigh. The truth of the matter was this: one, none of these people, with one or two notable exceptions, had been anything other than fillers for the person he really wanted to spend time with and, two, he just didn’t have it in him to sit and pretend that Crowley would be coming back to him one day soon when it was perfectly clear that he absolutely wasn’t. What was the point in having fillers for something that no longer existed? What was the point to an angel ignored by Heaven? What was the point to an angel without a demon to thwart?

Depression wasn’t something that Aziraphale had had a lot of experience of, personally, but he’d seen it in plenty of humans over the years to realise what was happening to him. He made a decision then, one he knew he was privileged in being able to make as a simple consequence of not being human, and resolved that this would not be the way he spent the next hundred years or so. He knew that Crowley needed time and space away from him at the moment, but he just had to believe that he’d come back to him some day, a thousand years down the line perhaps? In the meantime, he needed to carry on, try and do good, try and brighten the lives of those who’d suffered or were suffering still – and so that’s what he did. It was only as he was strolling through Hyde Park (not St. James’ anymore, not now) and watching the first bulbs of spring push their pointy little heads out of the ground around him, that he thought of Crowley’s abandoned roof garden, and how the demon would certainly fit into his definition of someone who deserved good things to happen to them.

Aziraphale was not a gardener, not anymore, but he could be both determined and enthusiastic. He attacked the internet with a speed that troubled his old dial-up connection and perused website after website, making copious notes which eventually started translating into a rudimentary plan of how he would bring the garden back to life, how he would make it sing and bloom and dance, and how Crowley would smile when he saw it waiting for him like that.

Two weeks into the planning stage, Aziraphale decided that a site visit was in order and he set off, walking happily through the familiar streets, finding a hidden alley not far from Crowley’s building and, tape measure and notebook in hand, miracling himself straight up to the roof of the building. And there he froze, his heart rising to his mouth as he turned on the spot and looked around him. Where there had been the garden, there was nothing. Where there had been benches and a fountain, the summer house and greenhouse – nothing. The air-conditioning unit remained, as did the top of the lift shaft and the defunct solar panels but as to anything else, it had all simply vanished, almost like it had never even been there in the first place.

Aziraphale was confused, he quickly looked around at the other roof tops, wondering if he’d simply alighted on the wrong building but no, this was the correct place. He then concentrated and
felt down, much like he had done when Crowley had first come back from Heaven, but this time, instead of the essence of a wounded and damaged demon, he found… Deb and Stephen, project manager and architect respectively, setting up their first home together, although Deb was already wondering if she’d made a mistake after meeting Connor from the post room. With a start, Aziraphale suddenly found himself sitting on his behind on the empty roof as tears forced themselves from the corners of his eyes.

Crowley wasn’t coming back, not in a thousand years, not ever.

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It took two days for him to get organised. He told Anathema that he would be out of town for a while, and asked her to pass the news on to both Adam and Madame Tracy, just in case either should come looking for him. He told his neighbours that he was going on a World cruise and had to force himself to smile brightly when Bridget from the coffee shop insisted on finding him her international travel adapter to take with him. He prepared signs for his windows explaining that he would be closed for the foreseeable future, and he poured for hours over maps of the world, trying to pinpoint where his feeling of Crowley was the strongest.

Eventually, he was ready to go. He’d gently packed Crowley’s single bag of belongings – never once peered into by an inquisitive angel – into a backpack with adjustable straps that could be lengthened to fit around his wings, stuffed in a few essentials of his own, dug out his trusty walking stick from years gone by, and then, finally, on the morning of the third day he was ready to go. Crowley wasn’t coming back, he understood that, accepted it even, but he couldn’t leave things like this. He’d treated the demon very unfairly over the years, he needed to apologise and try and make amends, only then would he be able to even consider moving on without his best friend of the last six millennia.

For appearances sake, he locked the door properly, with a key that probably felt more at home in the fifteenth century, after that, he just stood, letting the hustle and bustle of a London morning rush hour swim around him as he turned to stare down each of the four directions at his crossroads, deciding which one felt the most correct. South kept on calling to him, but whenever he tried to take a step that way, he frowned and looked over his shoulder once more. Eventually, he made his decision, “North-east!” he announced with a smile, and looking every inch the country gent out to inspect his pheasants, he headed off along Berwick Street.

It seemed natural to head to St. Pancras, even more natural to purchase a ticket for the Eurostar to Paris. Aziraphale was excited, he loved Paris and this was an adventure the likes of which he hadn’t partaken in years, the only thing that spoilt it for him was the absence of Crowley. It was a short and pleasant trip under the Channel, and Aziraphale alighted into a warm, Parisian spring morning. He set out into the familiar streets, buying himself a rather delicious chocolate and banana crepe from a street vendor and finding himself outside Gare Montparnasse just in time to
catch the afternoon train to Hendaye. This was a four hour trip and gave Aziraphale the first chance he’d had to wonder just what he thought he was doing, heading off like this with no real idea as to where to was going, but as he edged further and further west towards the French coast, it just felt so right, that he simply ordered himself some lovely looking cheese pastries from the trolley and sat back to look out of the window and drink his Bordeaux.

He made it to the border by tea time, and stood for a while contemplating his next move. It still felt correct, this general direction he’d travelled in, but the next logical move would be to head into Spain and that didn’t sit well with him at all. Crowley had had a bad time in the country in the fifteen hundreds. It wasn’t anything to do with the Spanish Inquisition as such, but the whole atmosphere had been one of such distrust and suspicion that anyone who looked slightly different was at a serious disadvantage. The poor boy had been tortured three times and burnt at the stake twice before he was fortunate enough to re-corporate into a different country. Unfortunately, that country had been Germany in the middle of its own witch hunt hysteria and Aziraphale had feared that history was about to repeat itself once more. Due to the reports he needed to file with heaven, he felt, at that time, that he couldn’t risk a miracle, minor or otherwise, to help a demon in distress (standing on the promenade in Hendaye, his cheeks flush at the thought) so he, instead, resorted to good old-fashioned bribery to get Crowley on a boat to London and to safety before anything untoward could happen again.

No, as far as he was aware, Crowley had never returned to Spain since those dark days, he really couldn’t see him doing that anytime soon. Sitting in a nice little sea-front café with un bol de chocolat and a plate of dainty little biscuits, Aziraphale pulled out the map of the world he was marking his journey onto, and laughed delightedly when he saw what really should have been perfectly obvious to him. Smiling, Aziraphale pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time – yes, he had just enough time for a night cap before heading off to catch the sleeper.

Sunrise over the Atlantic looked stunning, and Aziraphale was excited again when the taxi slowed down as it edged along the rocky track into Azóia. Aziraphale had pulled into Lisbon’s Santa Apolónia station in the quiet time just before dawn and, eager to be on his way, immediately hailed a cab. He was still a long, long way from Crowley, he understood that now, but this part of the journey felt so exciting, felt so right. It was somehow both soothing and intensely stimulating to be following in the footsteps, so to speak, of his very favourite being in all the world.

The sea, a kilometre away from where the taxi had dropped him off, was stretched out like a golden carpet, reflecting the rising sun in a manner that reminded him directly of Crowley’s eyes and he smiled again – he’d smiled more in the last day than he had in most of the last eleven, twelve, years – and shuffled excitedly where he stood. “I’m coming,” he addressed his empty street, “hold on, my dear, I’m coming to you!”
He took a room in a hotel, even though he really, really didn’t want to, but he was wise enough to realise that this next step was one he needed to prepare for. He didn’t sleep, but he did rest, thirty eight hours of resting and eating and drinking before stowing everything, including Crowley’s precious hold-all, into his rucksack and just as the village’s few bars and restaurants were emptying out for the night, he set off on the trek to the lighthouse. He walked for an hour until the lights of civilisation had been left far behind and only a quarter moon provided any illumination at all. Then he took a deep breath, held it for the count of three, before, with a soft whoosh, letting his wings out behind him.

It felt divine, it always did, to let his wings stretch and flex like this. Unbidden, memories of Crowley’s poor, abused wings came back to him, the scabby, featherless sticks flapping uselessly in the bath, he didn’t even know if the feathers had grown back. The memory made him feel sick, made him furious all over again for what Gabriel had dared to do to his most dearest of… dears, but he closed his eyes, took in a breath and pushed that thought away to deal with another day, another day soon; today he had different mountain to climb. He looked around him, checked, as much as he was able, that no one was watching and beat his wings, once, twice, against the rocky cliffs. The uplift was sufficient to get him off the ground and, with a smile threatening to split his face in two, Aziraphale headed up into the night sky.

The novelty of all that flying soon wore off, to be honest. It was disconcerting to not have an actual destination in mind, so be simply following his feel of where Crowley was, and there were very few islands in between Portugal and – anywhere else really – in case he needed to land in an emergency. There were always the ships though, there were far more ships than Aziraphale had ever considered that they would be and, as much as it was soothing in a way to know that they were there for dire emergencies (along with some required memory manipulation no doubt) it was an absolute pain to have to constantly alter his course to fly around them. The sky was so clear, which he supposed must be another mixed blessing, that they could see him for miles – as could the planes which came upon him much faster, and much closer.

In the end, he was very, very glad to see the huge ribbon of land lit up with a myriad of lights and undulating in front of him just as the sun was setting for the evening. It was the perfect time to arrive, he supposed, even though he’d completely lost track of where he was or how long he’d been travelling for, he only had to find an isolated stretch of beach and he’d be able to make an impeccably covert landing. In the end, he needed to fly further than expected to find some solitude, but at least the rows of high rise hotels and the statue of Christ the Redeemer shining in the dark told him where he was and it struck him that he’d never been to Rio de Janeiro before.

By the time he had walked back along Copacabana Beach and into the teeming city centre, his corporeal form was wearier than he could recently remember. He checked into the Fairmont, leaking a little divinity as he smiled at the lovely young lady at the desk and found himself in a suite with a stunning view over to Sugar Loaf Mountain.
After tipping the porter very generously for carrying his single bag upstairs, (for the sake of appearances, he’d switched his bizarrely styled rucksack into a striking, antique carpet bag which he felt complimented his suit rather nicely) he wandered out onto the balcony, sweeping his gaze appreciatively around the stunning view before closing his eyes and concentrating on his feel of Crowley, wondering how far Aziraphale had to go now, whether his friend was somewhere in Brazil, further in land maybe, or perhaps Chile or – he stopped, suddenly, his eyes flying open at the proximity he could feel – or maybe right here in Rio.

His heart started beating hard in his chest, he felt his mouth curving into a wide grin and, for the first time in months, he felt happy. It was ever so tempting to just launch himself off the balcony and follow that feeling home, he’d be there within minutes, he could just tell that, minutes and he would be at Crowley’s side once more and they could – and there he stopped, iced water flowing through him as he remembered why he was here, why Crowley was here. Crowley had run from him when Aziraphale had tried to… tried to what exactly? Tried to make him stay, his mind supplied glumly. Tried, very, very badly, to explain to the demon just how completely intrinsic he was to Aziraphale's life, how needed, how wanted. But instead, he’d just made everything worse and made Crowley run faster and farther than ever before.

No. Aziraphale had to be very careful here not to make this whole dreadful situation even worse than it already was. He knew that Crowley would know he was here, he knew that the demon could sense him even more sharply than he himself, if he hassled or pushed then he might ruin everything. He needed to wait, and he needed to plan exactly what he was going to say and he needed to give Crowley time to get used to the idea that they were going to talk.

It seemed like the best plan he could hope for and so he made for the bathroom and the promise of a humanly-decadent bath in the huge freestanding tub, but he wasn’t quite ready to analyse why the sight of two complimentary robes hanging side by side on the back of the door made him feel quite so… incomplete.
"Just stop will you? For fuck’s sake…”

He waited for two whole days, forty eight long hours, and, after all that time, Crowley was still in town. Aziraphale viewed that as a cautious accomplishment. At first he set off walking the streets, but eventually he found an empty alleyway and took to the skies, feeling the tug coming from high above and then, with his heart soaring almost as freely as his wings, he saw him, a solitary figure sitting on the edge of the roof of a sky-rise hotel, looking out at the statue of Christ the Redeemer as it rose up and gleamed above them all. Taking a deep breath, Aziraphale silently swooped in to join him, landing well behind the edge of the building, still not convinced that Crowley wouldn’t just take off as soon as Aziraphale was anywhere near him.

There was no movement though, not a glimmer and, perversely, the angel was both relieved and concerned; the stillness seemed so alien in Crowley. Slowly, he approached, making sure his footfalls were audible, trying to stop the nervous thumping of his heart, until he could sit himself down, his sensible brogues hanging over the edge of the building alongside Crowley’s familiar, black boots.

The silence stretched out, Aziraphale could feel anxious sweat prickling across his shoulders and he was really wishing that he’d announced himself as he landed; ‘Hello’ seemed trite and obvious now. He let out a long sigh and, instead, said the one thought that was bubbling at the top of his brain, “Thank you, for not fleeing the very moment you could feel me approaching.”

And still the silence stretched out. Aziraphale could feel his cheeks flush red and was just beginning to think that Crowley was going to blank him completely, when the tiniest of movements at his shoulder alerted him to the fact that his reply was coming. “I didn’t see the point,” Crowley’s voice was oddly flat, “you’d only follow me.”

Aziraphale bristled. “I would not!” he turned to primly stare at the side of Crowley’s head, “If you had left town as I arrived, I would have realised that you’d rather not have spoken to me and I would have respected that,” he nodded to himself, “I wouldn’t have followed you if you’d obviously wanted to be alone.”

Crowley turned to stare at him and Aziraphale thrilled at the first glimpse of his face in four, long months. It told him little, though, the ever-present sunglasses stared blankly at him and Crowley, the inventor of the poker-face, was giving nothing away, not even from the flat tone of his voice.
“Aziraphale, I left London and you still followed me half-way around the world. Where’s the respect in that?”

Flush deepening, Aziraphale turned and stared at the hands clasped in his lap. Ah, yes. Quite.

The silence was back, Aziraphale was doubting the sense of his long journey but then blew out a long breath and realised that, despite everything, he did have things that needed saying. “I’m sorry for that. I won’t stay long and I won’t try and make you come back to London,” he ignored Crowley’s bitter, ‘huh’. “But there are some things I feel that I need to say to you.”

“There always are.”

Frowning, Aziraphale shuffled uncomfortably on the steel lip of the building and thought back to all the feelings he’d had over the last six months, all the rehearsed conversations in his head. Why was it all so hard in real life? He took a breath in. “I really, well, I really wanted to apologise, really, to say that I was sorry—”

“That’s what an apology is.”

“-for,” Aziraphale swallowed, his hands clammy and his throat dry and his courage rapidly, rapidly deserting him. “For – not realising that Gabriel would take you like that. I should have done more to help you when I realised you were missing.” It wasn’t what he wanted to say, it was absolutely not what he wanted to say and the way he felt Crowley slump next to him only tripled his self-irritation.

“You’re not responsible for that twat, Aziraphale,” somehow, Crowley’s voice sounded even more void of life than before.

“I know, but I know they took you hoping to get some information or ‘dirtiness’ or something on me and that, well that does make me feel responsible and I should have known that they were lying to me and I should have done something and they hurt you and, your wings, your poor, poor wings! And—”

“Aziraphale!” Crowley’s hand was pushed up under his glasses, right over his eyes, and his entire posture was as taut as a bow, “Stop! Just stop will you? For fuck’s sake…”
Aziraphale stopped and the silence was back, sliding around them like choking pond-weed. What was he doing here? How was he managing to make all of this **even worse**? He let out a long sigh, and felt his posture slip until he was slumped almost as low as Crowley before summoning every scrap of bravery he possibly could. “Crowley, I’m sorry, I’m just so sorry for the way everything has turned out here when we’d hoped for so much more…” he could feel Crowley listening to him, somehow managing tautness and laxity at the same moment, still hiding behind the hand across his eyes. “I just…” he shook his head, throat tightening with every moment, “I just want you to come home.”

Far below them, a thumping beat started up around a hotel pool and Aziraphale stared, sightlessly, at the humans dancing and singing and whooping as they partied into the night. He realised he could barely remember feeling that happy.

Beside him, Crowley shifted again and Aziraphale risked a glance only to find his granite expression back, the trauma locked tightly away once more and his glasses turned to the distant *Cristo Redentor*. He spoke though, a single word that Aziraphale might have missed if he’d not been looking, “Why?”

“Because I miss you, I miss all the things we did together.”

Looking down at his black jeans, Crowley let out a humourless snort and Aziraphale’s stomach tightened as he knew that, yet again, he’d said the wrong thing, failed the test that Crowley had set up for him. And now the demon would leave, he’d just launch himself off the side of the building and swoop off into the night and Aziraphale would be left alone again and still no clearer as to what was **wrong**!

“I’m not coming back,” but Crowley hadn’t fled and, more than that, he was **talking**, and Aziraphale began to hope that maybe all was not lost. “I just can’t **do this** anymore, though angel. Not with you.”

And that hurt – just like that, the tiny sprig of hope was crushed. “Not with me?” the words were so quiet, he doubted Crowley heard them, he’d carried on speaking anyway, it seemed that now he had started, there were things he was going to say, whether they were what Aziraphale wanted to hear, or not.

“Six thousand years we have been together,” He was still staring at the statue and Aziraphale wondered if he was thinking of the gentle carpenter they’d both befriended all those years ago. “Six thousand years of meals and drinks and favours and Arrangements and helping each other and saving each other and being the only consciousness in the entire galaxy that either of us had to rely on. Six thousand years of meeting up, and meeting up again and meeting up more regularly and arranging to meet and looking forward to meeting up and.” Crowley’s voice had been rising with
every word he’d spoke, the heat, the passion that Aziraphale knew he was filled with, leeching out. He’d caught himself though, hauled it all back again, so that he finished in a whisper, one that Aziraphale had to strain to hear, “And you still see me as nothing more than a demon.”

Aziraphale was shocked, stunned even. He drew back to his full height, sitting primly next to his slouching companion, outrage reflected in every line of his body. “I… I do not!”

“Aziraphale, please. I don’t want to do this with you.”

“Well, I want to do this with you! You don’t just get to accuse me of that, Crowley, and shut me out and run away and hide from me for months and months and months and not give me a chance to defend myself!”

Crowley sighed and turned to look at Aziraphale and even without being able to see his eyes, Aziraphale knew that there was a challenge in there, “Go on then, defend away.”

“Well… I don’t! That’s all there is to it. I don’t see you as just a demon, of course I don’t. Quite frankly, you’re being silly.”

“Convincing, angel,” the sarcasm dripped from every word and Crowley’s gaze was down on his folded hands. “1645 BC, the Stroggli tsunami, you thought that was me-”

“And you explained that it wasn’t and I believed you.”

Crowley turned to face him, his granite expression cracking slightly as his words heated once more, “The earthquake in Helike, 373 BC-”

“Again, you convinced me.”

“The Antonine Plague, 165 AD-”

“And you explained that-”
“The Crusades, the famines in the Raj, the Nika riots, the Banana Massacre, the Wanggongchang explosion…”

“Alright! Alright! But they were a long time ago, Crowley! And you explained and I understood and I was wrong,” he took a deep breath and forced calm into his voice as he reiterated, “They were all a long time ago.”

Crowley looked away again, out to sea this time, his shoulders hunching over as his fingers picked at themselves, “The Haitian earthquake, the Boxing Day tsunami, 9/11, HIV, ebola… I got the blame for all of those as well if you remember. Please tell me, what constitutes a ‘long time ago’, Aziraphale?”

The mortified flush was back as Aziraphale combed through his memories. *Had* he accused Crowley of all those heinous acts? Of course he had, of course he’d *said* that, but… “I didn’t *really* think I was you,” it sounded pathetic said out loud, even to his own ears. “I hadn’t thought that for a long, *long* time, but I thought it was expected that I ask.”

“Expected?” Crowley’s voice was flat again, “By whom?”

“By Heaven! And Hell too, you probably claimed you’d done all of those things in your reports, I was just backing you up…”

Crowley couldn’t keep the snort inside, “Aziraphale… who was *listening* to us?”

“Well, well, you don’t know who was listening to us, dear boy, that’s why it always paid for us to play it safe!”

“Bullshit…” for a moment, Aziraphale thought Crowley was getting up and leaving but instead he raked his fingers through his hair, his jaw clenched in tension and then shook his head, shaking it all away, wilting like a dying orchid. The silence was back, Aziraphale had even stopped breathing so that he could listen to Crowley’s breaths, try to think of one thing he could say that would not sound like a trite falsehood, in the end, Crowley beat him to it.

“When I Fell,” his eyes were on the stars this time and Aziraphale found his heart stuttering at the quietly spoken words – in all of their long history together, Crowley had never once talked about his Fall. “I instantly realised I was on my own. Once the worst of the pain faded, it was the first thing I noticed, that *nothing* where there was always Her, always the Host.”
Aziraphale tried to imagine that, tried to imagine what it would be like to have that yawning emptiness inside himself – he felt it would be impossible to live with.

“I had a choice. I could do what some of the other Fallen – most of the other Fallen – had done and let all that pain and anger and hatred burn away everything I was. Or I could let it be, let all of that heartache go and try to be someone I could live with. Either way, I knew I was on my own, no one else would help me or support me or even give one tiny fuck who I was, just as long as I played Hell’s game.”

There was a sharp pain in Aziraphale’s chest at that.

“So, that’s what I did for,” Crowley shook his head as he stared at the stars, “I don’t know how long… it was hard, living down there with all of them, in that place… I don’t know why I was picked to go to Eden, but I know I wouldn’t have held out much longer in the Underworld.”

The silence was back and held for so long that Aziraphale wondered if Crowley was done, wondered if he should be saying something at this point, but again, what on earth was there that he could say?

Eventually though, Crowley started up once more. “It was such a relief to get out into the garden, to see the sky and the sun and the stars. To feel the breeze, smell the flowers, watch the insects,” Aziraphale remembered his giddy glee as if it were yesterday, but it only made sense once he thought where Crowley had come from. Why hadn’t he thought about that before? Really thought about it? “I think I could have been happy on my own there, for a very long while, certainly, but then there was Adam and Eve and apples – and you…” Aziraphale’s chest twinged, he had begun to think that Crowley had forgotten he was even there. “And things moved on and we spoke and it rained and you held your wing out over me and–” he choked to a halt and Aziraphale’s head whipped around to look at him, to see his shaking hand pushing up under his glasses to rub at his eyes once more and the twinge morphed into a fiery brand. “And, it was the first act of kindness I’d been offered since I’d Fallen–”

“Oh!”

“And just like that, all the time I’d spent fighting to be the only thing I’d ever need – it was ruined.” The hand slid out again, the glasses were slipped back into place, Crowley shoved his palms face to face between his thighs and dropped his gaze back to his boots. “So then there was you and whilst you weren’t like the others, you were always guarded around me, never missed a chance to remind me what I was–”
“Oh, dear boy…”

“What my place was, my proclivity to tempt and lie and deceive, reminding me it was in my nature, what else could possibly be expected? What else indeed? You were too busy telling me what I was, that you never even stopped to consider what I might be,” a bitter chuckle slipped out into the night. “And even when we’d known each other for so many years, longer than two beings have ever been acquainted ever, it all stayed the same. The ‘foul fiends’, comments about ‘fraternising’, denying me as a friend to anyone who was ever foolish enough to assume…”

“Crowley…”

“Not telling me about that book, lying about finding the Anti-Christ, hereditary enemies, how you’re the nice one, how it’s okay for me to kill a child but not you…”

He tailed off, but Aziraphale knew that, in his head, he’d also included asking Aziraphale to run away with him and Aziraphale turning him down flat, and unkindly at that.

“Even if this all ends up in a puddle of burning goo, we can go off together.”

“Go off together? Listen to yourself!”

The shame was burning him up from the inside out. “Crowley, my dear… you’re right. You’re absolutely right and I-”

“You don’t have to apologise, Aziraphale, please don’t apologise,” Crowley was still staring down between his legs, “You have your standards and your tolerances and that’s good, that’s as it should be. This is all down to me, this is all my fault – if I’d just kept to my place, we wouldn’t be in this position now.”

Aziraphale felt tears prickle at his eyes, how could he have allowed this to happen? How could he have made it so that Crowley felt he’d done wrong by simply allowing himself to have a friend in his life? How could he have hurt him like that? Over and over again?

They slid into silence once more, the thumping base line drifting up from the party below, lights
twinkling all around them as Rio enjoyed its Friday night; Aziraphale, meanwhile, had never felt so adrift.

He was aware of Crowley pushing up then, getting to his feet and turning from the edge of the roof, heading back towards the door that was propped open waiting for him, Aziraphale had a moment of wondering why he’d come up the human way before he was scrambling up as well, determined that he wouldn’t let Crowley walk away from this mess yet again. “Crowley, please…”

“I’m sorry, Aziraphale,” Crowley didn’t stop walking, “I just can’t do this any longer.”

Aziraphale hurried after him, “I know, I know dear, but-” they both stopped, they both turned back to the edge of the roof at the same moment, the exact same moment as a huge, shining shape rose up to meet them. It was so bright, it was hard to make out any features but whilst Aziraphale didn’t know who it was, he absolutely knew what it was, there was no mistaking that piercing, angelic energy. He opened his mouth to speak, to address the interloper and demand that they state their business here on Earth, but before he could even get the very first word out of his mouth, a bolt of light shot out across the rooftop, catching Crowley in the chest and propelling him backwards, lifting him off his feet and crashing him into the lift shaft housing with enough force to take out a wall...
Aziraphale spun around, his mouth gaping open, just in time to see the roof crumble down onto Crowley’s motionless corporation, and then back again, as the glowing figure alighted on the roof lifting their arm for another strike. “No!” Aziraphale instantly positioned himself between the angel and the demon, his own stature growing to meet the threat, his eyes taking on an otherworldly glow, “You will not smite him! He is under my protection! Leave us this instant!”

The figure lowered their arm and turned the glow down enough so that Aziraphale could start to make out some features. “Just a little bit late, again, Aziraphale, aren’t you? Story of your continued existence – shame for the demon this time, though.”

Aziraphale stepped forward, desperate to keep as much space between Crowley and Michael as possible, “You’re not taking him again,” his voice trembled with pure anger. “This time you’re out of luck.”

Michael just shrugged though, forcing a tight little smile out onto their face as they stood before Aziraphale. “I’m really not interested in the demon at all, to be honest, I came here for you. It was Gabriel who felt that your little, playmate might be useful, in fact…” they seemed to consider a moment. “I suppose he could be used as a lesson in fairness, though? He, which means by default, you, have removed Gabriel from my life, so I remove the demon from yours, yes?” Aziraphale was still trying to parse this riddle as Michael snapped their fingers and the roof shook, the lift shaft suddenly collapsing in on itself, the booming, echoing thunder of debris raining down through seventeen floors of hotel, still not quite loud enough to drown out Michael’s supercilious, “Oops!”

Aziraphale spun on his heel and threw out his wings, angling them just right to allow him to drop down the shaft like an arrow head, but before he was even close, he was brought up violently short, something snagging around his ankles and almost dislocating his hips as he crashed back onto the roof.

High-pitched, tinkling laughter came from the roof-edge and he spun around once more, whipping his wings away as he sprawled on his back, eyes flicking to the shimmering rope of light which held his legs fast. “Too late again!” Michael’s face was lit up in delight, “Oh, you are such a tubby,
slow Principality, aren’t you? How on earth have you managed to be such a royal pain in
everyone’s arse?” They stepped closer, and the smiled vanished, to be replaced by a look colder
than Aziraphale had seen on any demon, ever. “Well, I do hope that you have had your fun,
running around down here with your trained demon pet, but that’s over now, you’re coming back
to Heaven with me to face the consequences of your betrayal.”

They started walking towards him, winding up the rope of light as they went, making sure it stayed
tightly coiled around Aziraphale’s ankles at all times.

“The consequences of my betrayal?” Aziraphale was too angry and too concerned for Crowley to
feel anything like fear. “And how are you planning on doing that, then, Michael? Have you
forgotten my imperviousness to hellfire?”

Michael coolly cocked their head at him, “No,” and the cold smile was back, “But that would only
matter if I wanted to destroy you completely, which I don’t. That was also Gabriel’s plan. Get the
demon, make him spill the beans about how you could withstand the hellfire – we know it was
something to do with him – and then use that knowledge to turn you back into atoms.
Unfortunately, your hell-hound proved to have a very high threshold to pain. Even when Gabriel
destroyed his wings, piece by tiny piece, he wasn’t saying anything of use. He did scream though,
very, very loudly,” Aziraphale’s anger was mounting, moment by moment, “which was
inconvenient in that it alerted others to our endeavours. Others who did not see the validity of what
we were doing and were actually worried that mistreating a demon would upset our ‘friends’ in
hell,” Michael shook their head, mystified, “As if Beelzebub wouldn’t thank us for causing him a
thousand agonies.”

“Others who remember better than yourself what it is to be an angel?” Aziraphale spat, feeling the
solid shape of his sword as it moulded itself into being beneath him.

“Others who are too weak to do what needs doing,” Michael countered. “Anyway, Gabriel and his
plans are now indisposed for the near future which means that I have the opportunity to action
mine. You are coming back to heaven with me, not to die, Aziraphale, but to live, in my care for
millennia, until you are telling me the secrets of your escape and begging me to throw you into a
vat of hellfire.” Aziraphale was barely listening as he edged his fingers towards where the hilt of
his sword was digging into his spine, desperate to keep Michael talking whilst he tried to even up
the odds a little.

“And Crowley? What’s his part in all of this?”

Michael shrugged, “I told you, nothing. I had no idea he was even here until I arrived and then it
just seemed far too good a temptation to pass up. He gets discorporated, can’t see him halting his
fall down that lift shaft with his wings-“
Something like panic flared up in Aziraphale’s heart. He knew that Crowley had to have been hurt by Michael’s smiting of him, but demons were tough, he’d had that body for six thousand years, had it recycled through discorporation many times, and Aziraphale had assumed his wings would save him as the lift shaft collapsed, but then, he still didn’t know, had never dared ask of they’d ever recovered from the dreadful state they were in. And – he’d come up to the roof the human way…

Still Michael droned on, “-by now, his essence will be back in hell and he can look forward to the same type of eternity as you. Collateral damage, really, or an added bonus, depending on how you look at it.”

“An added bonus?” Aziraphale’s fingers stopped their probing as the panic and anger in his heart started to white out the edges of his vision. “How can you say that? Crowley is one of us.”

Michael’s face curled in disgust, “One of us? He most certainly is not. He is a demon! The lowest of the low, an abhorrence, an abomination, a detestation. There is a reason they live underground, you know, like vermin, insects, parasites living on Her creation! Vile and wicked, loveless and lawless, if She was any less good, She would have ground them all under Her heel instead of banishing them!”

Aziraphale had always thought he’d known how the Archangels felt about the Fallen, similar to how Aziraphale himself felt about them; the loss, the terror, the complete and utter sorrow of losing once-cherished brothers and sisters. But no, Michael, for one, felt this revulsion which was utterly alien to Aziraphale, alien for all life-forms, but for Crowley? For her to think of Crowley like this? Unmitigated madness.

He pushed himself up, his eyes glowing as they glowered into Michael’s rancid face, “You are wrong about Crowley, so wrong about him and I pity you that you cannot see Her beauty anywhere but in your own being!”

“Blasphemer!”

“It is not blasphemy! She made him with as much care and love as she made you! And She made him capable of many, many things. Of humour and compassion, of kindness and care, of patience – oh, so much patience –” Aziraphale was only beginning to understand that for himself, “and intelligence, of joy and creativity, of courage and imagination, of hope and generosity, She made him capable of a hundred angelic qualities, and unlike you, he embraced them all!”
Michael stepped forward, their face crumpled in a furious snarl. “You *dare* to compare a *demon* to an *Archangel*?”

“He doesn’t just compare to you – he surpasses you! There is more good in him, more kindness and love, than in all of Heaven combined!”

Throwing their head back, Michael roared in bitter laughter. “Love? Is that what you think this is? You think he *loves* you? Oh, Aziraphale, you poor, sad little angel! He doesn’t love you! He is a *demon*!”

Aziraphale’s mind scrambled madly at the thought of love, but he valiantly beat it back. “Title him how you will,” his voice was low and deadly, “But I have seen his heart and I know its purity, just as I have seen yours and know its inky depths!” With that, he rose up, faster, more fluid and determined than he had ever moved in all of his existence. As he ascended, he took the sword with him, feeling it blaze in divine union with his desire and swung it downwards, slicing cleanly through Michael’s golden restraints, towering above them and bringing the sword down with deific force, aiming for the top of Michael’s head.

It was almost inconceivable what happened next, one moment Aziraphale was millimetres away from committing celestial homicide, the next, his sword was spinning away over the edge of the roof, he was flat on his back once more and Michael was leaning over him, their long, claw-like fingers wrapped tightly around his neck, their face, bitter and distorted in total hatred, close enough for Aziraphale to feel their spit as they hissed in anger at him. “You *abomination*…” Aziraphale felt fear grip his heart. “You will suffer for this! For all eternity you-”

And then they were gone, a flaming ball shooting through the night and taking Michael with it, sending them sprawling away from Aziraphale who curled onto his side, coughing and choking from the pressure of the Archangel’s hand on his neck. He blinked through the water that had sprung up in his eyes to see Michael back on their feet, eyes and mouth wide as they stared at a dangerously swaying Crowley, standing far too close to the edge of the roof, shades long gone, blood running freely from his scalp and down the side of his face and neck, one arm hanging limply at his side, the other holding another pulsating ball of light.

“Repugnant demon,” they hissed, stalking ever forward, but cautious now, far more cautious than any Archangel should ever need to be. “Did you not scream enough when Gabriel had you? Are you back for more? Are you here to watch me do the same to the fat, little Principality?”

“Aziraphale!” there was a slur to Crowley’s voice which sparked even more fear into Aziraphale’s heart. “Fly, angel! For fuck’s sake, get out of here!”
“Don’t be ridiculous, dear,” Aziraphale’s voice was rough as he climbed to his feet, “I’m not leaving you!”

There was no time for any more argument as Michael, their lip curled in a snarl, sent another bolt of light Crowley’s way. Crowley reacted instantly, firing the ball of flame and then snapping his fingers and Aziraphale’s eyes widened as he saw his own sword appear there. Crowley twisted awkwardly, bringing the sword up in his one good hand, only just managing to deflect the bolt of light, although it did knock him back a step.

Aziraphale advanced from behind, nothing more in his mind than to take Michael’s attention away from Crowley, but, without even looking, Michael lashed out with the golden rope and, for the second time that night, Aziraphale crashed to the ground helplessly tangled. Another bolt went Crowley’s way, then another, and another and each one the demon managed to artlessly deflect. He was backing up the whole time though, rapidly running out of space as Michael, stalked him, less cautious than before, preparing yet another bolt as Aziraphale grabbed the celestial tether and flicked it up in the air, sending a wave into the Archangel which not only knocked their aim off as they attempted, yet again to smite the demon, but disorporated the rope, instantly freeing Aziraphale to continue his desperate scramble.

Michael changed tactics, spinning the rope out towards Crowley, catching him around the waist and the limp arm, pulling a pained snarl from his lips as the dancing, shimmering coils seared into his skin. Aziraphale leapt forwards, reaching for the sword as Crowley desperately tossed it his way but Michael was faster, tugging the holy rope so viciously that Crowley was pitched off the side of the roof, then throwing a jet of light Aziraphale’s way, knocking him off-balance, the sword clattering to the ground, the flames extinguishing even as Aziraphale grabbed for it.

“Enough!” Michael was ruffled, breathing heavily even though they didn’t even need the air, glancing back at the space where Crowley had been as if they didn’t trust him not to reappear at any moment, whilst keeping a light ball buzzing just above Aziraphale, making sure that he stayed down. “Enough…”

Aziraphale squirmed desperately but the ball held him still and as he fought, he watched Michael prowling back and forth along the side of the roof, eyes downwards, completely oblivious to Crowley sneaking around the crumbled ruins of the lift shaft, another ball of fire dancing silently in his palm. Aziraphale held his breath as Crowley edged forward, obviously looking for the best angle, wanting to be close enough so that Michael would have no time for counter-measures.

He let loose with his demonic fire, sending it streaking Michael’s way, just as Michael spun around and threw his own pyrotechnics in return. Crowley’s aim was true, his fireball slammed into the Archangel, sending them off the edge of the roof and crashing into the picture windows of the next hotel along. Unfortunately, so was Michael’s and, without the sword, Crowley only managed to slightly redirect its course, it still gave him enough of a glancing blow to send him careering back
into the pile of rubble in the centre of the roof.

“Crowley!” For just the briefest of moments, the power of the orb holding Aziraphale in place wavered and he scrambled up onto his hands and knees but then it returned, even heavier than before, slamming him back to the gravelled rooftop as Michael arose behind them, glowing with a rage so fierce that even Aziraphale couldn’t properly look at them. They didn’t speak though, simply gestured with a pulsating limb and a huge concrete slab which used to be part of the lift shaft’s roof levitated, slowing spinning on its own axis.

Aziraphale’s eyes widened, flicking between Crowley’s still form and the floating shelf of concrete, scrambling ineffectively, his heart pounding in his chest with a sickly dread. “Crowley!” he yelled again and could sense, more than see, Michael smiling.

“Die, demon!” the words reverberated through Aziraphale’s skull and he desperately reached out, metres and metres away from his fallen friend. Michael was enjoying the moment, the power they held over them both but it wasn’t going to last and Aziraphale saw the moment the decision was made, the order given and the concrete suddenly dropped, plummeting to where Crowley lay directly in its path.

“NO!” Aziraphale screamed, he didn’t think he’d ever screamed before, not like this, not like everything good in the world was coming to the end. He reached out as the concrete fell, trying, desperately, to deflect its course but he wasn’t powerful enough, his wide, despairing eyes watched it plunge and then he was forced to fling his hands over his head as, with a reverberating boom, the whole slab exploded, showering everything around him in clouds of gravel and dust.

There was another voice then, sombre and serene, but with an authority that spoke of absolute certainty. “Archangel Michael…”

Aziraphale looked up, looked all around, as the force holding him down wavered. There was no one there, though, nothing had changed, no one had stormed in to their rescue. He strained his neck, searching for the tiniest glimpse of Crowley, but there was nothing but brick dust and debris.

“No!” Michael, unsurprisingly, was instantly panicked, “I have them! I have them both at my mercy!” they looked around them, as clueless as to the source of the voice as Aziraphale himself. “The demon and the traitor angel! I have them beaten!”

It was as if they hadn’t spoken. The voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, all at once, reverberating through the air, the concrete below them, even the bones that made up
Aziraphale’s form. “You are to return to Heaven immediately. There are some questions which
need answering.”

“No!” Michael screamed again, shrill and furious, Aziraphale wasn’t even sure that they hadn’t
stamped their foot. “I have them, don’t you see? We can make the traitorous Principality pay!”

Aziraphale’s heart began to pound in hope – and love. Was this…? Could this be…? For so many
thousands of years, he had yearned to hear Her voice again, to feel that presence directed at him as
it had been as he’d stood outside the Garden and wondered. For the briefest of moments, he
thought it was, it just had to be… but then, with crushing disappointment he realised he was wrong,
this was not Her he could hear, this was not the opportunity of the audience he’d desired for so
long. The disappointment was sharp, but still, whatever this was, it was a diversion, whoever this
was, they were more powerful than Michael and, as long as they didn’t turn their attention to him
and Crowley, then this was a golden opportunity. The pressure on his back was still there, but it
was shaky, trembling even, and Aziraphale started to push up against it.

“You don’t understand!” Michael was nothing if not tenacious. “Behaviour like this can’t go
unpunished! He went against Her will! Against the Plan! Unforgivable!”

“That it not your place to decide,” the voice was low, emotionless, monotonous. Aziraphale was
glad it wasn’t Her.

“Well someone has to make a stand!” they were screeching once more, Aziraphale had never seen
an angel so… unhinged. “Someone has to avenge the ruined Plan!”

“And how do you know it was ruined?” at last, the very edge of emotion there, curiosity even.
Aziraphale wondered if anyone at all knew what the Plan actually was. Michael was lost for words
and the voice, the Metatron? continued, “But it’s still not your place. You need to return to
Heaven.”

Michael jerked into the air, their limbs thrashing desperately for a moment, until they went rigid,
held still in a beam of light that suddenly materialised from above.

The voice, meanwhile, wasn’t finished, with the air of a judge declaring a verdict, it intoned,
“There have been no directives issued from Heaven with regard to this angel and this demon. You
are to desist your actions immediately and return for judgement.”
It was Michael’s turn to scream then, the sound piercing enough that Aziraphale hauled his hands over his ears. It seemed without end, burrowing its way into every part of his being, shaking him apart from his soul outwards and then – it was gone. It was all gone, the glowing orb pressing him down, the light and the voice, Michael themselves – even the ruined lift shaft housing was as it was the day it was constructed. But, Aziraphale shakily hauled himself to his feet, eyes skipping desperately all around the rooftop, there was no Crowley.

“Crowley?” his voice was jagged, broken, he stumbled forward to the last place he’d seen him but there was only the empty roof, mocking him in its normalcy. “Crowley!”

Nothing.

He hauled in his panic and forced himself to reach out and feel and, yes, thank the Lord, there he was, still here, still corporeal, not far away, not far but… lower. Without thought, Aziraphale launched himself off the side of the roof, his wings opening to let him drift, silently, downwards, using an old trick of Crowley’s and making sure that no one would want to see anything unusual this night.

It didn’t take him long. At the rear of the hotel, were the gardens and there, crumpled under a squat-looking palm tree, was a familiar dark shape in the grass.

Aziraphale landed and folded his wings in the same movement, dropping to his knees at Crowley’s side, his shaking hands running up and down, desperate not to hurt like before but needing to know what he was dealing with. “Crowley? My dear?” he almost didn’t recognise his own voice for the fear in it.

Crowley was laid on his side, facing away from the angel, but at the feel of those butterfly touches, on hearing that shattered voice, he moved, one arm flopping out backwards until grimy and blood-streaked fingers wrapped around Aziraphale’s, squeezing with enough force to take the very edge off Aziraphale’s fear. “Angel…” the word was almost a breath.

“Crowley… thank goodness…” he swallowed, pulled himself together, “Can I touch you, dearest? Does it hurt you?”

There was something akin to laugh then, shallow and rough. “I don’t know – it’s hard to tell over the general fucking agony I’m in here.”
Aziraphale frowned. “Hold on, I’ll sort it – tell me if hurts you.” There was no answer from the grass and so he steeled himself, taking the longest, most calming breath he could and before gently squeezing the hand in his and manoeuvring it to lie in front of Crowley’s broken body. Reluctantly, he left it there and carefully placed a soft palm on a shaking shoulder, the other on a denim-clad hip, before gently rolling them towards him, wincing at the moan of pain Crowley made as he was eased onto his back. “Okay?” a sharp nod was his only answer.

He stared in trepidation, remembering that awful day in Crowley’s bathroom when he’d caused so much agony in his attempts to help. There was so much to do… obvious cuts and misshapen bones, bleeding and bruising, and that was only what he could see, and he didn’t dare even start.

“Angel…” the pain was obvious in every drawn-out syllable of the word, and Crowley looked so incredibly pale.

“I don’t want to hurt you…”

Crowley forced his eyes to open and to seek Aziraphale out in the darkness, and he was appalled by the pain he could see in them. “I can’t go back to Hell…” The fear that those words unlocked in Aziraphale eclipsed every other thought he had, and, with a determined nod, he pulled himself together.

He started with the deep and jagged cut in Crowley’s scalp, tentatively reaching out with his finger-tips, dripping his Angelic essence, so, so slowly, and watching Crowley’s drawn expression the whole time. Nothing changed though, there was no scream of pain and the flayed skin at the sides of the injury settled and started to knit together and his confidence flooded back. He worked steadily downwards, lips running through calming words like water, his fingers soft and gentle, his eyes taking everything in, making sure that nothing was missed. There were hundreds of lacerations, some deep, some superficial. Broken bones, over two dozen, including a crack in his skull. A dislocated shoulder and knee. One lung was deflated, his spleen was ruptured and a sliver of bone had embedded itself into his liver. There were burns to his arm and torso… it seemed that it had only been the most supreme act of concentration that had stopped his body from discorporating – and handing his essence straight into Hell’s waiting arms.

As Aziraphale worked, Crowley’s tension and shaking eased, as did the involuntary moans and grunts of pain. By the time he was aligning the tiny broken bones in his left foot and gently fusing them back together, Crowley was sitting upright, watching in silence.

Then they were done. Aziraphale paused, wondering about his wings but not daring to ask so instead gave into temptation and slumped down onto the grass at Crowley’s side, the fear, the fight and the healing all taking it out of him. They slid into a comfortable silence as the pool party around the corner continued on, unabated.
It was Crowley who eventually broke the quiet. “Thank you,” his voice was low, he sounded exhausted and Aziraphale found that he himself was shaking again, just like the night of the Armageddon-that-wasn’t.

“My dear boy,” he reached out and placed his palm on Crowley’s shin, just needing the contact. “You don’t have to thank me. Yet again you’re hurt because of me… I really don’t know what to say,” he swallowed hard, “I’m so dreadfully sorry.”

Aziraphale felt Crowley lift a little and knew that he was looking down to stare at the back of Aziraphale’s hand. “Don’t ever apologise for them, angel, nothing they do comes back on you.”

Aziraphale didn’t agree but didn’t have the heart to argue with Crowley about anything – not anymore. “Did I get everything? Are you hurting anywhere?” he asked instead. “Did I hurt you again?” How are your wings? He hoped Crowley would hear the question he still couldn’t form.

“I’m fine. Bit sore. It’ll pass.”

It would, Aziraphale knew that. Human bodies could be healed, but they could still also hold onto their pain. He frowned and as his own pains started to announce themselves. He lifted his hand and stared at a graze on his own wrist, absently healing it as his mind ran back through the events of the last hour. “I don’t understand what’s just happened,” he admitted. “Michael was here for me because Gabriel…? What in Heaven has been going on?”

For a long while, he wasn’t sure that Crowley was going to answer him, but finally he shifted slightly, and Aziraphale turned to watch him, catching him rubbing a filthy hand through his hair before blowing out a long breath. “Gabriel wanted a way to destroy you completely,” his voice was flat. “That’s where I came in, he hoped that I’d reveal the secret of the Hellfire.”

Aziraphale squeezed his shin, “Thank you. For keeping my secret.”

Crowley’s yellow eyes jumped his way as he let out a flat laugh. “What did you think I would do? I would never sell you out, Aziraphale.”

Another squeeze, “I know that.”
Shaking his head, Crowley’s eyes slid back to the grass. “But, I don’t know. Someone up there got wind of what he was doing and wasn’t happy. Some other angels came in, I couldn’t really see them from the position I was in,” Aziraphale really didn’t want to know what position that was. “But I could hear. They told him he was out of line, yadda yadda yadda, he needed to let me go, people wanted to talk to him,” Crowley shrugged, “You know Gabriel, he wasn’t happy. He flooded me with angelic energy before he went, told me that maybe you’d finish me off for him. I don’t know where he went, they just cut me down and left. So, I got myself dressed and – just went home.”

Aziraphale’s face crumpled at the matter of fact tone. The poor, poor boy. He knew Crowley would hate that sympathy, though, would see it as pity so he hauled himself together. “Sounds like he’s in trouble,” he offered instead.

“Good. The bastard.”

“And Michael.”

“Same.”

“And you and I?”

Crowley looked over, his eyes searching, then away again. “Breathing space? Again? I don’t know.”

They slid back into silence as the pool party finally wound down and the night started to quieten around them. Aziraphale swallowed and sat up again, meeting Crowley’s eyes. “I have a suite,” he offered quietly. “It’s very comfortable. You look exhausted. Why don’t you come back and-”

“I really should go.”

Aziraphale blinked heavily and looked down at his filthy trousers. “I suppose I deserved that,” he offered quietly.

“I’m not trying to hurt you, you know,” and Aziraphale knew he wasn’t. “But… I made myself vulnerable as soon as I let myself be your friend. And then, when I asked you to leave with me…”
And I rejected you… the searing pain in Aziraphale’s chest was back.

Crowley let out a long sigh that rent at Aziraphale’s heart. “I’m not good enough for Heaven: I’m not bad enough for Hell. I’ve been a failure in everything I’ve done; I just don’t know what I am anymore.”

Good, that’s what you are, you’re good, Aziraphale wanted to tell him, but he wasn’t sure he could get his throat to loosen up enough to form a single word.

“I invented clichés, but maybe they’re actually true. The things is – it’s not you, Aziraphale, it’s me. I just need some time to, I don’t know, find myself, I suppose.”

Aziraphale marvelled at the longest, most honest revelation Crowley had ever shared with him – it was just a shame that none of it was what he’d hoped for. “I understand,” he offered, even though he really, honestly, didn’t. “But you can still come back to the hotel with me? Just to rest? Before I go back to London. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you.”

Crowley was thinking, Aziraphale held his breath, if he could only get him to agree to come back with him, well, then they’d be able to talk and maybe sort something out? Maybe Crowley could see how desperately sorry he was for everything he’d ever done… maybe he’d even agree to come home… It seemed that a decision had been made, Crowley looked over at Aziraphale, and Aziraphale met his gaze, heart thudding in his chest.

“If I came back with you,” he whispered, “then I’d never leave your side again.”

Aziraphale offered up a tentative smile, “Would that be so bad?” but Crowley’s eyes dropped again, taking Aziraphale’s hopes with them.

“I need to do this, angel. I need to work out what I am. I’ll stay in touch, send a postcard…” he offered up a flirty little smile which Aziraphale did his best to return, and hauled himself up off the ground. Aziraphale stared at him, his mind frantically thinking of something he could do, anything, that would work to change his mind. There was nothing, though, and Crowley seemed to sense that, as, with a raising of his hand and another one of those flirty smiles, he turned and walked away, vanishing almost instantly between the dotted palm trees.

Aziraphale stayed where he was, and was still sitting in the grass as the sun rose over the sea.
“Art galleries to see perhaps, or… or directors of such I’d imagine…”

“Everybody's doing a brand-new dance, now,” Aziraphale sung along as he spooned a generous helping of Oolong into his new favourite tea pot. It wasn’t often he listened to the radio on a morning, and it was even rarer for him to find it playing a song he recognised, never mind one he knew the words to. “I know you'll get to like it if you give it a chance now.” But the silence of the flat above the shop had been draining in recent weeks and so it was a habit he’d fallen into, even if had had to use a little miracle on the old Bakelite wireless he’d had since the pre-war days.

He could only imagine what Crowley would say if he could see it, happily sitting on Aziraphale’s sunny windowsill, blasting out tunes from Capital FM. No doubt he’d have wrinkled his nose in that adorably disdainful manner of his and promptly sloped off, returning anon with some tiny, sleek, black thing that could make seven types of bread as well as play radio stations. The thought made him smile.

“There's never been a dance that's so easy to do, it even makes you happy when you're feeling blue.” Sitting at the kitchen table with his tea pot, resplendent in its lovely knitted duck tea cosy, his toast triangles and that delightful rhubarb jam he’d found in Borough Market, Aziraphale felt a familiar tug just behind his ribcage. Was he happy? If anyone saw him they’d certainly think that he was but… it was hard to be happy with his existence when he constantly felt that something was missing.

Someone…

His eyes drifted to the fridge and the postcards proudly displayed there. Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, Texas, California, Washington State, British Colombia, Ontario, Quebec… Crowley was certainly getting around whilst he looked for himself. Aziraphale’s heart tightened, wondering what else he was finding on his adventures, but at least he was keeping in touch, letting Aziraphale know he was okay, he was alive and, seemingly, quite happy. The very least that Aziraphale could do was pretend in return.

Of course, that was all well and good in the bright of the day with the noise of Soho all around him, or his old Bakelite and Capital FM, but the evenings, the long, long nights, well they were a different issue altogether. Aziraphale drifted now, away from the sunny kitchen and down into the backroom of the shop, the room where he and Crowley had spent so much time, especially during the years they were working together to raise the antichrist. He’d always thought of those evenings so fondly, the banter between them, the wine and the teasing, the arguments, yes, of course there had been arguments, but, underneath it all, Aziraphale had adored them, had loved the closeness they were developing, had relished the excuse he could give himself as to why he was spending so much time with his opposite number.
But now… well, it was hard for those memories to not be tarnished somehow, for him not to look over every single conversation he had ever had with Crowley over the years and pick up the message he was broadcasting, loud and clear, in every single thing he said or did: “You are not good enough to be my friend. You are not deserving of my time. I am superior to you in every way – and don’t you ever forget it.”

And Crowley hadn’t forgotten, had he? How could he when the reminders were coming so thick and fast?

But _why_? And this was the part that Aziraphale had struggled to come to terms with ever since Crowley’s uncommon fit of honesty on the rooftop in Rio. Why had he felt the need to keep Crowley down like that? For all those thousands of years? The answer had been an uncomfortable awakening for him.

At first, he wondered if he really _had_ thought like that, like the demon he’d met in the garden, the reason that Adam and Eve had been cast out into the desert, like he wasn’t actually worth anything that Aziraphale could possibly give him? But no, that wasn’t it at all. He remembered wondering why it had mattered so much about a simple piece of fruit on a tree and yes, what Crowley had said about putting it on a mountain or something had seemed to make a lot of sense to him. But then, the Fall was still such a sharply painful memory in his heart, the anger, the agony, the emptiness… the very last thing Aziraphale wanted to do was to ask questions, when questioning was what had led to the Fall in the first place.

He’d been worried though, worried that he wasn’t hiding his doubts well enough, worried that he should have done more to protect Adam and Eve, to lead them a little more, he was worried that he’d given away his sword, worried what the other angels would say – they already thought him odd for the way he loved the garden and everything in it – he was worried that he’d given away his sword, worried what the other angels would say – they already thought him odd for the way he loved the garden and everything in it – he was worried about how Adam and Eve would cope in the harsh environ outside the garden. In short, he was worried about everything, and wasn’t that just the way it was going to go from then on in?

But, in the midst of all that worry, came Crowley. Where the other angels pointed and sneered, Crowley smiled, where the other angels had whispered about him and ignored him, Crowley had approached him and listened to him. He knew that, had he ever had the nerve, or the level of stupidity, to tell the other angels his doubts, what they would have done; they would have run straight up to the top, no doubt, and told Gabriel, Herself even, what he had done, and waited for the celestial sparks to start flying. But what had Crowley done? Reassured him. Told him that he didn’t feel that it was at all possible that he _could_ do the Wrong Thing. Aziraphale hadn’t believed him, not one hundred percent, after all, plenty of angels had already done the Wrong Thing and Fallen because of it – _Crowley_ had done the Wrong Thing and Fallen because of it – but still, that hadn’t been the point. The point had been that Crowley had tried to soothe where the others – well – they had just distanced themselves from him.
And there it was – in a nutshell. That’s what Aziraphale had been doing for all of those millennia, he had been trying to distance himself from Crowley. He had been trying to establish plausible denyability should anyone ask, he’d been trying to prove to himself that he wasn’t about to Fall, he’d been trying to reassure himself that he was Right, always Right, and Crowley was Wrong. He’d been scared, yes, he’d been terrified but that wasn’t an excuse really, not when he considered who he was scared for. Heaven? No. The Almighty? No. The humans? No. Crowley????? No… not really… Yes, there had been fear over what Hell would do to him if they caught wind of their fraternising, but that had all been eclipsed over Aziraphale’s terror regarding Falling. So…? Himself, then. That was all, just himself, for all those years, comforting himself at Crowley’s expense. Frequently. Continually. Repetitively. Cruelly. It was the most unbelievable of curiosities that, after that first meeting, Crowley had ever deigned to return to his side.

But then, Aziraphale knew why now, didn’t he? Why Crowley had been drawn to him, over and over, like a moth to the flame that will only, eventually, kill it. It was because of his kindness, and how brutally ironic was that?

A single kindness that Aziraphale had extended to the being who had smiled at him and tried to comfort his fears, a single kindness that had destroyed the walls that Crowley had built around himself, the castle of self-sufficiency he had created. Did Aziraphale wish that he had left well alone? That he had never raised his wing and sheltered that strangely gentle demon from the Very First Rains? No – he was always selfish enough to realise that about himself. But what he did wish, with every part of his essence, was that he had woken up to this pain years ago, in fact, that he had woken up to this pain at all without Crowley having to flee to the other side of the world just to get some space for his own healing. Aziraphale regretted his obliviousness, he regretted his egocentrism, his inattention, his obstinacy and ignorance – he could never regret Crowley.

What was that trite saying? You never know what you’ve lost until it’s gone. Oh, but how so very, very true that was. So true and so painful and, for a being that had a literal lifetime of experience to draw on, a well-overdue wake-up.

So, what now? What could he do to even start putting right his half dozen millennia of wrongs? Well, every bone in his corporation was screaming at him to go to Crowley and prostrate himself in a desperate attempt at absolution. But – again – that was about him, wasn’t it? And his needs. He’d already tried that, in effect, and it was not what Crowley needed, or wanted. Crowley, who had been abused by Heaven and Hell, who was feared and loathed by humans who thought they knew what he was, who had been continually mistreated and insulted by the being he classed as his best friend, another wave of shame washed over Aziraphale. If he ever had the chance, and he had to believe that Crowley, as good as he was, would, one day, give Aziraphale another chance, then it would all be about Crowley, it would all be about Aziraphale being whatever it was that his friend wanted and needed. He’d had enough time taking, now it was his time to give.

Determinedly, he munched his toast, wishing himself a happy Almost-Armageddon-Anniversary and wondering which deli-sandwich he should buy for lunch later on. Maybe the Coronation Chicken, it seemed fitting for a celebration, especially on such a lovely day.
When he went down to open up the shop (he tended to open up for at least a few hours every single day, now) the postman had already been and there was a little pile of rectangular-delights on the welcome mat. Aziraphale felt a smile bloom right across his face as he bent to eagerly scoop the selection of envelopes from the patch of sunlight they were laid in, smiling at Anathema’s handwriting on one, eagerly running his eye over the cover stories on next month’s Prophecy Collector’s Monthly, ignoring the bill-coloured one and – yes! – another postcard, joy of joys.

He didn’t read it straight away, instead he took it to his desk and sat himself down comfortably before examining the picture on the front very carefully. “New York, my dear!” he smiled to himself, Crowley had always enjoyed New York, he’d loved the chaos of it all. The photo was the ubiquitous cityscape, of course it was, with the Statue of Liberty standing loftily off to the right. But that couldn’t be all, there had to be something, Crowley always left his mark… ah, yes. He laughed softly to himself wondering how Crowley’s exchange of Lady Liberty’s torch for a pair of chopsticks and a sushi roll had gone down, it wasn’t as if Crowley even liked sushi!

Finally, when he’d lasted as long as he possibly could, he flipped it over, smile brightening at the usual messy scrawl he’d spent the last five thousand years trying to decipher. He glanced at the date, three weeks previous, oh, this one had been a long time in transit, he wondered if it had got a little lost somewhere along the line – a bit like Crowley himself, really. Shaking such melancholy thoughts from his mind, Aziraphale set about reading the cramped scrawl.

‘Angel, how’s things? Hope you’re enjoying all the petrol fumes a London summer can throw at you, and you’d better not still be wearing your winter slippers!’ Aziraphale glanced self-consciously at his Clan Douglas tartan slippers and tried to tuck them away, out of sight under his chair. ‘New York is as pretentious as ever – I’ve taken an apartment in Greenwich Village and I’m posing (literally) as an avant-garde sculptor. All I have to do is pile up any old shite, call it something hollow and ostentatious and some dick offers five figures for it. You’d love all the art shit I get invited to.’

“I’m sure I would…” as long as he was there with Crowley at his side, of course.

‘I went to Capitol the other day. Thought I’d check it out for you.’

“Oh!” Aziraphale could suddenly taste Lobster Mac and Cheese…

‘Don’t think they’ve decorated (or cleaned) since we were there last-‘
“1951.”

‘-in, was it ’51?’

Aziraphale smiled.

‘The Mac and Cheese still tastes fishy, the milkshakes are non-alcoholic and the juke box was broken – you’d love it.’ He shook his head fondly. ‘Anyway, must dash, I have a private viewing in half an hour, can you believe some poncey gallery owner wants to put on a show of my ’work’?’ Suddenly, Aziraphale felt cold right down into his winter slippers. ‘Watch for me on the front of Time very soon! Stay safe, C.’

Carefully, he turned the postcard over again finding it less upsetting to stare at the giant sushi roll rather than to consider Crowley swaggering around under the watchful gaze of ‘some poncey gallery owner’. Crowley finding himself was one thing that Aziraphale could live with, him finding someone else was a different proposition altogether…

He sighed and, slipping the postcard into the breast pocket of his jacket, right over his heart, he pushed up from his seat and went to unlock the front door. Brooding over how Crowley was passing his time would help no one, least of all himself, and he’d vowed to himself that he wouldn’t spend his days drawn and sad, he would also try to move on, to live life to the full and maybe even find out a bit more about himself. After all he would see Crowley again, and so he had to be ready for that; the last thing he needed was to look like he’d done nothing but… pine since the last time they met. That would simply never do. No matter how many fiendishly rich and attractive gallery owners Crowley was spending his time with.

He set about tidying up the tiny period Murder Mystery section of the shop, trying, very hard, not to super-impose the descriptor ‘gallery owner’ onto every victim he came across, just about finishing his task as the bell rang and announced his first customer of the day.

In days gone by, Aziraphale would have scuttled quickly over, sizing up his visitor, trying to suss out what, if anything, they would be looking to buy so that he could quickly squirrel away any book in danger of leaving the shop. But that was before Gabriel and Michael both taught him what was important in his life. Since then, he’d moved the very best works of his collection upstairs or into the backroom and made peace with the fact that some of the books left behind in the main part of the shop would get sold from time to time – it was what usually happened in a shop after all.

He left his customer to browse, finishing up the final shelf and standing back to admire his neat and dust-free arrangement before turning around and finding himself face to face with none other than
Crowley himself, who nodded a cautious, “Angel,” in greeting.

“Crowley!” Aziraphale was far less reserved in his greeting. He flung himself forward, crashing into his friend with joyful abandon, hugging him tightly, his smile blooming right across his face as he felt Crowley carefully hugging him back.

“Dear boy!” Aziraphale beamed, pulling back but keeping hold of Crowley’s arms, “How simply wonderful to see you! You’re looking quite well! Rested and refreshed!” he did as well, there was none of that tension that had been evident for the vast majority of the last twelve years. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Crowley offered, a tiny smile of his own playing over the corners of his lips.

“And you’ve come visiting alone?” Aziraphale leaned around him, just to check that there was no ghost of a gallery owner who’d followed him in and Crowley frowned slightly.

“Of course.”

“Wonderful!” Aziraphale felt effervescent. “Come and sit down, come on! We’ll have a drink and a catch up, it’s just simply delightful to have you here again!” A year to the day he was last there… not that Aziraphale would ever say that out loud. “Come on, come into the back.”

“Err,” and just like that, the bottom dropped out of Aziraphale’s world once more.

“Ah…” he stopped dead and forced his smile to remain, even though it felt more than a little brittle. “You’ll be busy no doubt. Yes, yes, of course, dear boy, of course, I understand that. Lots of people to visit no doubt.” He threw a shifty glance Crowley’s way, “Art galleries to see perhaps, or… or directors of such I’d imagine…”

“What?” Crowley’s nose wrinkled in that way that Aziraphale had thought of so many times in the last year. “Don’t be stupid, Aziraphale. Art galleries?” he seemed to shudder.

“Oh,” Aziraphale wasn’t sure what to think about that – surely it was better to be blown off for a reason than for nothing?
“No, it was just, well…” he shifted awkwardly as Aziraphale starred at him, “Well – I was just wondering if you wanted to come out for a drive with me. Instead.”

Aziraphale gaped. “A drive?”

“Yes.”

“With you?”

“…yes?”

“In the Bentley?”

Crowley winced, “Yes. Look Aziraphale, if you’re busy or you’d rather not close the shop or just rather not than that’s all fine-”

His monologue was interrupted by Aziraphale’s huge smile returning, along with a click of his fingers which pulled all the blinds, switched the door sign around to ‘Closed’ and brought a light rain mackintosh and basket with a thermos and a tin of Scottish shortbread, over Aziraphale’s left arm, the right one he then offered to Crowley. “I’d love to come for a drive with you, dearest! Please, lead on!”

Crowley’s shy little smile was back again and, arm in arm, they headed for the doors and the beautiful morning.
Aziraphale’s joyful abandon waned in the face of a refresher course of Crowley’s driving. He could hear the basket sliding from side to side across the leather seats in the back, but couldn’t spare a limb from bracing himself against the break-neck speed to rescue it. In days gone by, he would simply have snapped at Crowley, told him to slow down or pull over and let him out right this minute, but even with Crowley coming back home and showing up in his bookshop, he didn’t feel that they’d quite returned to that stage yet. Instead, he tried not to heave a sigh of relief when they reached the M25 which was, miraculously, traffic-free for once, and Crowley settled back into a relaxed one hundred and twenty miles an hour which meant that Aziraphale only felt the need to hold on with one, white-knuckled, hand.

They hadn’t spoken a word since tearing off from Soho, and, now that Aziraphale could dispel with the fear of imminent discorporation for a while, he suddenly realised that the silence between them was a little strained, Crowley was a little strained and that was not the way that their silences using felt. He slipped a sneaky glance sideways and was rewarded with the chance to study Crowley’s profile in detail, to refresh himself after all this time of the sleek lines and sharp bone structure. Crowley did look well, especially when the last time Aziraphale had seen him he’d been ashen and streaked with his own blood, but there was a tension in his jaw, a nervous little twitching of the muscle and it made Aziraphale’s heart twitch in return.

“Where are we going, dear?” he asked carefully as they tore through a sunny Surrey, “Do you have a particular destination in mind?”

Crowley threw him a quick look and Aziraphale watched as his throat bobbed, before his eyes were back on the road and his answer came, low and measured. “Yeah, actually. I want to show you something.”

Aziraphale’s chest tightened, something, or someone? “Ooh, very mysterious!” he forced out a bright reply, “We should have brought a picnic, I’ll bet there are plenty of lovely spots around here.”

Crowley didn’t answer, and the Bentley continued eating up the miles and so Aziraphale gave up, leaning back in his seat and trying, desperately, to settle the writhing snakes which seemed to have
taken up residence in his belly.

They left the M25 at Wisley, and for a moment, Aziraphale had thought that they were going to the garden there, but Crowley barely slowed and instead set them blasting down the A3. Slowly, the scenery changed around them, getting more and more rural as they left the A3 behind and turned onto a single carriage way, typical of the English countryside. Aziraphale amused himself with looking at all the quaint little pubs and restaurants they sped past, trying to get a glimpse of wooden menu boards outside which was challenging due to the fact that Crowley was currently doing around ninety-seven miles an hour. Eventually they slowed, though, turned off onto a tinier road, barely wide enough for the Bentley and flanked on either side by huge hedgerows, and Aziraphale began to feel that they were getting very close to their final destination.

His anxiety rose once more and, shooting another glance sideways, he could see that Crowley’s had too, his hands almost white on the leather steering wheel as they slowed to a very un-Crowley thirty two miles an hour. Aziraphale steeled himself and stared ahead as the road twisted and turned in front of them.

It was late summer, the hedgerows were heavy with berries and hips, with lazily buzzing bees and tiny white flowers, much like the spread of the stars above, whilst behind them, farmland rolled its patchwork quilt across the land. The sky was a cloudless blue, stretching endlessly in every direction, but there was the slightest of breezes, keeping temperatures pleasantly warm rather than stiflingly hot – not that that would bother two supernatural entities on a road trip into the countryside. It was a perfect day, a perfect place, and Aziraphale scrabbled around to try and work out what on earth it was that had got Crowley so uptight.

They drove on. The hedgerows gave way to trees, so densely packed and verdant that it felt as if they were driving through a tunnel. Aziraphale glanced at Crowley again, wondering if he was appreciating all this natural beauty, but his eyes were fixed firmly on the road, his lips pressed together in a thin line. Then the hedgerows were back, lower this time, so that Aziraphale could see the farmland behind them and the hills in the distance beyond that – it really was the most picturesque of locations.

The slowed again, the road seemed to narrow even further and Aziraphale was sure that he could see the reaching fingers of hawthorn curling their branches out of the way as the Bentley passed by, preserving its paintwork and, by default, their own existence. A row of telegraph poles ran at their side, like sentries, then the road dipped down and twisted to the left, immediately curling up over an ancient stone bridge and its tinkling beck underneath. “Oh,” Aziraphale simply couldn’t help himself, “What a delightful bridge!” Crowley glanced at him, but didn’t reply.

Suddenly, they found themselves driving through a small traditional village. There was a large village green at the side of the road, cricket pitch marked out in the centre, trees and benches dotting the outsides, a red telephone box at the crossroads, a post office with a thatched roof, a
large old, coaching inn, the name, Noah’s Ark, displayed proudly outside, a handful of cottages with tumbling cottage-gardens, a sign pointing off to the right proclaiming ‘Winery’. “Oh, Crowley,” Aziraphale just couldn’t keep it in, “this village is like a chocolate box lid!”

Again, Crowley was silent, but he did take a left, down the side of the Village Hall with its gracefully pointed bell tower, back into the politely yielding hedgerows and Aziraphale was just about to ask if he wanted a nice cut of tea from the flask, when he slowed right down, pointing the Bentley towards a gap in the trees and a rutted track which suddenly opened out onto a solitary cottage, its white-washed walls shining in the sunlight.

The car’s engine immediately died and before Aziraphale could say a single word, Crowley was up and out, stalking away to stand, just out of talking distance, his back to Aziraphale, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the silent house.

Slowly, Aziraphale pulled himself out to stand in the sunshine at the Bentley’s side. The cottage was obviously old, but had, just as obviously, been recently renovated. The thatch was clean and neat and sat over the upstairs windows like heavy eyebrows. The whitewash was almost pearlescent in its luminosity, the windows, larger than those usually found in such an old cottage, were also white, the original mullioned design but again, lovingly restored, and the door was oak with a large rounded knocker in the centre. Aziraphale took a step in, his eyes running over the messy wasteland that was the front garden, the little wooden gate hanging precariously off its hinges and the stand-alone garage, clad in slate-coloured, feather edged wood, its sleek roller door silently retracting at the mere presence of the Bentley. There was no one else around, Aziraphale could feel that, just the two of them for miles and so… there was only one explanation for all of this… heart thumping heavily in his chest, cold, panicky sweat prickling down his spine, Aziraphale turned to Crowley’s rigid back and asked in a voice he knew was frosted and sharp, “Crowley, have you bought this cottage?”

For a long moment, Crowley didn’t reply, didn’t move a muscle although Aziraphale could see the tips of his ears reddening slightly and wondered what that meant. Finally, he heard a sigh and, still without looking around, Crowley finally answered. “Yeah. Come and see.”

They walked down the overgrown path, obviously the care that had gone in to restoring the cottage had not been extended to the garden and Aziraphale had to tug his trousers from a rather determined thistle as they neared the doorway.

It was suddenly, brutally clear what this was. Crowley was leaving. Again. But this time in a calm, rational and organised manner. A permanent manner. Crowley was leaving London for good. Crowley was leaving him...

“Hall,” Crowley’s voice was quiet, his usually large personality almost cowed, his eyes refusing to
stray anywhere near Aziraphale, despite the protection of the usual shades. The room was light and airy, plenty of space for coats and shoes, warm, off-white walls and lots of wood and brick and slate and wicker – it was very pleasant and tasteful.

“It’s lovely,” Aziraphale offered, masking his anguish into responding as a friend should when seeing someone’s new home. “Quite spacious.”

“There’s two living rooms, this one,” careful not to touch, Crowley leaned over and popped one of the doors off the hallway, gesturing inside to the tiny snug with the wood burner and comfy chairs, sound system and not much else.

“Charming,” Aziraphale offered, wondering how long it would be before Crowley managed to get rid of the tartan wing-backed chair and footstool which must have come with the cottage.

“Main living area,” Crowley headed in through another door, ignoring the wooden-spindled staircase and leading the way into the other room that looked out into the front and the messy garden. This was much bigger, another wood burner, wooden floor, huge chocolate leather sofas, curved-screen TV, cosy rugs in duck-egg blue, matching scatter cushions; whilst this was much more Crowley than the little snug, but all the comfy little touches like the candles and the low impact lighting seemed incongruous, and Aziraphale wondered just who had carefully arranged this interior.

“Very nice,” he offered as genuinely as he could and followed as Crowley walked through to the back of the house.

It really was the most perfect location. The whole of the back of the house was enclosed by glass which offered a fabulous view of the messy tumble of a garden, the rolling hills in the distance and the greens and yellows of agricultural England in between. There was a large kitchen, white, wooden units, clean grey walls, shiny metal appliances and a bistro table for two set in the sunshine at the far end. “This is lovely, my dear,” he genuinely meant it, but the words were so hard to force out through the tightness in his throat. Leaving. Crowley was leaving him. Granted, it was hardly South America and Aziraphale had feared that he’d never come back to England at all, so surely this was better? But still. It was a message wasn’t it? Crowley had found himself and his future, and that future did not include Aziraphale.

Crowley nodded, and still looking just about as awkward as Aziraphale had ever seen him, turned around and headed back the way they had come, back to and up the wooden stairs at the front. Without saying a word, at the head of the stairs, he opened a door and, with his head, gestured in. Miserably, Aziraphale trailed forwards, stopping dead at what was obviously Crowley’s bedroom. He stared around, dumbfounded, at the huge bed that monopolised the room, at the long wardrobes, fitted carefully around the eaves and the chimney breast – and they must have come
with the house as well, otherwise why on earth would Crowley need wardrobes when he just willed his clothes into existence every day? The bedding was a soft grey, the walls more of the slatey colour from the garage, there were splashes of peacock blue, cheerful and iridescent once more and the lump of anguish just grew. “Perfect my dear,” he muttered, flashing his best attempt at a happy smile when his tone of voice got Crowley’s eyes on him again. For a moment, they just looked at each other, Aziraphale grinning like a loon, and then Crowley was on the move again.

“Bathroom,” he walked in and stood next to the largest, strangest bath Aziraphale had ever seen. It was white and porcelain, just like any other bath in that respect, but shallow, with flared edges, like a huge nibbles-bowl, with a tap which was a cross between a shining silver pipe and a waterfall. “It’s good for getting your wings out,” Crowley admitted in a mumble, “better than a dust bath.”

“Right,” Aziraphale, who never relished getting his wings wet wasn’t sure what else to say and simply cast a quick glance at the cylindrical shower cubicle with the oversized rainfall head, before heading back out onto the landing, relieved beyond all doubt that this was the final room and that this tortuous tour would soon be over.

The door to the final room was shut tight and Aziraphale waited, politely, for Crowley to open it for him. Instead, Crowley just stood there, his fingers on the handle, his eyes on Aziraphale, his tongue flicking out to lick at already-wet lips. For a moment, it looked like he was going to say something but then the moment passed and instead he just let out a long sigh, opened the door and pushed it inwards, letting Aziraphale lead the way.

Aziraphale had expected a bedroom or maybe a room for his indoor plants, he obviously didn’t need the second bedroom of course, but what else would he have done with the space? It was what humans did after all, and Crowley was nothing if not the perfect student of human behaviour.

The room at the back wasn’t a bedroom though. It stretched across the entire width of the rear of the house, three sets of the same mullioned windows, each with wooden blinds which could be tilted at any angle to let as much – or as little – sunlight into the room. The walls were mustard, there was a large oak desk at one end of the room, leather chair nestled underneath, there was another wingback chair and stool, brocade this time in ruby reds and emerald greens and the same mustardy yellow as the walls, a matching chaise longue, a side table with reading lamp… but the vast majority of the room was taken up with shelving. Solid oak. Floor to ceiling. Rack after rack. Wall after wall and lower shelves back-to-back down the centre. There was a track running two shelves down from the ceiling, a rolling ladder attached to it, offering easy access right up to the top.

They were shelves for things.

For books.
Aziraphale’s shoes made a gentle tapping sound, reverberating around the empty shelves, as he advanced, his face slack, his eyes wide, stopping in the centre of the room right next to the first shelving unit and just staring. This was… what? Crowley did read, of course he did, despite what he tried to tell Aziraphale, but did he have this many books? He’d bought this house and dedicated half of the entire upper floor to a library, a beautifully equipped library – when he had nowhere near enough books to fill it? Aziraphale just didn’t know what to make of any of it.

He heard Crowley step in behind him, then. Heard him clear his throat, could imagine his taut edges. “This room has its own climate control and the blinds can be set to automatically limit the amount of light getting in at all times. That shelving unit at the end can be sealed as well, you see the glass covers?” Aziraphale nodded blankly. “Then it’s moisture controlled as well. All the lights recessed in the ceiling are on dimmer switches. It’s connected to the sound system in the snug. There’s a mini fridge there, look, saving using a miracle to chill the wine…” and then, abruptly, he tailed off, almost choking to a halt, and Aziraphale suddenly understood it all, suddenly understood that Crowley thought he’d said too much.

He turned around, could feel tiny tremors running through his entire body as he looked at Crowley, still standing in the doorway, as stiff as a board, his fists clenched at his sides. “I mean…” Crowley shifted slightly. “If you wanted to…” he shook his head. “I mean if you felt that…” he shook his head again, harder this time, “If… Urghhhh!” he tailed off, rubbing a hand under his shades and over his eyes, “If – ”

The icy grip that had settled around Aziraphale’s heart thawed. He took pity on Crowley and edged forward, the slightest of smiles winking at the corner of his mouth. “Yes,” he said quietly.

Crowley almost swallowed his tongue. “Yes?” his anxiety was making him brusque. “You don’t even know what you’re agreeing too.”
“Anything,” Aziraphale maintained happily. “Anything that you’re offering, I’m accepting, Crowley dear. Do you see that now?”

Crowley nodded, sharp and expressionless then took a breath, sweeping an arm out towards the library, “Your books-”

“Yes.”

“They won’t all fit.”

“I know that,” somewhere in his jumbled thoughts, Aziraphale was wondering why this wasn’t bothering him at all. “I have my favourites, my private collection, they’ll fit beautifully. The rest I can put into storage.”

“Storage?” Aziraphale fancied he could see Crowley blink underneath his dark lenses. “What about the shop?”

Aziraphale shrugged, his heart fizzing and fluttering at the thought of this library, the library that Crowley had made, for him! “Well, if I am going to spend all of my time down here, then I’m probably best off closing the shop up. Don’t you think?”

“Down here?” Crowley’s sharp wit seemed to have deserted him and left him capable of nothing more sophisticated than repeating what he’d been told but it was enough for Aziraphale’s happiness to pop like the bubbles inside him, leaving him cold and terrified once more.

“Well,” and now it was his turn to stutter and mumble and wish for the ground to open up and swallow him whole. How could he have been so, so stupid as to presume? “I just thought… I mean I assumed… wrongly it seems… but-”

“No!” Crowley leapt forward a whole foot, his hand reaching out for Aziraphale and then fleeing back again to hide in his pocket, “No, angel, of course I want that. You’re not wrong, I just thought…” he tailed off again and Aziraphale wondered when they’d lost the ability to finish a sentence in the other’s company.

“You thought I wouldn’t want to…” he filled in quietly and Crowley, ears red and eyes on the parquet floor, nodded again. “My dear,” the happiness was back inside him, but less effervescent in
the face of Crowley’s conviction that, despite the beautiful library, Aziraphale still wouldn’t want to spend time with him. He cleared his throat and aimed for what he hoped was the perfect balance between gentle and compelling and tried again, “Believe me, there is nothing I would like more.”

Another nod, more staring at the floor and then, “Um, when then? Do you think? I mean there’s no rush, I realise that I’ve sprung this on you and-”

“Today?” Aziraphale interjected and was pleased that it was enough to get Crowley’s eyes off the floor. “I mean, I couldn’t get the storage all finalised today, but I could make enquiries and,” he pulled his watch from his chest pocket and started calculating in his head. “We could be back in London for one, if you didn’t mind, and then I’m sure I could pack everything I’d need in an afternoon and we could come down again tonight? If that’s okay with you? If you meant it that soon? If you’re up to all that driving-” he stopped short as Crowley seemed to lurch towards him for the briefest of moments, hand outstretched again, before coming up short and deliberately curling his reaching fingers back in, stuffing his hand back into the pocket of his jeans, his body slouching into an obviously affected posture of relaxation.

“’Course,” his voice was still a little tight though, “if that’s what you want.”

It was what Aziraphale wanted, very much so, and so, with a heart far lighter than it had been when they ascended, he and Crowley clattered back down the wooden steps and out to the Bentley, Aziraphale taking a few minutes to coo over the huge back garden which, whilst resembling a jungle at the moment, had the most incredible views across rolling hills. He stood and leant on the picket fence (a picket fence!) waxing about the beautiful garden that Crowley could create here, how he could grow flowers and vegetables and herbs and have an orchard and an area for soft fruits and maybe for chickens or ducks and, oh yes! a pond maybe and a seat and an area to eat outside and all the time he was rambling on, his heart giddy with excitement, Crowley stood and leaned on the wing of his car, his voice silent, but his mouth twitched into such a fond smile that Aziraphale could barely bring himself to stop, for the fear of never seeing that smile again.

Time was pressing, however, and the tasks they had to do were so exciting that Aziraphale eventually did drag himself away and into the car where he resumed his soliloquy. “Oh, I love the windows, my dear! They are so striking. Were they like that when you first saw the cottage? No? Well, you have made an inspired design decision there, I’ve never seen any so utterly charming! And the little room, the snug did you call it? How cosy will that be on a winter’s night! And did I see a wood burner? Oh, I love the smell of a wood burner, it’s so Autumnal. Delightful!”

And just like that, bit by bit, he wore away Crowley’s strange, tight mood until they were conversing just like they always had, or maybe even more freely than they always had. Maybe he was less reserved and Crowley, less… anxious, or whatever it was. By the time they were edging through the awful London traffic, Crowley sounded almost as excited as Aziraphale, telling him about the two restaurants in the next village along and how one of them had just received its first
Michelin star. And suddenly, visiting that restaurant with Crowley was all Aziraphale wanted to do.
“Angel, look, if this is too hard for you, then you really don’t have to do it…”

Chapter Notes

The eye of the storm... I think they needed a little break from the angst <3

The job of packing up even Aziraphale’s essentials took far longer than the angel had first assumed, however. But, being creatures that didn’t necessarily need the rest, they just worked on through the night. Aziraphale was upstairs, packing away the favoured books who were making the move with him, whilst Crowley was downstairs, loading up box after box in the main body of the shop and labelling them all carefully, devising his own method of organisation to combat Aziraphale’s inherent chaos. Finally, a little after ten in the morning, just twenty-four hours after Crowley had landed back into his life, Aziraphale was ready to leave the bookshop and, unaccountably due to the absolute desperation he had to live in that idyllic cottage with his very best friend, he was also finding it hard to hold back the tears.

He stood, silently, in the middle of the echoing shop, his eyes running over the empty shelves and neatly packed boxes, his back straight, his fists clenched as scene after scene insisted on running through his mind like the flashbacks at the peak of a daytime melodrama. Crowley was behind him, a soundless sentry at the open door, allowing him to have his moment, even when that moment stretched into minutes.

Finally, Aziraphale let out a long sigh and his head dropped onto his chest just as it seemed that Crowley had run out of patience himself. Aziraphale heard his own sigh and then the words, dragged, it seemed, from his very soul, “Angel, look, if this is too hard for you, then you really don’t have to do it…”

Aziraphale smiled to himself and let out another long breath of his own, a cleansing breath he felt. “I’ve been reminiscing,” he admitted, eyes blurred as he looked around his beloved shop. “There have been a lot of very happy memories in here for me, more so than in any other place I’ve ever resided.”

“I know that.”

“Years and years and years of them.”

“Aziraphale…”
Crowley sounded choked and Aziraphale couldn’t have that, so he turned to meet his despairing gaze head on. “And do you know what I’ve just realised, just now, whilst I’ve been remembering them all?” Crowley, still looking so desperately pained, shook his head, his mouth tight, dread evident in every line of his body. Aziraphale smiled, a smile that he knew was so radiant that it let a little of his grace seep out at the same time. “That all of my treasured memories of this building involve you. That I have only been so very happy here because you have been here so much. That this is just a building and that I can move on, quite happily now, and make many more treasured memories, with you, wherever life happens to take us.” Crowley looked stunned, and wary about sending him running for the hills or back into the strange mood of before, Aziraphale smiled and stepped towards him, “Shall we?” he invited and strode out into the sunshine.

After a slow start, where Crowley’s fingers were white on the wheel of the Bentley, the atmosphere gently warmed through until conversation meandered and then flowed back to something that Aziraphale could consider ‘normal’. “A Winery,” he remarked as they sped past the same sign he’d seen the day before. “How unusual! Have you been? Do you know what it’s like?”

“English wine?” Crowley’s laugh was a short bark. “Honestly, angel, when have you ever tasted an English wine which was even half way palatable?”

Aziraphale rolled an exasperated eye his way. “My dear, that’s uncharitable. We had that delightful bacchus from Devon just two years ago! You thought it delectable!”

“I thought it passable.”

“Oh Crowley, your false bluster doesn’t fool me, you know. Never has,” Aziraphale let out a fond chuckle and glanced sideways, surprised to see Crowley’s face, slack with something, turned to him for the briefest of moments before he shifted back again, eyes on the windscreen, fingers white around the knuckles once more.

They were back at the cottage in no time at all and Aziraphale scuttled straight out of the Bentley standing and staring at the neat thatch which was positively glowing under the heat of the late summer sun. “Beautiful…” he whispered, before throwing a glance back over his shoulder at a lurking Crowley and smiling. “Are you ready?”

Unpacking seemed to take even longer than packing had. They worked through the day, and the
following night once more and finally, a little after lunchtime on the second day, Aziraphale felt that they’d finally finished.

His carefully selected books were lined up neatly on the shelves of the new library, the first editions and books of prophecy in the sealed cabinets. His various nick-knacks, collected from times and places the world over were carefully arranged in prime locations spread through the library, the snug, the main living area and the kitchen. His clothes were tidily hung in the dressing room which seemed to defy the laws of physics as it ran across the front of the house, creating a link from the bedroom to the bathroom. His pictures were on the walls, his throws over the back of various chairs and sofas, his teas in the kitchen cupboard, his gramophone on the side table in the snug and it was only then, as his cruelly neglected stomach growled loudly into the afternoon, that something occurred to him.

“Crowley?” he turned and watched as Crowley, a delightful smear of dirt running down the side of his face, wiped his hands on his black jeans and flicked his eyes, still hidden beneath the obligatory glasses, Aziraphale’s way.

“Yeah?”

“Where’s all your stuff?”

He knew his observation had been dead on, when Crowley froze in the act of brushing down, his expressionless face still managing to look dreadfully guilty.

“Stuff?” his voice was deliberately light.


He shrugged, deceptively light – or not. “Haven’t really got any, to be honest.”

Aziraphale wasn’t to be put off, though. “You did have, in the flat. There was that Da Vinci. And a large lectern, I remember it. There was that rather startling sculpture and all your collection of vinyl – Crowley, you had lots of things, where have they all gone?” Aziraphale could feel his irritation rising although that was mostly at himself and his obliviousness of this point until now.

“I don’t-”
“You don’t lie to me,” Aziraphale interjected quickly. “Not usually. Please don’t start now.”

Crowley flushed and for a moment, it seemed he was up for a fight but then he sighed and Aziraphale saw his shoulders slump as he gave in, “In the garage,” the reply was barely a breath.

Aziraphale thought. “In the garage? Why-”

“It’s just stuff,” the words were almost spat out and Aziraphale found himself wondering just how everything had nose-dived so quickly. “Stuff means more to you than it does to me, I wanted you to feel at home. I was happy to just do a nice thing, but feel free to make this into something it isn’t.”

Aziraphale made himself stop, made himself take a breath. “This is your home, Crowley.”

“Yours too.”

“But you’re the one to invest all of that time and money into it.”

Crowley opened his mouth, Aziraphale wasn’t sure what he’d been planning to say, but he quickly shut it again and ran a grimy hand over his face. “The money was nothing. I sold all my ‘sculptures’ when I left the States. People will pay stupid money for what they think is art.”

Aziraphale didn’t want to argue with Crowley. After the last twelve years, that was the absolute last thing he ever wanted to do. “Crowley,” he forced his voice into gentle, “There are none of your plants in this house,” that wasn’t exactly true, Aziraphale had noticed a dainty buttermilk tea rose on the bedside table upstairs, but, somehow, he felt that Crowley wouldn’t like him to mention it. “There are none of your records. There is none of your art. That’s just not right. You want me to be comfortable in this home? I won’t be if there’s nothing of you here.” But he wouldn’t fight him over it – nothing was worth that.

Fortunately, it seemed that Crowley had little fight left in him either. His hands were on his hips, his head down, his glasses slipping enough with gravity that he had to push them back up with one, careful finger. “Tomorrow,” his voice was so quiet that Aziraphale had to hold his breath to hear it. “I’ll do it tomorrow, right?”
And suddenly Aziraphale’s stomach twisted once more, “Oh, my dear! I quite forgot that you like to sleep!” he glanced at his watch. “And you’ve missed two night’s worth! Oh, I’m so sorry,” his hands fluttered anxiously, wanting to touch but not at all sure of his welcome. “Off you go, off you go, get into bed and I’ll finished everything up here, all the rubbish and the wiping and all of that,” but Crowley was already shaking his head.

“You’ve not eaten for two days,” he reminded him and Aziraphale’s stomach growled in response. “I’d had in my head that we could walk to the pub on the village when we were done here,” he still wouldn’t meet Aziraphale’s eyes though, it was almost as if his own wishes and desires were unimportant when compared to Aziraphale’s; he’d need to watch out for that and make sure that that never became a habit.

He forced out a smile though, and surreptitiously miracled the dust and grime from his own clothing, “That would be delightful,” he offered, “If you’re sure you’re not too tired?”

“I’m not,” Crowley presented a tentative smile of his own and, despite their determination to dial back on the miracles, clicked his fingers, instantly shifting the dirt and the sweat from his own skin, impeccably styling his hair and switching his clothes for another set of black-on-black, short sleeved in deference to the warm afternoon. “Ready?” he asked, making an obvious effort to pull himself together and Aziraphale tugged down the front of his waistcoat and nodded.

“**They still have a job to do, angel, I think it’s a bit harsh to just want to… want to… ex-**, extermination them just ‘cause you’re greedy…” Crowley leaned forward over the picnic table, and Aziraphale watched, transfixed, at the way the fairy lights from the pub garden twinkled in Crowley’s eyes.

“I never did say that I wanted to,” Aziraphale gestured emphatically, “exterminationate them, Crowley!”

“Pah!” Crowley sprawled even further across the table, “Thas not even a word…”

“All I did said was, if they’re called cherry trees then why in blaze’s name wouldn’t they give me cherries! I like cherries!”

“I know you do.”
“I like cherry scones and cherry muffins—”

“Cherry bakewells.”

“Oh! I love a cherry bakewell!”

“I know you do.”

“Cherry brandy.”

“Is that even a thing?”

“Cherry brandy? Oh, my dear boy, have you never had cherry brandy?”

Crowley shook his head, rather more vigorously than was called for and then swayed dangerously on the bench, needing to grab hold of the edge of the table before he pitched off into the grass. “Ooh, less have one, shall we? Us? Now? Shall we?” Aziraphale was grinning wildly, “I’ll go and ask the nice lady at the bar if she’ll— Oh,” he stopped, one leg thrown over the bench, expression falling as he noticed the darkened pub behind them for the first time.

“Oh,” Crowley echoed, following his eyes. “S’dark.”

Aziraphale looked at his watch but between the darkness of the beer garden and his swimming vision, he had no idea what it said. He could make a decent guess though, “It’s late,” he announced solemnly. “Oh!” his eyes jumped to Crowley’s, “And you were tired! Hours ago, you were tired!”

“Pah,” Crowley waved him off as he swung his own leg over the side of the bench. “You were hungry. And it was good, yeah? The pie?”

“Oh, the pie was delicious, my dear,” Aziraphale wobbled to his feet next to Crowley and looped their arms together as they set off for the front of the pub. “Just the right amount of chicken and ham.”
“Thas good in a chicken and ham pie.”

“Yes, yes…”

“What about the curry?”

“Oh, that was scrumptious! Like the ones in Amritsar, you remember?”

“Really?” Crowley’s entire body swivelled to look at him. “That good?” and Aziraphale looked just a little pained.

“Almost,” he admitted, reluctantly. “Not quite. It was very – passable – though. Very.”

They slid into silence as they mostly walked, slightly stumbled, along the empty road at the side of the village green. Aziraphale enjoying the dark and the quiet and the solitude and the stars and the pleasant alcohol buzz and the full stomach – he really shouldn’t have had three servings of strawberry trifle – but most of everything, the company. But then something struck him.

“Crowley?”

Again, Crowley swung his entire body around to look at Aziraphale, as if he didn’t trust his head to move on its own.

“I’ve just had a thought,” he was looking about him, at the silent and still village, the outline of the church spire against the backdrop of stars.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not sure I could find my way from here. Not yet anyway,” he turned back to Crowley as he felt the strangest shudder run through him at the words. “Can you?” he persisted. “Get us home? In the dark like this?”

“Absolutely,” Crowley confirmed, and Aziraphale was relieved, if a little worried as to why
Crowley’s voice was suddenly so hoarse.

Crowley lead them across fields and down tiny, overgrown paths and over stiles which Aziraphale struggled to traverse in his current level of inebriation, and, just as he really was starting to worry that they were well and truly lost, they rounded a corner and there the house was, lights blinking from its lovely windows, even though they were most certainly off when they’d left so many hours ago.

“It really is the most beautiful cottage, my dear,” from where he stood behind him, he could see the rising of Crowley’s cheeks which indicated his smile. “I think we are going to be very happy here.” This time, Crowley threw him a quick glance, although the smile seemed to have left.

They only made it as far as the main living area, Aziraphale lowering himself carefully into the wingback chair, kicking his socked feet up onto the ottoman, just as Crowley crumpled along the length of the sofa. The silence was back, an easy one though, as Aziraphale gently started leeching the alcohol out of his veins, careful to avoid a hangover, and Crowley lay still, his arm folded across his eyes, his chest rising and falling gently under his shirt.

“Crowley, dearest,” Aziraphale wasn’t sure if he wasn’t already asleep. “Why don’t you retire upstairs? You’ll be far more comfortable.” There was no reply, though, and Aziraphale pushed onto the edge of his chair before quietly pottering into the kitchen to make himself a nice cup of tea. He returned on silent feet, pausing in the doorway to check on Crowley and finding him exactly as he had been before, arm across his eyes, quiet huffs of air just noticeable in the peace of the room. He placed his tea cup and saucer down on the side table next to his chair and quietly padded over to the sofa, gently freeing the fleecy throw off the back and covering Crowley’s long form with it, tucking him in as much as he dared, before wishing the lights dimmer and retreating to his own seat.

He sat quietly, tea and nearby bookshelf ignored for now as he just watched Crowley sleep, traced the sculptured line of his bicep as it lay across his face, let his eyes linger on the strands of red hair that fanned out across the caramel scatter cushion; it was quite the most beautiful contrast of colours.

Seven days, he thought to himself. This time last week he had been in his shop, wondering where in the world Crowley was, how he was, when he would ever see him again. Four days ago, he was still thinking that. And now, here they were, flatmates? Friends? Best friends? He wasn’t entirely sure, but they had created a world here for themselves – even God herself hadn’t moved that quickly.
Crowley shifted slightly at that and Aziraphale froze, wondering if simply thinking of the Almighty in his presence had disturbed him, but he simply turned onto his side, the arm across his face sliding down to fold neatly across his chest as he slithered seamlessly back into a steady slumber. Aziraphale watched him a minute longer and then silently rose to his feet, creeping across the wooden floor and the wonderfully plush rug and, ever, ever so gently removing the glasses from his face, folding them up and placing them on the table between them both.

He settled back into his chair, checking that Crowley was still sleeping peacefully, before switching on the reading lamp at his shoulder, angling it well away from his slumbering companion, taking a sip of his steaming tea as he curled his feet up underneath himself and picked a book at random from the shelf at his side. He glanced down at the cover, Austen’s Lady Susan and frowned to himself. He’d never read it. He’d made up a box labelled ‘need to read soon’ and Crowley had been the one to unpack them here, onto these neat little shelves in a cubby hole of their own built into the side of the fireplace. He’d never read it because Jane had disliked Susan so. She’d been her first foray into a powerful, intelligent and scheming female protagonist, but unlike the much later, Emma, Susan had very little in the way redeeming features; for a soul so inherently positive and good as Jane Austen, she’d been hard to take.

“Oh, Mr. Fell! She’s no better than a gigelot!” had been the summary assessment when Aziraphale had pushed the point and now, it seemed, he had the perfect opportunity to see just how correct dear Jane had been in the judgement of her creation… or… his eyes drifted, unbidden to where Crowley was sleeping, barely a metre and a half away from him, his serpentine body stretched out along the leather seats, his expression so open, so soft and gentle without the constant effort he put in just to look cool and to sneer and scowl and judge… well, maybe he wouldn’t. Like this, Crowley was his own open book, and so Lady Susan remained very much ignored on his knee.

Aziraphale wondered as he sipped his tea, his eyes watching, transfixed, the delicate fluttering of Crowley’s lashes as he slept. He was so very beautiful, of that there was no doubt. Aziraphale had had six thousand, very long years to catch every covetous glance that had ever been thrown Crowley’s way. The colour of his hair was like none other that Aziraphale had ever seen, his skin was as perfect as the most expensive of porcelain dolls. His form was indulgence incarnate, and there were no words that Aziraphale could call to mind to describe the way he moved… But that was all window dressing and nothing more. A screen that Crowley manipulated into a shield, a ploy where he knew so few people would bother looking beyond the pretty package, which meant that he could continue to skulk in the shadows, slide from metaphorical rock to metaphorical rock, just like the serpent he’d once been. To hide so well from any prying eyes that no one would ever really see him.

Six thousand years and nothing had changed. Crowley’s Mayfair flat had been an achievement in designer concealment, brutalist veiling, however you wanted to describe it, and now this. Aziraphale frowned.
This cottage was actually, really, properly Crowley’s, he’d actually bought it with real money – albeit money he may have earned in a dubious manner – but still, it remained more than Aziraphale had ever done. The bookshop, like the Mayfair flat, were simply leased, long term and low (or non-existent) rent, but leased nonetheless. Crowley had *bought* this cottage. Like a human. And, to what degree Aziraphale was still unsure, he had also contributed to its design, its décor, its very aesthetics. Caring about those aspects, directing those aspects, well, that was all essential Crowley, but the final result? This beautiful house, with its library and book shelves and wine coolers, wine *cellar*, its tartan chairs and tartan snug and wood burners and Aga with a whistling kettle? Well that was all *Aziraphale*, or rather, all for Aziraphale’s benefit. The boxes of belongings stacked and relegated to sit alongside the Bentley in the garage? Tragically, Crowley.

Aziraphale watched him, waiting for the tightness around his own heart to ease, studying every unnecessary breath as it huffed silently in and out of lips that were startlingly similar in colour to the unique hair. So, what was this? Why ask Aziraphale to come and live here with him and then produce this facsimile of what he thought Aziraphale would get for himself? Or maybe he thought that he needed this perfect cottage before Aziraphale would even consider agreeing to spend any time here at all? Maybe he thought it was what he *himself* wanted? Maybe he’d spent so long simply existing only as Hell decreed that he had no idea what his own tastes were?

But no, that was stupid. Crowley had never towed the party line, not for Heaven *or* Hell, he was his own being, always had been – maybe that was why he was so lonely?

And there it was, just like that, the weight of it slamming into Aziraphale like a wrecking ball, forcing him to replace his still-steaming teacup back onto the side table lest he spill it. Crowley was lonely, that’s why he’d come back, that’s why he’d put together this perfect house, and yes, it *was* just to get Aziraphale to come and live here with him, ease that loneliness a little because, and here it was very easy for Aziraphale to see now; Crowley had spent the last six thousand years shutting everybody out. Most of the time. And most people. Whilst Aziraphale would never even start to pretend to himself that he understood all of Crowley’s complexities, it was just as he had said on that rooftop in Rio, he had always tried to be self-sufficient and Aziraphale was the only being in all creation who was allowed closer than anyone else.

Crowley had stayed away from him in order to find himself; tragically, it appeared that he’d had limited success on that front.

Aziraphale’s heart twisted uncomfortably inside him. Crowley was so beautiful, so absolutely beautiful, and this time he was *not* talking about hair the colour of burnt umber, hips that moved to a gyroscope of their own, eyes that shimmered like the oldest amber… no, he was talking about a soul as selfless as any that Aziraphale had ever known, more selfless than any angel with their Grace still intact – himself included. And yet he obviously didn’t see that; he’d punished himself for his perceived failings far more regularly and far more thoroughly than any demon host could ever have hoped to, it honestly broke Aziraphale’s heart.
What did he think of himself? How did he see himself? How did he measure his own worth? They’d never covered that, that awful night in Rio; Crowley had revealed how little he thought Aziraphale saw in him, but he’d never mentioned his own views on the matter. It felt clear now though, painfully clear, that he ranked his own needs and desires and anything he deserved out of life well, well below anything Aziraphale needed.

That hurt, a sharp, vicarious pain that someone so inherently good as Crowley, despite whatever he may think of himself, would lose out like that to the chance of happiness. And Crowley’s happiness was what really mattered to Aziraphale, he was beginning to realise, mattered so much because… he swallowed hard as he watched the gently fluttering eyelids on the sofa in front of him… well, because… his heart started beating harder in his chest… because… the cold sweat of fear broke out down the line of his spine, in-between the wing joints… because… oh, what was the point in fearing anymore? What was the point of letting Heaven and Hell dictate everything to him if they were just going to move on them anyway? Terrorise him? Hurt Crowley? Threaten to destroy them both? He’d given everything to Heaven in the millennia he’d served, spent six thousand years in varying degrees of fear and guilt – and for what? They still weren’t happy with him, his choices, his preferences, his conscience. Well, bugger them all. Bugger them. He was done with hiding his thoughts, even from himself, for goodness’ sake – how pathetic was that?

Crowley’s happiness was so, so vital to him, so essential to his own, because: (he took a deep breath, pulled himself a little straighter on the chair, smiled indulgently at the sleeping form across the room from him) because he loved him, no, was in love with him and that was deeper, purer, more sacred than anything Aziraphale had ever encountered in his entire divine life.

He paused, holding his breath and trying desperately hard not to cringe as he waited but – nothing. He counted out the seconds, toying with the finely sculptured handle of his tea cup as he wondered if Heaven would strike him down where he sat but, of course, nothing happened and why? Because Aziraphale had already loved Crowley, for many, many decades, centuries even; just because he’d finally allowed himself to acknowledge it, didn’t make it any less true. It had always been there, for all those years, hidden and unacknowledged, deep inside Aziraphale’s heart, and, since the Almighty knew everything that was inside him, every thought and feeling, She will also have known how he felt about one of her Fallen, one of her outcasts. He’d never Fallen though, he’d never been struck down – not for loving Crowley.

But did She still know what was inside Crowley? Did She see all of his doubts and fears, confusion and isolation and feel glad? Avenged? Oh, he hoped not.

But Aziraphale was no longer afraid of what Heaven or Hell could do to them, or rather, maybe he was afraid, but maybe he’d just, finally, realised that what would be, would be, and there was little either he or Crowley could do to affect that. If the powers above and below wanted to destroy them both, then they would, what could they do in the meantime other than try to live whilst they waited? It was a liberating thought.
And Crowley had tried, he’d tried to make this life for them where Aziraphale could be happy with his books and his knick-knacks, his tartan and his tea and, most of all, some more-than-heavenly peace and quiet; it was just a shame that he felt that this wonderful life couldn’t really expand enough to actually include something for him in it.

Aziraphale came to a decision, he loved Crowley, and if Crowley was going to do all of this just to try and make Aziraphale happy, just to try and keep Aziraphale with him, then it was about time that Aziraphale repaid the favour – no – the honour, and he knew just where to start.

The night slipped by, the two ethereal beings barely shifted in their respective poses, Aziraphale’s eyes barely strayed from Crowley’s so-dear face, but slowly, silently, the cottage around them filled with a different set of possessions. Aziraphale’s old 78s shuffled over to let Crowley’s 33s nestle in alongside them. Shelves of Eighteenth-century love poems rearranged themselves to accommodate glossy photo books on the wonders of the world and the skies above. The tea pot with its stripy, rainbow cosy budged over to let the shining chrome espresso maker share its spot on the counter. A bare patch of wall above the little kitchen bistro table found itself proudly displaying the guitar gifted to Crowley by Brian May after a particularly jubilant gig at the Marquee in 1971. The empty spot at the top of the stairs seemed much happier once a certain eagle lectern arranged itself in a suitably imposing stance.

By the end of the night, the cottage seemed more content, more balanced, and the Bentley sighed with relief at the all the empty space it now had in its garage. Aziraphale was cautiously hopeful that Crowley would like his changes, would maybe even start to see just how much Aziraphale thought of him, what Aziraphale thought of him… the possibilities sent him dizzy.

He pushed up from his seat, Lady Susan returned to the shelf for another night, and silently padded into the kitchen to start getting something prepared for breakfast. There was little in the cupboards and, despite the fact that Aziraphale generally preferred food prepared the human way, he set about making tea for himself, and coffee for Crowley and calling into existence a platter full of tiny, flaky, deliciously buttery, morning pastries. He was humming happily, watching, with delight, the growing strip of candy-floss pink that was lighting the horizon when he paused, a sound reaching him from the other room, one vague enough for him to be unable to place it, desperate enough to have his stomach in a tight knot, his feet hurrying back towards the front of the house.

“Crowley?” he breathed, not enough to wake him should he still be sleeping, and the knot tightened as he saw him tangled in the blanket, his naked eyes, still tightly closed but creased in anguish, his hair damp with sweat across his forehead, soft sounds of distress, the like of which he would never, ever allow himself to make should he be awake, escaping from his lips.

“Crowley…” Aziraphale repeated, dropping to his knees at the side of the sofa, one hand shifting without thought into the damp hair, the other gathering up a twitching hand, squeezing gently, watching the rapidly tumbling expressions on Crowley’s face as his mind twisted through
disturbing memories. “Crowley,” he squeezed the hand in his and brushed back a sweep of flame hair, taking a breath before whispering, “Sweetheart, are you awake now?”

The translucent lids flittered once more and then opened, and that spike of pain was in Aziraphale’s chest again as he registered the absolute terror in Crowley’s eyes before it was forced away, covered with a blink and a confused, “Angel?” as Aziraphale smiled at him.

“I’m making coffee,” he squeezed the hand in his again, refusing to let go just now, “and I’ve got some lovely little pastries too, so I thought you might want to partake, or, you can shift upstairs for some more sleep if you’d like?”

Crowley’s eyes jumped around the room a little and Aziraphale was sure he saw him pause over shelf with the photo books on it before he focussed back into Aziraphale’s face. “What time is it?” his voice was a little sleep-rough which Aziraphale found particularly endearing.

“A little after six, dearest. What’s it to be? More sleep or nice espresso, just the way you like them?”

An expression close to confusion washed through Crowley’s face and the fingers of his free hand drifted up to his temple, questing anxiously and then he was pushing up, dislodging the hand in his hair and shaking his fingers from the angel’s, “Where’s my glasses?”

Aziraphale forced himself to stay at the side of the sofa, his hip pressed close to Crowley’s, “They’re on the table. But it’s just us, you don’t need them, I’ve spent centuries with your eyes, my dear,” he wondered if that was actually the best thing he could have said. Crowley relented though, pressing his head back into the scatter cushion once more as Aziraphale smiled at him again, “Coffee?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll be two minutes, you just keep comfortable.”

Aziraphale returned to the kitchen, humming in contentment as he finished the coffee in the little pot that Crowley had brought back from Morocco, and placed it carefully onto a wooden tray alongside the teapot in its stripy cosy, the glossy pastries and two little plates. He felt happy, being here as Crowley woke up, being able to help him wash that terror from his expression, looking forward to them sharing a breakfast together in their own living room, this was just what they
needed, and exactly what Aziraphale wanted. Not even the realisation that Crowley had replaced his glasses whilst Aziraphale had been out of the room could dent that positivity.
“You remember how big the moon was in the desert?”

They lounged around until late morning. Crowley drank the entire pot of coffee whilst Aziraphale had two pots of tea and almost all of the pastries – he’d convinced Crowley to have the one with the bitter-sweet cranberries and chocolate chips. After that, at Aziraphale’s suggestion, they decided to head into the village to stock up on food and Aziraphale quite enjoyed them both going off to get ready together; Crowley insisting on a proper shower, whilst Aziraphale changed his three-piece cream and fawn ensemble for a three-piece cream and beige ensemble.

Aziraphale was ready first, whilst Crowley remained locked in the bathroom, trying to get his hair to do exactly what he wanted it to do. It was another warm day, not as sunny as the previous one and there had been a quick rain shower around 9am, but it was still very pleasant and Aziraphale wandered out to the tiny front garden to lean against the picket fence and try to decide if it would be agreeable to get a bench out there to sit on. Eventually, Crowley was ready, and, with a wide smile and a light heart, they set off along the lane towards their little village.

As usual, Aziraphale drove the conversation, chattering this time about the trees they wandered past. He pointed out the horse chestnuts with their grand-lady flowers, the oaks, densely packed and frilly-leaved and the deepest green hollies, wondering aloud if it would be okay for him to pick some at Christmas time and use them to decorate the cottage. “If that’s okay with you?” he asked Crowley quietly, throwing a look his way and trying to work out if this was a comfortable silence or if Crowley was at all upset at Aziraphale’s proprietary thoughts about his cottage.

An eyebrow appeared above the stubbornly present shades. “Alright? Of course it’s alright. Why on earth wouldn’t it be alright?”

“Well, my dear,” Aziraphale offered up a timid smile, “It is your cottage.”

“And your home,” Crowley shot back.

“Our home,” Aziraphale returned and, to his absolute joy, noted the curve of a smile as it blossomed across Crowley’s face. Riding high on that success he leaned over and threaded their arms together, ignoring the stunned stare Crowley threw at him at just enjoying the quiet and the late summer air and the feel of Crowley pressed up against him.

There were only three shops in the village. One was a very functional post office which also sold
mops and fire lighters, mouse traps and toilet brushes. The second, was a very well-stocked delicatessen, with goods that stretched from the entirety of Europe and even farther afield. They were in the shop for almost forty minutes, and in that time, Aziraphale managed to get the entire life story of the lady who owned it (Maggie) and, between the two of them, select four cardboard boxes of goodies from quail’s eggs and Gala pie, to triple chocolate brownie slices and Italian nougat.

“Have you driven, Mr Fell?” Maggie asked whilst Crowley offered a very sleek and exclusive-looking credit card.

“Ah, no…” Aziraphale admitted, suddenly realising that there was no real way that he could admit to planning on just sending the groceries home.

“Are you local? I can ask my husband to drop them around for you, later this afternoon if you’d like?”

The capacity for human kindness never failed to light Aziraphale’s heart and he beamed again, catching Crowley’s stare from across the counter and spotting the answering twinge of a smile on his lips. “Oh, that would be wonderful!” he enthused, “So incredibly kind of you!” he could feel Crowley’s fond smile on him and knew that he was only just restraining himself from pointing out that they had just spent over three hundred pounds on perishable goods which would barely last the week out in a mortal’s fridge. Nothing would go off in their kitchen though, they wouldn’t even have to plug the fridge in to ensure prefect freshness for as long as they desired.

“It’s no problem at all,” Maggie was already reaching for a pad whilst Crowley’s credit card settled their bill. “Where are you staying?”

“Ah, well,” Aziraphale glanced Crowley’s way and the amused half-smile told him he was on his own and so he steeled himself and blustered on. “Well, you see, my, er… well, Crowley and I,” he wished he knew what the correct label for he and Crowley actually was… “Well, you see, we’ve just moved into Hunter’s Cottage.”

Maggie’s face brightened, “You have?” Aziraphale nodded, proudly. “Oh, how wonderful! I wondered who’d bought that, it was such a sad little wreck before. And what a wonderfully quick job you’ve done! Barely a fortnight all told my husband said! Which builders did you use?”

Aziraphale felt his eyes widening and a ridiculous lie forming on his lips but before he had the chance to dig himself a huge hole, Crowley was there, his voice low but instantly commanding of attention as he passed the card machine back across the desk, sliding it right into Maggie’s fingers.
“Has that gone through okay?” he asked. “I wasn’t sure if I’d actually put the correct PIN in…”

He had, of course, although any PIN would have worked as long as it was Crowley putting it in and Maggie assured him it was all fine, thanking them for their custom and promising them their delivery, just as soon as her husband was back from his mother’s house.

They wandered along to the final shop, a neat little thatched cottage, clearly poised on a corner in order to mop up the tourist traffic as it headed through the village and towards the coast. Again, Aziraphale instantly struck up a rapport with the owner, a retired banker from London called Derek, who seemed to be more interested in finding out the intricacies of Aziraphale’s life rather than allowing him to look around his shop. Not so with Crowley, however, and Aziraphale leant up against the counter, conversing easily with Derek about the very best restaurants the city had to offer and watching as Crowley prowled the shop.

Aziraphale watched him closely, watched his expression as he passed by the little wooden sheep wrapped in strands of raw wool, the brown, grey and blue bowls with tiny mice perched on their rims, the hand knitted hats and finger-less mittens in the brightest shades imaginable. He saw the ghost of a smile wisp through his expression at the sunrise and sunset prints, the dark-sky photos with star trails and the smudge of the milky way, and watched as he moved to the candle section, picking each one up and smelling it, before returning to the first, a burnt orange-coloured one, and taking a final sniff before finally turning his eyes Aziraphale’s way and sauntering back up to the front of the shop.

“Ready, dearest?” Aziraphale asked him, knowing that once Crowley was done shopping and socialising with people he didn’t know, then he was done, and finished up his conversation with Derek in the most quickly-polite fashion available to him.

They were still the only two people out and about on this quiet afternoon and Aziraphale wasted no time at all in drawing Crowley close to him, winding their arms together as they walked home in silence, barely managing to restrain himself to actually opening their front gate before reaching into his pocket and offering up the Pumpkin Spice candle that Crowley had obviously liked the scent of so much, smiling widely at his stunned expression and leading the way into the cottage.

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After that, they fell into a kind of a routine. They’d potter around the house on a morning, drinking coffee (Crowley) and eating pastries or bacon sandwiches or eggs Benedict or crumpets or pancakes (Aziraphale) before spending the afternoons together in some pursuit or other. These were hugely varied and depended entirely on how they were feeling, what the weather was like and how much Aziraphale fancied heading out to find somewhere new to eat for their evening meal. Sometimes they’d walk the local area, sometimes drive out to the coast, a nearby town or maybe a
garden centre to continue the re-stocking of Crowley’s plants. Sometimes they’d stay in and Aziraphale would try to organise his library or work through a particularly interesting text whilst Crowley lounged on the chaise long in the library, making acerbic comments in response to Aziraphale’s ramblings. Sometimes Crowley would work on clearing out the jungle of a garden, Aziraphale plying him with hot drinks and following him around, making comments and suggestions which Crowley largely ignored.

For their evening meal, they either went out to Noah’s Ark, or to the Michelin starred Clay Pot in the next village along, or called a takeaway, somehow getting it delivered when their village was usually well outside the Deliveroo range. Occasionally though, they cooked for themselves, finding a recipe online for something that Aziraphale had a craving for and buying all the ingredients at the little deli along the lane. They cooked together, muddling through the instructions like the team they were, sharing tasks, helping out, taking turns to be sous chef and then sitting down at the bistro set in the corner of the kitchen, underneath the pristine Queen guitar, and critiquing their work, even Crowley trying everything they’d created, then scribing the recipe and their thoughts and amendments into their cooking journal as Aziraphale polished off the left-overs.

Hugely varied days indeed, but with a common thread running through it all. Aziraphale’s commitment to ensure that Crowley knew how wonderful, how absolutely vital to Aziraphale’s continued happiness and how completely loved he was, never faltered, if anything it gathered pace as the days shortened and the nights drew in. Once he’d started with the physical touches, the gifts, the thoughtfulness, he found that he just couldn’t stop, and he loved it all.

At the back of his mind, however, nagged a persistent grumble that reminded him that he wasn’t quite sure about how Crowley felt about, well, anything, to be honest. Yes, he’d worked out that Crowley was lonely and hadn’t wanted to live in the cottage on his own, but did that mean that he wanted to live with Aziraphale? Or that Aziraphale was the only person he felt he could ask? And if he did want it to be Aziraphale particularly, was that because they were friends? Nice, simple, platonic drinking buddies? Or was it because he wanted more, like Aziraphale himself wanted more, like Aziraphale often thought that he could sense Crowley wanting too?

It was so confusing, but fortunately didn’t really detract too much from the life he was very much enjoying in the cottage.

Their evenings, after they’d eaten, tended to follow the same, nightly, pattern. They’d retire to the main room, Aziraphale to the chair in the corner, Crowley to the sofa, with wine, or maybe a spirit of some description, and polish off a few bottles with conversation and reflection on the day. Eventually, well after midnight, Crowley would fall asleep where he lay and Aziraphale would let him settle before removing his glasses and covering him with a blanket and then they would spend the rest of the night as the first, Crowley sleeping, Aziraphale watching him, untouched book in his lap, memorising every single plane and angle to his face.
They were some of the most wonderful nights that Aziraphale had ever spent.

It was quite strange though, when Aziraphale thought about it as Crowley did have a perfectly good bedroom upstairs, one that he never seemed to use, well, certainly not for sleeping in. Aziraphale had mentioned, many times how much more comfortable he would have been, sleeping in his bed, rather than on the sofa, but he always had some ridiculous and transparent excuse as to why he’d rather not. The transparency had been an issue for Aziraphale, but, one night in early October, everything fell, sadly, into place.

It had been a wet and dark day. They’d spent the afternoon in the library, Aziraphale making notes on the journal of a Commissariat Officer he’d picked up on-line which covered the events leading up to the Battle of Waterloo – as well as the actual battle itself. It made for fascinating reading and stirred many memories in Aziraphale himself as he read. He’d not quite finished it, though, that afternoon. They’d wanted to try a recipe of lasagne that Aziraphale had seen on a TV cooking programme, and so he’d left his work on the desk as they’d retired downstairs to cook and eat and drink and now, as was usual, Crowley was sleeping on the sofa and Aziraphale, with a new selection off his Man Booker winners-list on his knee, was only thinking about the journal up in the library. In the end, the temptation became too much and, with a quick glance at a quietly sleeping Crowley, he slid out of the living area and up the wooden stairs, willing them not to creak as he went.

The journal was as fascinating as he’d remembered and, he was almost three quarters of the way through when he startled at a noise he could hear from below. Lifting his head, he frowned, knowing he’d heard that very noise before and wondering for a moment, before hastily pushing back his seat and rushing for the stairs.

Crowley was in much the same state as he had been the first morning they’d stayed in the cottage together. He was asleep, but twisted in the blanket, his face creased in anguish, his hair damp with sweat. It was still dark, barely the early hours of the night, and, unlike the first time, Aziraphale was desperate for Crowley to settle back into his rest. “Shhh,” he whispered as he slid onto the sofa at his side, “It’s okay, it’s okay… shhh…” One of his neatly manicured hands gripped Crowley’s own flailing one, the other swept through his hair again, settling, soothing, and incredibly, it seemed to work. He sat still as Crowley’s distress ebbed, stroking through his hair, gripping his hand firmly even as he felt Crowley’s grip on him slackening as sleep pulled him back under.

This was such a treat, such a rare opportunity to sit so close, to openly stare and admire, to touch… there was no way that Crowley would allow such impositions if he were awake. Sweeping guilt ran through him at the thought that he was benefitting from Crowley’s anguish, but he was settled again now, there was no way that Aziraphale would do anything at all if it would prolong those dreadful keening noises, that obvious misery. The second nightmare that he’d had in these few weeks; the second that had started as soon as Aziraphale had left the room.
Coincidence? He wondered.

Well, even a journal from the Battle of Waterloo wasn’t more important than helping Crowley keep the demons – or more likely angels – from his dreams. All he needed to do was pop back upstairs for two minutes and place the journal back in the climate-controlled storage then it looked like it would be a Man Booker night after all. He gently eased his hand from Crowley’s slackened grip and crept for the stairs, his socked feet silent, and within a moment he was on his way back again, just as the anxious keening on the sofa started up once more.

It was suddenly very clear why Crowley didn’t want to sleep in the huge bed upstairs and, as Aziraphale sat and stared at the first page of Milkman and plotted.

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The next day went by as usual. Breakfast and a lazy morning in the cottage, a ride out to the big garden centre in Winchester to look at Summer houses and green houses, before stopping for dinner in a Gastro-pub they’d had their eye on for a few weeks. It was a very pleasant day, with a very conveniently full moon and a tiny bit of miraculous sky-clearing just at the time of the night when the grandmother clock in the snug was striking midnight and Crowley was yawning and starting to slide sideways on the sofa. He kicked his feet up next to him, his socks gone, the fine bones of his ankles clearly visible over the hems of his narrow trousers, and Aziraphale made his move.

As Crowley settled, he broke with tradition and got to his feet, rising smoothly and crossing to the front windows as Crowley, still wearing his glasses, tracked him in silence. “Oh,” he remarked in, what he hoped was, a natural tone. “The moon is still looking so beautiful tonight, my dear. Can you see it from there?”

Crowley leaned forward and nodded, “Yeah. It’s a big one.”

“Harvest moon,” Aziraphale told him, a smile pulling at his lips. “You remember how big the moon was in the desert?”

Crowley scoffed, “It was the same size as it always is.”

Aziraphale rolled his eyes, “I’m aware of that, Crowley, I mean it looked bigger. You remember?”
Crowley couldn’t help but smile at that, “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Oh,” Aziraphale turned back to the window, unable to try and pull off his scam whilst holding Crowley’s gaze. “You know, what, dear? I think I might read in the bedroom tonight. In that chair by the window. There’ll be such a lovely view of the moon from there. What do you think?” He held his breath.

“What do I think?” it was hard to place the tone in Crowley’s voice. “I think the moon will move, angel, and then you’ll be left with nothing but trees.”

“But not for a while,” Aziraphale turned his smile back on Crowley, “and it’s so very lovely right now. But you’ll come up with me, yes? It seems silly for you to sleep down here whilst I’m up there.”

For a moment, Aziraphale feared he’d over done it, feared his enthusiasm had tipped Crowley off and wished, as he did about fifty times in every day, that he wouldn’t wear those damned glasses when they were alone together so that he could try and work out what he was thinking. The part of Crowley’s expression he could see was carefully blank and held for long enough to get Aziraphale worrying, but then he shrugged and kicked his feet back onto the floor.

“Sure. Course I’ll keep you company. Let’s go.”

That night, Crowley slept, for the first time, in the big bed, in a pair of loose and comfortable-looking shorts, with the duvet under his chin, his head on the softest of pillows and the moon gliding by, unnoticed, as Aziraphale simply sat and watched him, the tiniest of smiles on his lips the whole night through.

And maybe if Aziraphale had left everything to sit at that point he’d created, then, everything would have been okay. Maybe, if he had been satisfied with getting Crowley to sleep in his own bed and let Aziraphale sit there in the chair in the window and watch him, then they could have continued to enjoy their quiet existence in the country for countless happy and peaceful years. Maybe things might have even changed at their own pace, under their own rules, had they not been forced along.

Maybe.

However, one thing that Aziraphale was, was tenacious, and the success gave him ideas, and the
ideas seemed so lovely and such a wonderful way to try to shower Crowley in the feelings that Aziraphale had for him, to try and get Crowley to see just what Aziraphale thought of him, that the angel just couldn’t resist. And therein lay the seeds of calamity, seeds that germinated and grew like wildfire, hellfire even, smothering their little slice of happiness before it had even had the chance to really get going.

Chapter End Notes

There's a storm coming... but I would like to reiterate that there will, absolutely, certainly, definitely be a happy ending to this.
"Oh no, he’s far more than just a friend to me."

The next day passed pretty much like all the others. Crowley seemed a little sheepish, a little discombobulated, when he awoke under his covers with Aziraphale still sitting in the chair at the window with his book and a welcoming, happy smile. He couldn’t get his glasses on fast enough, although he did manage a rather caustic comment about the view of the moon that Aziraphale had to be enjoying now. Aziraphale only smirked though, although his eyes were drawn repeatedly to the sliver of bare chest he could see above the plump line of the duvet, and innocently reported that the view was just ‘wonderful, thank you’, as he nipped down stairs to get their morning beverages. Maybe it should have been a warning to him when he returned to find a fully dressed and groomed Crowley on his way down to meet him.

They lounged in the main room all morning, as had been their custom, and bantered in the usual light-hearted manner about how they would spend their afternoon and evening. In retrospect, Aziraphale might have been able to pick up on Crowley’s unease with the changing rules, even then, but Aziraphale himself had been too drunk on his own success, and the possibility of even more, that he’d completely overlooked the whole thing.

“Well, that sounds like a lovely plan, then!”, he beamed as they tidied away the dishes into their sleek and not-actually-plugged-in dishwasher. “The giant DIY shop it is!”

Crowley seemed to have recovered well from his strange mood of the morning, and he shook his head as he smiled, fondly, Aziraphale’s way. “You know, angel, it’s really obvious that you’ve never actually been to B&Q before, not if you have this level of enthusiasm for it.”

“Oh, it’ll be lovely!” Aziraphale was checking out the skies and frowning at the dark clouds he could see scudding in from the sea. “I’ve seen the adverts, dear boy, and it looks awfully good fun. It sells lots of plants and things too – we could get some for the garden.”

Both sets of eyes drifted out into the wet and muddy expanse that was their back garden, where Crowley had done nothing else, so far, but dig everything out and start to turn over the dark, loamy soil. By hand. Every inch of it.

And just like that, the playful mood had gone, and Crowley was stalking his way towards the front door, a muttered, “Come on,” thrown out behind him as he went. Aziraphale wasn’t overly perturbed though, he’d been dealing with Crowley and his snits for well over six thousand years and wasn’t phased by the mercurial changes in temperature. His head was too full of the jolly B&Q adverts too, which was probably why he didn’t notice the way that Crowley stiffened when he placed a hand on the small of his back as they left the house, his thumb rubbing intimate circles at the point where he knew a sleek, black shirt was tucked neatly into the usual slim back trousers.
Afterwards, he had to admit that the DIY experience had been a little disappointing in comparison to what he’d been expecting. Crowley’s mood had improved, though, and they’d stopped on the way home for rather delicious mussels in a tiny, high street restaurant which was usually booked up months in advance. Aziraphale had had sweet meats too, as a starter, and a beautifully dark Sacher torte to end whilst Crowley had lounged and drank red wine and interjected into the steady stream of Aziraphale’s conversation as had been required.

When they returned to the house, Aziraphale had gone straight upstairs and exclaimed, loud enough for a lurking Crowley to hear, “Oh, the moon is quite beautiful again, my dear! I think I shall read upstairs again tonight.”

Crowley didn’t reply, but he did vanish into the bathroom, emerging five minutes later dressed in soft cotton shorts and a t-shirt, stopping dead in the doorway as he spotted Aziraphale and his book and his pale striped flannel pyjamas, sitting, innocently on the other side of the bed.

Aziraphale smiled at him and then nodded to the glass of wine sitting on Crowley’s side of the bed. “I brought you a nightcap, dearest. It’s that bottle of Chablis I’ve had since the Coronation.”

Crowley stood, silently, for such a long moment, that Aziraphale began to wonder if he had rushed things a little, over played his hand, so to speak. But then he just nodded and walked around the room, circling the bed as if it may attack him, before cautiously sliding under the duvet and then sitting, bolt upright, against the pillows, sipping his wine and, despite the screen of his glasses, still managing to look pained.

Aziraphale kept them topped up, though, and kept chattering on, not really expecting much from Crowley other than for him to be there. Which he was, slowly, slowly, slinking further down the pillows, further into the duvet until, eventually, he was flat on his back and sleeping quietly, soft little huffs of breath announcing his slumbers.

Smiling, Aziraphale placed his own glass down on his bedside table and then leaned over, rescuing Crowley’s empty one from his lax fingers and sliding those infernal glasses from his nose, placing both objects on Crowley’s table. He stopped then, leaning over his sleeping companion and felt the way that his stomach tightened at their proximity, at the way his eyes were drawn to the sleeping bow of lips. It would be so easy just to… but no. Aziraphale, feeling flushed and a tad embarrassed, straightened up and sat primly on his own side of the bed. He’d never take advantage of Crowley like that, and anyway, when they got around to their first kiss, if we get around to our first kiss, he reminded himself, he’d obviously want it to be something they both remembered.
It was an exciting prospect, and one that spent the entire night circling around Aziraphale’s mind as he finished the bottle of Chablis and thought and plotted and watched Crowley sleep.

Crowley woke up the next morning looking even more tense than he had the previous day, which did take the edge off Aziraphale’s excited buzz just a little. So, he didn’t withdraw to make drinks this time, and he hadn’t wanted to creep off in the middle of the night in case it brought on another of Crowley’s distressing nightmares, so instead, he miracled the kettle and all the tea-making paraphernalia along with the coffee machine, right up and onto the dresser in the bedroom. He made the drinks, and they lounged in the bed until late morning, although Crowley, just about clinging to the edge of the huge bed, was far too board-like to be ever classed as lounging. Eventually, Aziraphale took sympathy on him, and slid off the bed to go and toast some crumpets, leaving the kitchen just a few minutes later to find Crowley already dressed and sitting stiffly on the window sill of the lounge, glasses in place and arms folded and just about as closed off as Aziraphale had ever seen him.

They had a pleasant enough day though. Lunch at Noah’s Ark, a drive to the coast and a walk on the beach, where Aziraphale tried, unsuccessfully, to find a moment when it would be appropriate for them to hold hands. They arrived home with the dusk and Crowley wandered about outside a little, staring at the muddy mess that was his garden, whilst Aziraphale commandeered his phone to order sushi on Deliveroo.

They ate at the bistro table, under the Queen guitar, conversation light and inconsequential, and then moved onto the drinking, three bottles of wine between them and Aziraphale was just wondering how he could claim he wanted to watch the moon again when they sky was thick with cloud, when Crowley stood and announced he was going to turn in for the night. They’d never done it like that before, never, and Aziraphale was a little wrong footed. He smiled politely and wished him a good night, tidying away their mess in an angelic gesture and then creeping silently up the stairs to find Crowley already asleep in the bed, his back to Aziraphale’s side, the duvet wrapped around his neck like a life preserver. Aziraphale stood for a moment, pondering, then slid on to the bed once more, creeping slowly into place so as to avoid startling Crowley, and there he sat, all night, just staring at the back of his head and wondering why this suddenly felt a little... off.

The next morning bloomed bright and clear with perfect blue skies and sparkling, if a little winter-
washed, sunshine, and the stunning beauty of it all replenished Aziraphale’s confidence and banished his creeping doubts. Of course it would take a little while for Crowley to adjust to all of this, it was a big change and Aziraphale had taken a long time to catch up with him. It would be fine. All the angel needed to do was keep on going, keep touching and encroaching and… well, loving, and Crowley would come around for him. He always had done.

Morning drinks in bed once more, Crowley wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt and lounge pants to sleep in this time – Aziraphale wondered if he’d been cold – and a slightly more relaxed demeanour once Aziraphale shifted to sit, cross-legged at the end of the bed, facing him across two metres of rumpled duvet.

“So, what shall we do with our afternoon then, my dear?” he offered airily as he dusted the semolina crumbs from the muffins off his waistcoat. “Is today the day that we have a drive over to Aubrey House? It’s definitely open on a Thursday and the gardens would look simply stunning in all this sunshine.”

Crowley’s long, elegant fingers were wrapped around a tiny espresso cup, enfolding it completely, but yet so gently, the same way he handled delicate flowering blooms and Aziraphale was having trouble wrenching his eyes away from the sight. “I’m not sure…” he sounded discomfited, though, and that was enough to make Aziraphale look up, catching his movement as his ever-present shades turned to the window. “I should really use this dry weather to make a start on the garden. If we want it ready to plant in the Spring, that is.”

Aziraphale shrugged, “My dear, you could have it ready with a simple snap of your fingers.” Crowley turned back to him and he sighed, “No, no, I understand. You want to do it the human way. I know that. I understand that. We can go to Aubrey another day. When it’s raining, perhaps.” But what would be the use in that? How could they walk the long, secluded garden paths, hand in hand, if it were raining?

“Or you could go yourself?” Crowley offered tentatively, and something in Aziraphale’s chest contracted so tightly that it created a sharp, jolting pain.

“On my own?” he knew the words came out with a snap.

Crowley shrugged, “If you want. We don’t have to do everything together you know.”

He knew, of course he knew but… weren’t they supposed to want to do things together? Now that they could? “I… I…”
“I could order you an Uber if you like?” he picked up his phone. “What do you think? Half an hour? You’ll be ready by then?”

Aziraphale just nodded blankly and Crowley tapped away, offering up a flat smile as he replaced his phone on the bedside table. “There you go, all sorted. I’ve booked for it go back and collect you at closing time as well, so you’ll have plenty of time to look around the house and the gardens.”

Aziraphale didn’t know what to say – he genuinely didn’t. So instead he just slid off the bed, mumbling something that sounded like thanks and went into the dressing room in order to change for the day. He heard Crowley get into the shower whilst he was busy – his ritual human wake-up – and, since he was still in there when the Uber pulled up outside the cottage, he simply shouted his goodbye and wandered out to the waiting car.

Aubrey House was nice, just as nice as Aziraphale had thought it was going to be. Three quarters of the house was open to visitors and the rooms were decorated and set just as they would have been in the late Victorian times; it was strangely comforting, in a nostalgic way. There was no one else there on this sunny day in October and so one of the Housekeepers, Alice, gave Aziraphale the full tour. The house was stunning, the gardens immaculate, the gift shop charmingly twee and the cakes in the café absolutely scrumptious, but Aziraphale spent the entire day with, what felt like, an ice cube lodged in his throat.

He was immensely relieved to see the Uber draw up to collect him, at the back of his mind he’d been worried that maybe Crowley just hadn’t arranged for him to return to the cottage, and even more relieved to see the dark silhouette of his house-mate still digging over the beds as he climbed out of his ride at the other end.

He wandered through the un-touched jungle of front garden, and followed the twisty path around to the back where he greeted Crowley with what he hoped was a friendly and relaxed-enough greeting. He stayed on the path, reluctant to enter the quagmire of sticky mud and ran his eyes over the huge space – it actually didn’t look that much different.

“Aangel,” Crowley sounded different though, less… buttoned up than he had done, and he was smiling, which was nice to see, even if he did still have those damned glasses on. “You had a good day?”
“Oh, yes,” Aziraphale managed to enthuse. “I had a private tour of the house from the Housekeeper, a rather lovely young lady called Alice, and a look around the gardens with the Head Gardener, Robert, he was very interested to hear what you were creating here!” he nodded at the sea of mud and was sure that Crowley’s cheek jumped a little at the words.

“Great.”

“And I had the biggest slice of red velvet cake in the charming café, then went to the gift shop and – oh! –” he fished into the pocket of his coat, “I got you this, in the gift shop.”

Crowley frowned and didn’t move his folded hands from the handle of his spade. “You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I wanted to!” I missed you…

“That’s very kind,” still Crowley didn’t move though, sticking to his island of mud in a sea of muddier mud and Aziraphale was left to pull the little bottle out of its paper bag and brandish it in the creeping gloom of twilight.

“It’s sloe gin,” he explained, trying so very hard to take away the desperate edge to his voice. “Robert makes it himself, from the sloes in the garden. Maybe we could grow sloes here? Well, you could. If you wanted, that is,” he trailed off, eyes still on Crowley, heart thumping uncomfortably in his chest.

“Right. Thanks,” and Crowley was back to being all buttoned up again.

Aziraphale sighed and lifted another bag at his side, this one larger and plastic with a line drawing of Aubrey House on the side. “I bought our evening meal as well,” he simply couldn’t lift the dejected tone from his voice. “They sell home cooked meals that you simply heat up in the oven. Alice recommended this Moroccan Lamb Tagine. I thought it might remind us of, well, you know, Morocco…”

Darkness was approaching fast. Crowley still had his stupid glasses on, but apart from that, it was very hard for Aziraphale to actually see him at all. He heard the sigh though, the sigh that seemed the cut them both, right down the middle, and when he replied, his tone was conciliatory, apologetic even. “That sounds perfect,” Aziraphale felt his heart lighten a little. “I just need to finish this bit and then maybe have a bath – that okay? I’ve been digging all day.”
“Of course! Of course, my dear, anything you like,” the relief was like a warm wave, almost knocking him straight off his feet – he’d been imagining himself sitting at the bistro table on his own with the tagine... “I could even massage your back for you, if you want?”

And back came the stifling awkwardness, the stretching silence, before a simple, “No, thank you,” was choked out and with a lame, “Ah, yes...” Aziraphale scuttled for the safety of the cottage.

He was part way through his second bottle of wine before Crowley came in from the, now pitch dark, garden. He was squinting at the instructions that came with the tagine, whilst pressing buttons on the still-silent and decidedly cold oven. “There you are,” he threw over his shoulder at the sound of the back door. “I thought you were staying out there all night.”

“I told you,” Crowley was in the doorway still, levering his filthy boots off as he stood on the mat, “I was finishing that bit.”

Bending, Aziraphale slid the foil cartons into the oven. “Don’t know how you could see a thing,” he snipped, “it’s positively Stygian out there.”

A dry laugh sounded out behind him, “Good job I’m a demon then, right?”

Aziraphale cringed and turned on the spot, straightening as he did so, apologies all at the ready. “Oh, dear boy, you know I didn’t-” he stopped though, words swallowed on the spot as he finally focussed on Crowley standing there behind him, still on the muddy door mat, lining his boots up carefully before straightening and finding himself the subject of Aziraphale’s full-on stare. He was muddy, of course he was, he had been out in their back garden which really was doing an excellent interpretation of ‘1916 in the Somme’, (and Aziraphale would know, he’d been there – they both had) but the mud was streaked across his cheeks in an arrestingly endearing manner, made all the more startling by the stark contrast to his white, chilled skin. His hair was far past the ‘tastefully mussed’ stage and well into ‘completely dishevelled’; it was starting to grow longer on the top and Crowley had obviously spent most of the day raking it back with filthy fingers as it fell into his eyes.

The usual form-fitting suit was gone, and instead Crowley wore a loose, baggy even, cable knit jumper, stretched and misshapen, black of course, but with a small hole just hovering over his left hip. Black jeans, skinny as ever, nothing unusual there, but these were ripped, two horizontal slices
over his right knee, one over his left, the skin underneath as white and mud streaked as his face had been. His feet, long and tapering with high arches and delicately sloping toes, were bare, so white to be almost blue as Crowley stood there, holding a pair of sodden, black socks in one muddy fist. There was no way that these clothes had been miracled into existence. These were his, and what a strange ensemble for a being who kept hold of nothing, to hold onto.

The whole effect was startling, he looked so completely different, but so Crowley still, and incredibly, it just made Aziraphale sway with the strength of the love he felt for him.

“What?” all Crowley could see, though, was the slack-jawed stare Aziraphale was giving him and instantly he pulled himself more upright, attempting to wipe some of the mud off his hands onto his jeans and straightening his glasses, making sure that they covered as much of his face as possible.

I love you. Aziraphale’s heart was pounding once more, he could see the furrows in Crowley’s brow, could almost taste the tension building between them yet again. “Goodness me,” he offered brightly instead. “It is muddy out there isn’t it? Dinner will be forty-five minutes if that’s okay with you?”

Crowley held his stare for a taut minute and then just nodded, his cold, bare feet slapping the floor as he made his way towards the stairs at the front of the house. As soon as he had gone, Aziraphale gripped hold of the edge of the counter as he threatened to sway right off his feet. He needed to step up his efforts here. He needed Crowley to see what he thought of him, how he felt about him. He needed Crowley to feel how Aziraphale felt about him. More effort was certainly required.

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It was over an hour and a half before Crowley made it back downstairs, smelling delightfully of some kind of wonderful bath product and delicately flushed with pink, where he had been white with cold.

“Sorry,” he murmured, not quite meeting Aziraphale’s eye. “I fell asleep in the bath.”

Aziraphale didn’t answer that, how could he when his cheeks were burning at the very thought of a flushed and naked Crowley asleep in that strange and shallow bird bath upstairs? Did he have his wings out? Were they even slightly recovered from Gabriel’s tortures? Even the three bottles of wine that Aziraphale had now drunk would not supply him with the courage to ask.
Instead, he just spooned the still-steaming tagine from the foil containers onto their plates and poured them both a generous glass of wine.

Conversation warmed up slightly as the meal finished and the evening wore on; Aziraphale was regaling Crowley with a footstep by footstep account of his tour around the gardens at Aubrey House. “Oh, and you should’ve seen their green houses, m’dear!” he leaned forward to make a point and rested his palm on the bare skin of Crowley’s lower arm, completely missing the way that Crowley immediately zeroed in on the movement, blank-faced sunglasses turning to stare at the soft hand resting so proprietorially on him. “There were three, they must’ve been… oh, I dunno… thirty feet… metres… feet… thirty feet long and,” he drew with his free hand in the air. “Long… like this with lots of, lots of, lots of plants and things in them. Lots!”

He poured them more wine with the drawing hand and Crowley used the moment to surreptitiously move his arm away, drawing back from the table and crossing his arms against his chest. “Plants?” he nodded, the edges of a smile shining Aziraphale’s way. “Who’d have thought that, then? In a green house?”

“I know!” Aziraphale beamed at him. “I knew you’d like to hear about that! I told Robert – Robert’s ‘tis the gardener there, did I tell you that? At the house thing I went to today? Robert?” Crowley nodded as Aziraphale necked his glass and, instead, reached for the bottle, draining the last of that in one go as well. “Well, I told Robert that I had this friend,” he stopped then, on that word, his bleary eyes settling on Crowley’s face and his drunken mind telling him to take care, be more cautious, slow down… “Well,” he leaned in a bit, conspiratorially, “Not friend as such,” he smiled, “and I could hardly say angel and demon, now could I, dear boy?” Crowley’s face paled, and ever-oblivious, Aziraphale laughed, “So, I said-”

He was interrupted by the screeching sound of chair legs on the tiles and Crowley was suddenly on his feet, his face set, Aziraphale blinking desperately as he tried to persuade his eyes to focus on the sudden shift in perspective. “Crowley?” he queried, confused.

“It’s late,” Crowley replied, his tone tight. “I think I’ll get some sleep.”

He turned and walked out at that, Aziraphale staring forlornly, after him.

“So, I said,” Aziraphale addressed the empty room, “‘Oh no, he’s far more than just a friend to me.’ Oh. Oh, dearie me.”

He reached, again, for the miraculously full bottle and closed his eyes as he drank straight from its neck and it wasn’t long afterwards that he was asleep himself, slumped over the table under the
Brian May guitar, oblivious to Crowley’s cries upstairs as he tumbled through a recurrence of his nightmares. He was still caught in the midst of his drunken slumber as a grey dawn crept over the hills at the back of the cottage, and a pale Crowley, back in his gardening clothes, snaked out to carry on with his digging.
Aziraphale awoke with the hangover for the first time in a very long while. He sat at the kitchen table, his head in his hand and watched Crowley outside, digging the garden over. It was a grey morning, nothing like the hopeful blue of the previous day, low, low clouds hiding the view from sight, a thin, mizzly rain clinging to every single thing, leaving them drenched and dripping, weighed down by the sheer volume of moisture in the air. And still Crowley turned the garden over, soaked to the skin, his over-sized woollen jumper stretching even further with the wet, his hair, the colour of the richest burgundy as it plastered his face, his fingers white with the cold as they gripped the spade, mud up to his shins and diligently working, turning the same patches of already-turned soil, over and over and over again, never pausing for a breath, never looking over at the cottage where a hungover angel with a heavy heart watched him, ceaselessly digging, and beginning to think that there might just be an even bigger problem brewing here.

Eventually, Aziraphale felt celestial enough to be able to miracle away his hangover and he moved over to the kitchen counter, making tea and coffee just as he would on any other day. He watched the thick, black liquid drip into the tiny espresso cup and considered making a double, before glancing out of the window and deciding that Crowley was wired enough as it was thank you very much. That though stayed with him, burned him from the inside out, so much so that he threw out a quick caffeine-removing miracle, just as he lifted the cup onto its saucer and headed for the back door.

“Crowley?” there was no response, but the dismal day just seemed to absorb every word he spoke. He tried again, “Crowley? Dearest?” his heart was beginning to pound harder against his ribs as leaned a little further out. “Crowley!” at last, a response, a lifted head and a bemused expression from behind rain-splattered shades.

“Angel! Hi. Yeah, you’re up then?”

Aziraphale paused. “I am indeed,” he lifted the cup, “Coffee?”

There was a moment of silence as Crowley straightened up, pushing at the small of his own back with his hand like an old man before he ran his eyes up and down the muddy swathe he was working on. “Yeah, maybe. In a bit. I just need to get this part done.”

The pounding against his ribs intensified and Aziraphale forced out a bright smile. “It’ll go cold.”

“I’ll warm it up again.”
Another pause, “I think that bit you’re doing looks done now, anyway.”

Crowley looked around at that, carefully appraising his work and shook his head, already lifting the spade again, “Are you kidding me? It’s a right mess. I’ve loads more to do today.”

Aziraphale left him to it, watching him from the windows of the beautiful library he’d created for his angel and wondering just what he’d done so badly wrong that Crowley would rather stay out in the dreadful rain rather than spend any time at all in the house with him.

He watched him dig, all day long, the coffee he’d left on the step instantly forgotten and soon overrun with rain. Aziraphale was pleased when he moved along a little, re-digging another part of the garden he’d already done, but still, it was a small ray of light in an otherwise, very gloomy situation. He couldn’t remember all of what had happened the previous night – why on earth had he drank so much? – but he’d obviously done something completely dreadful to make Crowley hide from him like this. The only thing he could think of to do was to allow him his space, and then, when he came back in again at the end of the day, apologise for whatever he’d done.

It wasn’t much of a plan, but where had Aziraphale’s plan got him so far?

The rain stayed all day long and Crowley never stopped. It was completely dark and the garden an identical sea of mud before he finally hobbled up to the back door. Aziraphale was ready for him, determined to show him just how much he cared, how sorry he was about everything, he was waiting with hair-drying miracles and help getting his sodden boots off and a steaming bath upstairs, which was the only thing that Crowley actually seemed interested in. There was a tense moment in the kitchen as Aziraphale tried to get him to remove the dripping jumper or the saturated jeans before heading through the lounge, but Crowley reacted like he’d been burnt, just about leaping out of Aziraphale’s reach and throwing an accusing look his way as left.

A completely sober Aziraphale sat and waited with their dinner at the kitchen table for a full ninety minutes, before giving up and heading up the stairs to see where he’d got to. All was silent upstairs. Aziraphale poked his head into the bedroom and found it as pristinely tidy as it had been that morning. He turned his attention to the bathroom and laid his head against the door, listening carefully as he held his breath. Nothing. Not a single sound. He steeled himself and tapped, ear still pressed against the golden oak, “Crowley?” Nothing. Sighing, Aziraphale stepped back and pondered his options, which really, were pretty slim. Walk away and wait downstairs once more? No. Knock again and enter? Well, he didn’t want to do that either but… images of Crowley in a bath of holy water had assailed him mercilessly since their body swap stunts of a year ago and the silence coming from the other side of the door was just too
ominous to bear. He knocked again, sharply this time and there was still not the slightest sound from inside. He drew breath and wrapped his fingers around the handle, gently pressing downwards until he could start to push in. Unsurprisingly really, the door wouldn’t budge and Aziraphale felt inside it, located the lock and persuaded it to open for him.

And then he waited, holding his breath again to see if there was any sound at all from inside. Silence still, and so, ever so gently, he pushed the door inwards.

The first thing he saw, as the door slowly crept open, was a crumpled pile of clothes on the floor, the sodden jeans, the baggy jumper and the sight pulled at the threads of his heart. He pushed further, announcing himself with a tentative, “Crowley?” which went unanswered once more and leaned in around the warm wood, blinking through the haze of steam until his eyes rested on the figure slumped against the porcelain of the bath.

Aziraphale’s heart began to thump in his chest and the blood rush in his ears and he crept forwards, eyes darting around, frantically trying to piece together the puzzle in front of him. Crowley was in the water, a tide of bubbles clinging to his midriff, as he sprawled, bonelessly, against the gentle sloping of the bath. His arms were cushioning his head, his hair was wet and curling endearingly around his face, his eyelashes fanned out over warm, pink skin as he slept in the water; Aziraphale wondered if it was possible to fall in love with him all over again.

He stood for a moment, eyes misting over as he stared, then, taking a deep breath, he tried again, “Crowley?” nothing. He took another step, “Crowley? Dearest?” and carefully reached out, holding his breath as his fingers brushed the warm skin of his friend’s arm.

The response was instantaneous. Crowley all but exploded out of the water, spinning on the spot, crouching in the bath, his eyes full of fear but his expression morphed into snarling, spitting self-defence. A wave of the warm, sweetly-smelling water crashed over Aziraphale as he fell backwards, ending up on his back amongst the wet clothing, eyes wide and guilty, heart pounding in his chest. They stared at each other, Aziraphale waiting for Crowley to see him, to realise that there was no danger here – the moment was a long time coming.

Eventually, he deflated, flopping back into the water, making sure that the bubbles covered his modestly, drawing a long breath as he closed his eyes, his head thumping back against the white porcelain. “Fucking hell, Aziraphale,” Aziraphale was instantly transported back to that awful morning in Crowley’s flat, “You never heard of knocking?”

“I knocked!” Aziraphale was finding the knowledge that Crowley was *naked* under the clinging bubbles extremely difficult to cope with, which was crazy since he’d shared baths with him back in the Roman days. *But, things were different then,* a little voice in his head told him, a little voice that Aziraphale did his best to ignore. “You didn’t answer, you were asleep!” and why did he have
to make that sound like an accusation?

Crowley’s flush deepened and Aziraphale knew that he couldn’t blame the hot water for that. “I was tired,” he spat back and Aziraphale’s heart tightened as it all started to go wrong again. “I didn’t sleep that well last night,” and then they both flushed, Aziraphale aware that he had never let on to Crowley that he knew about the nightmares.

He sighed and forced a smile onto his face, remembering his pledge to make Crowley understand just how loved he was, “Well, I’ve ordered us a takeaway, it’s keeping warm downstairs so why don’t I help you get nice and dry and we’ll go down to eat – the fire is roaring away quite nicely.”

Aziraphale wouldn’t have thought it possible, given the steamy heat of the room, that anyone would be able to blanche at all, but Crowley did, the colour leaving his cheeks as he slunk further down into the bath. “No!” Aziraphale’s stomach dropped. “I’m fine, I’m tired, I’m not hungry, I’m staying in the bath,” the excuses came out like machine gun fire and hurt just as much.

“Oh,” Aziraphale was robbed of words.

“If you wouldn’t mind…” Crowley nodded towards the door.

“Oh,” Aziraphale repeated, his mind spinning uselessly. “A drink then, dear boy? You’ll join me for a drink?”

“No!” Crowley seemed to be getting quite agitated and was squirming in the bath water, desperately gathering together the flagging bubbles and snaking onto his side which actually precipitated a flash of his pale backside up to the top of the water. Aziraphale couldn’t help but stare which unfortunately triggered a hissed, “Get out!”, the hostility in the scant words finally having him turn for the door, almost stumbling over the pile of wet clothes and fleeing downstairs with his own cheeks pinkened.

That evening, he did spend alone at the little table in the kitchen. Sitting in silence under the Queen guitar, picking his way through his curry whilst another sat, untouched, on its plate across from him and mocked him with its presence.
By the time that his plate only held onto a few grains of abandoned rice, he heard Crowley leave the bathroom and head to the bedroom for the night. When it was all quiet, Aziraphale slowly rose from his seat and went about the night time routines of tidying up, locking up and setting wards on autopilot. He trudged up the stairs and paused for a moment at the bedroom door, listening intently before slipping inside – he really wasn’t sure if his presence would be welcomed this night, but equally, he wasn’t going to sit downstairs and let the poor boy struggle through nightmares again.

Crowley was asleep, but already restless, the sheets tangled around his legs, the fact that he was wearing long lounge trousers and a long-sleeved t-shirt told Aziraphale that he had probably expected company this night. As soon as Aziraphale settled into the seat in the window – he didn’t dare approach the bed – the tossing and turning stopped. As he watched, Crowley settled in on his side, face turned to Aziraphale, arms wrapped around his pillow, and with a long sigh, relaxed into sleep. Aziraphale allowed himself a little smile of his own, at least he could do something right.

The smile didn’t last though. He sat in his chair at the window and stared at the face the had thought he’d known as well as his own and tried to work out just where they were going so dreadfully wrong here – or rather where he was going so dreadfully wrong. It had to be him, Crowley had known what he was doing when he’d asked Aziraphale to move in with him, surely he’d known what he would get? What it would be like to share every day with the being he’d shared history with for all those years? But, maybe he hadn’t? Maybe he’d miscalculated what it was going to be like to have to share every moment of the day with another person?

It didn’t seem to make any sense though. Crowley was the one who had come back and created this world for them both here, he was the one who had travelled up to London and brought Aziraphale here, he was the one who had been lonely enough to create the beautiful library as a temptation that Aziraphale just hadn’t needed, and there Aziraphale’s blood ran cold.

Maybe he was reading this all wrong? Yes. Crowley had done all of those things but what he hadn’t done, at all, was to make any indication at all that he wanted anything more with Aziraphale, not more as in more time spent together, but more as in deeper, closer, more intimate. And was that what Aziraphale wanted? Dear Lord, yes it was, and how had they travelled so far down this road before Aziraphale had even acknowledged this to himself?

Aziraphale would never admit to matching the definition of a hedonist word for word, but it was true, he did embrace all the pleasures that the world had to offer, including sexual pleasures. He’d spent his time sampling and tasting, had experimented with gender and positions, and, somewhere around the early nineteenth century had decided that his preferences lay with male presentations. He’d had a lot of experience, and, whilst all of those experiences involved a certain amount of care – he was an angel after all – very few had involved love.

It was those ‘very few’ that had been the most impactful, however. Not only had the sex been stunning, the emotional ties he’d made transcended the passage of time. Cecil. George. Matteo.
Oscar. Ralph. Those were the names, the faces, that lived on in his heart. He thought of them now, couldn’t help it really, let his mind’s eye drift from one to the other, taking in their dark hair, their long lines, their artfully sculptured faces… it seemed he had a ‘type’, his eyes leapt back to the figure in the bed in front of him, and he’d had that type for thousands of years.

And suddenly, nothing made sense anymore. This desire he now realised he felt for Crowley, had it always been there? Were his boys, his gentle Cecil, his funny Matteo, even his dashing Oscar, were they all nothing but stand-ins for what he would never allow himself to want? Or was Crowley just a continuation of that theme, of that type? Not the original architect?

Aziraphale knew the answer and he closed his eyes to apologise to the memory of his boys, to reassure them that, in their own way, they had been loved, they had been treasured, even if they could never actually live up to the first being to really capture Aziraphale’s heart. And how obstinate had he been for all this time in refusing to allow that thought to settle in him?

And Crowley, what of him? Aziraphale slowly ran back through the sands of time examining his memories for a moment when his friend had mentioned another, had seemed distracted or taken or even contented with something that wasn’t wrapped up in Aziraphale. There was nothing, but really, was that surprising? Crowley had played many cards very close to his chest over all their years together. Yes, Aziraphale knew that he had’t been responsible for the many tragedies which had enfolded in Earth’s long and tattered history, but he was still a demon, he still had work he was assigned, jobs that needed doing, that would be monitored. Aziraphale had been able to tell, over the years, when he’d been tasked with a more distasteful mission, had often been sought out afterwards to help deal with the fall out – and the alcohol. He knew that some of these missions had involved death, that some had involved huge temptations that, when the victim fell, they would bring many others with them. Crowley’s temptations of choice tended to sit far closer to a teenage prank – but he would do as he was instructed from Below. Surely those instructions would have also included tempting his victims into sins of the flesh?

Aziraphale’s stomach twisted with vicarious pain as he thought of his wonderful experiences of love and lust and sex through the ages. That weekend at the boathouse with darling George. The hotel in Sicily with Matteo. Had Crowley never had that? Had his experiences all been about temptation and debauchery and sin? Oh. If that were the case, then it would make absolute sense that he would like nothing of the sort with Aziraphale – the only being in creation that he actually considered his friend.

Aziraphale had convinced himself that everything he’d been doing here had been for Crowley, had been to show him how completely loved he was – but that wasn’t quite right, was it? It had all been for Aziraphale himself, again, it had all been about trying to become intimate with a being that had never shown the slightest hint that he was at all that way interested in Aziraphale, or anyone else for that matter. All his touching and encroaching and suggestion; he’d acted no better than a cad, no wonder his poor boy had had enough.
The moon traced onwards through the sky and Crowley slept and Aziraphale plotted; this time he would get it right. This time he would be just what Crowley needed from him.
As the day dawned, gloomy and wet yet again, Aziraphale kept his attention focussed solely on the figure in the bed. As soon as Crowley started to stir, Aziraphale was ready, greeting his flickering eyelids with a cheery, “Good morning, my dear!” before rising from his seat and tugging his waistcoat down. “I think I will go and change for the day ahead, and then make some breakfast. Anything to go with your coffee?” Crowley, blearily, shook his head. “Okay then. About twenty minutes downstairs? Is that time enough for you?” A nod this time and Aziraphale pushed out a bright smile. “Jolly good then! See you anon.”

And then Aziraphale was off downstairs, giving Crowley his space, his time, his privacy, as per the steps of his new plan. They needed to talk, that much was clear, there was no way that Aziraphale was going to get anywhere in trying to second-guess his friend any longer. But… the problem he’d been having, repeatedly had been how were you supposed to have a conversation with a certain immortal being, when said being was far more enamoured with standing outside in the pouring rain and re-digging a garden that had been dug over too many times already, than passing the time of day with the friend that had been by his side for six millennia? How indeed?

Simple. Aziraphale smiled to himself. You simply introduce the car, a lovely drive in Crowley’s car. No one could storm out of a difficult discussion held in a car, and surely it would be easier to even start a difficult decision when sitting side by side in said car, rather than staring helplessly at each other over a table somewhere? It was the perfect solution – if only Aziraphale could ensure that Crowley would agree to the drive in the first place…

And Crowley did come downstairs. Twenty minutes later, on the dot, he appeared in the kitchen in his gardening clothes and wearing his glasses. Aziraphale’s heart sank a little at the choice of attire and he quickly glanced out of the window as Crowley slipped into the seat opposite him, sipping at his espresso.

“It’s raining again, dearest.”

Crowley’s eyes didn’t flicker from his cup. “I saw.”

“Not the best weather for digging, I wouldn’t imagine. Not with the garden like that.”
That got Crowley’s attention. First on Aziraphale himself and then his eyes were up and skimming out of the window and over the garden which was now, less Somme-like and more Windermere. Crowley frowned. “It’s not supposed to flood.”

“Ah, well, yes…” Aziraphale instantly rose from the table and bustled over to the counter where he started making himself another cup of tea. “There’s been a lot of rain overnight, though. Yes. A lot. Of rain. I heard it.” He waited until he couldn’t feel Crowley’s eyes on the back of his head any longer before turning back once more. “Anyway,” he offered brightly. “No good for digging today, so, you know what I was thinking we could do?”

Crowley stared at him, expressionless for just a moment and then, mutely, shook his head.

“We could head out to that nice garden centre again, or the DIY shop, and finally choose a greenhouse for you. Then, once it is assembled, then you’d have somewhere you could still garden even when the weather is so bad! What do you think? We could have lunch out or morning coffee, afternoon tea, stop off in Winchester maybe for something to eat tonight, dear? Well, what do you say?”

There was a long pause as they looked at each other, Aziraphale fighting to keep his expression neutral and the flush away from his cheeks.

“I don’t mind gardening in the rain,” Crowley told him eventually, his voice quiet and strangely snake-like.

“But you get all cold and wet!”

Crowley shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me. And… I was going to start on the front garden today – but I’m assuming you’ve flooded that one too?”

Aziraphale, caught red-handed, just stared and Crowley pushed up from the table, with a muttered, “Unbelievable…” before stalking over to the back door.

“Where are you going?” Aziraphale was wringing his hands.
“Out,” with a snap, Crowley’s mud splattered boots were on his feet.

“Oh, please don’t go out, my dear! It’s so wet! Let’s do go and see about that greenhouse. Shall we? A nice drive, like before? A run to the beach as well, if you want?” he smiled, as natural as he could make it, panicking as his carefully devise plan crashed and burned right in front of him.

Crowley’s hand paused on the door handle. “What? No rain-bow?” he spat. “Isn’t that the traditional pathetic apology after a flood?” Aziraphale felt all the blood drain from his face at that low blow, but Crowley was past noticing – or caring. “Like Mother like son, yes?” he shook his head. “I should have bloody known,” and with that he was gone, slamming the door behind him, striding through the flooded garden, the filthy water washing up over his knees, his hair instantly drenched by the teeming rain.

“Crowley!” Aziraphale wrenched the door open again, shouting after his retreating figure, “Crowley! Please! Please just come back and we can talk about this! Please!” Crowley didn’t even pause though, and by the time that Aziraphale had dressed himself in galoshes, sou’wester and a long, sensible mackintosh, he was completely out of sight.

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It was a long, drawing day. Aziraphale spent most of it up in the library, staring out of the windows at the empty fields at the back and wishing he could see that lonely figure wending its way back to him. No figure appeared though, and the rain didn’t let up, the thick clouds precipitating the onset of darkness which left even Aziraphale’s enhanced vision useless. He trudged back down the stairs, lighting the fire and moving to put on a pot of filter coffee, trying to make everything as welcoming as possible for Crowley’s eventual return, because he had to return – didn’t he?

He wasn’t sure of the answer, he wasn’t even sure where Crowley was anymore. Earlier in the day he’d been reaching out to him, checking where he was, how he was, but mid-afternoon that had been stopped, he’d had a moment of complete panic and then had realised that it wasn’t that Crowley had been taken again, it was more that he had started blocking Aziraphale.

It was difficult to work put which was worse.

He was such a fool. How had he thought that touching Crowley’s precious garden would ever be tolerated? How had he not considered how flooding it would go down? After before? How was he such an idiot? Constantly? Irrefutably? Painfully?
Seven o’clock came around and the coffee had all run through the filter. Aziraphale knew it would keep warm though, and the logs he’d made the fire with would never burn down, everything was ready, he just had to sit tight and wait.

By eleven o’clock that waiting was becoming nigh on impossible. Aziraphale had cleared the flood water from the garden within the first ten minutes of Crowley leaving, but the rain had persisted pairing up with storm-force winds which had forced him into the mackintosh and galoshes again, just to check whether the Bentley was still in the garage. It was, although it seemed to glare, aggressively as if it wished it to a good afternoon. Just because the beloved car remained behind though, there was no guarantee that Crowley would return for it. He’d left it before, of course, and this time, if he was blocking Aziraphale’s attempts to check up on him, to find him, well, then that would be that, wouldn’t it? He’d never be found again. It was a devastating thought.

Aziraphale felt that he was close by, though, that he hadn’t left completely, not yet, and so he needed something else to reach out to him, some other way of trying to let him know that Aziraphale was so dreadfully sorry, and so worried, and so ready to do anything at all just to make him happier. He thought and thought, and pictured a lighthouse in his head, that glowing warmth in a storm, the promise of safe harbour, of hope, and, as the wind howled around the little cottage and tugged mercilessly at its neat bundles of thatch, Aziraphale stood in the library and lit candle after candle after candle along the entire length of the three windows, using just the smallest of miracles to make them burn tall and bright and everlasting.

Then, he sat by the fire to simply wait.

The wind rose as the night slid by, until it was making the windows creak and gusts were buffeting down the chimney and causing his carefully tended flames to stutter. He couldn’t get the thought of Crowley out of his head, all alone and wearing nothing but that baggy jumper and his torn jeans, staggering around in the wind and the rain, and the picture caused an actual pain in his chest. “Please come home, my dear,” he entreated into the fire. “I’m so sorry I’ve hurt you again. Please – come home.”

The wait was only another hour. Aziraphale was staring into the flames again, listing all the things he’d done wrong since moving into the cottage with Crowley, when, abruptly, the back door burst open, so violently, that Aziraphale at first assumed the howling wind had crashed through. The desperate, “Aziraphale!” quashed that thought, however, and had him instantly on his feet, fear thudding through his veins.

“Crowley?” Crowley surged into the living area, soaked to the bone, his skin white and mud splattered, his hair Bordeaux red, and his eyes wild and desperate. “Whatever is the matter?!”

Crowley stared at him, his eyes raking up and down and he reached a shaking hand up to push back
his dripping hair. “Oh God…” it wasn’t often he uttered the Almighty’s name, especially not in a voice that trembled so. “You’re alive… you’re alive…”

Aziraphale frowned at him. “My dear boy, of course I am alive! I’m not the one who’s been- Oh,” he stuttered to a halt as Crowley dashed past him, filthy boots trailing mud across the spotless wooden floors.

“The library!” Crowley shouted as he headed for the stairs, “It’s burning!!”

“What?!” Aziraphale’s chest tightened again and he fell into step behind Crowley, his mind going to all of his wonderful books, all that work and care that Crowley put into it all for him, how could it be burning? Not again…

Crowley had slammed to a halt as he crossed the threshold of the library and Aziraphale only had the time to consider that he couldn’t smell any smoke, when he suddenly pieced it all together, just about managing not to collide with Crowley’s stationary form in the doorway.

“Oh,” he repeated, unsure how to handle the situation, cringing as he heard Crowley’s hissed whisper of, “Candles…”

“My dear boy,” he started, trying to stop his voice from shaking, but he stuttered to a halt once more as Crowley turned and fixed him with a stare that could only be described as demonic.

“Candles,” he stated again and Aziraphale swallowed. “You lit candles, you miracled up candles, just to make it look as if the library was on fire?”

“Ah, no, now, Crowley, that’s not-”

“Again!” Crowley suddenly roared out and Aziraphale was left frowning.

“Again? But, dearest-”

“What was it then?” Crowley took a step into him, the yellow of his eyes swallowing all else, his pupils tiny, furious slits, and Aziraphale couldn’t help but take a step back. “You didn’t think that
the last time was enough for me, then? You thought I maybe needed a reminder, just in case I was starting to forget?"

“Crowley, now listen to-”

“You wanted me to think you were gone – again – just to get me back here? Just so you can torment me some more?”

“Torment you?” Aziraphale’s fear and confusion was rapidly being swallowed up by anger. “You think I would ever try to torment you?”

“Did the flooding of my garden not quite hit hard enough? Cut deep enough? You thought you’d have another go at me, then did you?”

“No, I did not!” the accusations were bringing Aziraphale close to angry tears. “I admit I flooded the gardens but that was only to try and get you to stay with me, to spend some time with me, so that we could try and fix whatever is going wrong here! And, and, and the candles were a light for you, a sign for you-”

“A sign that you’d been attacked? That they’d destroyed you with Hellfire like they tried to before?”

“No! A sign to guide you home to me! Like a lighthouse, Crowley, like a blasted lighthouse!”

“Pah…” Crowley just sneered at him, “It’s not enough that like a pathetic fucking worm, I can’t live without you, is it? No, you just have to keep on taunting me with what I can’t have, what I don’t deserve, what I’ll never, ever, be worthy of!”

“What?” ice was starting to creep up through Aziraphale’s feet, up his legs, through his torso, its creeping fingers reaching for his heart, gripping it tightly, freezing it solid. “That’s what you think? You think I…” he couldn’t actually put the thought into words.

Crowley shrugged at him, the grandest of gestures he saved for when he was really riled up, his sodden appearance only making him seem all the more tragic. “Why the Hell not?” his eyes were desperate, tortured. “It’s got to get you bonus points with the big guys, yes? Damning the unforgivable, the unlovable, to a lifetime of staring at the forbidden? Touching it? Tasting it?
Maybe even a way back in for you, hey? If you’re lucky.”

“I don’t want a way back in!” and Aziraphale couldn’t stop the tears now as they scratched up his throat and spilt out over his eyes, “And I don’t… I wouldn’t,” he shook his head, Crowley’s self-deprecation the most painful thing he’d ever heard, “Crowley, you are not unlovable!”

Crowley laughed, harsh and bitter, the sound of it searing the edges of Aziraphale’s soul. “No? You think that do you? After six thousand years of knowing this?” he gestured to his wet and muddy corporation, “You’re going to try and kid yourself that anyone would care about it?”

He wanted to say it then, after six thousand years, he wanted to make Crowley believe it, but not like this, not with all this anger and pain. He just shook his head, “You’re wrong.”

“In trusting you?” Crowley let out another, horrible, bitter laugh. “In thinking we could be friends, without you pouring salt into my raw and empty soul every fucking minute?”

“No,” Aziraphale’s voice was quiet with grief. “You’re wrong about me and all that I am. And all that you are, too. But I was wrong as well, I was stupid when I thought that you could let any of this… this… this self-loathing go long enough to see what I thought of you, what I feel for you! It’s as if you like it, Crowley! You like thinking that you’re bad because of the Fall and that no one will ever see you as anything but an extension of Hell, and no one will ever want you or need you or like you or love you, because it’s just easier that way for you, isn’t it?”

Crowley stared at him, eyes brows over the rims of his shades.

“Easier to hide yourself and belittle yourself and never even try because, well, you’ll never fail, then, will you? You’ll never get hurt. You can then simply crawl through life being miserable and hated and damned and letting other people try to reach you, try to touch you, emotionally, and you can push them away and slap them down and blame every little tiny inconvenience onto them and convince yourself that it’s never, ever going to get any better for you because it’s all you deserve – right?”

Crowley shook his head, his lip curled into a snarl, “What do you know about that? You don’t know me, at all!”

Aziraphale spat out a bitter little laugh, shaking his head, “Oh, I know you, dear boy. I’ve studied you for all these years and now I realise that I know you better than you know yourself! And I
know it’s useless! And that you’re happy being miserable, and I’m an angel, and I can’t, I can’t live with all of this!”

The sneer deepened into a snarl, “All this evil?” he gestured jerkily to himself. “The taint of it all finally got to you has it? Exhausted all the pity and charity you had for the poor Fallen angel?”

And just at that point, Aziraphale finally reached the end of his reserves. His throat was so tight he could barely swallow, the pain in his heart was so fierce he wouldn’t have been surprised to find that he was actually discorporating, and he’d just had enough. He’d just had enough.

His hands shook as he wiped away a fresh set of tears as they trailed, tragically, down his cheeks. “No. But now, dear boy,” his throat tightened further still. “Now… well, I think I might just have reached the very last of my resilience. I can’t go on like this with you,” he shook his head. “I just can’t.”

They stared at each other a moment longer, Crowley silent and frozen, Aziraphale waiting to see if he had something, anything, he could say that would save them both. But, of course, there was nothing. Not a thing that either of them could do, and, at the end of it all, it just seemed so pointless, so continuously torturous, that Aziraphale simply closed his eyes and miracled himself from the room.
“Can demons even have friends?”

Chapter Notes

Check the tags, more added :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aziraphale gave no thought as to where he would turn up, so was slightly surprised to find himself at the far end of the beach where he and Crowley had walked together what now felt like a whole lifetime ago. The dawn was starting to break, grey and insipid, and the wind and rain were still lashing furiously, joining forces with the sea whose foamy stallions crashed against the rocks. It was cold and wet and dismal and all the things that Aziraphale hated – but – he was an angel, so there was no need to actually feel any of that if he chose not to.

He sank down onto a rock, folding his arms onto his knees and pressing his forehead into his old-faithful coat, not caring one little jot for the sea spray that shrouded him or the rain that splattered his bowed back.

How had everything gone so very wrong for them? How was it that, right at the time that Aziraphale acknowledged his love for Crowley and his need for them to be more than they were, that he found himself so utterly clueless as to how to read his very dearest friend? Maybe that’s where you went wrong, whispered the irritating voice in his head, maybe you should have asked him occasionally, rather than just deciding what he needed.

Maybe he should have.

It was too late though, that much was perfectly clear. How could they recover from such pain and so many accusations? How could they strengthen trust when there clearly wasn’t any between them to begin with? How could he start to try and repair six thousand years of Crowley thinking the absolute worst of himself? How could they possibly do anything other than hurt each other, over and over and over again?

After everything that had been said and done between them, all the words and blame that could never be taken back, well, there was only one way the whole situation was going to end. And did Aziraphale want six thousand years of history to end like that? Did Crowley? The answer to that was about the only thing that Aziraphale was certain about any more.
The sky continued to lighten, the wind to howl, the rain to lash and sea to pound and still Aziraphale sat. His tears had eventually dried and he’d lifted his head to stare, empty-eyed at the waves, but they had nothing for him, no erroneous promises or fallacious assurances, and for that he supposed he was grateful. They simply rose and fell, gun-metal grey, edged in white, and Aziraphale watched them and let his mind empty.

He felt Crowley long before he actually arrived at his side and, perhaps, he’d known all along that the other half of his penance would come after him, to ensure the self-flagellation could continue. The thing was though, Aziraphale no longer had any taste for it. He saw him arrive out of the corner of his eye, the wind blowing his beautiful hair every way it could and the pain that he would never be Aziraphale’s own juddered through his chest once more.

A strange silence grew up around them both, a bubble of calm and quiet in the storm and even the wind let them be, taking its frustrations out on the frothy tops of the waves instead. Crowley’s doing, and absently, Aziraphale wondered at the power, wondered how he was so much more than Aziraphale – in every way – but could never ever even start to see it himself.

“Angel…” He was calmer, he was miserable, he’d been so frightened for Aziraphale’s safety, and if Aziraphale could tell all of that from one, simple word, then how had he been so dreadfully poor at reading Crowley’s other emotions since the dawn of time? “I’m sorry.”

Aziraphale shook his head, “Don’t be.”

Crowley edged closer, he was still terrified, Aziraphale could just about taste it washing off him in waves but what did it matter anymore? They were completely unqualified to navigate these waters between themselves – hadn’t they proved that?

He let out a long sigh and, eyes on the distant horizon and just bowed to their ultimate fate. “I’m going back to London.”

There was no reply to that, not a sound save for the exhausted exhale that Crowley made as he flopped down on a rock, a few metres to Aziraphale’s left.

They sat and stared at the waves, their anger exhausted, Aziraphale’s grief and loss bubbling just under his Regency exterior.
“Please don’t.”

Two words.

It must have taken Crowley ten minutes to force them out of his soul, and that’s all he could come up with.

“Why not?” Aziraphale could almost laugh at the irony.

“Aziraphale…” Crowley sounded pained, as if each word were trying to throttle him on the way out of his mouth. “Angel… I can’t… I just… Please stay.”

Vision blurred, chest tight, Aziraphale could only shake his head.

“Please,” and he’d never heard Crowley like this before, didn’t like it; a being so gloriously powerful reduced to begging for the one thing that made him more miserable than anything else? It was an abhorrence. “The cottage, the library, they were all for you.”

And Aziraphale knew that and that’s what made this so wrong, so toxic. How could he live with a Crowley who wanted him to be happy over everything else? Over his own happiness? Over his own mental well-being? He shook his head.

“Crowley…” there was a little grey pebble right next to his shoe, perfectly oval, and dusted like a sugared almond, Aziraphale stared at it whilst he spoke, “We can’t do this anymore.” in the bubble of peace that Crowley had made for them, he was sure he could hear their hearts breaking. “I can’t do it. How can we live like this? Wandering through the remains of what we once were? What we possibly could have been?”

There was no reply to that. Nothing at all as the wind finally started to calm and the fractious seas could ease a little themselves. Two immortal beings sat, silently, on their respective rocks and stared at the horizon, their world collapsing around them and both equally powerless to stop it.

It seemed that six thousand years of history did not equate to six thousand years of wisdom.
Finally, as somewhere behind the stubborn clouds the sun was approaching its zenith, Aziraphale forced himself to stand, noticing, out of the corner of his eye, Crowley doing to the same.

“When are you leaving?” it seemed that the inevitable had been accepted.

Aziraphale steeled himself, swallowing heavily and straightening his waistcoat. “Today. I’ll just head back and pack up the most important things. I can get the rest sent on later.”

Crowley let out a long breath of defeat, “I’ll drive you.”

But what would that achieve other than creating yet another opportunity for them to wound each other with their words?

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” from the corner of his eye, his heart twinged as he saw Crowley’s shoulders slump. “I think we just need to have a break from each other.”

“Like the old days?” the pain was dripping from every word. “Where we just bump into each other every couple of hundred years or something?”

Aziraphale chilled at the thought, “We could always write?” he offered hollowly, “Speak on the phone?”

A bitter, strangled laugh sounded at his side, and then the bubble of peace around them was gone – as was Crowley.

Miracleing yourself around the country was always risky and best done in a state of complete awareness and concentration. Since Aziraphale could barely remember his name by this point, he decided, instead to walk up into the nearest village and call a taxi from there.

It was early afternoon by the time he let himself back in at the cottage and was not at all surprised to find it empty. The taxi driver had told him that there were trains into Waterloo every twenty minutes from Haslemere, which was a short drive away. He determined to pack up his basics as
quickly as he could, and then call another cab to take him to the station – another round with Crowley whilst they were still so raw and bloody would be a disaster. He knew that was a latent fear though, he knew that Crowley would keep right out of the way until Aziraphale was long gone – a fact which, conversely, made him feel even more wretched than before.

He trudged up into the beautiful library and just stood there, staring around and seeing all the thought and all the care that Crowley had put into it for him. The carved architraves, the ceiling roses. The furniture, neat and classical but well made and very comfortable. The touches of luxury – the wine chiller, the moisture-controlled cabinet, the dimmer lights. The whole room screamed to him of care and love, so why was it so impossible for them to attain any of that in real life?

Not wanting to look anymore, Aziraphale miracled a carpet bag and a trunk on wheels into life and started packing, desperately throwing in anything that came to hand, blinking furiously all the while, wondering if the tightness in his throat would ever cease.

He was almost done. The trunk was full, the carpet bag almost. He was standing on the beautiful rolling ladder, looking for a book of War Poems he’d misplaced, when a frisson of energy ran over him, raising the hairs on the back of his neck. He froze, his heart thumping hard against his chest and slowly turned around, eyes skipping from one window to the next; he recognised that feeling, hadn’t felt it in a while though and just hoped that he was wrong.

The third and final window offered him the view that twisted his heart in fear. He could see them walking slowly towards the cottage, obviously wary of traps and wards, but determined and terrifying and absolutely uninvited. Aziraphale simply did not think, there was not a thought to be had, he knew why they were here and that, absolutely, was not going to happen. Not today – not ever. Leaving everything behind, Aziraphale turned and simply ran.

He met them a field away from Crowley’s garden. Maybe thirty of them, most blinking around them in the way of creatures not used to light, their assortment of earthly forms rousing varying degrees of revulsion in Aziraphale and, yet again, he marvelled at Crowley’s unicity. They were also carrying blades of some description. All of them. Aziraphale silently asked his sword to be ready.

“Principality,” it was the one known as Hastur that spoke first. A Duke of Hell, and one with an absolute loathing for Crowley. “We’re not here for you. Stand aside. We’ve come for Crowley.”

“Why?” Aziraphale was a Principality, though, a protector and he was not going to let thirty demons with a variety of very sharp weapons get past him.
Hastur cocked his head, “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No,” Aziraphale’s anger was starting to shift and grow inside which was good, anger was much more useful than fear when you needed to fight. “I understand that the Lord Beelzebub decreed that he wasn’t to be touched?”

Laughter rang around the field, Hastur raised his eyebrows and gestured about him, “And do you see Beelzebub here? Now?”

Aziraphale narrowed his lips. “This place is warded, you will not get in and you have been told that he is off limits to you – so turn around and go back to where you came, and I will not smite you.”

More laughter, and Hastur took a step in making Aziraphale have to steel himself to not back away. “You can’t smite us all, little angel,” he mocked. “Not before we turn you into celestial slices, anyway. And Crowley? He killed a dear friend of mine, right in front of my eyes. That gives me the justification to do anything I damn well please.”

“A dear friend?” Aziraphale couldn’t help himself. “Can demons even have friends?”

More laughter, and lots of pitying looks were thrown from demon to demon, but Hastur just smiled, “No. But we can have ‘excuses’. Now, are you going to move, or are we going to slice you into pieces?”

Aziraphale altered his stance, his sword coming into being in his hand as he did so, his shape shifted slightly, his glow intensifying, his size increasing, and his eyes became swirling pits of blue fire. “You will not pass,” he replied in a voice that seemed to reverberate right through the thick mud. “You will not hurt him. He is mine to protect.”

Hastur sneered, his own stature growing as his jaw and his teeth elongated, his hands grew claws and the dark pits of his eyes seemed to rotate like black holes. “Bring it on, little angel,” he jeered, “Bring it on.”

It had accelerated quickly, and Aziraphale only had time to lament his apparent lack of diplomacy, when the first demon came at him. It wasn’t Hastur, he hadn’t become a Duke of Hell by being the first one into a dicey situation and he hung back as Aziraphale swung his sword and quickly despatched the first three of his attackers with fluid efficiency. He watched though, his empty eyes studying as Aziraphale grit his teeth and prepared to dig in.
Aziraphale did not like fighting. He did not approve of violence as a means to an end at all. But, that should not be confused with an inability to fight; he had been created simply to fight in the first war and he had done, brandishing his sword against his brothers and sisters, watching them fall with a heavy heart but knowing that he was doing the work of the Almighty. And it should also not be confused with an unwillingness to fight either; if it was important, like protecting his dearest Crowley, well, there wasn’t much he wouldn’t do.

He was still just one angel, however, and they were many and they were excited beyond any thought for themselves by the prospect of slaying an angel. He started off okay, as they all seemed happy to wait their turns before attacking him. That soon changed however, as Aziraphale continued to cut them down, one after the other, their eager glee morphing into anger and they started combining their forces, advancing on Aziraphale from more than one direction at a time and the wielding of his sword started to get just a little frantic and indiscriminate. He grit his teeth and forged on, swinging left to dispatch a grinning frog-faced fiend, then jabbing right as a leering teeth-ridden demon thrust his own blade at Aziraphale’s shoulder.

They were coming faster, and Aziraphale couldn’t help but take a step back, and another, slipping slightly in his sensible brogues on the muddy ground. He didn’t let his concentration waver though, not for a second, refusing even to recoil in horror as a particularly well-timed arc sliced straight through the chest of the demon currently raising a machete at him, splattering him in thick, black ooze, so different from the red blood that Crowley bled when hurt. He just kept his focus and fought on, not even counting in his head, just dispatching one after another, after another, thinking that he might just make it, he might just do this, he might- oh.

He saw the blades of the double-headed axe as they swung away from him, wondering why one of them was edged in scarlet even as the tide of warmth spread over his waist. His hand seemed to spring open of its own accord, letting his sword thud, uselessly to the ground and a second later, his knees followed suit and he found himself kneeling in the mud and looking down at all the filth on his beautifully cared-for trousers, and the waves of deep, scarlet blood that were washing, in alarming amounts, over the neat slice across his midriff and spilling all over his cream ensemble. Oh, he found himself thinking in a bizarrely detached manner, it’s going to be a dreadful job to get all those stains out.

His laundry woes were cut short, however, as Hastur leaned into him, his eyes soulless, empty voids, his mouth curled into a terrible sneer. “Oh dear, oh dear,” he mocked. “Did the nasty demon get you with his axe?”

Aziraphale wanted to spit back a snippy Crowley-esque retort but there seemed to be no air anywhere in his body which he could use for speech. He wanted to shove Hastur and his dreadful maggot-ridden breath away from him, but he was incapable of moving a single muscle in his body. All he was capable of doing was staring, either at the leering face in front of him, or the exodus of blood all down his front and neither option was particularly appealing. He knew he was
discorporating, he could feel the life-force slowly ebbing from his form and he seemed to have nothing ethereal left inside him with which to stop it.

“Always going to happen though, wasn’t it?” And to top it all off, Hastur was still going on at him. Right in his face. “You hang around with demons for long enough, and they’ll get you in the end.” Which was rubbish, because Crowley had never turned on him, would never turn on him, and just like that, just when Aziraphale thought he had no more left to give, his heart broke all over again.

*Crowley.*

With Aziraphale gone, they would go after him next, hunting him down like a trophy kill. Hurting him, destroying him, when Crowley had already suffered so much for so many thousands of years. But then, what was worse was that maybe Crowley would think that Aziraphale had abandoned him, right when he was needed the very most, left him to the mercy of the ravening demons, just to save his own skin. It was testament to how well he knew Crowley that he understood that perceived betrayal would be worse for him to bear than anything Heaven and Hell could do to him.

But no, he wouldn’t think that. Surely he’d know that Aziraphale would never leave him? Not voluntarily at any rate.

“You know what I’m going to do now, then?” and, for the sake of the Lord! Hastur was *still* going on. He leaned in, and Aziraphale was concentrating so hard on not collapsing backwards into all the mud that he couldn’t even lean away from him. “I’m going to take your head.”

Despite himself, Aziraphale felt the hairs rise up on the back of his neck.

“I’m going to take your head, and let my *associates* here have the rest of you. And when they’re done, we’re going to take your pretty little head with us and go *demon hunting*. You know of any around here we could get?” Aziraphale couldn’t even blink. “And we’re going to do the same to him. But maybe I’ll leave his head on until last. Just so he gets the full experience – you know what I mean?”

So, that was that then. At least Crowley would know that Aziraphale hadn’t left him, but he would go to his destruction knowing that his angel had been sent back to Heaven and the punishments that awaited him there. He would never know, never, ever understand, just how much, how deeply and eternally, he was loved.
Yes – that was the very worst thing about this awful turn of events, and despite all the fear that Aziraphale had held onto over all the years of friendship with Crowley, he’d never actually believed that their end would be quite so violent, quite so repugnant. He felt it hard to understand how either of them had ever deserved anything so vile, but then, since when had the world that She created ever been fair?

Aziraphale’s silence and rapidly weakening corporation soon bored Hastur though and he stood up again, stepping back and lifting up Aziraphale’s own sword, dull now in the gloom of the cloudy afternoon, swinging it, familiarising himself with its weight. “A celestial sword,” he mused, “Just the thing to get rid of a particularly irritating angel, don’t you think?” Around him, the remaining demons found their voices, soon forgetting about their fallen brethren, baying for cold-blooded murder and squabbling amongst themselves for the best view, pushing closer, their amalgamated noise a clattering cacophony of chaos.

Hastur raised the sword, his empty eyes fixing on an angel who, at the very end, wished he was as much of a coward as had always been thought, wished he could close his eyes and discorporate with an image of Crowley in his mind rather than this maggot-ridden monster. He couldn’t bring himself to do it, though, so he knelt in the mud before a Duke of Hell, his earthly blood staining the beautiful countryside he’d looked out on over tea and crumpets at the bistro table in the sunny kitchen, and wished that just once in six thousand years of opportunity, he’d told Crowley he loved him. Just once.

The sword poised in the air above him.

The horde of demons howled.

Hastur smiled.

The blade swooped, and Aziraphale simply braced himself – and waited.

Chapter End Notes

Yikes - I know... update coming Thursday at the latest!

Also, final word count is currently creeping up to 70,000 words.
“You’ve made a huge mistake coming after us.”

Chapter Notes

Bonus update! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air around Aziraphale shifted, shimmered and abruptly, where there had been the denizens of Hell, clamouring for his death, there was a black, shimmering curtain.

Aziraphale was confused. Hastur was still there, the demons were still there, he could hear them, even louder than before, incensed, or excited, but all Aziraphale could see was this strange, glittering shield of darkness. Except… he looked a little closer, forced his fuzzy mind to concentrate a little more and… yes… it wasn’t a cloak of black in front of him, there were iridescent edges of purple, and pink, green and silver and the most incredible sheen of turquoise-blue and… oh… oh… Crowley!

Wings! His wings, his most incredible and beautiful wings were back, just as exquisite as before – no, more so to Aziraphale’s fuzzy eyes – and he was here and, yet again, he’d come to save Aziraphale and…

Here Aziraphale stopped as the howling of the predatory demons blistered his euphoria; maybe he’d come to die at Aziraphale’s side, and, airless and weak as he was, Aziraphale still couldn’t say how he loved him.

“Howstur!” over the gleeful yelps of excited demons, Crowley’s voice rang out. “You’ve made a huge mistake coming after us.”

But Hastur just laughed, “You think that, do you? Shows all that you know, you little snake. You’d signed your own death warrant the second you set up that holy water trap for me.”

And Aziraphale suddenly understood then that that was what had so incensed Hastur, cultivated what had always been a healthy dislike for Crowley into a pathological hatred; it was nothing to do with Ligur’s fate and everything to do with the fact that Crowley had dared to strike against him.

Crowley didn’t seem phased, in fact, when he replied, his voice was full of such anger, more anger
than Aziraphale had ever heard from him at any point in their long history. “I don’t want to do thiss,” his anger was drawing the snake from him. “I have spent six thousand yearssss not being thiss, and so I’ll give you one chancce to leave! All of you!”

Aziraphale, swaying a little where he knelt, frowned.

“One chancce!”

Hastur, however, just laughed. “No one’s scared of you, Crawly,” he sneered.

“That’s becausse,” Aziraphale winced at the way Crowley’s voice suddenly seemed to reverberate through his fuzzy skull, “you don’t know what I wasss!”

The only reply was a heightening of the demons’ baying and, suddenly, Aziraphale couldn’t keep his eyes open any longer. They slid shut, very much against his will, as he prepared for his end and hoped that they wouldn’t hurt his beloved Crowley too much. The howling was hurting his ears, but he could feel Crowley’s solid presence before him, protecting him like he had for every one of their shared years and suddenly it was all very clear to Aziraphale. It wasn’t that he loved Crowley, well, not just that anyway. They loved each other. They were in love with each other. Goodness, he could feel it washing against him, all Crowley’s desperate, desperate love, lapping sadly at his own fading aura.

Why had he never realised that before? Why had he never thought that all of Crowley’s care and concern and gifts and rescues were down to the fact that Crowley loved him just as much as Aziraphale loved Crowley? Did it matter that he’d never said it? Never acted upon it? Well, had it mattered to Aziraphale that his own love had never been spoken aloud, never been acted upon? He had been such a damn fool, why had it taken this long for him to work it all out?

Then he heard Hastur’s war-cry, and, in his mind, could picture the Duke swinging Aziraphale’s own sword towards an unprotected Crowley, about to cruelly cut him down where he stood, protecting his angel until the very end.

Aziraphale loved him.

Oh, Lord Almighty, how Aziraphale loved him.
There was no sickening sound of a death blow, though. No anguished cry from his love. No \textit{thud} as an abruptly-empty corporation hit the ground in front of him. Just the baying demons, and then a wall of air that passed over him with a barely-perceptible \textit{whump}, knocking him flat onto his back, his eyes open again, staring up at the eiderdown-grey skies above him and – silence – a total and utter silence.

He stared, there was nothing else he could do and wondered what had happened, where he was. Was this it? Was he somehow back in Heaven?

It was the sound of the birds that returned first, panicked and flustered but just birds, \textit{earthly} birds, and Aziraphale felt ridiculous hope flare in his chest. And then there was a face in front of his, blocking the flat, grey clouds, the most treasured face in all of creation. Crowley looked pale, so dreadfully anxious, and his beautiful golden eyes were filled with the most ghastly terror and Aziraphale could have wept for him.

\textit{“Angel,”} his voice was shaking, a sob held back in his throat by sheer determination. \textit{“I’m ssso sorry, I’m ssso ssso sorry that I wasssn’t here. Hold on, pleasssse, just hold on a few more minutesss and I’ll fix thisss, I can fix thisss, hold on.”}

One, trembling, hand cautiously cupped his face, whilst the other, and Crowley’s eyes, drifted down to the gaping slash across his stomach. He couldn’t fix this and how tragic was that? It was too late, Aziraphale could feel it; he’d lost too much blood, too much of his essence. Whilst Crowley \textit{could} heal him and \textit{had} healed him before, there was no way that he could bring him back from \textit{this}.

\textit{“Why didn’t you ssstay in the damn cottage?”} Crowley hissed. \textit{“It’s warded, protected! You would have been ssssafe there! What the fuck did you come out here and \textit{meet} them for?”}

I had to my dear, Aziraphale wanted the words. \textit{They had come for you – I had to stop them. I had to protect you.}

Crowley shook his head and pushed away his fringe in a hand streaked in Aziraphale’s blood. \textit{“It wasss only me they were interesssted it. They would have left you alone if you’d jussst ssstayed put!”}

And Aziraphale couldn’t quite believe it. Even after living with Crowley’s non-existent sense of worth for all these weeks, it still rocked him to his core that he would even start to think such a ridiculous thing. But then – Aziraphale had just this very morning told him he was leaving him – what else was he ever going to think?
He could feel himself slipping away, his essence drifting upwards and wished, more than powerfully then he ever had before, that he had strength enough to speak, to just say the words for the first time ever. But – it was too late, he was going, he was going…

“No!”

A spike of energy shot through him, ripping his eyes open, scouring air down his parched throat, kicking his earthly-heart back into life, which only made the blood spill faster from his wound.

“Don’t you dare!” Crowley was feverish. “Don’t you dare leave me, Azssiraphale! You have to wait, you have to give me a chance here!”

Aziraphale was trying, the Lord Herself knew that he was trying, and Crowley’s energy blast had helped, but not for long, he could already feel it ebbing away through the gaping hole in his body. He could at least move; one shaky, muddy hand could reach out and touch a trembling calf as Crowley knelt next to him in all the mud, his own hands skimming, desperately, over Aziraphale’s corporation. And he could speak, even as the darkness rolled around him once more, fighting to bring him down again, fighting against Crowley’s valiant efforts to heal him. “Crowley?” he whispered, knowing there was something he wanted to say but not quite remembering what it was any more, “Crowley, my dearest, what were you?”

And then Crowley’s face was back in front of his eyes, and his hand was warm against Aziraphale’s cheek. There were tears tracks on his face and he was smiling, but it was a fragile and broken kind of smile, and Aziraphale realised that it was probably a goodbye.

“Yours,” he whispered as Aziraphale’s eyes closed one, final, time. “I was always just yours.”

Chapter End Notes

Proper chapter post should be up tomorrow!
“It’s going to take a while.”

When Aziraphale’s awareness returned, he was warm and comfortable, and it was quiet, and he had no idea where he was. He waited, lying as still as he possibly could and wondered if he had the nerve to open even one eye, just for a tiny peep. There was a sound then, muffled, as if from another room, a chiming, like that of a clock, an antique clock, a grandmother clock of the kind that sat in the little tartan snug in the beautiful cottage and diligently chimed the hours away. Aziraphale’s heart started beating hard in his chest as he listened to those chimes and then, as they ended, he opened his eyes to find himself looking straight into Crowley’s own beautiful amber ones.

He was smiling again, a little papery maybe, but not, thank goodness, the jagged smile of before. He was also laid along the bed at Aziraphale’s side, his chin propped in one hand and his un-styled hair betraying the forced ease of his posture. “Angel,” there were a thousand layers to that word. “Good to see you awake.”

They were in the bedroom, their bedroom, and he was lying in the bed, their bed, whilst Crowley, bare-footed and dressed in a black t-shirt and the ubiquitous jeans was sprawled over the duvet. “I’ve been sleeping?” he queried, and went to shove himself up into a sitting position, jerking to a halt and crying out as the movement seared agony through his stomach.

“Careful, careful!” Crowley hissed, all his faked nonchalance gone, scrambling to his knees and hauling Aziraphale’s limp body up onto the mound of pillows behind him, “You’re still healing,” and suddenly his voice was shaking, “it’s going to take a while.”

“It is?” Aziraphale was surprised at how much it hurt and how weak he was; angels who could heal themselves were not used to feeling vulnerable. “Good Lord!” he gasped as his eyes fell on the mullioned windows, “How long have I been asleep?”

Crowley followed his gaze and let out the tiniest huff of a chuckle, the shakes banished again for the time being, and the sound was so full of calm and relief, it did wonders to soothe an anxious Aziraphale. “Don’t worry, not long. Just three days. The frost came this morning.”

It was beautiful though, everything was painted in sparkling silver, the tree trunks, the tiny branches, every blade of grass, and they shimmered wonderfully against the sharp, blue sky. “Three days?!” but still, it was a long time for a being that didn’t really sleep.

Crowley’s tentative smile fell away. “It was an awful wound; must have been a Hell-forged blade. I couldn’t get it to heal, I-” he took a breath, came back calmer, “You’ll have to let it finish up on its own.”

Aziraphale stared into Crowley’s naked eyes and could see what those three days must have been like for him, could trace the lingering fear and desperation. He reached out without thought and took hold of Crowley’s hand, relieved beyond all when he didn’t flinch or draw away but instead seemed to feed off the contact. “Thank you, my dear. Thank you so much.”

Crowley nodded, still not drawing away and still not shirking from their eye contact. “You’re welcome,” his voice was quiet, rough, “but you would have done it for me.”

“I would,” Aziraphale squeezed his hand a little tighter. “In a heart-beat. But only you. Only ever you.”
They held hands, they held gazes and then Crowley nodded, accepting, only then withdrawing his hand and folding his arms across his chest, pushing his hands up into his armpits as if to warm them. “Are you hungry?” he asked quietly, his eyes raking over every tiny shift Aziraphale was making in his attempts to get the most comfortable. “I’ve got soup downstairs if you like. From the deli.”

“From the deli?” Aziraphale’s stomach growled in response to the thought of food and they both smiled this time, two tiny, tremulous things, like damaged birds. “Have you been shopping?” Aziraphale was ridiculously pleased that he hadn’t awoken when Crowley was out – how would he have coped with that, he wondered.

“No,” Crowley’s face crumpled, frown lines appearing across his forehead. “I called Maggie, told her you weren’t well, wondered if she’d be able to drop a few bits off for us.”

Us, Aziraphale noted, that had to be a good sign didn’t it? But then, Crowley had not been the one who’d been about to walk out – not this time. “Did she?” his smiled widened a little. “How absolutely darling of her! I’d love some soup,” he shifted in the bed once more, testing his range of mobility and just about manages to bite back a hiss of pain, “But you may have to give me a minute here…”

“No!” Crowley was on him in an instant, a hand on his arm, a hand on his shoulder, more gratuitous touching than he was known for and Aziraphale stiffened. “You need to keep still, I’ve told you that. It needs to heal on its own, it was … deep, I’m not sure how good of a job I did with the… layers of, well… muscle and tissue.”

Their eyes met, Aziraphale wondering if the horror he could feel in his heart at that halting statement was reflected in his gaze. It was certainly reflected in Crowley’s. He nodded and eased back into the pillows once more, trying to remember what it was like to be able to move at all without the fire of agony starting up in his belly once more. “Right…” he whispered.

“I’ll bring it up for you,” Crowley’s hands were still on him though, twin points of heat that Aziraphale could concentrate on as the waves of pain receded. “If that’s okay? If you’ll be alright on your own for a minute?”

That brought up another little smile. “Of course dear,” why was his voice shaking so much? “I’ll be fine.”

Crowley withdrew at that, back to his perch on the other side of the bed, watching carefully, his eyes narrowed as Aziraphale’s breathing gradually settled back into something like a normal pattern, and then he spoke, “What flavour do you want?”

Aziraphale risked a tiny shrug. “What flavour did you buy? Don’t they do an asparagus one?”

“Asparagus and Wensleydale, you can have that one if you want. I also got pea and ham, mixed bean and chorizo, leek and potato, cock-a-leekie, pork and apple, mulligatawny and chicken noodle. So, what do you fancy?”

“Oh,” Aziraphale blinked at him, “Right, well, is it pea and York ham?”

Crowley nodded.

“Well, that sounds lovely, dear boy, if you’re-”

“I’m sure,” Crowley was up and off the bed in one fluid movement. “But you stay here? Yes? You don’t do anything? Is that clear? Not a thing.”
Aziraphale nodded and Crowley, seemingly satisfied, slid out of the room, Aziraphale listening as he thundered down the stairs and various clanking sounds started up from the kitchen.

Once he was alone, Aziraphale’s gaze slid to the window and the sugar-frosted scene outside. He never really expected this – to survive. From the moment he saw the demon horde from the windows of his library, he’d thought he was going to his end. Not his complete destruction, probably, but certainly a rather violent and messy discorporation and, with Heaven feeling the way they did about him, it would be unlikely he’d ever see an Earthly vessel again. Or Earth. Or Crowley. He’d made peace with that, in his walk across the sodden fields, made peace with knowing that he’d do anything, give anything, for them to just leave Crowley alone, allow him to enjoy himself for a change, to live without constantly being told what to do.

But that wasn’t what had happened, was it? Crowley had come back, he hadn’t let Aziraphale make his supreme sacrifice. And what had he actually done? Where had the remaining demons gone? The time after the axe had taken him was all very fuzzy but he felt that Crowley had done something, hadn’t he? Something…?

“Here you are.”

Aziraphale jumped at Crowley’s entry and movement let the fires of pain free in his belly once more. He closed his eyes, rode them out with his fingers gripped tightly into the top of the duvet and when he opened up again, Crowley was watching him, a wretched expression on his face that Aziraphale didn’t like to see. He dragged himself back under control, banished the thought of the pain as best he could and forced a credible smile onto his face, “Oh,” it still sounded more like a pained gasp than a word, “that looks divine, dearest, thank you so much.”

He was holding a huge tray in his hands, one that Aziraphale was very certain they hadn’t possessed before, with legs which folded out so that it could stand all on its own on the bed. Crowley set it down now, on the edge of the duvet and cautiously approached Aziraphale’s side. “’M sorry,” his voice was quiet. “I should have made more noise coming in, I never meant to… startle you.”

Aziraphale flushed, both at his own hyper-sensitivity, and Crowley’s needless apology, but before he could say anything to try and make it better, Crowley was talking again.

“You need to sit up a little, against the cushions, but let me help you, don’t pull on your stomach again, it won’t be good for it.”

This time, Aziraphale was all ready to brush him off and manoeuvre his earthly body into place himself, just like he’d been doing for the past six thousand years, but then, he remembered the pain caused by a simple jerk, and saw the look on Crowley’s face, the wretched guilt he couldn’t hide without the aid of his glasses and instead, simply nodded, breathing out a timid, “Thank you, my dear.”

They’d never been this close before. Crowley had come right up to the side of the bed and gingerly leaned forward, one arm snaking around to slide across Aziraphale’s chest, up and under his arm, the other hand had taken a firm grip just underneath his opposite shoulder. “Lean forward onto me, angel,” his voice was so quiet, so close to Aziraphale’s ear, that he couldn’t suppress the sudden shudder of want that ran through him.

He did as he was asked though, leaning forward with hardly any effort at all, thanks to the grip on his shoulder, until he was pressed tightly against Crowley, their heads touching, the pure scent of him almost overpowering.
“You ready?”

He could only nod.

The strategy was a good one though, and the operation smooth, barely a twinge across his scar, and he was sitting up against the pillows, Crowley slowly withdrawing, his eyes tracking every single expression on Aziraphale’s face, his fingers lingering, as if they didn’t want to leave, as if he didn’t want to leave. Aziraphale certainly didn’t want him to. Absently, he wondered where the glasses were.

He was on the move again in an instant, however, retrieving the tray and setting it to stand across Aziraphale’s thighs, the angel’s throat tightening as his eyes skimmed over the offering he’d been presented with. Yes, there was the soup as promised, green and steaming and smelling absolutely delectable, but there was also a teapot, in the jolly striped cosy that Aziraphale so loved and Crowley mercilessly mocked. A tea cup and saucer, bone china, one of Aziraphale’s favourite. A little milk jug. A bowl of sugar cubes, pincers at the ready. A side plate, offering four neat triangles of bread, buttered thickly, with the crusts removed. A little glass jar of lemon posset, the kind also sold in the Deli, the kind that was Aziraphale’s absolute favourite, with a tiny, silver teaspoon. And a napkin, white with blue flowers, folded neatly in the corner of the tray.

For a moment, he just stared at all, at everything set out with so much care and… what else was that? He didn’t dare even speculate. He just stared, everything swimming in front of him as his eyes suddenly brimmed in moisture and then Crowley’s voice was at his ear, tragic and concerned, “Angel, what? Are you alright? Does it hurt? Aren’t you hungry?” And Aziraphale could only shake his head and cover his mouth with one hand, his other reaching blindly out, relieved beyond everything when he felt Crowley take it, his own fingers soft but firm on Aziraphale’s. Crowley increased the pressure around his fingers and somehow, it felt just a little bit like forgiveness.

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It was slow going, but Aziraphale ate most of the soup, a triangle of bread, half of the posset and drank two cups of tea.

After that, he was exhausted, literally exhausted in a way that he’d never felt before. He slumped back into the pillows, smiling at Crowley who had spent the entire time perched on the side of the bed, watching him eat as always. Crowley rose, smoothly, to his feet, lifting the tray out of the way and smiling into Aziraphale’s wearied countenance. “Nap?”

Aziraphale nodded, “I’m afraid so, dear boy. I don’t think I could stay awake if I tried.”

“You’re healing,” Crowley explained, already reaching across to gently ease Aziraphale upright, slide the pillows down behind him, “It takes it out of you.”

Within a moment, Aziraphale was laid on his back again, his eye lids heavy, Crowley drawing the curtains on the frosty day outside, when something occurred to him. “Crowley?” he knew that there was sleep already in his voice, but Crowley heard him still and turned to listen. “Can I see it? Do you think?”

There was a pause, “Your scar?”

Aziraphale nodded.

“You sure?”

Another nod, and this time, Crowley nodded back.
He approached the side of the bed again, flicking on the bedside light and taking hold of the edge of the duvet. Their eyes met and Aziraphale nodded again, granting consent, and Crowley, carefully folded it back. Aziraphale looked down, wondering, for the first time, if Crowley had miracled him out of his filthy, blood-stained clothes and into these softly striped flannelled pyjamas he’d had since the 1930s, or done it a more human way. Crowley was onto the tiny white buttons now, doing it the human way this time for sure, slipping each one through its hole and Aziraphale watched, transfixed, at not only at the care he could see in each movement, but also the trembling of his fingers as he worked.

Finally, they were all open and Crowley looked up again in the half-light of the room, met Aziraphale’s eyes once more and asked quietly, “Ready?”

“Yes.”

He startled as the fabric moved aside and the relatively cooler air pulled a twinge from the sensitive skin, but lifted his head anyway, craning his neck to look down. In an instant, Crowley’s hands were on him again, they honestly had never touched so much in such a short space of time in all of their previous lives, helping him to sit up a little, pushing a pillow under his neck so that he wasn’t having to stretch, making it all so easy for Aziraphale to just look down and, “Oh.”

He wasn’t really sure what he had been expecting, after all, he’d seen the injury when it was fresh and spilling blood all over the fields around him, but still, he probably hadn’t expected it to be so long, or so wide, so red and raised, and jagged, and angry looking. No wonder it bloody hurt.

“I know,” Crowley’s words spilled out of him in a waterfall of anxiety, “I know it’s not a wonderful job, and I’m sorry. I did try to get it neater, but by the time I’d healed the organs beneath, and the layers of muscle, and it had skimmed a bit off your hip bone too, so I had to put that back, and replaced your blood, and sealed the fat cells up again – I didn’t have much left in me.”

Aziraphale swallowed and stared.

“But it will get better now. Your grace will help it heal and minimise the look of it. And I can have another go, if you want, see if I can get the skin to settle bit flatter, and bit more your natural colour…” he tailed off in the face of Aziraphale’s stunned silence. “It’s just your corporation remember,” he added miserably, “None of it will show in your true form.”

Aziraphale looked up then, at the mention of his true, angelic form and frowned. Goodness, when was the last time he’d presented like that? It was a mark of how native he’d become that he couldn’t even remember. Crowley’s tragic expression tugged at him, though, and he reached out, wrapping his own fingers around a bony wrist and squeezing. “Darling,” he flushed at the accidental endearment, “I had no idea,” he glanced back at his belly and then up again into Crowley’s wide eyes. “How did you save me? I had no idea it was truly this bad. How did you stop me from going back to Heaven? We both know that, if I had, it would have been the end of me for certain.” He shook his head, “Thank you, dear boy, I don’t know how you managed to undo such a dreadful injury, but thank you. Thank you so much.”

Crowley, his cheeks flushed red, started buttoning Aziraphale’s pyjama top back up, his fingers trembling even worse than before. “You don’t need to thank me, again,” he muttered. “You did before. Of course I was going to save you. You know I’d never let them take you.”

Aziraphale squeezed his wrist and let go, laying back into the pillows, his eyes already closing on him, “I know dear boy,” he whispered, “I know.”
It was dark when he awoke next, the full, thick darkness of the middle of the night, and he knew that a distinct something had woken him. He lay and listened and then his heart tightened painfully as he heard the rumble of voices coming from the lower floor of the cottage.

Without thinking, he quickly and silently rolled from the bed, pleased and surprised to find that there was no pain coming from his stomach at all, and padded cautiously across the to the galleried landing. The voices were louder there, and one of them was definitely Crowley, but the other he couldn’t place past the point of it being male. The hairs on the back of his neck rose anyway, as if they could sense something that he himself wasn’t quite ready for. He stole on, his bare feet finding all the spots on the stairs that wouldn’t creak, his breath held fast in his chest, his ears straining for the slightest of sounds.

The door to the main living area of the cottage was slightly ajar and Aziraphale cautiously approached, eye on that gap, heart hammering in his chest as the voices on the other side droned on. Then, he was close enough to see and he leaned in, glad he’d stopped breathing as, otherwise, he knew he’d have been unable to stop a horrified gasp from escaping him.

Their comfortable and beautiful living room had gone, replaced instead by a wide, white room, sterile and barren, cold, with the lurchingly familiar smell of ozone that rocketed his fear into overdrive. He leaned in a little and there, yes, of course, what did he expect, there was Crowley, on his knees on the floor, his hands on his head, bloodied and bruised all over again, his wings out, drooping and dripping blood, flashes of white bone ghastly in the harsh light and, “Aziraphale!” Gabriel, that bastard, standing there and grinning like there was no tomorrow.

“Leave him alone,” it wasn’t much, but Aziraphale’s body swam with so much fear and anger, it was a miracle that he was able to get any words out at all.

Gabriel laughed again though and gestured lazily in the air, miracling up a double-edged axe, the double-edged axe, still streaked in Aziraphale’s own blood, dripping it onto the cowed and shaking Crowley. “No can do, I’m afraid. We’ve been waiting for you, you see. Waiting for you to come and watch me do this.”

He swung the axe and Aziraphale started forward at a run, watching in horror as it arced gracefully through the air, watching the insane smile blossom on Gabriel’s face, watching Crowley as he knelt and shook and waited for his end and then, oh, Almighty Lord, he was too late. Gabriel stepped to one side, twirling the axe theatrically through the air, angling it down and across and Crowley barely made a sound as it simply sliced him open, right across his torso, almost cleaving him in two as he collapsed in a silent, bloody heap on the floor.

Gabriel’s laughter bounced off every surface in the room as Aziraphale got to him, his red mist of anger eclipsing all else as he simply pounded him, fists, feet, knees, head, anything he could use to inflict pain on that bastard Archangel, he did, just pounding and pounding and pounding as he screamed for his mate, his partner, his very soul, feeling himself collapsing like a spent star, no reason to exist anymore.

Not without Crowley, oh… Crowley…

“Aziraphale!”

But that wasn’t Gabriel, that wasn’t his nemesis calling his name.

“Angel, please!”
A trick, surely a trick?

“Angel, it’s okay, it’s okay, I’ve got you, I’ve got you… It’s okay…”

Suddenly the laughter was gone. The white was gone. The room was gone. As was Gabriel and all the blood and Crowley… oh, but Crowley was still there, and it was his voice soothing Aziraphale from his despair and – they were in the bedroom still and it was dark and quiet, and his belly was on fire and, “Your wings!” he gasped through his absolute panic, “Oh, Crowley! Your wings!”

“Are fine,” for the first time, Aziraphale registered that he was being held against Crowley’s chest by a strong pair of arms. He’d been desperately trying to push away, but now he held on, great fistfuls of black t-shirt allowing him to shove his face into all that strength, all that promise of security, everything he’d relied on without even really knowing it, for so many blind years. Even with his eyes screwed shut and his face pressed into Crowley’s flat stomach, he could tell that Crowley’s wings had manifested around them, shutting out the world, protecting them, caressing them.

“Gabriel…” he muttered, knowing he was crying now, silent tears that were soaking into Crowley’s t-shirt.

“Isn’t here,” a gentle hand was stroking up and down his back. “Never been here. He can’t hurt us anymore.”

“He killed you,” a barely contained sob burst forth and Crowley’s arms just tightened around him.

“He didn’t. I’m here, I’m always here. It was just a dream, angel, just a dream, a nightmare, I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

A nightmare? Oh. Aziraphale had never had a nightmare before, never had a dream before. But Crowley had. Oh, poor Crowley, was that what it was like for him? Every night? His absolute worst memories and deepest fears all scrambled together into something so dreadfully realistic? His heart broke, and his sobs overtook him, but Crowley simply held him and stroked him and soothed him back into sleep.

It was still dark when the terror returned, Hastur this time, with Aziraphale’s own sword and threatening to take Crowley’s head. This time his sub-conscious was a little wiser, and shocked him, gasping, awake before the Duke had managed to get within striking distance of them both. Instantly, there were hands on his arms, soothing him as before, Crowley’s low voice, reassuring him, promising him his safety. He was trying not to hyper-ventilate, halting breaths in the face of staring his panic down, his own hands grabbing at the strong arms that reached for him, feeling the iciness of Crowley’s skin in the depths of another cold night.

“You’re freezing,” Aziraphale stuttered through the lingering tendrils of fear.

“I’m okay.”

“Come under the covers,” he muttered, pulling the duvet back and hissing in a breath as the cold air rushed over his wound, then freezing, mortified, remembering all their awfulness from the days before Hastur made his move and suddenly terrified that Crowley would get up and run from him again.

There was an awful moment of stillness, Crowley’s face lost to him in the pitch dark of the room then, the smallest of sighs before, “Hang on.” The bed shifted as Crowley got up and Aziraphale’s
heart stuttered in fear but then he was back, sliding in under the duvet, still dressed in his jeans and the t-shirt Aziraphale had sobbed all over, his hands and feet blocks of ice in the cosy nest. He then shifted a little closer, met Aziraphale’s reaching hands and allowed the angel to sidle up to him, arms around each other, Aziraphale’s head on his shoulder.

“Okay?” he asked, his voice so close, so perfect.

“Hmmm-mmm,” Aziraphale replied, asleep again before the minute was out.
The next time he awoke, it was light once more. Strips of bright sunlight edging their way in around the curtains’ peripheries. The room was still and silent, and Crowley was still sleeping at his side, turned to face him as Aziraphale mirrored his position, each of their four hands laid against the other somewhere, Crowley’s two points of heat, one curled against his chest, right over his heart, the other splayed across his ribs.

Aziraphale stared at him as he slept, stared at him and wondered how they were still here, how they were still alive – how they were still together. And really what was there to be frightened of anymore? They’d faced down Hastur and Michael together, Gabriel was no longer a threat, it seemed that the only hurt they could suffer now would come straight from the other. Ridiculous.

Imagine if Aziraphale had left the other day. Imagine that he’d gone back to London and left Crowley all alone here when Hastur and his lynching party arrived… Sickness swirled within him. Would he have lost him that way? Because of Aziraphale’s cowardice and stubbornness? His unwillingness to persevere? Lost him before he’d really had the chance to find him? It seemed ridiculous.

Yours, Crowley had told him as Aziraphale drifted away from that muddy field, I was always just yours.

Was he? Really? For all that time? Aziraphale’s despite it all?

Crowley stirred then, his lashes fluttering against his cheeks, and his eyes opened, staring blankly at Aziraphale for just a moment before widening slightly, and Aziraphale could just about hear him trying to convince himself not to flee, could feel the sudden tension thrumming through him by the fingers flexing slightly against Aziraphale’s ribs. That would not do, he decided, no, not at all, not when he should still be so deliciously warm and cosy and relaxed.

Aziraphale didn’t let himself pause, didn’t let himself think. With a slight shift in position, he brought his hand up and out from the duvet, placing it softly on Crowley’s, now stricken, face and leaned in a little, ignoring the ache in his belly as he made sure they were looking directly into each other’s eyes.

“Crowley,” goodness, why did his voice shake so desperately? “My dearest one,” a trembling smile
washed out of him, “I love you so very, very much.”

Time stopped.

Breathing stopped.

Hearts stopped.

In all of their long and complex histories together, no one single moment had ever been this important.

Aziraphale waited.

Trusted.

Ruthlessly crushed the fears that were threatening to swallow him.

And then, “Angel,” Crowley replied in a whisper that was awed and terrified and propitious all in one go, “I’m yours,” he shrugged slightly. “Always been yours. That’s all there’s ever been, really.”

And then Aziraphale smiled as his heart and lungs and everything all bubbled back into life. “And I’m yours, darling, I’m so sorry it’s taken me so long, but I’m here now. And I’m yours. And I love you. And I know it won’t be easy, but we can do this, we can make each other happy.”

Crowley nodded, and his instant trust pulled a twinge from Aziraphale’s heart, but then he frowned a little, shifting his eye contact away and Aziraphale was never going to stand for letting that go, not after all the pain they’d already suffered from silence and miscommunication. “What?” he whispered, “Please tell me, darling.”

Maybe it was the inadvertent endearment that reached Crowley, but the hand on Aziraphale’s ribs twitched slightly and he swallowed, before, eyes firmly fixed on the pillow beneath Aziraphale’s head, he made his admission. “If you were mine,” Aziraphale held back on insisting that yes, he was. “Then, I don’t know that I’d ever survive having to give you up again.”
Aziraphale pressed his hand a little closer to Crowley’s cheek, “You’ll never have to give me up.”

“Best not promise anything you can’t deliver.”

“But Crowley, darling, I can deliver,” and he was sure, now, that he could, surer than he had ever been of anything in his entire existence. “Our side, Crowley, officially. Now I’ve finally got you, I’m not giving up on you, on us, not ever.”

Crowley looked up at him then, weighing and then simply nodded. “Okay,” and it was that easy. Six thousand years of motion, not always in the right direction, had brought them here, to this single point in a bed together with declarations made and Aziraphale staring at Crowley’s lips and wondering…

“May I kiss you?”

Crowley’s eyes widened but his answer was a simple lean forward, which Aziraphale mirrored, closing his eyes as he edged in, his heart thundering in his chest and, oh… For how long had he thought about Crowley’s lips? For how long had he refused to admit to himself that he’d thought about Crowley’s lips? About how they might feel, about how incredible it would be to touch them with his own. Taste them. Have all of that essence which was uniquely Crowley just there – his – at long last.

In the spectrum of kisses Aziraphale had ever shared, it was certainly chaste. Crowley was statuesque, his lips warm and soft but immobile and for a long time that was more than enough, but after the thrill of finally getting to that point in their relationship, Aziraphale started to want more, to wonder more, to crave more.

He pressed a little more firmly, dared to move his lips, opening slightly, then pushing back in, repeating and just letting the very tip of his tongue peek out and trail across Crowley’s bottom lip. There was no response. Aziraphale’s hand was still cupping Crowley’s face and his thumb came to life, ever so gently stroking at the soft skin under an eye, his lips increasing the pressure a tiny bit more and just as he was starting to feel that he was overstepping into something that Crowley absolutely did not want, there was a noise, a deep keening noise of unmistakable need and Crowley surged forward, his own mouth mirroring Aziraphale’s perfectly, the feel of his tongue surging forward to claim the Aziraphale’s own, enough to send a wash of lust straight to his belly.

He pressed in more tightly still, allowing the hand on Crowley’s cheek to slide into his beautiful
hair, pulling them even closer together, feeling Crowley’s hand on his ribs desperately tighten, the one on his chest splay out over his heart, no doubt feeling its thunderous hammering, he pressed in further, desperate for more, needing everything from Crowley and then-

“Ah!” Aziraphale wrenched himself back and stiffened, the hand in Crowley’s hair tightening spasmodically, his breath catching in his throat as his belly lit with flame once more.

Instantly, Crowley was there, like he always was, taking hold of his shoulders, turning him onto his back, gently leaning him into the pillows, his voice an avalanche of fear, “Oh, angel, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, are you alright? I’m sorry, here, here.”

Cool hands touched and stroked, a balm to Aziraphale’s pain, but the tide of anxiety was almost more than he could stand. The tendrils of pain were retreating as Aziraphale lay flat and still, but Crowley… Crowley’s upset was a pain all on its own. Aziraphale reached out a shaking hand, pleased beyond belief when he felt long fingers curling around his own, ‘It’s okay,’ he tried to project straight into Crowley’s mind, ‘It’s okay, you didn’t hurt me, I’m fine.’

“I’m fine,” eventually, enough ease returned to allow him to speak aloud the mantra of his thoughts and even squeeze the fingers wrapped around his own, despite the fact that he’d been left shaken and drenched in a cold sweat. He breathed through the silence that enveloped them, and then steeled himself and opened his eyes to find Crowley hovering over him, the worry in his expression impossible to hide, his lips wonderfully kiss reddened.

Aziraphale forced out a smile and lifted the hand not wrapped in Crowley’s up towards his cheek again, after all, he had really quite liked having it there. “This wasn’t your fault,” he answered tiredly. “A hell-forged blade,” he shook his head in wonder, “You saved me, don’t forget.”

Delightfully, Crowley flushed and, for a moment, leaned into Aziraphale’s hand just a little, like a touch-starved cat and the movement lit the fires of lust in the angel’s belly once more.

“Come here,” he whispered and tried to use the hand on Crowley’s cheek to draw him downwards, let them continue on with that rather wonderful kissing they’d been enjoying.

To his consternation, however, Crowley pulled back again, his posture tense, even as he lifted Aziraphale’s hand from his cheek and pressed a firm kiss to its centre. “Maybe we’re being a little ambitious for the circumstances,” he offered quietly.
Aziraphale frowned and wished he was confident which ‘circumstance’ Crowley was referring to.

They slid into silence, one not quite as comfortable as before, and it was no surprise when Crowley was the one who shifted first.

“You want to go back to sleep?”

“No,” disappointment was making Aziraphale petulant. “I’ve only just woken up.”

He was sure that Crowley sighed at that, but he was still holding onto both of Aziraphale’s hands, so there was that. “Would you like to read, then?” he offered. “I can get you some books. Or breakfast? There are some English muffins downstairs, if you like.”

But Aziraphale wanted to kiss. And more. He wanted to lie back down with him and hold him and touch him and love him. After what they’d just said… it was deserved, wasn’t it? It was needed. He didn’t want to do any of those other things, but then… maybe they should wait until Aziraphale was fully recovered, if that had even been what he’d meant. Aziraphale’s mind was wide awake, but his corporation was drained of energy, but felt like it was over-run with ants, and there was the stubborn darkly squirming presence of lust deep in his gut; he didn’t know what he wanted to do, what he could do to make any of it better.

He shrugged, mulishly, and Crowley smiled, kissing the palm of the hand again before lying both flat on the duvet. “I’ll read to you,” he announced, twisting around and shuffling himself back up the bed, his back against the head board and arranging the duvet neatly over them both. Then, he leaned over and reached into the drawers at the side of the bed where he kept the limited selection of books that had moved him over the years.

Aziraphale was stunned into silence, and even if he had been able to think of something to voice, he doubted he would have been able to get a single word out due to the sudden tightness in his chest. Instead, he shifted his hand from where Crowley had placed it, settling it gently onto the duvet right above Crowley’s thigh, and closed his eyes as Crowley began.

“Marseilles, The Arrival. On the 24th of February, 1810, the look-out at Notre-Dame de la Garde signalled the three-master…”

A hand snaked into his hair then, cautious and gentle, and as he listened to the lilting cadence of Crowley’s tones, he lay still, seeped in fatigue, and tried not to sob at the frustrating perfection of
“You don’t have to do this, angel, I told you, I’ll just bring it upstairs again.”

Crowley was standing at the side of the bed, the deep indigo of twilight behind him, and Aziraphale was surprised to see that he wasn’t wringing his hands, honestly, his voice was that fretful. Aziraphale had to concentrate hard to make sure that he didn’t roll his eyes. “Crowley, I am feeling so much better already,” and he was, he was getting more movement hour by hour and the pain had already shifted from the searing agony of the previous morning to little more than a sharp tug. “I’m sure I’m more than capable of walking downstairs for a meal!”

Crowley was not going to be easily convinced, however, his brows were drawn, his entire posture was rigid – it was almost like he wanted Aziraphale to stay a bed-ridden invalid. Flushing from his uncharitable thoughts, Aziraphale shifted upwards, all under his own steam, and he only had to concentrate on biting back the tiniest of pained grunts. “See?” he stared at Crowley, challenge in his expression.

With a sigh, Crowley capitulated as Aziraphale had always know he would. He took a step forward, his expression carefully closed off and leaned down to pull back the duvet, “Only if I help you,” he muttered – Aziraphale had wanted nothing more. Between them, they swung Aziraphale’s legs around so that his bare feet were hovering slightly above the fluffy rug at the side of the bed and, kneeling, Crowley gently eased the Clan Douglas tartan slippers into place. Rising to his feet, he plucked an ancient woollen dressing gown from the bottom of the bed and swung it around Aziraphale’s shoulders, encouraging his arms into it as one might a very young child.

“Crowley,” Aziraphale rolled his eyes even as he raised an arm to help, “I don’t need this, I-”

“It’s cold,” Crowley bit. “You wear it, or you stay in bed.”

Wisely, Aziraphale fell silent.

Once the belt was tightened to Crowley’s satisfaction, he stepped back and held out both of his hands, his expression drawn and tense. “You let me do the work, right?” he instructed. “You strain your stomach muscles too much and the damn wound might open again, do you understand that?”
Aziraphale nodded. He understood, but he didn’t agree, it was his stomach and he could feel the excellent job that Crowley had done on him.

“On three, then. Ready?”

Aziraphale nodded.

“One, two, three.”

They worked together as they had in so many ways before, Crowley smoothly taking the angel’s weight, drawing him upright in one motion until they were standing at the side of the bed together, toe to toe, nose to nose and Aziraphale felt all that lust squirm back into life. They didn’t move, Crowley seemed as much under a spell as Aziraphale, their eyes were locked. Crowley’s few extra inches of height required Aziraphale to tip his head back slightly in order to maintain eye contact and that raised his lips as well, pushed them closer to Crowley’s, made it easy for him just to lean in, just to stretch up a little, just to…

Their second kiss began very much like the first. As their lips met, Aziraphale could possibly compare it to kissing a statue; Crowley was motionless under his touch, their hands linked, the pressure around Aziraphale’s fingers increasing. Aziraphale pushed closer, remembering from before how Crowley had caved, how he’d made that incredible sound of desire and surged into his angel, flooding him with love and care and longing – Aziraphale wanted that again.

He pressed in, traced Crowley’s lips with his tongue, felt an almost-shiver come from him, knew that the surrender was coming and then- everything shifted, and he was suddenly swaying slightly on his own on the carpet, his hands empty and cold, Crowley a good two feet back from him, eyes wide and almost panicked and the strangest crackling energy flowing around them.

They stared.

Aziraphale swallowed.

Crowley twitched, almost as if he was going to run from the room, but then he deflated and ran a hand over his face, letting out a long sigh before meeting Aziraphale’s wide eyes once more. “Dinner?” he offered quietly, reaching out a hand.
Considering the awkward scene from the bedroom, dinner was a surprisingly relaxed affair. It was properly dark by the time that they sat down at the little bistro table, Aziraphale unable to stop his eyes from constantly drifting out to the black square of window, knowing the field that lay beyond, wondering if the mud was still stained with his blood…

“Hey,” Crowley’s hand had been warm on his arm, his voice low and intimate, and Aziraphale had been unable to stop himself being drawn back into the warmth and the light. “You’re alright now,” he smiled, the soft and genuine one that Aziraphale loved the most, “It’s all done with.”

Aziraphale smiled a grateful smile in return, “I know.”

After that, they’d eaten. Soup again, mulligatawny this time, with soft, floury buns, and a dish of sun-dried tomatoes, mozzarella balls and tiny, sharp olives. There had been wine to drink, and a plate of slightly warm Portuguese custard tarts

“Maggie?” Aziraphale asked, gesturing to their meal and, popping a quarter of a custard tart into his mouth, Crowley nodded.

“As soon as you feel up to it, we’re going to have to go around and see her. Apart from the fact we owe her a fortune, she’s convinced you’re at death’s door, here.”

She wasn’t wrong. Aziraphale couldn’t bring himself to voice the words out loud.

Crowley rose to start clearing the left overs away, Aziraphale’s appetite was recovering, not quite up to full capacity yet, but still, they had polished off most of the spread Crowley had pulled together for them.

“What do you want to do now, then?” Crowley was emptying a dishwasher that had only had to have its door closed for all of the dishes to become spotlessly clean, “Are you tired? Do you want to go straight up?”
Starring into his half full wine glass, Aziraphale considered. “Not really,” he admitted. He swirled the liquid around a little and considered. The rules of this new phase of their relationship were virtually unknown still, and he was wary of unsettling their very delicate balance. “Did I notice that you’d lit the stove? In the snug?” From that very first day he’d seen it, in that late morning heat of August sunshine, Aziraphale had known that it would be a delightful place to spend cosy winter evenings. “We’ve never sat in there before,” and they hadn’t, and Aziraphale wasn’t sure why.

Crowley’s reaction was encouraging though, he smiled and snagged another bottle of red from the rack, along with his own empty glass, and reached a hand out to help Aziraphale up from his seat, “Sounds great.”

The snug was every bit as cosy as Aziraphale had thought it might be. The fire was crackling away in the stove, and, as they entered, Crowley lit candles all along the window sill and the mantelpiece with a click of his fingers. Aziraphale shuffled over to the two seater settee and leaned back with some degree of relief as his wound was starting to ache with all the sitting upright he’d been doing, and smiled in thanks as Crowley pushed the footstool over to him, helping him to lift his legs onto it, before topping up both their glasses, and, to Aziraphale’s immense relief, slotting himself in the empty space alongside Aziraphale on the sofa.

They let out a simultaneous sigh of contentment, which made Aziraphale giggle, and, since they were both holding their glasses in the hands that were resting on the arms of the settee, he took a breath and reached out, slotting their fingers together and smiling inanely as he felt Crowley’s hand tighten on his in what could only have been a gesture of affection.

“Music?” Crowley asked him, softly, and Aziraphale hummed as he thought.

“That would be lovely, but I have no real preference, dearest, whatever you like is fine by me.”

Balancing his wine on the arm of the settee, Crowley pulled out his phone and started tapping away, slipping it back into his pocket as the first unmistakable strains of Carmina Burana drifted out, seemingly, from all around them.

Aziraphale sighed again and wiggled his toes at the glowing stove; this is what they had defied heaven and hell for, this is what they had done their best to save the world for, this was what he had confronted thirty demons on his own for… This chance for simple contentment, for simple life, and it had been worth it, every single second of it all.

He allowed his thoughts to drift then, back to a time, decades before, when he and Crowley had seen Carmina Burana in Berlin. It had been 1939, Crowley had been sleeping, but had been
forcibly woken so that he could go and contribute to the foment that the Nazis were already cultivating very well on their own. Aziraphale had known how that would wound him, had seen precious little of him since their argument over the holy water, and so had travelled to Berlin himself, simply to see how he was doing, see if he could lift his spirits at all. He supposed it had helped, they’d certainly had a very pleasant evening at the opera but then, when Crowley had asked him, over after-show drinks, why he’d come out all of that way, did Aziraphale tell him the truth? Tell him it was because he cared about him, was worried about him? No, of course he hadn’t. Instead, he had rolled out the usual stories of keeping him in check, thwarting his wiles, making sure that he wasn’t pushing Hitler and the Nazis too far down the path of repugnance.

It hadn’t gone well.

Crowley’s face had morphed through hurt and into fury in a matter of seconds. They’d argued – briefly – and Crowley had stormed out – quickly – only to re-surface in London scant years later, just to save Aziraphale, and his books, from a messy discorporation in a church.

Aziraphale closed his eyes; the pain they had lived through from their own hands, no, from Aziraphale’s hand, and from their unwillingness – inability? – to ever express the truth of how they were feeling… How dreadful and pointless had it all been? And what of now? He thought back to their argument in the house the day that Aziraphale flooded the gardens, the things that were said, the truths that were spat out in hurt and anger. Where were they now? Those truths? Dead and buried and no danger to them anymore, or lurking, like the very worst demons, ready to rise up and strike them down the second they felt the opportunity arise?

Aziraphale wasn’t always a coward, he’d proved that to himself just five days ago in a cold and muddy field, and he needed this to work, they needed this to work, desperately so.

He took a long swallow of wine and then, unconsciously holding Crowley’s fingers even more tightly in his own, he took a deep breath, keeping his eyes fixed on the stove even as he felt Crowley turn his gentle, amber eyes on him. “My dear,” his heart was thumping hard in his chest. “I believe there are things that we need to talk about. To clear away. It might not be easy, but, well, if not, I fear that they will return to hurt us in the future.”

Crowley didn’t answer. Yet again, however, he didn’t make a break for it, he simply turned his gaze back onto the flames and squeezed Aziraphale’s fingers encouragingly.

“I know that I have made mistakes with you, many mistakes that I fully intend addressing, but I have also been very much in the dark about how you have felt at any point of our rather long and complex relationship. I’m absolutely not blaming you, please don’t feel that I am, but, as we go on, I would very much appreciate you telling me how you’re feeling about everything, what your emotions are. I’m really not that good at gauging emotion, you see, and I’d really appreciate your
There was nothing but silence for a minute as Crowley thought, considered, and then, “I don’t think you’ve ever asked me before.”

Aziraphale blinked, “Pardon me?”

“How I was feeling,” Crowley was talking to the stove. “You’ve never really asked.”

“Would you have told me if I had?”

“Probably not.”

“No,” Aziraphale admitted, “I don’t suppose I did, though. I apologise for that, too, dear boy.”

“And I never asked you.”

“Something to think about all around then, I suppose.”

This time, Crowley didn’t reply.

Aziraphale took another breath, squeezed Crowley’s fingers gently, and then started again, “My dear… I am also so very sorry that I flooded your garden. It was cruel and crass and ever so badly misjudged. I just hope that you can see, implausible as it may seem, that I didn’t do it out of malice, not at all.”

The silence stretched out for long minutes. Side by side, hand in hand, their eyes fixed on the neutrality of the stove, they waited and tried so very hard to stay afloat as they traversed these white-waters.

“I know,” Crowley’s voice was audibly strained. “You don’t have to apologise for that.”
“But I do!” Aziraphale risked a sideways glance and saw Crowley gulping down almost half of his glass of wine in one. “It’s bad enough that all of that hurt us once, I can’t let it come back and do it again.”

No reply.

Aziraphale pushed on, though, ticking at the list in his head. “The candles in the library as well,” his own eyes slid to the candles Crowley had lit on the mantelpiece. “I would never try to distress you in that way, my dear, in any way.”

“I know.”

“And I’m also sorry, so sorry,” Aziraphale could feel the heat of mortification creeping across his cheeks. “that I have appeared to torment you, at any time in our joint history,” his throat closed at that and he stuttered to a halt, relieved when Crowley jumped into the empty space.

“Urgh… angel,” he dropped Aziraphale’s hand and deposited the wine glass back onto the arm of the settee so that he could rub at his face with both hands, “It’s not that… it wasn’t that… I just… urgh…”

“I know, my dear,” Aziraphale reached out and rubbed his shoulder, gently, “I know, but… well, you must have felt that way, sometimes, a little at least, to say such a thing? And it’s alright you know, because the more I understand, well, the more that I can make sure that I never do such a thing again. You see?”

Crowley’s head slid into his hands and he slumped forward, elbows on knees. Aziraphale reached his hand out again and placed it on his back, still and steady, not pushing, not invading any personal space, just waiting, just supporting.

“It’s not all that simple you know, angel,” Crowley was talking to his feet, “At first it was all very straight forward. We were adversaries, we thwarted each other, obstructed each other, even discorporated each other on occasion.”

Aziraphale cringed.

“But then we entered the Accomplice Phase and things started to get a little more… complicated.
After that, I don’t know, I’d felt that we were into the Friends Phase, but still there was all the ‘demon’ shit going on—"

“I never meant anything by that.”

“I know, I know, angel, and I was okay with it, I suppose. I’d made peace with it, which is what made the next phase all the harder.”

Aziraphale tensed, “The next phase?”

“The Cottage Phase.”

Aziraphale absently rubbed a circle into Crowley’s back, “I don’t understand, dearest.”

Sighing, Crowley scratched through the short hairs at the nape of his neck. “When I asked you to move in with me here, I’d already resigned myself to the fact that we’d only ever be friends.”

Aziraphale pressed a little harder.

“And I was… content… with that. More than content, really. Travelling around the Americas, I’d really missed you.”

“And I, you, my dear.”

“So, I was happy for us to be friends, nothing more and then… well…”

Aziraphale could taste his discomfort.

“I started getting all these signals from you that I just didn’t understand.”

“Signals?”
“Hints. Touches,” he winced as Aziraphale removed his hand and twisted around in his seat, his eyes wide and worried. “Please don’t, Aziraphale,” he glanced at the hand that had been resting so recently on his back. “You’ve asked me to tell you how I’m feeling and I’m telling you. Please don’t punish me.”

Aziraphale balked, “Punish you? Oh, my dear, never! I’m so sorry,” he replaced his hand and rubbed his thumb up and down jutting vertebrae. “I was just so shocked at your words, I never thought how my actions may be interpreted. Please, dearest, please continue.”

Crowley sighed and twisted back to face the stove. “I didn’t get anything from you that made me feel you were genuinely interested in anything I had to offer you.”

A sharp pain jumped into life in Aziraphale’s chest.

“But you were touching me and invading my space.”

Aziraphale felt all the blood drain from his face in horror.

“And – I just couldn’t handle it. I could never… deal… with something physical with you… if that was all it ever was. I’m just not… that’s not the way I do things…” he tailed off, miserable and dejected and Aziraphale wondered if this had actually been such a good idea after all.

“Crowley,” his voice was choked, “I am so, so very sorry.”

Crowley just shrugged his shoulders and stared at his feet.

“I was trying to show you how much I loved you…”

That got a response, Crowley’s head snapped around, fast as a viper and he stared at Aziraphale, uncomprehending. “You couldn’t have just, I don’t know, told me?”

Aziraphale flushed, “Well, I did. Eventually. I was just so worried that it would be too much and
“So instead you thought that acting like some handsy old git from Grindr would be better?”

Trying not to wonder what experience Crowley actually had of Grindr, Aziraphale could only shake his head, “I’m sorry,” he offered. “I never meant to make you feel uncomfortable in my presence.”

Crowley sighed, yet again, and, much to Aziraphale’s delighted surprise, leaned back from the fire, sliding his arms around the angel’s chest and – ever so carefully – laying his head against the part of his pyjamas that hid his scar, kissing gently. “It’s done,” he whispered as Aziraphale’s fingers slid into his hair, “don’t dwell on it.”

Aziraphale swallowed and closed his eyes, his emotions swimming so close to the surface since his run-in with Hastur. “And the things I said to you about wanting to be miserable...”

Crowley kissed him again.

“I never meant any of that, dearest, not at all.”

This time, Crowley drew back, his eyes wide and visibly anxious and Aziraphale realised that they had probably both faced enough truths for this night. “Let’s go up,” he whispered. “A good night’s sleep and you’ll be almost good as new tomorrow.”

Aziraphale nodded. All he wanted to do right now was hold Crowley, hold him and be held in return, all through the night. They could continue putting right their past wrongs another day.

After all, they now had all the time in the world.

Chapter End Notes

So, relatively long chapter there - I felt we needed it after all the cliff hangers of last week! Maybe three chapters to go now, some loose ends to tidy up and maybe a few more rocks to clamber over.
I might not get chance to update until the weekend, though, as I am away with work for a few days. :)
Aziraphale had never been one for sleeping, but the effects of the hell-forged blade were such that he was more than happy to climb into bed alongside Crowley that night. Crowley had always been keen on sleep, but following the events of the last few weeks, it seemed to Aziraphale that, he too, seemed permanently exhausted.

Whilst Aziraphale gingerly changed into a fresh set of pyjamas in the dressing room, Crowley, as was his custom, showered and came into the bedroom dressed in long lounge pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt; Aziraphale was not so fatigued not to feel an implied slight. He climbed into bed first though, immediately shifting towards the centre and looking at Aziraphale with what could certainly have been an expectant air about him. Aziraphale was thrilled and quickly slid in to meet him, shuffling about until he ended up on his back with Crowley pillowed on his shoulder, their arms around the other, and he was most pleased with this arrangement. He dropped a kiss onto Crowley’s head, with a whispered, “I love you,” received a silent kiss to his chest in return, and after that they both fell, rather quickly, into sleep.

Aziraphale woke first, Crowley still slumbering on his shoulder and passed a very pleasant hour just enjoying the peace and inhaling Crowley’s scent, waiting excitedly for the new day to begin in earnest.

It was a little after eight when Crowley finally stirred, waking up slowly, seemingly content with his position and fully aware that Aziraphale was awake before him.

“Mornin’ angel…” his sleep-roughened voice made Aziraphale’s insides squirm deliciously and he smiled as he returned the greeting.

“Good morning, my dear. How did you sleep?” he felt he knew the answer, but it never hurt to make sure, he himself had had a most refreshing night, with none of the unpleasant thoughts and visions which had plagued him previously.

“Yeah, good.” He felt Crowley stretch against him, long and lithe like the snake he was. “You?”

“Splendidly,” Aziraphale found that he could not keep the smile off his face. “I believe it must have been the company I was keeping.”
Crowley huffed a little laugh and pushed himself up onto an elbow, turning to run his sleep-doused eyes over every part of Aziraphale he could see. “How’s the stomach?”

Holding eye contact, Aziraphale tested himself out, twisting slightly from side to side, tensing his abdomen then relaxing it, before sliding his hands under the duvet and pressing slightly, right over the sight of his scar. “Barely a twinge!” he announced delightedly, thrilled with the speed of his healing. “What a difference a day makes!” He’d meant his injury, of course he meant his injury, but there were other things that had changed in that day, and the tiny smile on Crowley’s face, combined with the way his cheeks flushed just a tad, made him think that he wasn’t the only one who had thought that.

“I’m glad,” Crowley pressed up into a sitting position. “Breakfast in bed?”

“Oh no,” reaching out, he folded his fingers around Crowley’s. “How about I come down stairs and we make something together? I’d like that.”

Crowley narrowed his eyes, “How about you come down stairs and sit at the table watching whilst I make us something?”

Aziraphale could still taste the edges of trauma in the air, from both of them, and as much as he felt that Crowley was molly-coddling him, he was also respectful of everything he’d been through, alone, since finding Aziraphale on his knees before a ravening horde of demons in a muddy field. As such, he acquiesced, nodding in promise whilst adding, “Of course, my dear. Who am I to stop you waiting on me hand and foot?”

He received an eye roll for that, of course he did, but what had he expected? And then Crowley was sliding out of bed and coming around to help Aziraphale up.

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Breakfast was a slow and lazy affair at the little table in the kitchen. The frost had gone, and, whilst the day started damp, it had cleared away to a passable attempt at November sunshine, certainly more cloud than clear sky, but a delightful hint of brightness.

The food had been delicious, lightly toasted muffins, soft boiled eggs with carefully cut soldiers, a cold salad of ham and various melons, it was hardly *cordon-bleu* cooking, but Aziraphale had
never known Crowley to prepare food at all, he himself certainly didn’t, so it was another revelation. Once they’d eaten their fill, they retired to the main living area with a teapot and a coffee pot and the promise of films to watch. Crowley had always been able to make any film he fancied watching appear instantly on his screen and it seemed that this newest model of television would be no different.

“What do you fancy watching, angel?” Aziraphale was getting himself comfortable at one end of the leather sofa, making sure that there was plenty of room for Crowley to join him and shrugged, a little helplessly.

“I never keep up with modern cinema, my dear, you know that. I’m more than happy for you to choose whatever you would like to watch.”

“It doesn’t have to be modern,” there was still no sign of Crowley’s glasses, Aziraphale hadn’t seen them once since he’d woken up which was a wonderful development. “What do you fancy? Any film you like? From any time.”

Aziraphale thought. He’d never really been one for films, always preferring a book and never really finding that adaptations sat well with him, but there had been a few, over the years. He thought back and then smiled, “Breakfast at Tiffany’s?” he offered. He did remember that one. He even remembered that he and Crowley had seen it together in November 1961, in a beautiful Arc Deco picture house in York of all places, although he can’t quite remember what they were doing there at the time.

Crowley didn’t answer, but he did turn the television so that it was angled better towards them and withdrew to slide onto the sofa at Aziraphale’s side. As the film slowly meandered into being, they shifted and shuffled until they were settled, Aziraphale sitting up against the arm rest, Crowley sprawled between him and the back of the cushions, their feet tangled together, Crowley’s head on Aziraphale’s chest once more, and Aziraphale’s arms around him. They must have been twenty minutes into the plot before Aziraphale could tone down the shimmering buzz of happiness inside him enough to actually concentrate on what was happening on-screen.

On reflection, it may not have been the wisest choice for their first movie, post-mutual-admission. Firstly, parts of it echoed their own painful dance a little too much. Secondly, Aziraphale’s heightened emotions meant that he found himself a little choked up at the end, mainly over the possible fate of the poor cat, which was, quite frankly, embarrassing.

Crowley made no reference to it, though. Not verbally at any rate. He simple lifted himself up out of the gap he’d slithered into and pressed a quick kiss to Aziraphale’s cheek, no doubt feeling the trace of tears there, before withdrawing to the kitchen with a quick promise of, “I’ll make us a drink,” warming Aziraphale’s heart. By the time he returned with a black coffee and a mug of hot
chocolate piled high with tiny pink and white marshmallows, Aziraphale had pulled himself together once more and they sat, shoulder to shoulder this time, as Crowley started the next film off.

‘Love Actually’, was a new one as far as Aziraphale was concerned, and it took him a little while to warm up to the ensemble style, but once he had, he was enraptured, watching the entire thing in silence, leaned up close to each other, their fingers interlaced. Only at the very end, when he had turned to voice his enthusiasm for the offering, did he notice that Crowley had angled himself in such a way that he could watch Aziraphale throughout, rather than the actual film.

They returned to the kitchen then, and pâté and toast, followed by the last of the Portuguese tarts. They talked briefly of heading out somewhere, a drive, the garden centre, the beach maybe, but all of the suggestions actually made Aziraphale anxious; he wasn't ready, yet, to venture out into the world with Crowley. This was their new thing, so wonderful and precious and private. He knew that one day he'd like nothing more than strolling through the herbaceous borders section of the garden centre with Crowley's hand proudly in his, but for the moment, he couldn't stand the thought of sharing in even the vaguest of senses. Maybe Crowley felt like that too, or maybe he was just happy to do whatever made Aziraphale happy as, a little after two in the afternoon, they found themselves back in bed once more, Aziraphale with his head on Crowley's belly, Crowley sat up against the head board, The Count of Monte Cristo in his hand once more.

It hadn’t been a surprise to Aziraphale that Crowley read, despite his many protestations to the contrary. He was too well educated in life, had too much knowledge and too many opinions for a being that never spent time within the pages of a book. True, in latter years this could have come from the World Wide Web of Interneting, or whatever it was called, but Crowley’s knowledge pre-dated that particular invention significantly. No, Aziraphale had never been in any doubt that he read, what he had been unsure of, however, was the relationship that Crowley had with books.

In the shop he’d always been carefully dismissive, he’d never ever wilfully damage one of Aziraphale’s books, but he certainly wasn’t going to wax lyrical over the any wonderfully new first editions Aziraphale presented to him. He never read, either, not in the book shop when Aziraphale was watching, but… the angel was positive that he did so out of sight, subtly and secretly, when Aziraphale was otherwise engaged, too many books had been moved around for that not to have been happening, too many books carried Crowley’s scent long after he’d departed for the night.

So, no doubt at all that books were read, and stories absorbed, but they never discussed it, Crowley never offered his opinions on the latest blockbuster that Aziraphale had deigned to read or the latest rediscovered classic he lost himself in when he should have been getting ready for Crowley to come and collect him.

Given all of that, it was surprising to find that he had a fiction library of his own, one that contained books he’d obviously had for a long time and most importantly, it had been a feature of
his life in this cottage before Aziraphale had unpacked the rest of his possessions for him.

Now, Aziraphale wanted to know what else was in those drawers at the side of the bed. *The Count of Monte Cristo*, surprised him at first, but really, should it have? It was a story of a man wronged, ripped from his life and punished without just reason, of course Crowley would be drawn to that. Especially when the tale is intense and dramatic, rather like Crowley himself, especially when ‘the Count’ finally gets his happy ending, the optimism of which was not lost on Aziraphale at all. Knowledge of this book threw light on facets of personality that Aziraphale already understood, it was tantalising to imagine what knowledge may be gained by seeing the other titles which lay hidden from his eyes…

Of course, Aziraphale would never look, would never presume, would wait to be invited into Crowley’s private world, bit by bit, just as he was. They had the time now, after all, and it would absolutely be worth waiting for.

The afternoon wore on, light faded, but Crowley had never needed much light to see by, not since the Fall, that was. His voice worked through the hours, steady and soothing and Aziraphale, who had never had anything longer than a sonnet read aloud for him before, lapped up every glorious moment, every shifting cadence of Crowley’s words. His head stayed pillowed on a flat stomach, his fingers idly tracing the contours of his long legs, hidden as they were under the duvet, or sketching patterns on the material of his t-shirt, or skimming the gathered ridges of his waist band, back and forth, back and forth. It was a sublime way to spend an afternoon.

Finally, as night stole up on them and Aziraphale had switched on the bedside lamp – simply so that he could see Crowley as he read – they reached the final chapter, the happy ending, heavily implied at the very least.

“The eyes of both were fixed upon the spot indicated by the sailor,” Crowley read, “and on the blue line separating the sky from the Mediterranean Sea, they perceived a large white sail. “Gone,” said Morrel; “gone! Adieu, my friend—adieu, my father!”

Aziraphale studied him, entranced by the way his pupils flexed with every movement of his head, always shifting, always maximising the available light, totally adaptable, and so like Crowley himself.

He read on, ““Gone,” murmured Valentine; “adieu, my sweet Haidee—adieu, my sister!”

“‘Who can say whether we shall ever see them again?’ said Morrel with tearful eyes.
“Darling,” replied Valentine, “has not the count just told us that all human wisdom is summed up in two words?”

Aziraphale’s stomach knotted, he knew this ending now, he remembered it, he knew what was coming.

“Wait and hope.” Crowley read.

Wait and hope.

Silence.

Crowley closed the book and looked down at his lap.

Wait and hope.

You go too fast for me, Crowley.

Oh. He really had been the most appallingly dreadful friend; why had Crowley ever stood by him? Waiting and hoping as he had? Honestly, Aziraphale couldn’t imagine what he deserved less. And now? Now, he could feel the mortification rolling off Crowley, could feel the desire to bolt, to berate himself for letting Aziraphale into the secrets of his heart, even just a little bit…

“Crowley,” his voice was soft, he made sure that it was infused with everything he felt for this incredible creature who had shown him such absolute trust and he waited until Crowley, brave as ever, tore his eyes from the cover of the book and looked Aziraphale’s way, sad and resigned. Aziraphale smiled at him, feeling the tears pricking the corners of his eyes, “I love you,” and that, he was realising more and more each day, was only a tiny fraction of what he felt. “And thank you,” he reached out, took Crowley’s hand. “Thank you so much for waiting and hoping, my dear. What would I have done if you hadn’t? How would I have been able to live once I came to my senses? Once I realised what you were to me, if you hadn’t been so patient?”

“Don’t,” Crowley’s voice was jagged and soft all in one. “Please don’t, angel. I can’t stand to see you sad.”
“I’m not sad, my darling,” Aziraphale scrambled, clumsily, to his knees and shuffled closer, tugging Crowley to him, crushing him against his chest, fisting hands in his t-shirt, the realisation of how very easily his stupidity and stubbornness could have cost him everything crashing through him. “I’m not sad. How can I ever be sad again, with you near me?”

Crowley’s arms immediately came up around him, iron-like in their strength, his own fingers sunk, desperate and deep, into the old pyjama top and they just held each other. Wait and hope? Not anymore, not now.

The morning broke bright and frosty once more. As was becoming their custom, Aziraphale awoke first, enjoying the opportunity to lie in silence, Crowley sleeping on his chest this time, and just wrapping his arms around him, loving every moment of this new opportunity.

Eventually Crowley surfaced, squeezing a good morning into Aziraphale’s middle, before seeming to realise where he was laid and sliding off to the side, his eyes wide and earnest as he looked up, “How are you feeling? Did I hurt you?”

It actually took Aziraphale a moment to even remember about the wound to his stomach and Crowley’s weight on him had been nothing but delightful. He smiled and shifted down the bed, turning to lie on his side, chest to chest, and gathering up Crowley’s fingers in his own. “Not at all, my dear. I feel wonderful this morning, quite recovered,” and it was true, he hadn’t had even a twinge of pain all morning.

Crowley nodded, convinced, and they slid into silence, drinking each other in, edging a little closer until, as was probably inevitable, their lips touched once more.

This time, Crowley wasn’t statuesque, this time the hand in Aziraphale’s slid free so that it could whisper over Aziraphale’s ribs and come to rest on his waist, this time, his mouth opened straight away and his lips pressed eagerly to the other’s.

This novel eagerness lit Aziraphale on fire, inside and out. His hands reached for Crowley and pressed them even more closely together as they kissed, one sliding down to rest on the small of his back where he tugged him closer still, feeling the tingling warmth in his cock, daring to push his hips forward just the tiniest bit, just to gain the very first edge of friction, just as his tongue slid out a little, meeting Crowley’s, swallowing the resulting moan of desire as Crowley pressed closer
There was a shift in the air and suddenly Crowley had gone, from his arms, from the bed, and, when Aziraphale blinked, bewilderedly, across the room, feeling that weird crackling around them again, he realised that Crowley had actually miracled his way away from Aziraphale. Again. That Crowley, who was now standing by the door to the en-suite, white-faced, but with high spots of colour standing on his cheeks, had actually miracled himself out of Aziraphale’s kiss.

“I’m sorry.”

They spoke together, Aziraphale not even sure what he was apologising for – Crowley had wanted that, hadn’t he?

An awkward silence fell and Aziraphale watched as Crowley ran a shaking hand down his face. “I’ll,” he closed his eyes, opened them again, obviously forced himself to hold Aziraphale’s stunned stare. “I’ll just go and have a shower.”

Aziraphale didn’t answer, he had no idea what he could even say. He just sat on the bed as Crowley slid into the bathroom and locked the door firmly behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience on this section :) I’m hoping to have another up mid-week, but it may run until the weekend again. I shall do my best,
“Get your shit together, demon.”

Chapter Notes

Check the tags, more added. There are also warnings with this chapter, it's heavy on the angst. If you're up for the risk then read on, otherwise scroll to the notes at the end and the warnings are there.

I feel that this would be a good place to state - again :) - that our two boys will absolutely live happily ever after (together) at the end of this fic. Maybe three more chapters after this. (I know, it just keeps growing!)

Who's up for some Crowley POV?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as the door was closed tightly behind him, Crowley started the shower with a thought and slumped against the wall, screwing his eyes closed and tugging at huge handfuls of hair. What the fuck was going on with him?

He vanished his clothes and stalked to the cubicle, tugging the doors open and stepping inside, turning the dial right up so that the water came out at a temperature which would melt the skin of a mere mortal, before sliding under and letting the flow blast against his shoulders, running down his neck and through his hair. Seriously though, what the actual fuck?

It wasn’t like he was a blushing virgin, for fuck’s sake, he’d done the dirty deed with literally thousands of humans over the millennia. Thousands of humans, successful temptations every one of them, enticing them to succumb to his wiles, luring them into taking what they wanted from. Dingy motel rooms, backs of cars, filthy alley ways, public toilets. Men, women, pairs, groups. He’d done it all, really, so why would he run for the hills in complete panic every single time it looked as if they were heading into something a little bit more heated than holding hands?

And it wasn’t like he didn’t want this; there was literally nothing more in the entirety of Heaven, Hell, Earth and the cosmos that he wanted more than an intimate relationship with Aziraphale. He’d spent thousands of years thinking about it, dreaming about it, fantasising about it, wanking off to the very thought of it and coming harder than he ever did with one of his conquests. And now here he was, right at the edge of getting it and what was he doing? Making a right fucking mess of it, that was what.

“Don’t fuck this up,” he muttered to the tiles. “Get your shit together, demon, and do not fuck this one chance up.”
He’d been in love with the angel for six thousand long, lonely and often hopeless years. A raised wing in a storm; a single act of kindness which had undone all his hard work in armouring himself against the world, in batten[ing down the hatches following the searing agony of his Fall. Six thousand years in which he knew he was never going to be good enough to deserve anything in return, never going to be anything that would brighten Aziraphale’s life, never going to be anything other than the creature of dark and evil that he had turned into.

And yet… Aziraphale had seen something in him, something more than the filth and despair of Hell, something that had made Crowley think that maybe, just maybe, everything worthy and good had not been burnt away by his Fall. Something about him that even deserved the love of an angel? He shivered, barely believing it still, but yes, yes, that’s what it seemed, that’s what Aziraphale had told him. It was a heady thought indeed.

But of course, it wasn’t going to last, was it? How could it when he was damned? Unforgiven and unforgivable. And that wasn’t even just his job description – it was his entire being. Of course he was going to fuck this up one way or another.

But this way? Because he was scared of sex? He actually laughed at himself, bitter and harsh and drowned in the steam and the water. Was there anything more pathetic than a demon scared of sex?

He’d imagined that it would be his darkness that would have seen Aziraphale off first. The something that seemed to hang around him and scream out to animals and small children, ‘This one is dangerous, this one is the stuff of nightmares. Run and hide. Cover your eyes. Don’t look, don’t stay. This one will be your end.’ Occasional adults got a whiff of it too, crossing the road as he walked by, choosing a different table, a different café, when Crowley slid onto the table next to them. He’d had it for five thousand years now. It had been his discorporation many times over before he got better at extracting himself from awkward situations. Aziraphale had never seemed bothered by it, over the years, but surely it was just a matter of time?

Or maybe it would be his possessive insecurities instead? He wondered how much Aziraphale actually knew about this aspect of their relationship. He must have noticed that Crowley had a propensity to turn up just at the points when Aziraphale was in danger, even the angel couldn’t be as dense as to not notice that, but did he know why? Did he have even the slightest suspicion that Crowley had stalked him for all of these years? Followed him, watched him, studied him, coveted him. Even under the searing heat of the shower, Crowley could feel himself flushing red, remembering how he’d spied on Aziraphale’s various love affairs through the years.

He’d never watched them having sex, he wasn’t a complete wanker after all, but he’d watched them walk through parks together, meet up in Gentlemen’s clubs, share meals in dark little restaurants, attend shows and concerts and plays together… all of the things that they did, really, but without the pointed comments and the two feet of space in between them at all times. It had been his own, personal, brand of torture.
But, it had also been needy and possessive and pathetic and if he felt that he could have Aziraphale to himself, that they could be in one of Aziraphale’s wonderful relationships together without Crowley resorting to this base, obsessive behaviour, then he was even more of a fool that he’d ever realised.

And what about the truth of what Crowley actually was? What would Aziraphale do with that once, if, he ever found out? Whilst Crowley was not at all happy about who he was now, it would be a complete and utter lie to think that he, or Aziraphale, would feel much better at all about what he was before. Maybe in days gone by it might have gone over better, but now, after every single thing that had happened to them both since that fateful night when he was presented with a basketful of Anti-Christ… well, he could certainly see Aziraphale going with the better-the-demon-you-know attitude.

So, yeah, there was plenty about Crowley that would send Aziraphale running for the hills at any single point of their lives without Crowley deciding that he was going to be a pathetic virgin over the thought of sex as well.

And what was that even about? He was so not a virgin, he was far from inexperienced, and he’d never had any complaints before… was that it? That he was so damn scared that his performance wouldn’t be good enough for Aziraphale? That his unconscious mind was catapulting him out of a situation before he could even begin to fuck it up? Maybe. And it would have been a nice try, if the actual catapulting wasn’t pissing Aziraphale off all on its own.

Crowley flushed again. What must he think of him? What must he think was the reason for all this weirdness? That Crowley was determined to fuck everything up? That almost getting Aziraphale killed by the hoards of Hell wasn’t enough for him? That, now he’d thrown off the driving compulsion to dig over his garden at every hour of the day, he was inventing a phobia of sex? That he was a terrified little virgin? Too scared and outraged to let Aziraphale even snog him? Or… his blood ran cold… or that he was a victim somehow? That he had been overpowered, mentally or physically, sexually, and that someone had stolen from him, left him with a fear of letting anyone else close?

He wasn’t actually sure which of these possible scenarios was the worst.

He needed to get a damn grip here.

He could do this, he absolutely could do this. He’d worked hard, over the years, to be whatever it was he needed to be in order to tempt the particular soul he’d been sent after. He could seduce, if that was required, use his hands, his mouth, his unique tongue, to stoke the flames of passion and
transport his victim to the very highest of vocal passions. He could also be submissive though. That was a common one with priests, push and push and push at them until they snapped and then they would take. Hold him down, string him out, hiss vile insults into his ear, inflict pain across his body and then fuck him, face down, arse up, pounding into him like the sin they felt it was. And afterwards, looking him at him with the depths of contempt, blaming him for their own fall. But Crowley never minded, not really, he’d done the job he’d needed to, and everything they said to him was usually true – he was a demon after all – what did he expect?

So, what would Aziraphale want out of their coupling? It was hard to see him as being the submissive, swooning type, particular given how hands-on he’d been these last few weeks. But then, Crowley couldn’t really see him pinning him to the bed and fucking him mercilessly either. It was a conundrum, but one that he could certainly roll with, once he stopped sidestepping through space whenever the going got steamy.

He switched the shower off and stepped out, snagging a towel from the warmer and standing on the duck board, wrapping himself in the soft, fluffy depths, drying his face and scrubbing through his hair. He couldn’t hide in the bathroom for the rest of his life. He was lucky as it was that Aziraphale hadn’t followed him in, full of righteous anger, demanding answers and explanations and being completely oblivious to how he was actually making the whole, dreadful situation even worse.

But… he suddenly froze, his stomach uncomfortably tightening, what if Aziraphale hadn’t come bursting in simply because he’d gone? Simply had enough of Crowley’s dramas already and just… left? Panic swirled inside him – he’d honestly thought he’d have longer with the angel than this, he didn’t even have a stash of Holy water as his get out clause for when the going got tough – and he reached out just a little, feeling for Aziraphale in the way that six thousand years of trying had taught him.

And there, thank someone, Aziraphale was exactly where he had been when Crowley had bolted for the bathroom. Still sitting on the bed, still waiting and Crowley could feel the confusion washing off him. Yeah, he thought darkly, you and me both, angel. But still, he wasn’t a coward, not normally anyway, and nothing was going to get solved with him in here and Aziraphale out there.

Winding the towel around his hips, he stepped in front of the mirror, staring critically at himself as he had done ever since he’d first found water still and clear enough to see. His hair was damp and the colour of wet blood. With a thought, he dried it and got it to stand up just like he wanted, bold and irreverent, an image he hoped he could live up to. His eyes were harder to fix though, and he’d know, how many hours had he spent over the millennia trying to do something about them? Trying to get rid of their other-worldliness, trying to find something of the gold they used to be? Aziraphale had never complained of them though, had always seemed happy when Crowley was brave enough to go without glasses, as he had been these last few days, but still… Crowley looked at them, at the acidic yellow, the repulsive slits, the bulging protrusion… and drew forth the darkest pair of shades he could from the air around him. He ran his eyes over the rest of his sharp
features, the angular nose, the severe set to his mouth, the prominent cheeks, the jutting collar
bones and sighed, stepping away. What did Aziraphale even see in him?

“Come on, Crowley,” he whispered to himself as he folded the towel back neatly over the warmer.
“You can do this. You can ride this out. Fake it until you make it, yeah?” It wasn’t like he’d never
done that before. He clicked his fingers, dressing himself in black silk pyjamas, then scowling and
thinking better of it. “Too much,” he muttered and tried again, lounge pants again, charcoal grey,
bare feet, nothing underneath, a soft, black V-necked t-shirt. He turned back to the mirror,
critically appraised what he saw. “You’ll do,” he told himself. He just had to keep his head, he
could do that. He had to go in there, convince Aziraphale that this was nothing but a jittery set of
nerves, get the angel kissing again and then things would run their course. Maybe he’d have to try
and bite back on the power a little, limit what was available to him on an unconscious level, stop
him from jumping ship at the first inkling of heat. All he needed to do was ride this out. If he got
through this, got to the point of actually fucking, then he’d be ‘cured’. Course he would. Easy.

He took one last look at himself and nodded, “Showtime,” he muttered and unlocked the door with
his mind.

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Sliding back into the bedroom, Aziraphale’s eyes were waiting for him, skimming up and down,
lingering on his shades and Crowley could see the pressing together of his lips – a clear signal of
his disappointment.

“Crowley-”

“I’m okay…” *Fake it ‘til you make it*, Crowley reminded himself. “I’m just,” he offered up a
tentative little smile, “A little nervous. This has been a long time coming for me.”

Aziraphale watched him, *read him*, and Crowley was insanely glad that he had thought to wear
sunglasses. The moment stretched out a little, Crowley forced himself to look relaxed, to seem as
honest as a demon possibly could, and eventually Aziraphale nodded. His expression didn’t
change, however, his eyes remained shrewd, calculating and Crowley could have sworn, just when
he needed the angel to be his usual oblivious self, that he was seeing through most, if not all, of
Crowley’s charade. Aziraphale was ridiculously clever when he wanted to be – trust him to start
adding things together now.

“We don’t have to do anything, my dear,” he offered softly, his eyes appraising. “We have all the
time in the world now, no rush.”
“But I want to,” Crowley stepped forward, his voice little more than a wistful whisper, “How could I not want you?” and he did, by all the angels and demons in the whole of existence, he wanted Aziraphale so, so much. “It’s just a little…” he shrugged, “over-whelming.”

Again, Aziraphale nodded, and this time, held out his hand, Crowley almost sagged with relief. “Come and sit with me,” he was still worried, and Crowley instantly complied.

At some point, Aziraphale had got out from under the covers and was sitting cross-legged on the rumpled duvet. He’d patted the space in front of him once Crowley started shifting his way and now they sat facing each other, mirrored positions, Aziraphale still cautious, Crowley still playing for meek and nervous.

“May I?” Aziraphale asked him, fingers reaching for the arms of his glasses and Crowley nodded, what else could he do? But he also could not help the swallow that slid out from him.

Aziraphale slid them away, folding them carefully and placing them on the bedside table. Then he turned back and wrapped his fingers around Crowley’s, his own incredibly blue eyes skipping over every detail of his face in excruciating detail. “I love you.”

Crowley’s insides spasmed, just like they had done every time Aziraphale had told him that so far, just like he knew they would should Aziraphale ever tell him that again. Was that a normal reaction? Did normal people perform the Heimlich Manoeuvre on their own diaphragm every time they were told that they were loved? He doubted it, but then since when was he anywhere near ‘normal’? It choked him up though, made it so that he couldn’t even begin to think of saying it in response. Again, he wondered if it would always be like that and how long he had before Aziraphale started minding. It was all he could do to simply nod.

Angelic fingers reached up then, leaving his hand behind and trailing, softly, over his cheek bones, the line of his nose, his eyebrows, his lips. “You’re beautiful.”

Apparently, that was enough to trigger the Heimlich as well, and this time he couldn’t even nod. Smooth, Crowley, he berated himself.

And then, Aziraphale was leaning in, fingers returning to a chiselled cheek-bone, sliding backwards across his snake mark, into his hair, cupping the back of his head, just the right amount of scratchy-pressure on his scalp and Crowley had to close his eyes, almost melted at the sheer bloody tenderness of it all. How did he deserve this? How?
“I love you whatever we do, whatever we don’t do,” a thumb traced Crowley’s lower lip. “I just love you, whatever. Can you see that?”

Crowley couldn’t answer, couldn’t move. It was taking everything he had not to melt into a steaming puddle of goo and sob.

“We can leave this…”

Crowley forced his head to shake.

“There’s no pressure on you.”

He peeled his eyes open, held Aziraphale’s which were so, so close to his. “I want to.” Talk about an understatement, he was already regretting his lack of underwear as his cock swelled and thickened against his thigh at Aziraphale’s mere presence.

Aziraphale leaned yet closer and Crowley’s eyes slid shut again, “My angel…” and fuck, this time the Heimlich was so strong it was painful, but Crowley forgot about all of that the very second that Aziraphale’s lips touched his.

It was like it had been first thing that morning when they had both been warm and cosy and relaxed in bed and Crowley’s crisis hadn’t quite reached impactful proportions; it didn’t take much at all to light Crowley on fire. Aziraphale kissed him, softly, gently, love almost tasted in every move and Crowley snapped.

His free hand leapt up to tangle in all that down-soft angel hair, his mouth widened, and his tongue surged forward to meet with Aziraphale’s. He angled his head, both of their heads, to better deepen their contact and felt a moan pulled out of him, right out of his very core, and full to the brim with desire and want and need and love.

And then – yes, there was the desire to run. More than a desire really, a drive, all-encompassing and desperate and enough to make him stutter in the kiss, to almost imagine himself vanishing away, but, ruthlessly, he shoved it back, clamped down, hard, on his power, stifling it and imagining himself just fine, just fine, enjoying Aziraphale, Aziraphale enjoying him, everything just as it should be.
It worked, to a point, but the desire to bolt was still there, even as Crowley kissed and touched and tried to hide from Aziraphale, drawing him back, twisting them around until he was laid on his back, submissive and open, and Aziraphale was above him, kissing him hard, fingers in his hair still, fingers on his hip, opening him up and breaking him down with more skill than Crowley would ever have imagined from him.

Still it remained, though. Morphing now into fear, a cold, hard fear which was a simple consequence of Crowley not allowing himself to run from the encounter. It’s fine, repeated the mantra in his head, I am fine. This is fine. Everything will be fine. If he could keep his car alive with the power of his imagination, he could get through sex with Aziraphale. And he had to be doing a pretty good job if the way that the angel’s breathing was becoming more laboured was any indication. And the way that his hands were becoming heavier. And his kisses more possessive. It was lighting Crowley on fire, in direct counterpart to the fear that was trying to creep up and drown it all out.

“Darling…” desperate fingers were drifting over his waistband, in much the same way that they had when Crowley had read aloud the previous day, and he found himself swallowing, sweating.

“Yes,” he gasped as Aziraphale’s mouth withdrew from his. “Angel… just yes!”

In a moment, Aziraphale was on him again, kissing and kissing and kissing, his tongue probing and sweeping and turning him inside out and all he could think was, he’s going to touch me… for fuck’s sake… any second now he is absolutely going to touch my cock… It had been the subject of his most secret fantasies for so many years that he genuinely could not believe that it was happening – he also couldn’t believe the absolute terror that was gripping him, almost flinging him across the room, away from Aziraphale’s shifting fingers and being held in check by the most supreme effort of will. He had, honestly, never been this scared of anything in his entire existence.

The fingers edged closer, finding the skin of his belly and tracing there, making Crowley twitch and gasp through the kiss. Then they were gone again, lifting the waist band of his trousers, stretching it wide, pulling it up and Crowley could imagine it being lifted over his jutting erection, could feel the heated skin washed by the cooler air of the room, swallowed convulsively as it was tucked down underneath his balls, lifting them, pulling a full body jerk from him and a pulse of warm pre-come to escape as he imagined what he must look like, exposed like this, for Aziraphale, and still he bit down on the fear.

“Beautiful,” Aziraphale repeated and suddenly hot fingers were gripping him, holding his swollen cock tightly and, instead of the pleasure he was expecting, it was pure fear that exploded out of him, a fear that came too late to protect him from the sudden pain that wracked his body.
He screamed, he knew it was a scream, there was nothing else it could be, loud and curdling and he felt Aziraphale spring away from him. It made no difference though. His body was no longer his own; something was loose inside him, something thick and black and evil and it was already in control. Blearily, he realised that the restraint he’d forced around his own power had left him vulnerable, left him exposed, but it was too late to do anything about it, now, not now he’d been invaded.

He arched up, feeling the waist band of his trousers snapping back up over his belly, and froze, balanced on his heels and shoulders, rigid and swimming with agony, unable to move on his own.

Aziraphale was talking to him, he could hear the angel’s voice but had no idea what the words were, no idea as to where Aziraphale even was as his vision had whitened out with the pain. And then another wave came, arching him back even further and he felt – heard – his spine crumble under the pressure, his neck break. He screamed again, he was sure he must have done, anyway, as he felt the alien blackness inside him swirling and growing in strength, pushing against his very essence and his fear multiplied exponentially.

As soon as he’d heard the cracking of his neck he’d known that discorporation was a certainty, but things growing steadily worse. He could feel it, knew it, this darkness inside him was going to destroy him. He wanted to reach for Aziraphale, but he couldn’t move, he couldn’t speak or breathe or think or even find any of his power. There was another crack, his body spasmed and he screamed again. The blackness inside him swirled and fired and exploded.

A sob at the loss of absolutely *everything* was ripped from his throat.

And then, with the brightest burst of pain he had even known – he simply ceased to exist.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for:
- Mention of inclination towards suicide
- Explicit sexual details
- The destruction of an immortal being in what appears to be a pretty final manner
At the moment it started, Aziraphale had thought that Crowley was just showing enthusiasm for having his cock touched. A lot of enthusiasm. Very loudly. After all, he had always tended towards the dramatic. But then, within a second, cold realisation slammed into him, knocking his hands away, filling him with absolute terror as he realised Crowley’s pain.

“Oh!” he fell backwards onto the bed, eyes and mouth wide as he watched Crowley jerking in agony, watched him rise up, rigid, onto his heels and shoulders. Was this him? Had he done this, like before? But no, that had been his grace that had hurt Crowley, not his touch, never just his touch. Had it? Had it?

The screaming was inhuman, it shouldn’t have been possible for Crowley’s body to even make that noise and it was tearing Aziraphale apart from the inside out. He surged forward again, hands going to that taut body, flooding it with healing grace, no idea what was actually going on inside Crowley but just needing to do something to try and help him. There was no way in for him, though. It was like Crowley was a sealed vessel, Aziraphale could feel the alien power inside him, could feel it coiling and spinning and preparing to strike, but he couldn’t get his own grace inside, and the fear inside him tripled.

“Don’t worry, darling,” he had no idea what words he was spilling in his panic, as his hands fluttered uselessly over rigid muscles. “Don’t worry, I’m here, I’m- oh!” Another scream, another vicious jerk and this time there was the shotgun-crack of shattered bones, a shattered spine. “No! No, no, no…”

Still Aziraphale’s desperate attempts at healing were blocked out. Crowley’s lips were drawn back, his teeth bared in a snarl, his hands clenched into fists, his eyes scrunched tightly closed. There were tears though, two silvery tear tracks running from the corners and his eyes and Aziraphale felt his own well up in response.

“Crowley!” he leaned in, tapping desperately at a waxen cheek, trying over and over and over again to get in, to break through whatever it was inside Crowley that was not giving him access. “Crowley! Can you hear me? Can you reach for me? Darling? I can’t get to you, Crowley, please,
can you get to me?"

Another scream, another crack.

“No!”

The panic was swirling desperately inside Aziraphale as he tried another tack, sat back a little, tried
to empty his mind from the horror in front of him and reach out. Was there someone there?
Someone close? Was someone doing this to Crowley? To them? How would they get in past the
wards?

But no, there was no one there. No one had broken their wards, there was barely even a human
within three miles of them. He opened his eyes, reached for Crowley again, tried to hold him but it
was difficult the way that his body was rigid and jerking, “Darling?” he whispered, “Dearest?”

Another scream, enough to make Aziraphale wish he could cover his ears and then it stopped,
suddenly, all of it, everything.

All the tension flooded from Crowley’s form and he slumped, heavy, into Aziraphale’s arms.
“Crowley?” Crowley was limp, pale, washed in sweat, but so still, so heavy, his eyes were open,
staring up, sightlessly at the ceiling and Aziraphale couldn’t hold back the sob. “Crowley?”

With shaking arms, he lowered him, gently, to the bed and forced back his panic, forced himself to
think and to act rationally. He took a breath, closed his eyes and placed his hand on a cool and
 clammy forehead, reaching in a little, looking to heal, looking to soothe… but with a gasp, his hand
sprung back again.

He stared, horrified, and forced himself to try again, to place his hand again, to search again…
but… again, there was nothing, this body in front of him was just that, a body, a vessel, very much
an empty container.

Aziraphale scrambled to his feet at the side of the bed, unable to drag his eyes away from the
empty form in front of him but already planning, already thinking how he could do this, how he
could get Crowley back. A discorporation wasn’t final, it wasn’t, all he had to do was to speak to
someone from below, the Lord Beelzebub perhaps, maybe he could persuade them to issue
Crowley a new body, maybe he could strike a deal with them, maybe…
His panicked thoughts stuttered to a halt as his eyes had continued to run over the empty vessel before him – had something there moved? Had there been the slightest shifting? His heart thumped hard in his chest and he stared, keen eyes raking up and down, up and down and, oh… there it was again, but it wasn’t a movement, it wasn’t a shifting, it was a *shimmering*. Instantly, Aziraphale was up on the bed again, gathering Crowley’s body in his arms, trying to hold as much of it as he could, trying to absorb it all into his own form. “No,” he muttered, gathering him close, folding him in, “no, no, no.” He’d seen this before, in the first war, angelic forms permanently destroyed shimmered like delicate mirages as they left existence behind.

“No,” he pleaded again, his arms clinging tightly. “No, please, Mother, please don’t take him, please, not Crowley, please… please… please.”

He could feel it though. He could feel the body in his arms lightening, shivering slightly, could imagine the shimmering and he held on tighter, tried to anchor it to him with his grace but it was always shifting away from him.

“No!” and now he was shouting, his words drowned in tears, his arms desperately trying to hold onto a form that was fading out from within his very embrace. “NO!” he scrabbled and scrambled and clung and swore and sobbed – but Crowley’s body only shivered and lessened, shifting in his arms, impervious to Aziraphale’s desperate attempts to hold onto it until, finally, finally, it was gone.

And so was Crowley.

For ever more.

Aziraphale sobbed.

It was impossible to gauge how long he sat there for, in the rumpled duvet of their bed, sobbing into his hands and feeling more bereft than he ever had in any of his days of existence. The room around him was still and quiet, the gardens too, the wards were untroubled – but still, he felt the bed dip as something settled down next to him.

Ridiculous hope flared within him and he drew back, breath held in anticipation but, of course, it wasn’t Crowley, how could it possibly be Crowley when he was gone?
He knew who it was though, he’d never seen that particular face before, but he knew, just like he would always know and, this time, he just didn’t want to see. He turned away, sliding down off the bed to sit on the floor with his back to it, his red-rimmed and gritted eyes turned to the square of blue sky visible out of the window, and took a deep breath. “Bring him back.”

There was a long moment of silence. Aziraphale took that time to contemplate how he had changed, how, maybe even a couple of weeks ago he would have been terrified at this moment, cowed and awkward and wondering if he was being judged, *how* he was being judged. But now, no, none of that was important, all that was important had vanished out from his very arms, *and he didn’t even know why.*

A gentle inhale of un-needed breath preceded his, predictably-intangible answer. “He’s with Azrael now. I can’t reach him there.”

A fresh wave of pain lanced through Aziraphale at that. He’d known, deep down, of course he’d known, he wasn’t stupid after all, but to have it *confirmed*... Crowley was gone. Gone. He’d not thought he had tears left inside him, but new ones appeared, squeezing out between his spiked lashes and sliding down his cheeks. He’d never known pain like it, or anger, and it was the anger that was rising now, uncoiling inside him, his very own serpent, apoplectic at the loss of its mate. “How did he deserve that?” the words were almost spat out. “After everything he’s ever done for your world, your humans, how did he deserve *that*?”

This time a sigh drifted his way, and Aziraphale could even imagine the gentle look of pity that graced the face of the young, dark-haired woman currently sitting on the bed. *Their* bed. “You know it’s nothing to do with what he *deserved,* Aziraphale. Life doesn’t work like that anymore. Not since the advent of free will.”

“Free will?” Aziraphale rose like a cobra, his eyes furious spots of burning blue as he twisted to glare over his shoulder. “You think that somehow he *chose* this?”

“No,” and how could she be so frustratingly calm in the face of Aziraphale’s terrible anger? His terrible grief? “Of course not. It’s not *his* free will that lead to this.”

Aziraphale stared at her, his mind reeling, struggling to make sense of any of it. He twisted around on the floor, back to the wall now, underneath the window and met her steady gaze, the roiling emotion in him giving him a courage he never thought he possessed. “You need to explain that.”
She shrugged, mild and calm, as if she were simply delivering the weather forecast, and her
demeanour stoked the fires of Aziraphale’s anger a little more. “He introduced free will to the
world, through Eve, and after that,” she shrugged, the fine shoulders under her simple white dress
lifting with the gesture, “of course it would spread. To him. To the other humans. To you. To
others, in both of the realms.”

“Neither of us have ever had free will,” Aziraphale spat, “not until now.”

“Oh, but you have,” the peace-child routine was really starting to get on Aziraphale’s nerves, “All
the way through, you have both made your choices beautifully. Where would this wonderful world
have been without you?”

“You wanted us to avert Armageddon?”

“Of course.”

“But it was written!”

At last, the first chink of what Aziraphale thought was real emotion, but of which type? Anger?
Grief? Maybe they were actually one and the same thing? “Not by me.”

“You’d better explain.”

A thrill of fear shot through Aziraphale then as he realised who this was, what he was saying, but
he ruthlessly crushed it under his anger. Crowley had been destroyed, right in front of his eyes, and
he’d been unable to do anything to stop it. The very least they both deserved was a why. The being
on the bed simply looked at him, something else wavering in her chocolate eyes for a moment, but
then it was all gone, locked away behind a screen of humanness, but Aziraphale was not fooled.
She held his gaze, and started talking.

“I created you all, made you different, but I never made a single one of you perfect.”

Aziraphale found it impossible to work out if this had been intentional or not.
“But as I saw the flaws in one, I tried to create another to offset that, to keep the balance,” she looked to the window, a little wistful perhaps? “It wasn’t until I had created thousands of you that I realised what I’d missed, what very few of my angels possessed,” she smiled at Aziraphale then, “Real love. Unselfish love. A love for things and places and events. A love of life. You were created then, you were designed to embrace living and loving and, my angel, you have done such a wonderous, wonderous job with it. You have loved my creations, and the creations of my creations, far more than I ever hoped you would.”

Somehow that stung, to be told that he had only ever done what he was designed to do, but really, wasn’t that the way of it all?

“And soon it became clear that I would need you, more than I ever thought I would, if I wanted my world to survive. I would need you to be my champion. Free will was so very uncertain, different beings used it in ways of darkness I never envisaged.”

Aziraphale thought of all the cruelty he’d see in his years in Earth. Cruelty from humans of course, a cruelty that Crowley had always maintained had come straight from their own hearts, no demonic intervention from anyone had been needed. But then, he remembered a flood, earthquakes, volcanos, famine, plague, drought, hurricanes, tsunamis – it hadn’t just been the humans who had murdered.

He pushed all of that away. “Your champion?” he spat. “You wanted me to go up against the might of Heaven and Hell and yet you left me alone to do it? You never once answered my prayers? My questions?”

The irritatingly beatific smile was back, “But I didn’t leave you alone, did I?”

Aziraphale blinked, “Crowley?”

The smile widened, “You were, neither of you, perfect, but he was perfect for you. His rough edges complimented yours. Your soft edges smoothed his. He spent millennia making you think, invigorating your free will, showing you how unconditional love could be. He took what I’d made in you and polished it to the wonderful gem you are now. He was, and always has been, perfect for you.”

Leaning against the wall, Aziraphale had to spread both of his hands against the plush carpet, fingers digging into the pile, in order to steady himself as the whole world seemed to shift and swim beneath him. “You made him for me?” he whispered.
There was a laugh, short and tinkly. “No, he was created such a long time before you, almost at the very start. I just realised, after I created you, that he was there, and he was perfect and the way I’d made him would be just what you’d need so that you could fulfil your potential.”

Pain shot through Aziraphale’s heart once more. “And yet this was his fate? Our fate?”

The pretty young woman with her chocolate eyes, perfect skin and halo of fine, curled hair shifted a little then, warped into something Aziraphale had to squint against, just for a moment, until she settled once more, but there was a cloud in her expression that had not been there before. “No,” her eyes were on the bed where, barely an hour ago, the being in question had been sleeping, completely unaware of the horror awaiting him with the dawn. “That was never supposed to be his fate. How could you think that I would seek to punish him for simply fulfilling the role I’d needed from him? You think his love marked him as deserving of destruction?”

Aziraphale had wondered, but to have it confirmed… sickness swirled inside his chest, “It was because of me?” Had his voice ever been so small? How could he live through this now? All the years he’d feared he’d fall if their relationship had been discovered, but in the end, it was he who had brought about Crowley’s end. Even his friend Will would never have written anything this tragic. “Hell killed him because of his love for me?”

There was a sudden crack and a shifting of the air around them and Aziraphale startled violently, his head snapping to the side and fear clenching at his chest as he saw the being lounging against the cupboards in their bedroom, the being who was looking very much like he simply owned the space he’d appeared into.

“Samael,” the voice from the bed sounded strained, irritated. “Why are you here?”

The man-shaped being simply smiled and brushed imaginary lint from the sleeve of his expensively tailored jacket. “Mother. Good to see you as well. I had just been,” he gestured between the woman and where Aziraphale was pressed up against the wall in terror, “listening in, and I thought I’d drop by. Make sure I wasn’t blamed for anything that wasn’t actually my fault here.”

The irritation from the bed was clear, “I had no intention of doing that.”

“You won’t mind me taking over the story then? In the interests of truth?”
She opened her mouth, looked as if she very much did mind, but she was too late, the man in the suit had pushed on, his disconcertingly dark eyes settling on Aziraphale’s wide blue ones.

“No, that whole mess,” he waved a hand at the bed, “was nothing to do with us. All that cloak and dagger stuff isn’t our style. More direct, we are –” he paused, “I mean, you did meet Hastur, didn’t you?”

Aziraphale nodded, dumbly.

“Duplicity. Hidden traps. Fate. Nasty little blessings that rear up and destroy you when you’re just trying to get laid… far more an angel’s bag, wouldn’t you say?”

Aziraphale was terrified. And grief stricken. Overwrought and overwhelmed, but he had never been stupid. Instantly his mind spun back to the events of almost a year ago, a beaten and cowed Crowley, huddled in his bathroom simply over-flowing in angelic grace.

‘You know Gabriel, he wasn’t happy. He flooded me with angelic energy before he went, told me that maybe you’d finish me off for him.’

They’d both assumed that Gabriel had been referring to what would happen should Aziraphale have tried to heal a damaged demon already brimming in angelic essence, but it hadn’t been that, it had been far more terrible and cynical than that. Gabriel had blessed him, cursed him, with a trap that would only spring if he allowed himself to become intimate with Aziraphale, if he allowed himself to be loved and cherished. And, on some level, Crowley had known of the threat, all the jumping away, that’s what that had been, something, somewhere, telling him he was in danger, that he shouldn’t engage, but Aziraphale had pushed it, Aziraphale had wanted him, Aziraphale had brought about his destruction…

The fear vanished, consumed by anger, he looked up at the motionless figure on the bed. “You knew this?”

“Not until it was too late.”

“Too late for us to stop?”
A pause. “Too late to stop Gabriel.”

“But you let us blunder into this mess knowing that it would destroy him?”

Her expression morphed into one of utter grief, “Free will,” she whispered, “I can’t get involved in the decisions you make.”

Aziraphale dropped his head into his hands, despair swimming through him. He’d been an idiot an absolute idiot. Crowley had known, and instead of facing it with him, trying to work out what was causing the uncharacteristic fears, Aziraphale had helped him to cover it all up, facilitate the very end. Had Gabriel watched? He’d no doubt loved every single moment of it. Free will? Maybe a little warning would have been helpful.

“This is fascinating really,” Aziraphale drew his eyes up to stare at the owner of the voice as he tapped his lips with one perfectly manicured finger, “You’re sitting there, agonising over your role in this, Crowley’s role in this, that wanker Gabriel’s role in this, but really, you want to talk about what destroyed Crowley? You don’t think you’re missing the bigger picture?”

Aziraphale stared at him, filtered through his anger and regret and settled on something else. He turned back to the motionless figure on the bed, his voice ice and salt. “Why did you make him Fall?”

“Aziraphale…” it was a clear warning.

“You said he was perfect for me, that he was needed to help save the Earth, and yet he Fell? Why did he Fall?”

“I don’t need to explain this to you. You have always been accepting of the way things have to be.”

“And maybe, had I not, Crowley would still be here with me now,” his voice was starting to rise with the anger he could feel swirling inside him. “Why did he Fall?”

There was a crackling in the room, the countenance of the being on the bed shifted into something a little darker, just for a moment, “Don’t test me, Principality.”
Aziraphale shifted his eyes to the man at the wall, “Why did he Fall?”

“You know the answer already, don’t you?”

“But I need you to tell me,” he glanced back at the bed, “I need one of you to tell me.”

The woman in white folded her arms, her lips pressed together in a tight line and so, with a huff of irritation, Aziraphale turned back to the being she’d called Samael, the one whom Crowley had called many other things.

Samael waited a moment, seeming to defer to the other, and then, with a smirk which suggested that he’d wanted to be the one to tell Aziraphale all along, he started. “I don’t think it’s news to anyone here that Crowley never really *fit in* below.”

It certainly wasn’t news to Aziraphale, but he was surprised to hear that from the being who had always been Crowley’s master.

“He wasn’t suited to being a demon, to living below. But then, he’d not really been the same calibre as the others even before the Fall, had he Mother?”

Silence.

“I did my best for him, of course, helped him hide, let him spend all of his time on Earth, I even turned a blind eye to the truly awful job he was doing as a demon on Earth.”

Aziraphale frowned, tiny jigsaw pieces floating around in his head, not quite fitting together in a way that made sense, not quite yet.

“But he shouldn’t have been there, should he? He didn’t Fall for his past misdemeanours, did he Mother? He Fell for his future heroics.”

The silence was thick. Both Aziraphale and Samael looked to the being on the bed who eventually shrugged. “What do you want me to say? I’ve already told you that Aziraphale needed him. What use would he have been sitting up in Heaven in an admin role?”
Aziraphale’s stomach tightened uncomfortably. “You made him Fall,” his voice was low, dangerous. “To make sure he was in place when Armageddon came around. Like a pawn in a game of chess.”

Samael laughed, “We’re all pawns, angel.”

Ignoring him, Aziraphale held the eyes of the woman on the bed. “He didn’t deserve to Fall, did he?”

She shrugged, “I needed him to.”

Fury washed through Aziraphale like a boar wave. He slowly climbed to his feet, standing with his hands flat against the wall behind him, aware of Samael watching him eagerly with the hint of a smile on his face. “But he didn’t deserve it though. And you made him Fall, you burnt him, threw him out of heaven, ripped your grace from him. You hurt him physically, and worse than that, far worse than that,” he stepped forward a little, the grief, the frustration at the futility of everything searing through him, “you never told him why.”

“I could never communicate with the Fallen,” the words were convincing, but the tone, less so and the fact that she doubted, stoked the flames of Aziraphale’s fury.

“He talked to you though,” somehow, Aziraphale just knew the truth of that. “He asked you, didn’t he? Why? Why had he Fallen? Why you’d forsaken him. What he’d done wrong to lose your love, and the fact of the matter was, he’d done nothing wrong, not a damn thing!”

“He never lost my love.”

“But he didn’t know that!!!” Aziraphale’s roar surprised even himself, he took a step closer to the bed. “You let him spend thousands and thousands of years hating what he’d become, hating himself! Drowning in self-loathing and disgust and horror. And why? Because you needed him to do a job?!”

She straightened up, her eyes flashing as Aziraphale advanced. “I needed him for you!”
“Don’t pin this on me!” his hands were in fists. “I would have loved him whatever he was. I would have followed him whatever he was. He didn’t need to Fall for me! That’s on you – all on you!”

Anger stirred at last in the fathomless brown eyes and Samael smiled, his arms folding across his chest as he watched the confrontation brewing in front of him. “It is on me!” she hissed. “Everything is on me, Aziraphale! Don’t you dare think to sit there and pass judgement! Everything I have done I have done is for the good of everyone, for the good of Creation! Do you carry that responsibility? Do you have to think further than your next glass of wine? Your next crepe?”

Aziraphale flushed.

“No, you don’t. Do you think that I can spend all of this time in preserving Creation without making some sacrifices?”

“No,” Aziraphale’s reply was sharp though, his expression edged in fury, his eyes flashing with blue fire. “I was at Golgotha after all. I know all about your policy on sacrifices. I just never realised that Crowley was another of them.”

“A price worth paying; if it saved the world.”

“No,” Aziraphale stepped in again. “Not like that. He would have done anything you asked of him. Anything. He loved you still, even after you forsook him.”

“I never-”

“Yes, you did! In his eyes, you did! And that’s all that matters to me! You forsook him, you hurt him, you left him alone for all those millennia. You let Gabriel torture him, and then murder him! For nothing more than wanting to be loved! And I loved him, I love him still, and you expect me to accept this? To see this as a price worth paying? As the way of the just?” He shook his head. “No. If this is the price worth paying, then I am not interested. If this is the side of the good and the just, then let me out. Crowley Fell for nothing, let me Fall for this.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” the warning was low, serious.

“Don’t talk him out of it, Mother,” Samael’s eyes were dancing with excitement as they flicked
between the two other beings in the room. “I haven’t had a Fallen angel in years.”

“Oh, I know what I’m saying, I know what I’m passing on. You think I want to live in Heaven after everything Heaven has done to Crowley? You think I want to be an angel when angels have proved themselves so brutal and duplicitous and evil? You think I can forgive all of that when you all stood by and let the being I love be persecuted for nothing more than the use he could be to you? The hordes of Hell never treated him like that!”

“In fairness, they would have done if I’d let them,” Samael interjected.

Aziraphale ignored him, “I would rather Fall than live like that.”

“No.”

“Can’t stand the thought that someone would chose against you?”

“Aziraphale, you are my child. I created you. I know this hurts right now—”

“This will always hurt! He was perfect for me, you said so yourself! You want to prove in the mercy of Heaven? Then. Bring. Him. Back.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then make me Fall.”

“You don’t want to.”

“Oh, I do.”

“You don’t know what you ask.”
“Make me Fall.”

“You don’t deserve that!”

“Make me Fall.”

“I would never hurt you like that.”

Aziraphale stepped closer, his eyes vivid blue fire, sparks fizzing around his hair, the air crackling with menace and pain. “Make. Me. Fall!”

“Don’t push me into doing this…”

“Do it.”

“Aziraphale…”

“DO IT!!!!”

The air shifted, time skipped a few beats, Aziraphale drew himself up to meet his chosen consequence, wind ripped through the room, “NO!” and, for the second time in a week, something huge and pearlescent-black insinuated itself between Aziraphale and the rest of the world. “NO! He doesn’t Fall! That angel doesn’t Fall! Not EVER! Does everyone understand that?”

Aziraphale staggered backwards, crashing into the wall behind him, desperately trying to make sense of what was going on around him as there was another shift of air, another blast of wind, and Death was suddenly standing at his side, sickle and everything, and Aziraphale felt his head swim.

“Family reunion!” Samael yelled. “We just need Gabriel and Michael, Uriel I suppose… not Sandalphon though… and we’ll have the whole gang!”

“Crowley?” Aziraphale’s mouth was dry, his entire corporation was trembling, but he’d know those wings, that hair, that scent anywhere.
There was no answer to his strangled exclamation, but a hand snaked backwards through the shimmering feathers, palm open, fingers reaching and Aziraphale grabbed it, stepping forward and winding his other arm around a neat waist, holding on tightly and praying that, this time, he’d never have to let go.

“He didn’t mean it,” Crowley was still talking to the figure on the bed though, not talking, pleading. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying. He was upset, that’s all, with Gabriel. It’s understandable, but please don’t take him, he’d never survive the Fall.”

“Crowley!” Aziraphale hissed indignantly right down his ear.

“So, what then, Azrael?” Samael was still cracking smarts from the other side of the room. “You letting them out again now? You got a returns policy?”

“Angel!” Crowley directed his voice over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the guest on the bed, his fingers tight around Aziraphale’s hand, his other arm spread out to the side, like his wings, doing his best to create a barrier between Aziraphale and the other entities in the room. “Don’t speak, will you? What the fucking *f*uck did you think you were doing, here?”

I’M NOT LETTING ANYONE OUT, SAMUEL, AS WELL YOU KNOW. HE JUST LEFT.

“He just left?” hilarity erupted from somewhere over the shield of Crowley’s wings. “Of course he did, of course he did… he’s always done his own thing.”

More jigsaw pieces…

“*Please,* don’t make him Fall,” there was a sob in Crowley’s voice that pulled Aziraphale’s arm more tightly around his waist. “*Please...* I am begging you, here.”

“He too fast for you then, Azrael?”

SHUT UP.
“I’m not going to make him Fall…” at last there was a response from the bed and Aziraphale felt as Crowley sagged against his chest at Her words.

He tugged them even closer together and rose up on his toes, peering over the top of a sleek and shining wing and re-established eye contact. “And don’t send him back, either.”

“Angel!”

“What?” He might not understand what was happening here, but he did understand that Crowley was back, and very much alive, and very much here and holding him, and he would accept that as a win any day of the week.

She smiled though, and shook her head. “I can’t send him back,” she didn’t seem that disappointed either. “Azrael’s affairs are his own.”

As one, Crowley and Aziraphale turned to Death, who remained standing at their side, still and imposing, his intention impossible to read. Aziraphale felt Crowley’s fingers tighten on his own as they waited for judgement.

I DON’T MAKE DECISIONS. IF THEY’RE DEAD, I TAKE THEM. IF THEY’RE ALIVE, I DON’T. THIS ONE IS VERY MUCH ALIVE AS FAR AS I CAN TELL.

This time, Crowley let out a long breath, the whispered, “Thank you,” only just audible to an Aziraphale who was finding it hard to pull air into his tight chest. So… that was that then? Everything was reset? No one was Falling, no one was dying? They were actually going to walk away from this mess?

“So that’s it then?” It was as if Samael had heard his thoughts, but it seemed that he wasn’t to be so easily satisfied. He pushed up off the wall, his handsome face creased into a frown, his features morphing into something more resembling the creature that Aziraphale had met at Tadfield Airbase. The air around them crackled, Samael’s eyes were glowing embers, their unsettling red burning into them where they stood, the stench of brimstone wafting disconcertingly around the room. Aziraphale felt his fingers tightening on Crowley’s, he drew them tightly together, determined to go together should he make an attempt to destroy either one of them. He knew he was shaking, that piercing stare was the most terrifying thing he’d ever experienced, it took all he had to keep his place and not just grab Crowley and flee. He felt the figure in front of him sigh though, a long push of breath that he’d seen and heard so many, many times over their millennia together, and he knew that Crowley was going to speak.
“Pack it in, Samael,” his voice was quiet, exhausted, the words so very different from what Aziraphale had expected. “You’re being a dick. Aziraphale doesn’t scare that easily.”

Instantly the red eyes vanished, the air lost its electricity and the brimstone was replaced by a delicate waft of *CKOne*. Samael straightened from his imposing posture and smiled. “Oh, I don’t know. He looks ready to wet himself if you ask me.”

There was a blast of cold air, and Death vanished without preamble, pulling a dry, “Never did have any manners…” from Samael who then turned to the silent figure on the bed. “Well then, is that it? All done? Time to get back to the grind?”

Aziraphale was surprised when she smiled at him. “Always in a rush, Samael, aren’t you?” he smiled back, genuinely soft and she climbed from the bed, coming to stand in front of them both. “Oh, I don’t know, I was hoping that Crowley and I could perhaps have a little chat?”

The full-body twitch was the only response Crowley gave, and Aziraphale bolstered his courage to duck under a bristling wing and stand hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder. “I’m not sure he’d like that,” he offered quietly, “I think we’d rather be left alone.”

Aziraphale’s voice seemed to jolt Crowley into action and he threw a quick glance sideways, his naked eyes doing everything they could to send some reassurance the angel’s way. “It’s okay,” it didn’t sound okay, he looked back to the young woman standing before him. “As long as you give us your word that you won’t do anything, to either of us, I’ll talk with you.”

She actually seemed affronted at that, but, given the circumstances and the year they’d both had – Aziraphale felt that it was more than a reasonable request. She nodded though, graciously inclining her head towards them both. “Of course. You have my absolute word.”

Crowley turned to Aziraphale then, the first time they’d looked directly at each other since Crowley’s miraculous resurrection. He seemed just the same, still wearing his loose pants and the grey t-shirt he’d thrown on after his shower. Exactly the same, returned to him whole and unharmed – were they really going to be that lucky?

He took both of Aziraphale’s hands in his own and squeezed them gently, pushing out a little smile. “That okay with you, angel?” he asked softly. “I won’t do anything if it makes you uncomfortable.”
Aziraphale loved him, he just absolutely loved him. Sliding a hand free, he reached up and cupped the side of his face, leaning in just a touch. “If you’re happy, then I’m happy,” he whispered back. “And I’m so, so glad to have you back, dearest.”

Crowley’s smile widened just a touch and he leaned in, pressed his lips to Aziraphale’s and then pulled away again, his cheeks flushing slightly as he threw a quick glance at a smirking Samael. “I’m happy,” he admitted. “It’s going to be okay.”

Aziraphale nodded and let him draw away, following his every movement with his eyes, trying, and failing, not to startle as he pointed a finger right in Samael’s face, his expression severe. “You. Behave yourself. It’s not fun to wind the angel up. Understand?”

Hands out in a gesture of complete innocence, Samael smiled at him, “Of course. How could you think I’d do anything other?”

Crowley shook his head, more jigsaw pieces, and, with a last glance at Aziraphale, headed out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Without a word, the young woman followed him.
“You really haven’t forgiven me, have you?”

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry this is such a short update. It's been a crazy few days and I'm away tomorrow with work again. More at the weekend, honest...

Aziraphale was less than impressed to suddenly find himself alone with Satan himself, regardless of how much Satan currently resembled an upwardly mobile bank manager. He threw him a shifty glance as he inspected the bedroom around him, opening drawers at random and testing the springy-ness of the bed and, not feeling that he was the kind of angel who would ever be able to tell the King of the Underworld to just stop, he instead drifted over to the window and found himself looking out on Crowley and the ‘young woman’ as they stood and conversed on the overgrown front garden.

Crowley was barefooted in the cold and the mud of a late November day, but Aziraphale was not at all surprised to see that his feet were both clean and dry, as where his companion’s white linen pumps – he supposed that that was what you got when you had preternatural power to spare.

They were less than five metres apart, in a straight line, but Aziraphale found his anxiety climbing by the moment. He wanted Crowley back at his side, he wanted his hand in his, he wanted his arms wrapped around that familiar body, holding it close and safe at his side. It had been a hard morning, and Aziraphale knew it had left its scars. As if feeling his disquiet, Crowley looked up from his spot in the garden and smiled and it was a smile of such hope and comfort that Aziraphale forced himself to smile back and swallow his unease; this would be okay, Crowley had said so.

“It’s rude to eavesdrop.”

He’d been so intent on watching the figures below him that Aziraphale had not even sensed Samael coming closer, not until he spoke at Aziraphale’s elbow, smirking darkly at the way the angel startled and leaning casually against the window sill, watching him.

“I’m not eavesdropping,” Aziraphale was unable to keep the pompous out of his voice. “I’m just watching.” And he was, practised eyes weighing every single expression on Crowley’s face as he spoke with his creator, ready to swoop down there and grab him should the need arise.

Samael didn’t retreat though, he just stayed right where he was, leaned up on one elbow, far too close to be considered polite, staring intently at an Aziraphale who was doing his best to ignore
him and not remind him that Crowley had told him not to try and wind him up. Eventually he spoke though, as Aziraphale had expected he would, but it was not what he’d expected to hear.

“So,” Samael’s scrutiny was excruciating, “you love him, then?”

Aziraphale kept his eyes fixed on Crowley’s dear face. “I don’t see that it’s any of your business,” he was proud of his gall.

“You’re ashamed of him?” Samael sounded totally scandalised.

“What? No!” confused blue eyes were drawn back into the room and the supercilious smile of the demon at his side. “Why would you say that?”

Samael shrugged. “No reason, except… if you really did love him then I would have imagined that you’d be wanting to shout it from the rooftops, not deny it to the very first being who asks you…”

Aziraphale flushed. “I didn’t deny it! I simply explained that it was none of your business, that is all!”

The handsome face was creased in a frown. “Poor bugger…” Samael’s eyes drifted to the garden. “I wonder if he knows the heartache he’s in for. In love with an angel who doesn’t love him back…”

“What?” Aziraphale’s eyes jumped down to Crowley and then back again, taking in the disappointed set to Samael’s expression with his own wide eyes. “How ridiculous! Of course I love him back! I’m dreadfully in love with him, totally in love with him! You know nothing about us, if you think that that’s the case!”

Samael smirked again, then, and Aziraphale realised he’d been played. For a sucker. He pursed his lips and looked out onto the conversation in the garden once more.

“Why?”
And Aziraphale turned back into the room. “Pardon me?”

Samael weighed him carefully. “Why? Do you love him?”

Aziraphale blinked. “Well, there are lots of reasons, really, but mainly just because he’s, well, just him. And I love him. For just being him. It’s actually terribly straight forward.”

This time Samael didn’t smirk, and he didn’t bait Aziraphale either, he just looked at him, steadily and quietly, and asked, “It doesn’t bother you then, that he’s a demon?”

“No,” and it didn’t, not now. In fact, he couldn’t imagine loving Crowley as much as he did if he wasn’t a demon, if he wasn’t just exactly who he was.

Samael’s eyebrows raised. “It doesn’t,” he swallowed, “you know, repulse you, to… you know, be close to him? To kiss him?”

In a moment of dawning, Aziraphale felt an unexpected wave of pity for Samael and his handsome face and his desperate questions; he forced himself to maintain eye contact as he answered. “No, of course not. If you meet the right person, the person who truly loves you, then they’ll love you, and want you, for precisely what you are. Not despite it.”

Samael stared at him, inscrutable but still intense for a long, painful minute, but then laughed, his face creased and sour, an unmistakable waft of brimstone coming with the sound, and then turned away, back to the door out onto the hallway. “The person who truly loves you…” for fuck’s sake, the crap that you heavenly lot come up with, it never gets any better. Same tired old shit if you ask me.” He left then, sliding out around the form of the young woman who was once again standing in the entrance to the bedroom – alone this time, Aziraphale’s chest tightened.

“Where is he?” he leaned around her for a better look, but could only see the top of the stairs. “Where is he?!”

“He’s downstairs,” they were back to that same lilting tone that had so irritated Aziraphale before. “He’s just having a moment. I wanted to come and say goodbye.”

Aziraphale drew himself up straight and tugged down the front of his waistcoat, desperately trying to not wonder why Crowley would need a moment. “Goodbye,” he said primly, ignoring the
swirling feeling of sickness inside him.

A perfectly groomed eyebrow quirked, and a head tilted ever so slightly to one side. “You really haven’t forgiven me, have you?”

“No,” Aziraphale had to swallow around the dryness of his throat. “For the way you’ve hurt Crowley, I haven’t, no.” And I’m not sure that I ever will.

She nodded, “I hope you can learn to trust me again then, in time.”

There was a sudden and irritating blurring to his eyes which Aziraphale very much did not appreciate. He hoped so too, but he certainly wasn’t going to say it. He just looked at the little smile that was sent his way and then, in the lapping of waves and singing of birds, she was gone.

He shook himself and headed for the stairs, the anxiety starting up again, the need to see where Crowley was, to be touching him at all times, convincing himself that the other half of his soul was still there, still breathing, still close at hand, was burning away inside him. He hoped that this wasn’t going to become a problem for them.

He stopped still as he turned the corner into the living area, though, his eyes jumping ahead to where Crowley, and Samael, were standing in a spot of sunshine at the entrance to the kitchen. They were talking, quietly, Aziraphale could hear their voices but not their words and they were close, very close. Crowley’s head was bowed, his posture slumped and exhausted and it hurt Aziraphale to see him like that. His hands were behind him, gripping the edge of the counter he leaned on whilst Samael spoke to him, his own head bowed towards Crowley’s, a hand in the back of that wine-red hair, a hand on the side of a chiselled jaw – it was a strangely intimate scene.

As Aziraphale watched, Samael leaned in further still and pressed a kiss, long and obviously heart-felt, onto Crowley’s forehead, lingering, eyes closed, and then pulling away. Crowley didn’t move, he didn’t look up, he just stayed perfectly still, white fingers holding onto the counter top for dear life, as Samael took a step back, glanced once at Aziraphale, nodded, and then vanished completely.

Instantly, Aziraphale was on the move and Crowley heard him, red-rimmed eyes lifting his way, his expression just so lost that Aziraphale’s heart broke for what must have been the twentieth time that day. They homed in on each other, two halves of the same being, each useless on their own, greeting each other with open arms, grabbing huge fistfuls of each other’s clothing, anchoring themselves together, burying their faces in each other’s necks – simply holding on.
“Do you trust me?”

Chapter Notes

So, this story has had an 'explicit' tag since the very start, I feel it's now time that it actually earned it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Crowley who moved first. He pulled away, just ever so slightly, barely loosening his death-like grip on Aziraphale’s pyjama top but leaning his upper body back the tiniest degree, just giving himself the opportunity to **look**.

And look he did, they both did, staring into each other’s eyes in a manner that made Aziraphale feel as if his stomach was being drawn out through his pointless and purely aesthetic navel. He absolutely could not look away. Crowley stared at him, the whites of his eyes lost in amber, the amber rapidly being swallowed up by black, and he stared back, his heart thumping solidly against his ribs.

Then Crowley moved again. His hands unwound themselves from Aziraphale’s clothing and shifted upwards, settling either side of Aziraphale’s face, where they gently angled him and then – Aziraphale barely had time to consider what was coming – before Crowley was kissing him, devouring him, in the way that Aziraphale had always, most secretly, hoped that he would.

Crowley was kissing him. **Kissing him.** Open mouthed and with more than a hint of tongue, holding Aziraphale’s head at the absolute most perfect angle and… oh… emotion assaulted him from every side. Lust, love, pain, love, sorrow, desperation, love, fear, anger, so much love… It was impossible to tell whose emotions they were, where they were coming from, but they were so strong, relentlessly beating at his heart and soul, drumming out a rhythm like the pounding of a desperate heart, stealing his breath and his thoughts and his balance.

Suddenly dizzy, he clutched at Crowley’s forearms, clinging on for dear life. He’d never seen Crowley like this, **felt** Crowley like this; so much passion just **exploding** out of him, threatening to dash them to pieces as they were caught in its flow. Aziraphale was almost taken away with it, he could feel himself drowning in everything Crowley was, everything he’d ever wanted, when the tiniest sliver of sense lifted it’s Aziraphale-like head, reminding him, with sharp and distinct terror just what they were **risking** here.

He jammed the brakes on, slammed a hand into Crowley’s sternum and physically heaved them apart. He felt it then, the crushing disappointment, the terror of daring and having a door slammed
shut in response, and this time he knew it came all from Crowley.

“No,” his fingers gripped into the front of the soft t-shirt, anchoring Crowley in place; they were not running away from this, it was not going to break them this time. “Don’t think I don’t want this,” oh… was he gasping? He felt Crowley’s fingers digging into the soft skin under his chin, pushing and pulling, wanting to run, wanting to stay. “I do, darling, I do but,” he did gasp, then, as Crowley pushed towards him, grinding their hips together, giving Aziraphale that first taste of how much Crowley wanted. “But,” he locked his elbows as Crowley tried to pull them back together, “But…” why was it so hard to think? “Gabriel!”

Everything stopped, for a second, Aziraphale even wondered if Crowley had stopped time. They stared at each other, so, so close and Crowley shifted his hand from trying to drag Aziraphale closer and instead laced their fingers together, the action warming Aziraphale’s heart. “It’s gone,” he whispered, his voice strained and ragged, holding Aziraphale’s eyes.

Beat.

“Gone?”

Crowley nodded.

“Was it… Did She…?”

He instantly regretted his question as Crowley winced and shook his head, replying instead, “Samael.”

Aziraphale blinked. And stared. And blinked some more. “Satan?” he asked to Crowley’s nod, “But why?”

Again, he wished he could take back his words as he saw Crowley’s face twist and pale. He shouldn’t have asked, he shouldn’t have, it was none of his business, of course Crowley didn’t want to tell him anything about-

The hand holding his squeezed. “Stop fretting, angel,” his voice was strained but there was a thread of tired amusement running through it. “It’s fine, it’s nothing. We just go way back, that’s all.”
He was created such a long time before you, almost at the very start. Such a long history, before Aziraphale was even a thought in his creator’s vast consciousness. He forced out a shaky smile, “Old friends?”

Again, Crowley seemed pained. “Not anymore,” he whispered, “but I think that he feels responsible, a little, for – what… I am, so… he helps out, a little, sometimes,” he shrugged awkwardly.

Aziraphale knew, though, that Satan knew why Crowley had Fallen, knew that it had nothing to do with anything he was or anything he’d done, but he nodded, Crowley’s complicated relationship with the Prince of Darkness was really, nothing to do with him. He circled back to the issue at hand. “So, he?”

“Removed it,” Crowley’s eyes were still holding Aziraphale’s so closely, “The blessing.”

“The curse,” Aziraphale corrected and frowned, “Are you sure?”

Crowley nodded.

Aziraphale blew out a long breath, “I’m not sure I trust him, my dear. After all, he is the devil…”

“I trust him,” Crowley’s answer was instant. “In this case,” he amended at Aziraphale’s raised eyebrows. “I do. And anyway, I can feel that it’s gone.”

There was a silence as Aziraphale stilled, implications running through his mind at speed. “You knew?” he asked, unable to keep the horrified tone from his voice. “You knew what Gabriel had done to you?”

A terse shake of his head was his answer. “No! Not exactly, anyway. I knew he’d done something, but let’s face it, in all those months, he’d done lots…”

Aziraphale’s stomach turned.
“And I could feel that he’d left something behind, but I figured it was just him, you know? His… essence or something, I don’t know. I didn’t know what it was, but, well, now I do, and I know it’s gone.”

Closing his eyes, Aziraphale sighed, “Crowley…”

“I know,” a warm hand slid onto his cheek. “I know, angel. I know it was fucking scary, I know…”

“I cannot lose you.”

The hand pressed a little. “I know. But it’s okay. I promise you.”

“Crowley…”

“Do you trust me?”

Again, Aziraphale’s stomach tightened. He opened his eyes and looked back into Crowley’s, that was a little below the belt, he thought. “You know I trust you. You are literally the only being in the entirety of creation whom I do trust. Implicitly.”

Crowley smiled at him, soft and gentle and in a manner so rare that it lit Aziraphale’s heart on fire again. “Then trust me, angel,” he whispered, leaning in again, “Trust me.”

The hand on the side of his face pressed again, angling him, holding him steady as Crowley touched their lips together once more, gentle, asking. Trust him? Could Aziraphale do that? Let him take the lead on something so terrifyingly real and final? There was no choice though, really? Was there? Either Aziraphale trusted him on everything, or they had no real business being together at all. Aziraphale had his answer.

His own hands went to Crowley’s head then, taking over, holding him still, opening his mouth and devouring him whole. It was incredible how fast the fire rekindled, Crowley made the most delightful noise of needy surprise into Aziraphale’s mouth and transferred his hands to the collars of the soft, striped pyjamas, clinging desperately, pushing his body up close and slithering upwards, rucking Aziraphale’s pyjama top up until the other could feel the friction of Crowley’s waistband against his bare belly.
Aziraphale felt Crowley surge against him, trying to take over the kiss, to control, to dominate, and the thought sent a surge of hot blood into his cock. He couldn’t help pushing his hips forward, grinding them together, feeling a flash of triumph as Crowley made a strangled, desperate noise and gave up his fight, sagging against him, shivering and clinging and widening his legs a little to allow Aziraphale to thrust against him, widening his mouth and letting Aziraphale right inside him.

Aziraphale accepted the invitation, sliding his tongue inside, feeling another shudder, and tasting the intrinsic flavour that was pure Crowley, chasing a fleeting suggestion of divinity that always seemed to be just out of reach, aching and tender, but there. Warmth surged through him at the realisation, at the knowledge that despite everything, Crowley had held onto that part of himself, hadn’t let anyone dictate to him exactly what he should be.

But then it was becoming harder to think, especially with Crowley this willing and pliant against him. Jerking his own hips in response to Aziraphale’s persistent grinding, letting his angel into him, standing up to everything Aziraphale was giving him and, delightfully, not slipping off through space. He doubled his fervour, backing Crowley up against the kitchen counter, holding his head still so that his tongue could taste every hidden recess of his mouth. The hard edge of the counter behind them, Crowley ripped his mouth away, gasping as his lips fell to Aziraphale’s neck. “Dominant?” he panted, kissing a line down a taut ligament.

Aziraphale laughed and fell to sucking a prominent collar bone. “Problem?” he goaded, “I can stop if you like?”

He felt as Crowley let out a little huff of amusement against his lips, “You’re alright…”

“Just give me the word, dearest, and I’ll stop…” he thrust his hips a little as he spoke, loving the grunt his action provoked.

“Ugh… angel.”

Aziraphale’s lips quirked into a smile again.

“Shut up, will you and just kiss me?”

He complied, crowding Crowley up and onto the counter, slipping into the gap made as Crowley opened his legs and reached out, sliding his hand up a taut thigh and over the prominent, hot bulge
he found pushing against the cotton of Crowley’s lounge pants.

Crowley broke their kiss again, letting out a strangled moan, so different from the horrific screaming of before, his arms tightening like a vice around his neck.

“You want me to kiss you?” Aziraphale asked, his throat tight. “Or would you rather I did this?”

Crowley spread his legs even wider, the invitation clear, his breath ragged against Aziraphale’s neck, the groan long and desperate and Aziraphale wanted to hear it again.

“Stop. Talking,” Crowley managed to force out and shifted forward, dislodging Aziraphale’s rubbing hand and pressing the bulge and the sharp prominence of his pubic bone, right into Aziraphale’s corresponding swelling. Then it was the angel who was groaning, long and desperate.

“Crowley...” Aziraphale choked, this was incredible, earth shattering, far better than anything he had ever done before with any human ever, but he wasn’t going to last very long, and really, he’d wanted more. His only response, though was Crowley clamping down even more tightly onto him, thrusting harder and making stars flash into life against his closed eyelids. “Upstairs?” he offered through his gasps, wanting to do this against a soft mattress, but still Crowley didn’t let up.

“Here,” he panted as he thrust. “You could have me here, angel, over the counter, right the fuck now.”

Aziraphale’s knees buckled and a burst of pre-come soaked the front of his pyjamas as images swam into life in his head. He’d like that, oh, he’d really, really like that, but not this time, not for their first, and that’s not what Crowley wanted either, not really.

It struck him then, with a painful clarity which was often elusive around Crowley, what this desperation actually was. Partly, it was habit, from a being whose only experience of sex had been precisely that: rutting and rubbing and moaning and coming. Crowley had never made love, demons, as a rule, didn’t, but that was what was on the agenda today – Aziraphale would make sure of it.

But, it was also born of desperation. Crowley had loved for such a very long time, he’d wanted for such a very long time and been denied over and over and over again. He needed it as proof that this time was going to be different, that this time he was going to get his chance. Aziraphale could feel
the fear running through the desperation, the ache of rejection, of constant thwarting; he had created this tempest, and it was up to him to navigate them safely through it.

“We’re not going to make love here,” it was hard to talk as Crowley’s hands found a sliver of flesh at the base of his back. “But I’ll help you, okay? We’ll take the edge off, that’s all, we’ll make it easier.”

“Take the edge-” Crowley stuttered to a halt as Aziraphale slid his hands down to the small of his back and pulled him closer, held him still as he started to thrust and grind in earnest.

“Take the edge off,” Aziraphale repeated into his ear, his own breath catching in his throat as the fire in his groin flared higher still. “You need to come, we need to come. Come here…”

One hand slid into already-mussed hair, positioning Crowley for another kiss, the another pulled them even more tightly together. Aziraphale closed his eyes and concentrated on every move he was making, every sweep of his tongue, every frantic press of his hips. He pushed harder, drove fiercer, his mind was swimming, his heart was hammering, he could feel his cock drooling pre-come, his balls tightening and then Crowley locked up against him, his mouth falling open, his entire frame shuddering as he clung to Aziraphale, breaking their messy kiss and pressing his face against a wildly jumping pulse. The quick scent of semen and Aziraphale was done, hips desperately grinding against Crowley’s his own arms rigid as sheer, absolute pleasure burst out of him and soaked the front of his pyjamas.

Slowly, the aftershocks receded and the pounding of blood in Aziraphale’s ears faded enough for him to be able to hear the shaky breaths, almost like sobs, that Crowley was making against his neck. He shifted his fingers in sweat-damp hair, massaging tenderly, and pulled air into his lungs. “Alright, dearest?” he asked tentatively.

Crowley didn’t answer, not in words anyway, he pulled his face from where it was pressed so closely to Aziraphale’s neck, and reached up to kiss him, deep and open mouthed, but slow and so achingly loving that Aziraphale felt tears prickle behind his eyelids.

“I want you,” Aziraphale admitted into his kiss. The edge of panicked desperation had flown, but Crowley still needed too and Aziraphale could feel, right through their layers of damp cotton, that they were both still hard.

Crowley made an inarticulate noise against his lips and, suddenly, they were in the bedroom, stumbling backwards into the cupboards as Crowley desperately struggled to find his feet.
“Oof!” there was a moment of ungainly flailing, before Aziraphale managed to catch himself on the edge of the set of drawers, his other hand desperately wrapped around Crowley’s waist and they came to a stop, Crowley crushed against the wall, Aziraphale pressed right up against him, a negative shot of the scene in the old hospital all those months ago.

They looked at each other, “A bit of warning next time,” Aziraphale whispered and then they laughed, wild and free and it was quite possibly the happiest that Aziraphale had ever felt Crowley be, in return, it was, quite possibly, the happiest that Aziraphale had ever felt from himself.

The laughter stopped abruptly, however, as Crowley smashed their mouths back together, pushing up from the wall and walking Aziraphale back towards the bed. This was it, Aziraphale realised, this was the time when, finally, he got to have Crowley, they got to have each other, and now he felt that he was the one who was shaking apart in desperation. He felt the bed at the back of his calves and turned them, pitching them sideways and so they both fell, landing on their sides, facing each other, their mouths still fused as they kissed.

Aziraphale grabbed the hem of Crowley’s t-shirt and pulled, realising, belatedly, that they would have to separate in order to get it up and off. He broke the kiss for the shortest of possible moments, but Crowley, always awake to an opportunity, reciprocated the move, tugging Aziraphale’s pyjama top up with enough force to pop two buttons as it caught under his chin. The planned reprimand died on his lips, however, as their bare chests suddenly pressed together and the intimacy of it whited-out Aziraphale’s thoughts for a moment.

He barely had time to recover, before hands were added to the moment, Crowley’s hands, as light and flighty as a butterfly as they tried to touch every where at once, hips, spine, ribs, stomach, chest, oh God, a light skimming across his nipples, it was impossible to think. Aziraphale combated the situation by slamming them together, trapping Crowley’s erratic touches and smoothing over the wide expanse of smoothly muscled back, wishing he could see it as well as feel it, going back to kissing, he would never get enough of all this kissing.

But Crowley pulled away and wriggled his hands free setting them instead to the waistband of Aziraphale’s pyjama bottoms, tugging ineffectively against the tight bow Aziraphale had them in. “Angel…” he moaned against heated skin. “Come on… I thought you were going to fuck me here?”

Aziraphale shuddered, the crass words filling him with guilty excitement but there was a cube of ice sitting right in the middle of all his lust-fuelled happiness and he knew exactly why it was there. He tried to slow things down a tad, tried to get them back under his control. “No rush dearest,” he whispered, unsuccessfully trying to capture Crowley’s lips again and still his questing fingers. “We have all the time in the world.”
Crowley made a noise as he fumbled for the pyjama cord where it was pressed between their two bodies, “I have given you all the time in the world,” he muttered and, although the familiar strain of teasing was evident, Aziraphale could hear the very real frustration there too. “And now I need you to fuck me, angel. I need it… please.”

The ice-cube grew and Aziraphale could ignore it no longer. He shifted around, pressed Crowley into the mattress and slid on top of him, lining their cocks up in a way that had both of their eyes rolling, before he settled into gap between Crowley’s long legs. He pressed up onto his elbows, slid his hands into Crowley’s hair and caught his eyes, “Listen,” he started.

“No…” Crowley moaned, his face crumpling, his eyes closing. “For fuck’s sake angel, do not do this to me now, not when we’re so close, not when I really thought…”

“Shhh,” Crowley really could be most dramatic at times, “Of course this is going to happen, of course it is, but I need you to listen to me right now, darling, just for a moment. I need you to listen. Crowley?”

But Crowley turned his head away and Aziraphale felt that swell of despair, frustration and rejection wash up from him and really!, it just made him lose his temper a bit. The hands in that flame-hair tightened and he tugged Crowley back around to face him, the edge of pain enough to get those dilated yellow eyes on him, for him to notice the moisture swimming in their depths.

“Listen!” he ordered, and Crowley just blinked at him, tried to blink away some of the tears. “For goodness sake, darling, I’m trying to tell you something important here! Please will you just listen?”

“Can’t it wait?” Crowley sounded petulant, “Until after the fucking?” and this time, Aziraphale snapped.

“I am never going to fuck you!” he hissed and this time, Crowley’s entire being seemed to deflate beneath him, his eyes sliding closed once more, Aziraphale almost swaying under the wave of agony that washed over him. “Oh, for goodness sake!” he never should have said it like that, but sometimes… was this the most frustrating being ever created? He shifted his hands, laid them on the sharp edges of Crowley’s cheek bones and tried to bite back on all the anger swirling through him. “Darling, fuck is such a passive verb, don’t you see that? It implies rather a lot of lying back and thinking of England, and, really, that is not how I want to do this.”
Crowley opened his eyes and just stared at him, every inch the rabbit in the headlights.

“I love you,” he expanded. “All of you. More deeply than I can even get my mind around. I don’t want us to fuck, I don’t want it to be something that I do to you, or you do to me, I want it to be something we can do together. A way to show how much I love you. How much you love me?”

How did that end up as a question? And why did Crowley still look so confused?

“But we can still fuck though? Can’t we? Together?” and Aziraphale realised that this argument on semantics was lost on Crowley in this state.

He smiled, though it was a little sad, “We can make love,” he amended. “We can do anything you want. With each other. Together. Because I love you, so, so much.”

Crowley met his smile, and his was a little watery, “And we can do it now?” he blinked again, “Because I’m really not sure how much longer I can stand not being with you, not showing you how I…” he swallowed, his words choking him, and he shook his head.

“I love you,” Aziraphale repeated, not minding Crowley’s silence and knowing that he would never be able to say it enough times to make up for the six thousand years of distance he’d put them through. “I absolutely, love you.”

They stared at each other and Crowley nodded, his eyes wide and wet and Aziraphale bent to kiss him once more, just hearing, just at the moment before their lips touched, the whispered, “Make love with me, angel,” that sent tongues of fire blazing throughout his entire being.

He was the one who was then tugging at Crowley’s pants, pulling them down over slim hips, watching transfixed at the way his solid erection sprang up when freed, slapping against his belly in a move that had Crowley’s eyes pressed tightly shut. And then he was naked and underneath Aziraphale and he looked so utterly gorgeous, so open and stunning and vulnerable and Aziraphale wanted nothing more than to reciprocate but now he was the one struggling with the stupid bow of his own pyjamas. “Help me,” he hissed as he caught Crowley watching him with the edges of amusement in his eyes.

“Now who’s the impatient one?” Crowley drawled, but the arousal was evident in his tone and, as Aziraphale pulled and tugged, he suddenly found himself naked, his own erection pressed snuggly against the hairs on Crowley’s thigh.
He gasped, looking around the room in horror, ignoring, with a supreme act of will, the glorious friction on the underside of his cock. “Crowley! I’ve had those pyjamas since-”

“1951 angel, yeah, I know that. They’re on the floor over there, don’t fret.”

Aziraphale was going to look, they were very nice pyjamas and he really should check but then Crowley shifted under him, increasing that wonderful, scratchy pressure and he forgot all about them, starting up the kissing once more, this time with the added excitement of the undulating they could do together.

As they kissed, Aziraphale’s mind span to all the options open to them now, all of the things he really, really wanted them to do. But… this was the first time, not the only time, he hoped, and so he could afford to be patient, couldn’t he? Just tick one thing off the list for this first time, just one thing, the most important thing, naturally, the one that he’d thought about the most on the nights when he lowered his guard enough to even consider it possible.

“Darling,” he spoke onto Crowley’s kiss-red lips, “Can I…?” and his hand travelled downwards, skirting a heavy cock to drift enquiringly into the vee of his buttocks.

“Fuck! Yes!” Crowley hissed, instantly spreading his legs even wider and tilting his hips upwards, the permission explicit.

Usually, with his human lovers, Aziraphale used a wide variety of lubricants that he purchased from the kind of shops angels weren’t really supposed to go to. But he had no such supplies in at the moment. It had felt – presumptuous – to buy some in for Crowley and he’d not had the desire to do this with anyone else for a very long time. There was nothing else for it but to miracle something up (he wished he could see their faces in Heaven if they noticed that one coming through) but he would be damned if he didn’t do the rest of it the human way for his love.

He returned to the kissing, party because it was just so absolutely wonderful, partly to keep Crowley’s mind off what else he was going to do but he needn’t have worried, as soon as his finger found the precious little opening, Crowley let out a long sigh of relief and pressed himself down a little, crowning Aziraphale’s finger through the tight muscle. That act of trust – act of want – was so wonderfully arousing that Aziraphale couldn’t help but press all the way in, pulling back from their kiss as Crowley moaned and arched in response. “Alright?” he gasped, getting a frantic nod and a hissed, “More!” as his response. He instantly obliged, curling another finger into place, his eyes widening at the sight of their intimate joining, Crowley, flushed and gasping underneath him, writhing on the mattress as Aziraphale stroked inside him.
“Oh!” Crowley jerked, Aziraphale’s eyes drawn to the way the muscles of his thighs bunched as he realised he must have inadvertently brushed his prostate with his stretching. He retraced his steps, did it again and felt his own cock twitch as the same response ensued. He did it again, and again, entranced by the flickering muscles, the creeping flush, the groans that were turning into lusting pants, steady and rhythmic and completely addictive.

“Stop!” Crowley’s voice was high and tight like the hand he snapped around Aziraphale’s wrist, “Gonna come, angel, gonna come… stop…”

Aziraphale paused, considering, “You could, you know. We should be able to do this indefinitely, my dear, we could test that out.

Crowley, legs splayed, cock hard and dribbling over his own belly, still managed a little laugh. “Another day, let’s experiment another day. For now, please, just get inside me.”

“I’m already inside you,” Aziraphale teased, wiggling his fingers slightly and relishing one more full body jerk before sliding out again.

And suddenly he froze. He looked down, saw Crowley there, all that arousal and trust and he was scared. What if this didn’t work? What if Crowley didn’t like it? What if Crowley didn’t like him? Crowley was ready, there was no doubt about that, but suddenly, Aziraphale wasn’t.

“Hey,” but there was a hand on his face, turning him to meet dilated amber eyes, and fingers, miraculously slick, trailing over his hip, making his stomach tense in anticipation and then a hand, firm and hot and so dear, slowly stroking him up and down, firing his engines, building his need. “We’re ready,” oh, he loved Crowley so very much. “You alright, angel? We’re ready.”

Aziraphale nodded and shuffled over him, unfortunately dislodging his clever fingers in the process. He pressed himself into the gap between Crowley’s legs, edged up until he could feel himself poised in just the right place, laced their hands together, placing them either side of Crowley’s head and then leaned forward so that he could look right into those stunning eyes.

“We’re ready,” he affirmed and, as slowly as he possibly could, pressed inside.

He watched as Crowley’s eyes fluttered and rolled into the back of his head and felt a surge of excitement as he realised that very soon, he would get to see what he looked like when he came.
“Crowley,” he whispered and, with those incredible yellow eyes back on him, pushed the rest of the way in, not sure who owned the ‘fuck’ or the ‘damn’ that accompanied him bottoming out.

For a moment, he stuttered, blown apart by the view beneath him, the tightness around his cock, the way that their fingers were perfectly interlaced, and he couldn’t help but bend to drop a kiss onto his forehead. The Almighty had told Aziraphale that Crowley was perfect for him, had She meant in this way too? She had to have meant in this way too...

“You are beautiful,” he breathed, sliding freely inside him, watching Crowley tremble and his expression tense every time Aziraphale nudged over his prostate, thrilling at the way that they were, finally, one. “Beautiful in every way too, not just your packaging.” Predictably, Crowley scrunched up his face and looked away, but Aziraphale went with him, chased him down. “Stunning,” he maintained, “not ’nice’, I know you don’t do ‘nice’ but stunning, my dear, exquisite.”

“Angel…”

Aziraphale could feel his thrusts building, the pressure in his balls rising again, his desire to just own Crowley stacking up inside him. “Let me compliment you,” he whispered, “let me tell you how gorgeous you are, how special and how much I completely adore you. If I can’t tell you when we’re making love, then when can I?”

“Literally, any other time,” Crowley hissed out through a rigid jaw, “How can I concentrate on coming when you’re telling me things like that?”

Aziraphale chuckled and bent down, pressing his knees into the mattress, “You don’t have to worry about coming,” he whispered, “Let me handle that,” and he quickened his pace.

“Uhnk!” was Crowley’s verdict on the change of speed, his fingers gripping onto Aziraphale’s own and Aziraphale allowed himself a tiny smile of triumph before pulling out further, almost all the way, feeling the fresh air on his slick cock and then slamming back in again, relishing the cry and the arched back that his move initiated. He did it again, and again angling his thrusts carefully so that he pulled out a wordless cry every time he pressed in.

He quickened his pace, watching, transfixed, as Crowley slowly came undone beneath him. He leaned down to press a kiss right next to the bead of sweat blossoming under the flame-red hair line. He bent himself double to lick at the flushed hollow of throat. He squeezed the long fingers in his in time with every hit of his blunt cock against a highly-stimulated prostate. He angled his hips and watched gooseflesh bloom everywhere beneath him. He switched up the level of power
alternating between achingly gentle and brutal enough to have Crowley shift up the bed a fraction. It had never been like this, this intense, this fucking pleasurable.

“Uhnk!” Crowley commented again, and Aziraphale watched him writhing helplessly below him, found himself thinking just how absolutely spell-binding it was to watch his buttoned-up partner fall to pieces like this on nothing more than Aziraphale’s cock, wished that they could stay like this forever, that Crowley would always be this safe and this happy for every moment of the rest of eternity.

“Uhnk!” he tried again and Aziraphale watched as he peeled his eyes open, fixing his wide, black pupils on Aziraphale and whispering, “Please…”

“Please?” Aziraphale was confused, he raised the pace a little more and thrilled at the moan he pulled from Crowley’s chest.

“My cock,” he hissed, his head thrashing between their joined hands. “I need you…”

He didn’t finish, Aziraphale wasn’t sure if it was the particularly sweet thrust he’d just given him, or some kind of embarrassment that was stopping him getting the words out, but either way, it didn’t matter. “You don’t,” he doubled his speed. “You don’t need that, you just need this.”

Crowley moaned and bent his head back into the mattress, opening his body up even more, allowing Aziraphale just that little bit deeper inside him.

“I love you,” Aziraphale growled, tightening his fingers at the broken almost-sob Crowley made, forcing himself to concentrate on his angle, on his speed, on- oh, goodness!

Crowley locked up, his eyes rolled into the back of his head, but it was the feeling that washed out over Aziraphale that almost shook his rhythm away from him. Love, desire, arousal, happiness, yes, but belief, so much belief that Aziraphale sobbed out loud. Oh, he knew! Crowley finally knew Aziraphale’s love for him, finally understood its depth and permeance and that belief was like a scouring light that washed everything else out of its path. He was so tense, so close, but so free of doubt for the first time in all the millennia that Aziraphale had known him. He fell to grunting now, with every thrust inside him, his stomach muscles quivering, his lips silently forming Aziraphale’s name and Aziraphale could only stare and marvel and, oh!

The most beautiful cry of wonderment and bliss was ripped from Crowley as he came. Aziraphale
tore his gaze away from the look of abandoned pleasure he was wearing and down to the untouched-cock, watching in rapt delight as it spurted between them, twitching and quivering as the pleasure broke and crested. It seemed to go on forever until the rhythmic twitching of Crowley’s insides around him were too much to bear and he leaned forwards, letting Crowley’s fingers slide from his own and frantically hammering towards his own release.

Liberated, Crowley’s arms reached up and wound around Aziraphale’s back pulling him closer and whispering in his ear, his voice dry and choked, “Come for me, my angel,” and Aziraphale exploded, crying out in pleasure as he was sucked deeper and deeper into the vortex, imagining his essence spilling out of himself and into Crowley, joining them, claiming him.

He came to earth slowly, tipping his hips lazily as he chased every last thread of pleasure, then forced his eyes open to find Crowley looking up at him, his expression unguarded and adoring and everything Aziraphale could have had for most of these last six thousand years.

“Don’t,” Crowley whispered, his voice hoarse and wrecked, his hand sliding up into Aziraphale’s hair. “That was fucking brilliant and well worth the wait. Don’t ruin it all by dwelling on what might have been.”

*I wish I’d had you for my own earlier…* the thought wouldn’t leave Aziraphale, but he nodded, wondered if he looked as exhausted as Crowley and winced in silent sympathy as he slid out of the still-tight grasp, feeling a rush of warmth follow him. He waved a hand, another entirely inappropriate miracle cast and groaned as he flopped down on top of the duvet at Crowley’s side, reaching over to pull it over them both and tuck himself under Crowley’s arm. There was a kiss pressed to his head and then, warm and sated and at peace for the first time ever, they both fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Can I hear a wahoo? :D

Phew! Can't believe it took me 80k words to get them there! Awkward boys...

There's an outside chance of a post mid-week, but otherwise it'll be next weekend. Some loose ends to tie up is all we have to cover now :)

And if there is another note under this about Wednesday, it shouldn't be there, it's a glitchy-glitch... :/
"Always"

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the thickest, darkest part of the night when Aziraphale stirred. It was the third night they had had since Crowley’s remarkable return from Death, and in all that time, they’d barely left the bed. This new aspect to their relationship, this intimacy, had stunned Aziraphale. Yes, he’d had sex plenty of times before, with plenty of humans and in plenty of places and times, and yes, he’d enjoyed it.

He’d enjoyed it rather like he enjoyed a fresh roll mop on a Friday morning, or a nice slice of hummingbird cake on a Sunday afternoon – if fact, thinking about it, he’d probably enjoyed it rather less than a nice slice of hummingbird cake on a Sunday afternoon – and therein lay the crux of his pondering.

Sex with Crowley, making love with Crowley, was not only just marginally better than a roll mop from the fishmongers on Florentine Street, it was totally, completely, all-encompassingly better than anything that Aziraphale had ever experienced before in all of his long years in both Heaven and Earth. It was better than he could ever imagine anything being, it was, absolutely, the very best thing in all of creation.

It was, he realised, the comprehensive nature of the act that made it so supremely satisfying. The fact that it enmeshed his corporeal body with his mind, his true-form, his heart (oh, yes, his heart) and his soul, was enough to bring him to levels of incandescent joy that he’d never even dreamt of before.

Once he was over the initial exhaustion of the brush with Death, the Devil and the Almighty themselves, it was enough to provide his body with, not only never-ending levels of stamina, but a refractory period that ran into mere seconds and, where his most darling and desirous Crowley was concerned, a libido that never dimmed. All-in-all, he felt that it would be perfectly acceptable to spend the rest of eternity in a room with only Crowley and a bed.

However, he did, also, so enjoy going places with Crowley, experiencing all the things the world had with Crowley, talking with Crowley, watching Crowley do things (anything really, even sleeping), eating out with Crowley… just existing with Crowley really. And anyway, even though his dear serpent did seem to also enjoy the whole sex-with-Aziraphale thing rather a lot, too, he didn’t seem to share the un-ceasing levels of stamina and libido part, actually falling asleep mid-act at one point, and it was only Aziraphale’s recognition that that had been almost at the end of thirty-six hours of constant love-making and orgasming that saved his self-esteem from a rather brutal crash and burn. Crowley needed his naps, he needed his moments, and then he’d be right as rain again, and just as enthusiastic and amatory as Aziraphale himself, and that was okay, more than
okay, really, as it let Aziraphale’s head clear of the consuming desire for a while, and let him
realise that there was, indeed, more to the world than his bed and their many, many, erogenous
zones.

More, like wondering.

And jigsaw pieces.

He swept a distracted palm over Crowley’s bare chest, watching, from his shoulder-pillow, how
armies of goose-flesh rose in its wake, letting them settle back into smooth skin with a fine dusting
of hair, before doing it again, his eyes absorbed by Crowley’s body’s reaction to him even as his
mind tumbled through questions he’d never thought he’d be able to ask.

“Dearest?” he knew, from the pressure of the arm around his back, that Crowley was awake, if
wearied. “What were you before? Really?”

There was a silence to his question but Aziraphale wasn’t at all concerned. He knew Crowley now,
really knew him, almost as if their shared intimacy had allowed all the layers of bluff and pretence
to faze away, like fog on a summer’s morning. He knew him, he understood him, everything he’d
ever done in their long lives together was now rolled out in front of him anew, but with levels of
comprehension attached that Aziraphale had never been privy to before. Crowley had always been
an enigma to him in more ways than one, now there was clarity.

With that clarity, however, came the most dreadful pain; the realisation that Aziraphale had not
always been fair and just to his most dear of companions, rarely been fair and just in fact. History
after history re-presented itself to him, but this time wrapped up the in the knowledge of what
Crowley had been thinking in that time (usually whatever he had felt was best for Aziraphale) and,
more poignantly, what he’d been feeling. What he’d been feeling had rarely been good, it broke
Aziraphale’s heart to feel how lonely he’d been for all those centuries, how wretched he’d felt,
abandoned, forsaken, unloved, unwanted… and by beings much closer to him than the Almighty.

But, that had been then, and this was now and Aziraphale’s toes still tingled when he thought back
to the moment that Crowley realised, when he understood, finally and irrevocably, that Aziraphale
loved him. Loved him, wanted him, cherished him, understood him – and wanted him still. In
Crowley, it had wiped away all of that hurt and anguish. Aziraphale could feel it all being washed
away. All of those sharp edges that had always surrounded him, protected him, they all vanished in
a wave of love and forgiveness and a desperation for the new phase of their life together to begin at
once.
In a moment of basking in the blinding light of Aziraphale’s love, Crowley had forgotten, forgiven and eagerly moved on.

It would take Aziraphale a lot longer to forgive himself – and he knew he would never forget the injuries he had inflicted.

He knew now, though, how Crowley felt, knew that he wouldn’t exactly like this question, but he would understand why Aziraphale had asked it, and he would answer.

The arm around his back tightened, another, skin slightly chilled from laying atop the crumpled duvet, crept around, encircling Aziraphale completely and setting off a sweet, swirling wave of love and longing and arousal. “I’m sure you can guess, angel, after everything that happened the other day.”

Of course. And it hadn’t been just the other day, had it? All through their long history there had been moments, jigsaw pieces, that Aziraphale had largely ignored. Crowley had never said so explicitly, but he’d always implied that he were nothing more than a lower ranking demon, thrown out in the world to cause mischief and mayhem. But had that really added up? The relative freedom he was afforded, the knowledge he held, the fact that he’d been delivered the anti-Christ… and his abilities… how many lower demons could shapeshift so proficiently? Conjure Hell-fire at their finger-tips? Fight an Archangel without instant obliteration? Stop time… Aziraphale was a principality for goodness sake and he couldn’t stop time, why had that never triggered any suspicion in him before? It wasn’t like he knew many demons even a fraction as well as he knew Crowley, but even so, he knew that they couldn’t stop time, knew that they couldn’t even fight him with any measure of success, never mind Michael.

Aziraphale stroked his palm over Crowley’s flat stomach this time, loving that he could. “But I never guessed, not back then, and you never told me?” He heard Crowley’s sigh under his ear and knew that, whilst he was secure in Aziraphale’s love for him, he wasn’t yet secure in his own history.

“I was never sure that you weren’t just being polite in not referencing it. I mean, it wasn’t anything I was proud of, what I had been, not when I saw how my brethren were acting. What they had done. How could I want you to think I was like that?”

The palm stroked more firmly over warm skin. “You were never like them. Never.”

Crowley pressed a kissed onto the top of Aziraphale’s head and Aziraphale knew that he was hoping that the topic could now be dropped, but Aziraphale needed to understand, there was no
room in this new relationship of theirs for hurt through confusion.

“Did they know? Who you were? Michael, I mean. And Gabriel…” Aziraphale’s heart twisted at the possibility that Gabriel could have done everything he did to Crowley and known that he was, for all intents and purposes, his brother.

This time, the pause was longer, and Aziraphale knew that Crowley was organising himself, his thoughts, his emotions, before speaking.

“Michael… maybe. When they didn’t instantly destroy me, they must have at least wondered. Gabriel,” Aziraphale felt the fine tremor run through him at awakened memories. “I don’t know. It wasn’t like I had the opportunity to show him the depth of my power.”

Aziraphale was the one who tremored then, at that first casual reference Crowley had ever made to his status.

“I was too busy being beaten up…”

A wave of bitterness washed out from his love and, without thought, Aziraphale sent an answering pulse of love and comfort.

“They probably know now, though. Samael will make sure of it.”

“But he knew?”

“Of course. He was the one who sent me up top when it was becoming clear that I couldn’t survive a moment longer in Hell.”

Aziraphale swallowed. “He loves you,” but Crowley just laughed and squeezed Aziraphale more tightly within the circle of his arms.

“Samael loves himself. That’s all.”
“But you have history, you said so yourself. He loved you once?” Aziraphale wasn’t bitter or frightened or even jealous and he hoped that Crowley could feel that from him. He just needed to understand.

The reply was a long time coming. “I don’t know. Maybe. I never bought into everything he said, everything he wanted, but I was more accommodating than the others. They never saw eye to eye with him.”

Suddenly, Aziraphale understood. “You were the peacemaker?”

Crowley laughed again, “A very poor one, it would seem.”

They slid back into silence. Crowley kept his circle of love tight, Aziraphale watched his own hand shift up and down with Crowley’s breathing as he thought.

“Did you hear all of my conversation with the Almighty?” the arms around him tightened and Aziraphale felt the hum of worry and anger rise around them.

“Yes.”

Of course Crowley would still try and watch over him, even from death. “You heard what She said about your Fall?” This was new; they’d never talked about this, not actively at any rate, although Crowley made the odd reference to it, tended to soliloquise a little when completely and utterly hammered.

The pause was long and then. “Yes. And she told me as well. In the garden.”

Aziraphale kissed his chest, “I’m so sorry, dearest.”

He felt Crowley look at him, felt his surprise. “Angel, Falling for you, to help you is the only reason of all that I could understand. Accept even. You know I’d do anything for you.”

Aziraphale lifted his head, sought out those wonderful eyes in the dark, “But I would never have wanted that for you!”
“I know,” a warm hand cupped his cheek and Crowley smiled at him. “But you didn’t have a choice, did you? Just like me. And now we’re here and we’ve done what we were meant to do, and now we can be what we were meant to be.”

The night remained still and silent, but Aziraphale felt his eyes widen in shook. “She said that?” he knew his voice was little more than a breath, “She said that we were meant to be together?”

Crowley’s head tilted slightly as he looked at him, “Not to me, no. To me, She said that we needed to exercise our free will. That we’d earnt it. And that no one from Heaven would bother us.” Aziraphale’s eyes widened further. “Samael said the same. More or less.”

Aziraphale stared, knew that Crowley would be able to feel his heart thumping against his own chest. “We’re free? Forever?” why was his voice wavering like that?

This time, Crowley smiled at him, but it was a little bitter, a little sad, and the thumb against his cheek stroked gently. “Forever is a long time, angel, and I don’t really trust any of them, not completely. Best think of this as breathing space, still. Extended, maybe.”

That was a disappointment, and really, it shouldn’t be; not when they had been so close, so many times, to losing everything. He leant down, pressed a kiss to Crowley’s lips and then settled again, his head on his love’s shoulder, his hand now curled over a bare hip.

He felt the breath underneath his cheek, heard the rumble as Crowley spoke again. “But… angel… since we’re talking about this,” Aziraphale could feel Crowley’s reluctance to discuss anything and his heart swelled with pride at the distance they had come together, the steps they’d made. If they could lay here like this and talk about difficult things, things they’d much rather gloss over, well, watch out Heaven and Hell as they truly were going to be unstoppable. He shuffled and tensed a little and Aziraphale stroked his hip, encouraging, and then he started again, sighing, long and loud and with all of his words tumbling out in a rush afterwards, “You can’t ever do that again, you know, goad Her like that, goad any of them like that, they’ll make you Fall and,” he took a faltering breath, “you’d never survive that.”

Despite it all, Aziraphale felt Crowley’s lack of faith in him sharply. He squeezed the hip under his palm once more and pressed a kiss into the warm skin under his cheek. “Nonsense dear. I won’t pretend it wouldn’t be incredibly hard, but of course I’d survive it. You have, after all, and look how wonderfully you’ve turned out.”
Crowley moved then, like a shifting tectonic plate, and Aziraphale was unseated from his comfortable cushion, bodily lifted with a strength that belied Crowley’s slender build and placed back onto the pillows, on his side, Crowley’s hands firm around his biceps, those yellow eyes pinning him in place like a butterfly in a glass. He could feel the anger radiating over him and really wasn’t sure what he’d done.

“This isn’t a game, Aziraphale, this is deadly serious,” it was the harshest voice he’d used since the day that Hastur attacked. “Falling isn’t just ‘incredibly hard’, it’s agonisingly painful. Forget the pools of sulphur that melt your skin, forget the high-speed free fall that crushes your wings, forget the burning of your feathers, the smell of which you will never, ever forget, forget all of that just for now, and try to imagine what it feels like to have her grace ripped from your heart. To have the love of the Host, the very presence of the Host, scoured from your soul. To go from being so very loved, so very treasured to being reviled and hated and abhorred. To lose the form that you’ve lived with for so very many millennia and, instead, become little more than a creature, a figment of nightmares that you see in the mirror every single time you look in there.

“And it never gets easier, you never get used to it, it shocks every single time that you forget what you are, but it’s the first thing that everyone else sees about you, that marker that yells unnatural and deviant and perverse. And all you can think of, literally, all you can think of is Her, and how you’ve disappointed Her, let Her down. How you still love Her, despite the torture she’s inflicted on you, body and soul and heart and mind. You still love Her and want her back, even though she lit you on fire and dropped you out of her Home, out of her favour. How you would do anything to regain that favour, how you lie awake at night and go over every single tiny little thing you did and wonder if that was it, of that was it, or maybe it was just that She’d never liked you anyway, not half as much as your siblings and so, really, it was inevitable that you were going to Fall.”

Aziraphale could only stare, his fingers scrambling to touch Crowley somewhere, anywhere, his chest tight, his eyes pricking.

“You think that that sounds incredibly hard? Or does it sound like absolute, unescapable, eternal fucking torture? Because that’s what it is, angel, torture that never abates, never lessens, you just become numb to it, accepting of it, and, funnily enough, finding out that you never damn well deserved it in the first place doesn’t really help at all. And you would ask for that? You think losing me was as bad as it got? Believe me – losing me is nothing to what Falling would be like for you, angel. Nothing.”

Aziraphale’s hands had found Crowley’s cheeks and were holding him, framing his beautiful face, feeling warm tears as they lapped at his fingers, warm tears that he knew were replicated on his own face. “But, if I lost you, I wouldn’t care.”

Crowley sighed, a long breath of air that seemed to completely deflate him. His eyes slid closed, Aziraphale instantly missing those lovely amber lights. His voice when it came was far quieter,
more broken and it twisted something unpleasant in Aziraphale’s chest. “You would, you absolutely would, and you know why?”

Aziraphale shook his head, knowing that Crowley would feel him doing it.

“You think it was my strength that led me to survive this as well as I have? To be able to face every day without screaming and sobbing and wishing for an end? Or turning my anger and hatred out on everything around me? Polluting it with my putrid stain?”

Aziraphale’s voice deserted him and, slowly, Crowley’s eyes opened again, swimming in moisture, fresh tears over flowing onto his cheeks and Aziraphale realised he’d never seen him cry so openly before.

“It wasn’t my strength, angel, that saved me. It was yours. Always yours. Keeping one foot out of the dark and in the light. Keeping just a spark of something good alive inside me. Keeping me me, when I didn’t want to be what I was or what I was destined to be. You saved me, Aziraphale, and if you Fell without an angel of your own to keep you sane,” he shook his head, “you’d never survive.”

Aziraphale leaned in and pressed kisses to Crowley’s cheeks, his eye lids, his forehead, his lips. Kiss after kiss after kiss until his own tears had abated and the vice in his throat had loosened enough to let him whisper his reply. “I’m sorry, my darling, I’m so sorry that all of that happened to you,” how could he ever have thought Crowley over his Fall? “And I’m sorry for every single hurt you’ve suffered since then.” And goodness, how many of them were there to catalogue? From the humans who persecuted him, to the demons who tried to control him. From the Mother who cast him out, to the best friend who ensured he knew his place. And still Crowley had become this, this wonderful, wonderful creature whom Aziraphale loved more than life. And trusted. And believed in.

“And I’m so sorry that I frightened you like that, that I asked to Fall. I understand now, darling, I completely understand, and you are right, I would never survive that, not even if I had you to help me through it. I’m glad I could be there for you, to help you, but you’re wrong; this is down to you, your evolution into this wonderful being, not part of Heaven, not part of Hell, but all part of you, it is down to you, Crowley, it is. And I love you so much for all of it.”

He kissed him then, desperate to taste him, to comfort him, but also completely unable to stand it should Crowley continue to tear himself apart like that. It was a slow kiss, long and gentle and Aziraphale kept it up until the hands on his biceps opened, the clamps dropping away, Crowley smoothing along his arms until he could interlink their fingers, still framing his own face as they did so.
Slowly, Aziraphale pulled back, pressing kiss after kiss onto now closed lips until he could bear to stop and drop their foreheads together. He felt Crowley’s little huff of laughter against his kiss-wet lips. “But if you’d not made me so desperate, so angry and so absolutely fucking terrified for you, I would never have left Azrael like that. Not even my imagination could have come up with that, but I couldn’t, wouldn’t accept you Falling either, so I suppose something had to give.”

“And he doesn’t want you back?” Aziraphale couldn’t shake the lingering terror. “He’s not going to come back for you?”

Crowley kissed him, soft and chaste. “I suppose he might one day, for something else, but you heard him, angel. I’m alive and I’m staying that way.”

“Another old friend?”

Another huff of laughter. “Something like that.”

They slid into silence, foreheads pressed together, fingers linked, as Aziraphale just tried to process how much he loved this incredible creature and how wonderfully lucky they were to have this chance at a life together.

Then, just as Crowley seemed to be settling into sleep, something struck him. “Crowley? Dearest? Can I ask you something?”

He felt the tensing, felt the fear and exhaustion, but, of course, his wonderfully brave serpent rallied beautifully.

“Always.”

Aziraphale kissed him and then, “In the morning, after breakfast, how do you fancy going to the big garden centre in Winchester again?”

There was a pause, Aziraphale could almost hear the gears in Crowley’s mind trying to work it all out. “Of course. You want something?”
“Yes,” Aziraphale pressed closer, feeling their naked bodies sealed together in the warmth of their nest. “You. Holding my hand as we wander through the herbaceous borders. Just you, really. Just always.”

Crowley didn’t answer, Aziraphale could feel the swell of overwhelming emotion emanating from him and threatening to unseat them both and so he slid one hand forward and into all that soft hair, drawing Crowley’s head down to his chest and stroking him there, soothing him.

“Go to sleep, my darling,” he whispered, his own eyes sore and heavy. “We’re safe now. And it’s going to be okay. And tomorrow you’re going to teach me just what a herbaceous border actually is,” he felt Crowley huff against him. “And I love you.”

Aziraphale closed his own eyes then, arranging them both to his liking, making sure they would be warm enough as the November cold rolled on. He felt sleep stealing up on him, pushing away thoughts of Falling and fear and unrequited love and ineffability and-

“I love you too, angel.”

Fresh tears sprung to his eyes and he gathered Crowley ever closer. Oh my. This was it. This was his life for as long as he remained. He was the luckiest bastard of an angel there ever was.

Night crept on.

In a little cottage in the South Downs, a not-quite demon and a not-quite angel, both of whom had lost so much across the millennia, slept content.

In their arms, they held tightly onto that which was, and always had been, most precious to them.

That which had never left.

That which remained.
Done! Although I might get around to a Christmassy epilogue if life is not too hectic.

A huge thanks to everyone who has read and, especially commented, and kudossed and generally been so supportive and welcoming. My first GO fic has been incredibly good fun and far longer than I had first imagined it would be. What a lovely, positive fandom this is.

Thanks to everyone who stayed until the bitter end and a happy winter festival to you all, whatever your chosen one might be.

Indigo x
I just couldn't resist a rather sweet epilogue to this. Reading the whole story back, there were precious few moments when poor Crowley was ever, really, happy and I wanted him to be!

He does happy really well.

He also, unfortunately, does angst really well so a tiny bit has snuck into this (rolls eyes) but honestly, just the tiniest bit!

Happy Christmas - or December - to you all.

Indigo :)

Crowley was sleeping. It had actually been a skill he had started to cultivate long before he was sent into Eden to make mischief, it had been born from the necessity of needing some way to escape the crushing nature of Hell. At first, he'd only been able to sleep as a snake, but he persevered, Crowley had never been a quitter, and soon enough had managed the feat in his more human form as well. And in Eden. And on Earth. During the day as well as the night. For hours at first, then days, then, famously, for almost a century. It was a skill he was proud of.

He didn’t need it the same way now. There was no, dreadful, driving desire to while away the hours of existence, no, now it was just nice to curl up in a soft, warm bed and slide away for a few hours, before waking up for another day that could be anything he wanted it to be. Yes, sleeping next to the one you loved really made all the difference.

He wasn’t deeply asleep. His body had told him it was starting to get light and so he was rousing, the snake in him looking forward to basking in the sun’s rays, but he was still pleasantly asleep, cocooned in the duvet, naked and known, Aziraphale’s scent all around him, it really was the very best way to start the day. Until…

“Oh no!”

He was wide awake in a moment, bolt upright on the bed, his eyes wide and trying to pinpoint the danger they were in, his chest heaving as he drew in breath, his heart pounding under his ribs, Hell-fire ready to spring to his finger tips at his command. And there was Aziraphale, at the window the night shirt that fell to his knees, his head turned to Crowley, looking very much not in danger, but very much apologetic as Crowley attempted not to hyper-ventilate in front of him.
“Oh,” he offered up a shaky smile, “I’m so sorry I woke you, dearest, please, so go back to sleep.”

Go back to sleep? Was he completely ridiculous? Crowley wasn’t even ready to stand down from Def Con One yet. “You’re alright? Everything’s alright?” he had to force the words out over the gasping, and then everything was made so much worse by the way that guilt and sympathy ran over the angel’s face in equal amounts and Crowley realised that he’d just signed himself up for another instalment of the ‘are-you-quite-sure-you’re-over-the-whole-Gabriel-Michael-Hastur-Death-situation-dearest?’ conversation. And no, actually, if you were interested, he absolutely wasn’t. Obviously.

“I’m quite alright, thank you,” but at least Aziraphale now appeared more embarrassed than concerned, although he was still looking out of the window in some level of obvious distress.

Crowley took a deep breath and held it, concentrating hard on slowing the desperate racing of his heart and gripping his traitorously trembling fingers together in his lap, then let the air out slowly and, feeling far more in control of himself, asked the question, “So, what’s up then?”

For a moment, he wasn’t sure that he was going to get an answer, but, as he watched, Aziraphale’s eyes jumped to the window once more and its slowly greying sky, then back to Crowley. Then to the window again as the tiniest tip of a pink tongue darted out to wet his lips, then his grip on the windowsill tightened, one more furtive look at Crowley, still sitting bolt upright in bed, the edges of panic still blurred around him and, “I’d hoped it was going to snow.”

It took a moment to parse any degree of sense from the jumbled ejection of sounds, but Crowley had had experience. His eyes widened slightly, and he knew, in the dark of the room, they would be almost entirely black, and then he allowed himself to crash back against his wonderfully plump pillows. “You thought…” he blew out a long breath. “We talked about this, angel, yesterday,” and, in fact, on and off for the last three weeks. “There was no snow forecast anywhere around here. I told you that. We looked at the weather charts. I told you that, if you wanted a white Christmas, then we’d have to go to the Highlands.”

“But I’d wanted to have Christmas here,” and he had done, right here in the cottage, ‘our cottage’ he’d called it and that fact had warmed Crowley’s heart. “And well, I supposed I’d hoped…”

“Hoped?”

“You know… well, Adam.”
Ah. Well, quite. That was, in fact, a relief as Crowley had been starting to fret that Aziraphale had decided that he was powerful enough to rustle up a white Christmas over-night and that somehow, by not doing so, he had performed a huge faux pas. It was far better that Aziraphale be disappointed in Adam rather than in him, although, really, he hated to see Aziraphale disappointed at all. He sighed and tried offering up a consolidating smile, “I’m sorry…” he really was. “But you know that Adam’s a whole lot more human than he was, and we’re way off from Tadfield here,” his eyes slid to the clock on his bedside table, “but we can still make the Highlands, you know. The roads will be clear today, I bet we could convince the old-girl to really motor for us and-”

The bed next to him had dipped, and a warm hand had landed to stroke against his cheek and Crowley turned and found himself nose to nose with a smiling angel, one who, inexplicably, seemed to have tears standing in his eyes. “No,” he whispered and pressed a kiss to Crowley’s mouth. “I don’t want to go anywhere else. I want to be here, with you. I just wanted our first Christmas here to be perfect for you. With snow and-”

Crowley leaned up and pressed in his own kiss, deepening it more than Aziraphale had, giving himself the time to dredge up the courage to be ridiculously sappy. It only took him eight minutes, but in that time, their kiss had grown heated, their breathing rough. He drew back anyway, feeling Aziraphale’s fingers tightening in his hair in silent protest, and made sure that the angel was looking at him before he spoke. “It already is perfect,” he whispered, his cheeks creeping red despite his eight minutes of prep-time, “because it’s with you.”

It was worth the effort though, as Aziraphale’s smile blossomed bright enough to light up most of the South East of England, and Crowley felt his own cheeks rising in response.

“Oh, you absolute darling thing!” Crowley was still, marginally, surprised at what comments like that continued to do to his insides, “And here I am, waking you up in that dreadful manner!”

Enough of the fear had gone, replaced by embarrassment, for Crowley to not want to dwell on that at all, so instead, he reached a hand out of the warmth of the duvet and cupped the side of Aziraphale’s face, holding those blue eyes with his own as he simply said, “Happy Christmas, angel.”

Aziraphale kissed him again, heavy and demanding, before pulling back to whisper, “Happy Christmas, dearest,” as he scrambled back under the duvet, vanishing his Wee Willie Winkie night shirt as he did so. Oh yes, Crowley still had it.

It was easy to fall back into the kissing, they’d done so much of it now that it was almost second nature, they knew what they liked, they knew what worked well for them both and what worked
well for Crowley, all the damn time, was the continued realisation that he was allowed to do this, that Aziraphale wanted to do this – with him. The other stuff could still be a little nerve-wracking at times, there was simply so much of it, and even with the huge amounts of time they devoted to practising, Crowley hadn’t felt that he’d had the time to become smooth at all of it. Didn’t mean he wasn’t enthusiastic though, and that, fortunately, seemed to be enough for Aziraphale.

Crowley banked on that now as he slithered under the duvet and traced his way down Aziraphale’s warm and oh so tempting body.

“Oh!” a hand slid into his hair, somehow managing to grip and encourage and caress all at the same time, “Oh, dear boy, you know you don’t have to…”

“Shut up,” Crowley’s words were addressed to Aziraphale’s navel as he wriggled further down, desperately trying to keep his elbows off anything squishy. “You want me to stop?”

The question was posed just as his mouth found its goal and a gasp and a giggle was his answer. That and the hand in his hair tightening along with a breathy, “Please don’t…”

Crowley felt like this was still something out of amateur hour, but he paid attention (up to a point) when Aziraphale did this to him and he liked to think he could still make it good and was getting better every time. Plus – the angel didn’t have a tongue that could do this…

“Oh! Goodness me!” Aziraphale almost shot off the bed at that, a knee connecting smartly with Crowley’s chest in a manner he was sure you’d never see in a porn movie. It was enough to throw him off his rhythm though, but thankfully not enough to make him instinctively bite down. “Sorry!”

He didn’t reply, not with words at any rate, shifting slightly so that he could rub at his bruised sternum with one hand, whilst using the other to support himself in going back to his task, finding Aziraphale by touch alone.

He had a plan, vaguely, something he’d thought about doing before but never really got around to, but the mere suggestion of trying it now was making his own cock swell and lengthen and he found he was rubbing himself against the sheets, even as his tongue simultaneously wound around Aziraphale’s entire length and used its forked tip to delve into the tight little slit at the end.

More wriggling around was needed, but eventually Crowley was ready, jaw aching slightly from
the awkward angle, gag reflex supressed, fingers slick from a hasty miracle, politely nudging at the angel’s thighs, his actions forming the question he still couldn’t form out loud.

The answer was clear and immediate; the fingers in his hair tightening, the gasp of realisation and another hefty thunk in the ribs as Aziraphale’s legs sprung apart. There were no apologies this time, though, nothing more than a long groan of pleasure as Crowley’s long fingers traced the cleft of Aziraphale’s arse, finding the most secret of entrances and sliding eagerly inside.

Crowley had done this before, plenty of times, watching wide-eyed as Aziraphale came apart to his touch. He’d also sucked him off as well, been stunned as the angel enthusiastically came down his throat in something like forty-seven seconds of work (yes, he had been counting) but doing both acts together, well, this was the treat he hadn’t dared until now and it seemed to be going well.

“Oh, oh, oh…” Aziraphale was twitching and moaning with every sweep of Crowley’s finger against his prostate, little salty bursts of excitement blooming on his tongue in complement. “More, dearest, more, please…”

Obviously, Crowley obliged, withdrawing his finger and returning with two, and then three, enjoying himself immensely but getting impatient for the main course, finding his own hips grinding down into the sheets with more pressure and more urgency.

“Crowley, ugh,” Aziraphale performed a full-body twitch once more, “enough, enough darling. Inside me. Now. Please? Oh…” a turned-on angel was not a particularly articulate angel, but Crowley was more than ready to up his game once more. He was back on more solid ground as well, emerging from under the covers knowing that his cheeks were red and his hair damp, his lips swollen and wet and that the taste of Aziraphale was still on his tongue. He slithered into place, grabbing a kiss, manoeuvring his hips into the vee of Aziraphale’s legs and then lifting up, adjusting himself with one hand until he was poised and smiling, fuck, what was wrong with him that he couldn’t help grinning like a full-blooded idiot? as he pushed in.

The smile didn’t last though, how could it when Aziraphale’s eyes rolled up into the back of his head and the white-hot grip around Crowley’s cock threatened to squeeze an embarrassingly instant orgasm out of him? Instead he closed his eyes and gnashed his teeth together and imagined Gabriel’s smug smile and, miraculously, was soon back under control.

The same could not be said for Aziraphale, though, whose eyes were still up in his head somewhere, his mouth open in the perfect ‘O’ and his hands gripping bruises into Crowley’s biceps. Crowley moved slowly at first, not wanting to tip him straight over the edge, watching his expression for every tiny flicker, keeping his movements slow and languid and steady – a feat that almost killed him.
Eventually though, as always, his unlimited patience with Aziraphale was rewarded as his posture relaxed ever so slightly, the death grip on his arms receded, and those beautiful blue eyes were back on him, smiling along with every other part of his body – something only Aziraphale could do. “Oh, Crowley,” he was positively sparkling, “you’re simply wondrous!” and damn it, if Crowley didn’t almost come again.

They set into their familiar rhythm, Crowley still watching Aziraphale so carefully, his snake eyes trained on every single flicker and flutter, slowly stoking his angel back up again. Aziraphale, for his part, touched and petted and stroked and teased until Crowley felt that the entire surface of his skin was suffused with love, angelic love, but love for him; these moments between them were always the very best of his long life.

His own need was growing, but he ruthlessly hauled it back again, he wouldn’t be coming before Aziraphale and it was always his intention for this to last as long as he could possibly make it, there was no pleasure too great for his angel. He shifted his posture slightly, pressing his knees a little harder into the mattress and, oh, yes, that was it, right there, he couldn’t help the rush of triumph he felt as Aziraphale twitched once more, his eyes rolling along with a very happy-sounding, “Oh!” He held himself right there and did it again, and again, and again, speeding up despite himself, increasing the force of his thrusts, watching, open-mouthed as Aziraphale’s hands came up to grip his arms tightly once more, every slide in accompanied by a selection of, “Oh!” or “Yes!” or “Darling!” or, increasingly, “More!”

Crowley knew they were both getting close. He tried to slow it all down again but the grip on his arms intensified.

“Don’t stop,” Aziraphale’s breathy plea was about as un-angelic as could be and lit Crowley on fire, “Please, dearest, don’t stop.”

He didn’t. He couldn’t – not any more, he could only ever give Aziraphale everything he ever wanted. Each thrust was harder, deeper, faster, and unerringly hit the spot that Aziraphale needed him to. The moans and the pleas came louder, the bed started squeaking along with their movements. Crowley could have silenced it, either of them could have, but it actually increased the pleasure and excitement and the intimacy of it all. He drove on, watching as Aziraphale slowly stiffened beneath him, bending backwards, taut as a bow, pushing his hips up to meet every thrust, his eyes screwed tightly closed, his mouth frozen open until – the exact moment that Crowley had been waiting for – when he cried out a strangled noise of bliss, his cock rising up and shooting ribbons of pearly come across his own belly, his channel tightening, maddeningly, around Crowley’s length and, “Crowley,” gasped in such a rapture of wonderment and bliss that all the iron-will and imagination in the world wasn’t enough to stop him ramming himself home and coming, hard and fast, inside Aziraphale’s body.
He came back to himself slumped over the angel, nestled in the space between his thighs, arms around him and a hand softly stroking through his hair, and, despite everything they’d just done together, this was always his very best moment, the intimacy of it, his cock still inside Aziraphale, both of them smeared in come and sweat, it was better than anything else ever. Unable to really martial his body into anything useful, he pressed a kiss onto the chest beneath his cheek and settled down to await his landing back on earth.

“You are amazing,” Aziraphale’s voice was soft, but slightly hoarse, and the words both thrilled and embarrassed him. “You really are, my dear. That was even more incredible than usual. I do love you so.”

Crowley swallowed, his throat tight.

“What would you like to do now? I mean it’s- Oh!”

Aziraphale stiffened suddenly and Crowley’s bliss shattered as the ever-present fear punched up through the swirling endorphins. “What?”

The angel was looking to the window and Crowley followed him, his eyes widening as he took in the sparkling white tableau outside, the perfect covering of snow, the picture-book white-painted trees, the endless blue skies… what the Hell?

“Oh,” there was a hand on his cheek, chasing away the last of the fear and drawing his gaze back down to the wide eyes below him. “Did you do that?” Aziraphale’s voice was trembling, “For me?”

Crowley thought, had he? He hadn’t meant to, not consciously, hadn’t really thought he was capable of it, not something as huge as that, but then he had been thinking of giving Aziraphale everything he wanted, and, now he thought about it, he could detect that tell-tale fuzziness that came with having miracled something massive. He couldn’t lie though, never really had been able to, not to Aziraphale. “I didn’t mean to…” he admitted softly, and somehow, that made it even better, Aziraphale’s eyes filling with love, his mouth curling into the most adorable smile and his fingers gently pulling Crowley’s face down so that they could kiss.

“I love you,” he repeated. “My precious darling, I just love you so much.”

Crowley just didn’t know what to say, but, again, it seemed as if that were okay as Aziraphale
tugged him down to his chest and kissed his head and wound his arms around him and sighed happily and Crowley let it all wash over him.

They stayed like that, in silence, for so long that Crowley started to slide towards a warm and happy nap. Aziraphale was still stroking through his hair and occasionally pressing a kiss into it, all the while looking out of the window at the sparkling winter wonderland, and it was the very best of mornings. It all had to end though, at some point, the angel had never been as good at sloth as Crowley.

“Do you want some breakfast, dearest?” another kiss softened the blow.

Crowley thought. “’M not sure…” it had been a rather large miracle, “’M pretty tired still…”

Another kiss. “Of course you are,” and another, and then an unwelcome shifting. “Well, why don’t you stay up here and get some more sleep and I’ll head down and get some breakfast. Then, maybe, we can open our gifts before we go out for a walk in the snow?” he sounded cautiously hopeful.

Crowley hated the snow, hated being cold, but then he thought about how Aziraphale would beam, how he would dress himself in some long, ancient scarf, some ridiculously fluffy mittens, how he’d want to hold Crowley’s hand or snuggle up together as they walked, how he’d notice everything about the winter-wonderland-landscape they’d created and comment delightedly on it all – he was actually agreeing before he’d even realised. “Course, Angel. After a nap, yeah?”

A kiss was pressed into his hair as Aziraphale slid from the bed. “Of course, dearest, you take your time,” a sweep of a warm palm across his bare shoulders, the duvet pulled up higher to warm him, another kiss. “I’ll just wait downstairs until you’re ready.”

Crowley nodded and shifted slightly to lie on his belly, pillowing his head on his arms, his eyes closed against the white glare of snow. He couldn’t help tuning in, though, to Aziraphale’s shuffling as imagined him pulling the ridiculous night shirt back on over his head, adding the old tartan dressing gown and thick fluffy socks, even though the cottage had the very best in under-floor heating. Another kiss to his head and then Aziraphale was gone, heading down the stairs, his happy little voice singing, “Santa Claus is coming to town,” under his breath as he went. Crowley went with him, in his head, imagining his smile as he stood and wished the tree a good morning, checking all the presents underneath were just as they should be. He imagined him wandering into the kitchen and looking at the view, all the way to the distant hills, all the perfect snow wiping the landscape clean, removing, for good, the memories of his brush with death and a demonic blade in the field behind the house. He pictured him flicking the kettle on, reaching up to get the Christmas tree crumpets that Crowley had found for him and popping them under the grill, not even remembering to light it, but smelling them toasting anyway…
Without thought, Crowley was out of bed, pulling on his loose lounge pants and tugging a t-shirt over his head. With a thought, his bed-hair was vanished, and he was heading down the stairs himself. Sleep could wait – he had snow and gifts and tea and a happy Christmas angel all of his own.

What more could any demon ever want?

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